Summary

“Don’t worry, Scott caught me up on everything,” Kira assures with a bubbly smile via video-chat. “You and Derek, huh? I probably should have seen that coming. I always thought it might be Cora, but Derek was the one that looked at you how I used to look at you.”


Kira laughs and laughs. When she gets herself together, she replies, “Yeah, those little hearts and stars in your eyes definitely say different."

or

Stiles moves from the shiny, fast paced lifestyle of Los Angeles to the foggy, sleepy town of Beacon Hills so his dad can become the new sheriff. Newly fifteen, he does his best to finish out his freshmen year of high school (by staying under the radar) when he suddenly becomes the Beyoncé of the Supernatural community. And, without much prompting on his part, he ends up catching the eye of one of the most prominent Werewolf families in all of North America. It literally all starts with a stuffed animal(s).
Hello, it's me the writer (black, queer female, aged 27) and you will find a land mine of grammatical errors (a few inconsistencies) but substantial diversity with incredible world-building (and character development) to make up for it. If any of that is fine with you, carry on and :) please leave a comment or kudos.

**Fair warning, I've only watched TW up to season three (when Allison was killed off), so I'm like winging everything else, and I'm trying to keep this story updated at least every month. (10/10/18)

See the end of the work for more notes.

- Inspired by *Fly a Little Faster* by *mirrorkill*
- Inspired by *So Shed Your Skin and Lets Get Started* by *halffhardtorock*
- Inspired by *Stilinski's Home for Wayward Wolves* by *owlpostagain*
No seriously.

It all starts with a stuffed animal.

No, okay, but the weird thing is that it actually starts with Peter Hale showing up on his doorstep with an eerie smile and a stuffed animal.

“What is this?” Stiles asks, narrowing his eyes in confusion and suspicion. “And what is that?” he adds, pointing to the stuffed animal in his hands.

“A present,” Peter merely says, and holds the stuffed toy with just his large left hand. “Happy birthday.” Then he adds, like an afterthought, “It’s a wolf. You like those, right?”

Stiles just stares at him. This is literally all he can do. This goes beyond the realm of bizarre.
“Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

“No. That would be a definite no,” Stiles says quickly. Although Peter may appear to be harmless, well, Stiles is no idiot, and his father taught him better than that. He may not be as skilled at reading people like his dad is, but he can still see the word ‘trouble’ etched on Peter like neon lights.

Peter smirks and Stiles fidgets in his doorway as his cheeks grow warm. Not only is Peter charming, but he’s a Hale. Stiles has yet to really understand what that means since he’s only been in Beacon Hills a month, but he’s pretty sure that being a Hale or even associating with one is highly significant.

Stiles is virtually a nobody at the moment. He hasn’t really made any friends yet (not for the better lack of trying either). He’s basically at the bottom of the social ladder and he hasn’t got a clue how to make his way up. He’s a spaz, he knows this, but that’s something that worked in his favor back when he and his dad still lived in Los Angeles. Here in odd little Beacon Hills, it works against him. It probably didn’t help that they’d moved here in the middle of Feb-

Let’s back up for a moment.

To put things in perspective: Peter Hale is a somebody. Maybe not celebrity famous, but like small town famous. He’s got the looks, the money, and the charisma. He has an overwhelming presence about him that is hard to describe or narrow down using simple words like “devilish” or “witty” or even "manipulative". Though Stiles can still say those terms have to be true one way or the other.

So needless to say, it’s beyond peculiar that Peter “probably could land on the cover of vogue magazine just for being this good-looking” Hale, a sophomore college student at that, has gone out of his way to visit Stiles “would probably still be invisible even if he set himself on fire” Stilinski, a dweeb of a high school freshman, for his not-birthday.

It’s all very down-the-rabbit-hole feeling.

Peter, as strange as this all is, is looking like he can’t really understand why Stiles isn’t giving into his charms or at least licking the ground that he’s standing on, which is a reaction most people give to the Hales. Stiles likes to think he has a better sense of self-preservation than most people.

There’s not actually a severe warning bell going off in his mind, but there’s just something there. It’s almost like an absentminded feeling of caution toeing the line of adventure and peril. He can’t quite put his finger on it but his trusty gut is telling him to proceed with caution. He crosses his arms.

Peter’s smirk widens and he looks amused, as if he approves of Stiles’s apprehensive behavior. So, of course, he mocks Stiles’s stance like the younger man is the most entertaining creature he’s ever met.

It turns into a stare contest.

Peter doesn’t blink once. Seriously. Not once.

“What do you want?” Stiles asks, because as popular as Peter is, everyone knows that he’s bad news (in that way that they know but don’t really actually know), and that he doesn’t do anything without expecting something back. He’s got a very anti-hero reputation. ”What do you want?” he repeats, when Peter makes no move to answer.

“Just to be neighborly,” Peter says, trying for earnest, and failing. He’s wearing a fitted biker jacket with dark jeans ripped at the knees and a graphic t-shirt that says “M.O.N.S.T.E.R.” in gaudy, white
His face is unshaven but he wears it well, while his hair is slicked and neatly parted to the side. Nothing about him says he knows how to be neighborly.

Stiles snorts. “You don’t even live in this neighborhood.” Which is true. He lives in a gigantic house deep within the Beacon Hills preserve. It’s another one of those odd Hale things (or so Stiles hears through the grape vine in this small, chatty town). “Seriously, dude. What do you want?”

Peter shrugs slowly, like he has all the time in the world. “I heard you were good at giving advice and researching things.”

God, who was even talking about him? Stiles didn’t even think anyone knew he existed. “Who said that? And how do you know I like wolves? Not saying that I do, but —”

“You go to school with two of my nieces, and my nephew,” Peter interjects smoothly. “I think I’ve heard them mention you a few times.”

Unlikely. So unlikely.

Stiles knew exactly who he was talking about, too.

Laura Hale is a gorgeous senior who never wastes time on freshmen, outside of her sister, Cora, who always looked at Stiles like she wanted to punch him in the throat during their AP English, Biology, and History class.

Although...that could be because he’s always tapping or drumming his pens and pencils against his notebook or his desk. But the weird thing is that she sits all the way in the front, and Stiles sits all the way in the back, next to the windows. So either she’s got freakishly good hearing or Stiles is just that loud.

Then there is Laura’s little brother, Derek (the middle child), who seems permanently glued to a basketball. Or not so glued, because he spends a lot of his time dribbling it or using it to flirt with girls and guys alike. Derek is a sophomore, and well on his way to becoming the captain of the basketball team if all the rumors he hears in the halls are true.

Either way, Stiles knows for a fact that neither Laura, Derek, nor Cora have ever mentioned him in any of the ways that Peter is trying to imply. He’s never spoken to any of them. He hasn’t spoken to anyone really.

“You’re lying,” Stiles says, and edges back into his house, ready to shut the door and be done with all this weirdness. “And also, it’s not my birthday.”

“Close enough. Consider it an early gift,” Peter deflects cleverly, and Stiles doesn’t know where he’s getting his information from but he’s scarily right. “And you’re correct, I am lying,” he admits. “But you don’t make it easy for anyone to get to know you.”

Stiles makes a face. He’s not sure how to take that or what that’s even supposed to mean. “You’ve got six seconds before I slam this door shut,” he warns.

Peter grins and says, “You’re not being very polite, Stilinski. You could at least invite me in for a cup of water or a beer —”

“Six seconds are done,” Stiles decides and steps back to shut the door.

Peter quickly lifts his hand to stop the door from shutting, and wow, he’s weirdly strong. “Fine,” he sighs, like he’s disappointed that Stiles won’t play along. “What do you know about El
Chupacabra?"


Peter smirks in that self-satisfied sort of way. It looks positively vulturine. “Just hit a dead end in my research and I’ve got this paper that I’m trying to finish,” he airily explains. “It’s for my Folklore class.”

“Why not go to the library and ask a librarian? I hear they’re useful.”

Peter shrugs. “I get the feeling you’re better suited to this task,” he supposes. “You seem like a smart kid. And I heard you got a quaint little library filled with subjects of mythology that could rival my own family library.”

“I have a small collection,” Stiles corrects, and it’s not so much his as it was his mother’s (she was a collector of some sorts), but same difference. He still doesn’t get how Peter just knows this stuff. “Just google what you need and hope for the best. Avoid Wikipedia at all costs.”

Peter scoffs. “You think I haven’t already tried that? Like I said. Dead end. I need more.” He cocks his head. “This paper is riding on a very important grade. You wouldn’t want me to fail, now, would you?”

Stiles has a hard time believing him at his word, but he doesn’t know all the facts and he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t interested himself. He sighs and loosens his grip on the doorknob. “Fine, come in.”

Peter doesn’t walk through the door. No. He swaggers.

Stiles is beginning to find him insufferable already. He gestures to his nicely decorated but messy living room and says, “You can have a seat. We gave our housekeepers the day off, so...”

Peter looks at him silently.

"...yeah, that was a joke. We don’t actually have housekeepers. Uh, nevermind. I’m not much of a host. So if you should feel yourself dehydrated, please help yourself to some tap water we generously pay tax money for. Anyway, I have to go get my computer.”

“Or I could go up to your room with you?” Peter suggests with an odd look as he steps into Stiles’s personal space and just looms over him like a creep.

Stiles is uncomfortable. Really, really uncomfortable. “Uh, no. I’ll be back,” he says, leaning back so he can breathe a little. “And I would also like to remind you that my dad is the sheriff, so if you steal anything or try to murder me, um, there will be retribution. And...justice.”

Peter just stares at him intently.

Stiles tries to be as subtle as possible about his fleeing because Peter’s gaze is burning holes in his back. He breathes a little easier when he clicks his door shut and rummages around through the mess of clothes and books for his phone. When he finds it, he shoots his dad a quick text that informs him of his company, just in case this exchange with Peter carries on long after his dad’s shift ends. He then pockets his phone before he grabs his laptop, unhooking it from all its cords, and carries it down to the living room where Peter is standing by a window and looking out like he’s expecting company.

Stiles doesn’t even question it. “So what exactly are we dealing with here?”
Peter looks at him sharply. “What do you mean?”

“Your paper,” Stiles explains slowly with a frown.

Peter relaxes, and Stiles has to comb over his previous words to try and figure out why Peter had look at him like he’d caught him in a lie. Peter straightens and his face melts into an expression of indifference. “My apologies for monopolizing you like this,” he says, and who even says things like that? He's dressed like he’s punk rock but he speaks like it’s tea time with the Queen of England. “But I’m afraid this is really important. I know enough about the origins of El Chupacabra, and its general history. I’m not so sure about its breeding patterns. Or hunting patterns.” He pauses before he adds, “Any weaknesses would be useful too.”

Stiles frowns as he cracks open one of his books. “What kind of paper are you trying to write?”

“Need to know, Stilinski,” Peter murmurs as he twitches and turns his gaze back out the window. “You do me a favor and I’ll feel inclined to return it sometime in the near future.”

Stiles sighs and dismisses Peter’s presence entirely before diving in. He doesn’t stray far in his research. He just jots down the things he thinks Peter is looking for on different colored note cards. Green being confirmed facts, yellow being useful but questionable information, and red for interesting but completely ridiculous and untrue material.

Peter sometimes looms over him like a creep, making thoughtful sounds before he returns to his post by the window. He doesn’t actually ever sit down in all the three hours Stiles toils away for him. Another thing he finds very abnormal.

His dad eventually walks in with two large pizzas, looking worn out as usual while he loosens his suit tie. Stiles can’t help but smile when he sees him; that excited bubbly feeling of ‘dad’s home!’ gurgling in his stomach (even after all these years, it never fails). Most people are probably used to their parents by the age of six, but call Stiles frugal because he’s the only parent Stiles has and he doesn’t plan on taking that for granted.

Peter straightens immediately and goes to shake his hand. “Sheriff Stilinski,” he greets. “Peter Hale.”

“Please, just call me Sheriff,” his dad jokes.

Stiles rolls his eyes as he gnaws on a pen cap.

“I hope you’re hungry. I wouldn’t want these pizzas to go to waste,” his dad says as he gestures to the boxes he’s sat down on the kitchen table. “You’re certainly invited to stay. You’d be the first guest my son’s brought home. I’ll admit, he’s had me worried.”

Peter opens his mouth, most likely to accept, but Stiles quickly interjects by saying, “Peter was just leaving, actually.” He shoves a stack of notecards into Peter’s hands before ushering him out the door quickly.

“It was nice meeting you, Sheriff,” Peter calls out from over his shoulder, sounding very amused with Stiles’s antics. When Stiles has pushed him over the threshold, he turns to face Stiles with a grin. "Do you know there's a cat that sits across the street from your house nearly everyday?"

"What?" Stiles blinks before shaking his head. "I mean animals usually can be found outside. Cats are one of them. They're not called Alley Cats for nothing. Though we don't have alleys but the term can still apply, I think."

"Yes, but this particular one is peculiar. Have you really not noticed?"
"No." And Stiles silently thinks, *Nor do I want to. What is with this guy?*

Peter hums thoughtfully but doesn't say anything more on the matter. Instead, he says, "Thanks, Stilinski. I’ll let you know how my paper goes."

"Or don’t," Stiles advises before slamming the door shut. He locks it for good measure and isn’t surprised that his father is looking at him oddly when he turns around. “What?”

“You tell me.”

“He gives me the creeps," Stiles merely says before pushing past his father to make his way over to the pizza. He shoots his dad a look. “This is really unhealthy.” His dad gives him an annoyed look. “What? Did you flash your gun and badge before requesting every meat known to man be sprinkled over these pizzas?”

“I had a feeling you might say that. I’ve been eating all that organic crap you’ve been feeding me without fail, so I think I deserve this little slip,” his dad says as he steals the slice Stiles was just about to eat. “I’ll take it easy. But you should know that I invited Melissa and her son over.”

Stiles narrows his eyes at his dad.

Melissa McCall had been the pretty nurse who his dad had flirted (terribly) with when he took Stiles to get updated on all his shots because his current high school refused to accept him without them.

His dad just meets his stare head on. “Go straighten the living room. I won’t even ask about your room,” he says after a swallow.

Stiles huffs but he does what his father asks. He’s got good timing, too, because by the time he’s got the living room in order, the doorbell rings. He answers it because his dad asks him too.

Melissa greets him in some purple scrubs with a homemade blackberry pie in her hands. Her son smiles at him and Stiles can’t help but notice that his jaw is crooked.

Stiles moves out the way and lets them in, closing the door behind them. He’s not even surprised when his dad is waiting at the kitchen table with the good plates and cups like this was some kind of gourmet meal.

Melissa smiles and greets his dad and his dad gets all gooey in the face and that’s all Stiles can take before he begs off eating at the table so he can go into the living room instead. His father wouldn’t normally let him eat there, but Melissa’s got him so enthralled that he just waves him off without a glance.

Subsequently, Melissa’s son follows him, and they sit on the living room floor with their backs against the couch while Stiles channel surfs.

“My name is Scott.”

“Stiles.”

“Mom says you guys moved here a little bit ago,” Scott says with a mouthful of food. “You like it so far?”

Stiles shrugs and avoids really answering. “Do you go to Beacon Hills High? I don’t remember seeing you.”
“I’m thirteen,” Scott explains, and Stiles feels a pang of disappointment. Scott somehow picks up on it and adds, “But I will be a freshman in the fall.” He smiles wide. “So what are your favorite video games? I’m really into Dragon Age.”

“Oh thank god. A kindred spirit.”

Scott laughs.

Stiles discovers he has a lot more in common with Scott than what he would have thought. The fact that they are a year and a grade apart doesn’t dispel their instant connection. They hit it off, spectacularly so.

By the end of the night, Melissa kisses his dad on the cheek while Stiles and Scott exchange phone numbers, making plans to hang out over the weekend. Stiles tries not to think about why his dad and Melissa exchange these pleased and knowing looks when they do. He waves at Scott one last time and goes up to his room while his dad insists on walking Melissa to her car.

He stops short after he opens his door and sees the white wolf that Peter had brought with him as a ‘gift’ sitting on the middle of his bed like someone had put it there.

It certainly hadn’t been Stiles.

He also can’t help but to notice that his window is ajar.

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The next day during AP Biology, Cora Hale approaches him and-

No, wait.

Let's back up for a moment.

To put things in perspective: Cora Hale is intense. She usually puts blinders on, ignores everyone, and paves a clear path through the crowd with just a stormy expression. There have been many occasions that (Stiles couldn't help but to notice) she'll be approached by girls and guys alike who she'll dismiss with one look or callous comment.

Stiles has never known her to actively approach anyone about anything. And yes, she isn’t always unpleasant, but she always keeps to herself (unlike her other siblings, who were social butterflies by nature). But Stiles thinks it's because she prefers it that way. Cora is the calm and the storm, you know, those days in the summer with thick clouds in the sky, and even in the dry air, you wouldn’t help but to wonder if it would rain.

Which is why it kind of throws him for a loop when the next day during AP Biology, while Stiles is trying not to fall asleep as he roots around his backpack for the assigned homework, Cora Hale approaches him and says, “You’re Bilinski.”

“Stilinski,” Stiles corrects, trying not to take offense of her wording of it. He leans back warily when Cora pushes her face close to his. She smells like coconut and jasmine. “Or you can call me Stiles,” he adds lamely, nervous and confused.

Cora scowls, furrows her brow as her fingers slowly curl into fists. Her raven black hair is braided into two french braids and she’s wearing a grey sweatshirt with cupcakes and smiley faces over an a-line leather skirt with white sneakers. Her eyebrows are unfairly perfect, her winged eyeliner is flawless, and her burgundy lipstick looks like a religion. She’s always obscenely well put together.
It makes Stiles want to cry a little.

Cora says, “Why do you smell like my brother?”


“No, dumbass,” Cora says, and wow, rude, but that’s all she says.

The bell rings and everyone is forced to go to their assigned seats.

This doesn’t stop Cora from glaring at him the whole period.

Or in AP History.

Or in AP English.

Stiles can’t think of what he could have possibly done.

And also, what kind of nose does Cora have to be able to smell *people on other people*?

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During lunch, *Laura Hale* sits down at his table with a knowing smirk that Stiles doesn’t get at all and says, “You’re cute.”

Stiles splutters and almost spits orange juice on Laura but she’s got freaky fast reflexes and she gracefully ducks out of the way in time. “Oh god, I’m sorry!” he says, completely mortified. He knows his face must be absolutely red.

Laura just throws her head back and laughs.

That doesn’t help Stiles’s dignity at all since-

No, wait.

*Let’s back up for a moment.*

To put things in perspective: Laura Hale is like high school royalty. She's all soft pageant smiles as she floats through the hallways with her equally popular and beautiful clique like butter wouldn't melt on her tongue. Her very presence is peaceful, like a warm, breezy, summer day with the smell of earth in the air; those days when it feels as if nature itself could reach out with arms and hold you in the simplest embrace.

Laura likes to wear her hair long, like down to her waist and keeps it gleaming with a healthy shine. She’s wearing a purple v-neck sweater tucked in a pair of black high-waisted jeans. She’s got the kind of an elegant grace and shape to her (like a stage dancer). She definitely looks like she’s Derek’s and Cora’s older sister, but some of her facial features are slightly different.

Stiles wonders maybe if they have a different dad or something.

“It’s okay, Stiles,” Laura says, and *holy god*, she knows his name *and* she even pronounced it correctly! “I heard you had a little run in with my uncle.”

“Uh, yes? Yes. I did,” Stiles stammers, nervous and he doesn’t know why. Oh wait. He does. He’s only talking to one of the most popular girls in school and trying so hard not to ruin it.
Laura hums thoughtfully before she says, “He gave you something, didn’t he? A stuffed toy?”

“Uh.”

“You should know that it wasn’t his to give,” Laura continues, ignoring Stiles’s expression of bewilderment. “You didn’t throw it away did you?”

“Why? Is it cursed?” Stiles asks. It would be just his luck to be in possession of a cursed artifact.

Laura snickers. “Nope.”

Stiles waits for her to elaborate. She doesn’t. “Okay, well…” He fidgets with his lunch tray. “Is it yours? Do you want it back? I can give it back. I have no problem with returning things. I’m like a librarian’s wet dream come true, and I’m going to stop before I say anything else to embarrass myself.”

Laura just smiles fondly at him.

Stiles stares dreamily.

“Did you cuddle it?” Laura asks suddenly, as her nose twitches. She smirks as she looks over her shoulder at Derek, who is glaring at them for whatever reason from across the room where he’s sitting with his basketball team.

Stiles hunches down slightly. His glare is almost as intimidating as Cora’s. Must be genetic. He says, “Did I cuddle what?”

“The wolf.”

Stiles feels his cheeks grow warm. Honestly, it had been an accident. He swears he shoved the thing to the other side of his bed before he fell asleep, but he woke up that morning with it in his arms and his nose buried deep in its fur. It had smelled really good, like vanilla and jasmine. “Um — no?”

For some reason, and it has to be coincidence, as soon as he says this, Derek glares even harder at him before he storms out of the cafeteria.

Laura snorts before she turns her gaze back towards him and just looks at him like she knows he’s lying. He probably shouldn’t have phrased it as a question. She says, “You’re cute.”

“Yeah, you said that already,” Stiles says and then he quickly backtracks because this is Laura Hale paying him a compliment. “I mean — thank you? Usually my grandma used to only say that but more in a like patronizing way. Not that I think you’re humoring me or anything. You seem to know what’s cute, and what’s not cute. Uh. Yeah.”

Laura doesn’t seem to mind the word vomit at all. She stands, leaning over the table to steal his apple and Stiles gets a faint whiff of jasmine and grapefruit. She takes a loud, juicy bite before she says, “It’s Derek’s.”

Stiles blinks in confusion.

“The wolf,” Laura elaborates in a cryptic tone before she strides out of the cafeteria with all eyes on her.

Stiles nearly swallows his own tongue.
His dad would say that once is an accident. Twice is coincidence. Three times is a pattern.

By the end of the day, Derek Hale corners him in the boys’ locker room-

No, wait.

Let’s back up for a moment.

To put things in perspective: Derek Hale is the epitome of "boy-next-door”. He has more of a laid back style to match his attitude. He wore things like padded vests over long sleeve henleys matched perfectly with a pair of joggers and the latest shoes. He's not so much soft-spoken as he is polite but Stiles has never seen him throw a fist or pick on the new kid like some of the varsity players on the swim team are infamous for.

Which is why Stiles is a little thrown that Derek Hale, after a very embarrassing and disappointing Lacrosse tryout, confronts him in the boys' locker room to ask, “Are you an idiot?”

“What? Hey, are you even supposed to be in here? You...uh…you’re a....”

Derek furrows his brow and leans closer, looming over Stiles so he can stare at him intently in the same way that Peter did the day before. But then he starts sniffing at Stiles before his mouth twists into a scowl.

Stiles swallows and jerks away nervously, biting back a curse when he accidentally knocks his elbow into the locker behind him.

Stiles is upset, okay? He’s been confronted with way too much hotness today and he has no idea what’s going on. One minute, he's invisible and now all three Hales have approached him and stared him down like he couldn’t be any more real. He stares at Derek with wide eyes and he tries not to think about how everyone is watching them with interest, instead of like, you know, reporting this confrontation to the nearest adult. Seriously though, his heart is beating like a drum in his chest because Derek smells exactly like the stuffed animal he still has in his bed.

Stiles feels his cheeks grow warm and he fidgets.

Derek glares at him and leans even further into his space which helps nothing. “I said, are you an idiot?”

Is he being bullied? Is this what being bullied feels like? Do people still even bully other people these days?

“No, I, uh, I’m not an idiot. I’m actually Stiles. Stilinski. Stiles Stilinski. And you, uh, apparently don’t have any issues with personal space. This is very personal right now. Did I do something? Is this about the —” And here Stiles makes sure to lower his voice, even though they are literally only talking about a stuffed animal, not drugs or anything illegal. “— the wolf? Because I had no idea. Peter just ambushed me with it, claiming it was a gift for my birthday but my birthday isn’t for another couple of weeks. Not that you care, because why would you care? You don’t care. I don’t care. It’s beside the point. I’ll—I’ll totally give it back, dude. You know, if it means so much to you. Which I can understand because I used to have this pillow that I couldn’t sleep without when I was little, so, you know, uh. Totally get it.”

Derek stares at him like he’s the most idiotic person before he shakes his head and says, “Stay away from my Uncle Peter.” And then he just leaves Stiles standing there, gaping like an idiot with his shirt halfway off without even mentioning the stuffed animal.
In hindsight, Stiles probably, *definitely*, should have known something was up.

But he didn’t.

*Of course* he didn’t.
The rest of the week passes without incident and things *presumably* go back to normal.

Derek and Cora ignore him altogether (no surprises there, he doesn’t register on most people’s radar in this town). But whenever Laura sees him in the halls or at lunch, she goes out of her way to give him a smile, or a wave, or a wink, or even all three if it’s a good day. Lately, it’s been really good days with her. Seriously, he doesn’t know how he’s gotten to be so fortunate.

Stiles isn’t sure what to think of it, so he decides to not think of it at all. He’s a real advocate for ignoring a problem until it goes away. Not that this is a problem or anything because *Laura Hale* notices him now (this has to be some teenage milestone). It’s just confusing. Stiles feels as if he has become a punch line to some unknown joke, and he’s completely fine with never knowing what the joke is. Forced obliviousness either has to be his best or worst asset.

As for the white wolf — or as he likes to call it, ‘the stuffed animal of chaos’ — he puts it on top of his dresser and leaves it there until he can figure out what he should do about it. He absolutely does not touch it. He has a feeling that Derek or Cora or Laura would know if he did. So he doesn’t.

Stiles drowns his worries by diving into schoolwork, TV, comics and videogames (plus the occasional food mashup/experiment gone wrong; last week he’d made the grievous mistake of slathering nutella over some leftover hard shell tacos *before* cramming it with bits of bananas, olives, and hot dogs, which — yeah — was the worst of them so far. He didn’t leave the bathroom for almost three hours after that.) Outside of those *wonderful* life choices, he skypes and texts Scott from time to time. And by time to time, he means almost every night.

His dad is oddly out of sorts during that week, but Stiles knows from experience that it probably has to do with his work. Probably.

One symptom of his wandering thoughts is that his dad always gets absentminded with simple things. Like holding his coffee to his mouth without ever actually drinking a sip, or stirring sugar and cream in the cup until he’s forgotten just how much or how little he’s put in it (which in turn ends up with gallons of discarded over sweetened coffee going down the drain in the kitchen sink). Oftentimes, his dad will leave the faucet on even after he’s left the room, neither of them knowing why he turned it on in the first place. Or he’ll catch him staring at the TV without actually watching the TV.

The sheriff gets lost like that sometimes. He combs over the details of whatever case he has at the time almost obsessively. He treats the victims like family. It’s what makes him such a good detective.

Stiles is a bit intrigued by this unknown case that’s got his dad so wrapped up in his thoughts. He tries to ask, but his dad just sighs and gives him a sadly indulgent smile while telling him not to worry. As if Stiles is even capable of doing anything but. Which is why Stiles pulls up any recent local news articles he can find. He doesn’t find a treasure trove of weird activity, but he finds enough. Most of what the articles report center around the ‘*strange disappearances of over a hundred household pets and wildlife animals*’. Some newer articles say the animals that are found by locals and hikers in random spots within the woods are ‘*slashed open and drained dry of all blood*’

Stiles whispers, “*El Chupacabra…*” to himself and feels silly immediately, slapping his laptop shut. He had spent hours perusing through all the online media outlets that Beacon Hills has to offer. He grabs his copy of *The Hobbit* and some post-it notes, because it’s Friday night and he has better things to do than psych himself out about some random coincidences that could just be some crazy
group of occultists getting their freak on. (Which is more likely than a *mythical creature* doing it.)

Stiles totally doesn’t care and he loses himself to the realm of Middle Earth, and totally doesn’t care even *more* as he gnaws on his nails. He uses sheer will to concentrate on utilizing his post-its to mark his favorite places in the book he’ll want to revisit and explore.

It works for an hour before he’s up and at his computer again. He is only so strong.

He doesn’t get a wink of sleep until dawn, and by then he's sprawled across a pile of articles he had printed out. His body is covered in photos, and he’s surrounded by print-outs of anything that might even be a little bit connected to what’s been happening locally. A stack of papers to his right is pages upon pages that recount any past reports concerning El Chupacabra in other communities. He had spent hours sorting what could find online until he had a good collection that didn’t seem like total hoaxes.

Stiles jolts awake in the morning when his dad tosses a shoe at his stomach and he stumbles to his feet. He gets tangled in a pair of his jeans that had been tossed on the floor, trips and slips over some books and articles, and then lands back onto the carpeted floor with a loud thud and a high-pitched squawk.

His dad sighs.

Scott, who also happens to be standing beside the sheriff, laughs behind the back of his hand, like the traitor he is.

“Stiles,” his dad starts, and then pauses as he assesses the disaster area that is Stiles’s room.

Stiles bats away a piece of paper stuck to the side of his face and smiles innocently at his dad.

The sheriff sighs again and lifts his coffee mug to his lips as he mutters, “I don’t even want to know.” He takes a loud sip before he says, “This is why I tell you to clean your room. You could break your neck.” Then walks away.

Scott gingerly steps around the mess and makes his way over to Stiles. “I tried calling before I came over but you didn’t pick up so I thought — woah, dude. What is all this?” he asks suddenly as he picks up a magnified picture of a gutted bull terrier. “Um.”

“*Not* what it looks like, Scotty,” Stiles promises as he snatches the photo away and throws it over his shoulder. “Remind me what we’re doing today?”

Scott blinks slowly, like he’s trying to process everything, and then says, “*Freaks and Geeks*?”

“Right,” Stiles says as he runs a palm over his buzz cut. “Marathon club?”

“Marathon club,” Scott confirms with a happy smile.

Scott had invited Stiles to join him and his friends for their monthly get-together during a Skype call. He had explained that it’s something they did every month: pick a series, watch it from beginning to end, and move on.

Stiles had never done anything like that, not even with his friends back in Los Angeles. He had been in mostly online communities, swapping manga or comics, and hadn’t really hung out with anyone that much outside of school. He had only had two friends: Emmanuel and Sebastian, but he doesn’t really feel like they should count for more reasons than he could name. So when Scott offered, he had accepted the invitation without thinking about it — but once he did, well, he started *thinking*
about it.

“Okay. Let’s take ten to talk about the elephant in the room. Well, no, elephant is probably not — I mean it is but it isn’t. Or, you know, maybe I should — I mean I could, and, to be honest, I’m trying to. I’m not exactly used to the whole, you know, everything. So I’m not trying to make it into a big deal. It’s probably not a big deal, but I’m the type to talk about the things — well, I like to talk in general but —”

“Stiles, I’m lost,” Scott admits quickly. He looks like he’s been trying to find the right moment to jump in without being rude, which is okay because he’s not used to Stiles yet. Interruption is fair game and Stiles is never offended when it comes to that. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing...per se. Just. I have to say this because I just have to.” Stiles sighs and he might as well just say the exact thing he’s thinking. “It’s not going to be weird, right? You told your friends about me. I’m, like... older.”

“Not that old!” Scott instantly protests. “And they’re all around my age. Some are even your age.”

“Yeah, but, you guys are eighth graders and I’m in high school,” Stiles remarks carefully.

Scott’s brow furrows and he looks at Stiles with huge puppy dog eyes. “You think it’s lame?”

“No!” Stiles quickly says, and then adds, “I think I’m lame. You guys are probably really awesome and I’m just a dumb loser who couldn’t even make friends within his own age group.”

Scott still doesn’t look like he understands. “But we are in your age group.”

“I didn’t mean like that, I meant — like — you know, I’m in high school, and I have no high school friends.” Stiles sighs and slaps a hand over his eyes when Scott gets this totally hurt look on his face. “I’m not explaining this right.” He drops his hand. “I don’t want your friends to feel weird because I’m hanging around.”

“Stiles,” Scott says slowly and he looks very earnest. “You’re one of the coolest people I’ve ever met. If I like you then they’ll like you. The fact that you’re in high school is a bonus.”

Stiles’s mouth fidgets uncertainly. “Really?”

“Totally,” Scott confirms, flashing his trademark sunny smile. “If anything, you make me ten times cooler just by association.”

Stiles grins shyly and shoves at Scott’s shoulder. “Alright, ease up — you’re really laying it on thick.”

Scott shrugs but he keeps smiling like he really needs Stiles to believe that he’s awesome.

Stiles stands and dusts himself off. “Give me thirty minutes and I’ll be ready to go.” He starts searching for his towel, and it takes him longer than it should have. He should probably really clean his room. Then again, this is a constant thought in his mind that he never follows through on.

Once he finds his towel by sheer miracle, he makes his way to the bathroom and takes his Adderall. It kicks in while he’s standing in the shower and he ends up staring at this one tile on the wall really intensely until the water turns cold and he’s forced to snap out of it. He quickly scrub himself down before the water gets to freezing temperatures.

Scott’s lounging on one of his blue beanbag chairs with a stack of articles in his hand. He looks up
and says, “Dude!”

Stiles raises both his eyebrows expectantly before he shuffles over to his dresser for some clothes.

Scott waves the stack of papers in his hand and says again, “Dude!”

“Yeah, buddy, I’m here,” Stiles replies in amusement. He slips his boxers on under his towel and drops it once they’re on all the way. He struggles into a pair of jeans, hopping around, wishing he was coordinated with his hands and feet and — well, basically his whole body — because it would make his whole life much easier. And less embarrassing.

“You’re super into urban legends or something?” Scott asks, a meager amount of urgency in his tone. “Mi abuelo used to tell me and mis primos — wait, sorry. I mean, he used to say to my cousins and I, that these were real things to be afraid of. The legend of El Chupacabra was kind of one of his favorites. But they were just stories to scare us when he took us camping. You don’t — you don’t actually believe this has anything to do with what’s been happening here?”

Stiles pokes his head through his blue-and-orange striped shirt with a sheepish expression. “Well, it’s really — kinda? Sorta. Maybe? Yes and no. No and yes.”

Scott snorts and puts the papers down on the floor. “Nature, dude. It’s probably a mountain lion or something. We have those around here.”

“They don’t fit the pattern,” Stiles mutters to himself before he shakes his head and sighs. “You’re probably right. I just get worked up about things like this. I see something strange and I try to make sense of it. It’s genetic, really.”

Scott nods like he understands. Maybe he does.

Stiles glances towards his window at the grey, sullen sky and says, “Should I bring an umbrella? It’s pretty cloudy out. Do you think it’ll rain?”

Scott is giving him a strange look when he glances back to him.

“What?”

“Nothing…” Scott says but the way he drags it out kinda makes it apparent that it’s definitely something. “I just forget how new you are around here I guess. It, uh, never rains.”

Stiles is sure the double take he does looks as unattractive as it feels. “One second, uh…” He takes a moment to scratch his head before he continues, “What do you mean it never rains?”

Scott just shrugs like it’s no big deal. Like it’s not a phenomenon. “I was born and raised here. It’s never rained. To my understanding, it never has, even before I came along.”

“I’m sorry I just have a hard time believing that with all the lush forests and vegetation around here, it’s not because of the result of nature’s sky tears.”

Scott shrugs again.
Stiles has a million more things to say about this but he just sighs, deciding to let it go for now. Maybe he’ll bring it up with his dad.

“Oh, before I forget, your dad left and he wants you to text him and be home by ten. He also said you could spend the night at my house if you wanted and if it’s okay with my mom, but you have to call and let him know so he can come and pick you up in the morning.” He makes a face and then adds, “He also said you weren’t allowed to do anything until you did your chores, though.”

Stiles groans and falls backwards onto his bed, which turns into a pained grunt when his head hits the edge of a book. He peers over at Scott without actually moving anything but his eyes. The preteen is watching him with an amused frown. Stiles makes his best impression of a puppy pout and says, “Any chance that our status of friendship has reached a level where you help me out with things like this?”

“I can do the kitchen for you to make things go faster. But, dude,” Scott gives him a solemn look. “You’re on your own with your room and your laundry.” He offers his hand.

“Fair enough.” Stiles grabs Scott’s hand and pulls himself up.

Between them, they get everything done within two hours.

It’s a bonding experience of sorts. If sighing a lot and flinging clothes into the washer and dryer with no color separation is considered bonding. Which it totally is.

Scott drags him out of the house after the last load of laundry is thrown in the dryer. They climb onto their mountain bikes and peddle off, with Scott leading the way. They ride into town first, to stop at the local grocery store for some snacks, since Scott claims it’s his turn to host the marathon. Then somehow manage to make it to Scott’s house without dropping or spilling anything or eating dirt while attempting to juggle all the bags in an effort to keep their balance. Scott lives in a rambler house on a cul-de-sac full of, who he explained are retired Hawaiian dancers who decided to settle down here since the Beacon Hills feels kindred to them.

There’s a group of people waiting on Scott’s porch steps when they arrive.

Stiles takes a head count that comes to four girls and three boys.

They all stand and greet Scott enthusiastically.

A tall, dark-skinned boy says, “You’re late, McCall. We’ve been sitting out here for hours.”

“No you weren’t,” Scott begins to protest, but then he pauses. “Were you?”

They all share looks and snicker as Scott’s brow furrows deeper.

“Don’t think too hard, McCall,” says a boy with a perfect jawline and pretty blue eyes. He has one ear pierced, two small lines shaved in his left eyebrow, and he’s dressed like a backup dancer.

“Introduce us,” the girl besides him says. She’s dressed in nothing but pastels, wearing a powder pink oversized half-cut hoodie over some white lace high-waisted shorts and a pair of silver thigh high boots. She has a silver septum nose ring and her hair is in flowy beach waves the color of strawberry blonde. She looks like she runs a popular fashion trend blog.

“Oh, yeah. This is Stiles. Stiles, this is everybody,” Scott merely says. He starts pointing as he continues, “The giant on the end is Boyd.” He points to the black male wearing a graphic t-shirt with some obscure indie band name. ”Then Jackson, and his girlfriend Lydia.” He indicates to the blond
with the pierced ear and the girl with the strawberry blonde hair. Then he points to the boy with
distinct Hawaiian features. “That’s Daniel, but we call him Danny,” he says.

Danny smiles with a slight wave. He’s wearing a Looney Tunes track suit oddly enough, but it seems
fitting. He has long hair that stops right above his shoulders and he has a sweet smile.

When Scott sees that’s all sorted, he continues, “That’s Allison, but we like to call her Ally.”

Stiles isn’t sure, but he thinks that Scott puts a bit of a lovelorn sigh with Allison’s name.

Allison appears to be the short, pale girl with long, curly, jet black hair that’s tucked behind her ears
and stops at her small waist. When she grins, she has the most adorable pair of dimples that Stiles has
ever seen. She’s wearing a white t-shirt with the Canadian flag under a red flannel button down and
a black pleated skirt (and white gladiator sandals).

“All then’s Erica,” Scott says, moving on.

Erica is a really lanky, tall but pretty girl that has the build of a ballerina dancer who dresses like a
goth. Her platinum blonde hair, which is obviously dyed, sits in a messy bun above her head. She’s
got smoky black eye shadow that makes her green eyes pop, and the black lipstick really makes her
pale skin look almost like porcelain. She’s wearing a black, gently fitted, V-neck satin dress with
fishnet stockings and burgundy ankle boots. She has more ear piercings than Stiles could ever dream
to have (she doesn’t take pain well). Erica just smirks and winks.

Scott finishes, “Last but not least, that’s Malia.”

Malia’s got honey blonde hair that’s about as short as Danny’s, and really thick eyebrows. She looks
bored with everything. She’s wearing a heavy metal graphic t-shirt and a pair of studded dark denim
leggings with flip-flops. Her toenails are painted with smiley faces.

Then it gets silent and everyone turns their attention to Stiles.

Stiles hopes he isn’t staring because they are all really good-looking. He has a problem with staring
at attractive people, and right now he’s got a whole group of them looking at him in apprehension.
That’s probably because he’s doing nothing but staring, like a complete weirdo.

“Is this One Tree Hill? Why does everyone in this town have killer looks?” Stiles blurs because he
can’t help it and he’s not even exaggerating. He tries to get his point across by flailing his arms, bags
in hand, groceries threatening to spill out. “Seriously, I call total b and s. There’s no way you guys
are in junior high. You’re super aesthetically pleasing and we all know that we Americans are ugly
trash.”

They all smirk. And just like that, the tension is broken, and they welcome him into the fold.

Scott unlocks his front door and they all pile into his living room to start their marathon of Freaks
and Geeks.

Stiles ends up on the couch, crammed between a sprawling Erica and Malia. Malia puts her feet in
Stiles’s lap like she has been his friend for longer than ten minutes, while Erica commandeers the bag
of cheese puffs and watches the TV upside down like it’s no big deal. She goes to great lengths not
to touch any part of him and he totally doesn't take offense to that because Malia seems to be making
up for it by lounging over him like a lazy, affectionate cat.

Lydia stays curled up on top of Jackson in one of the loveseats, phone in hand and attention divided.
Jackson keeps his hands planted firmly on her ass in a blatant show of possessiveness that Stiles
hopes isn’t because he’s here.

Danny is sitting on the loveseat across from theirs, and he’s constantly texting.

Stiles has a sneaking suspicion that Lydia and Danny are texting each other.

Boyd sits leaning against the coffee table with his hand propping his head, completely enthralled by Lindsay Weir.

Meanwhile, Scott and Allison are lying on their stomachs, shoulders touching as they sneak glances at each other like clockwork.

Stiles isn't sure if they're in a relationship or edging their way into that territory, but the tension between them couldn't be any more blatant.

From noon to midnight, they watch episode after episode, pausing in-between to share their favorite scenes and characters, or to just generally murmur in anticipation. After a while they order some pizzas and everyone pitches in when the delivery boy gets there.

Stiles doesn't say much because he’s too busy watching them. He thinks about how nice it is to fit in again and feel like he belongs somewhere. It makes him smile when he thinks he'll have a clique come fall when they make their way into high school as freshmen.

The night wears on and Stiles has to call his dad because it’s looking like everyone’s staying over. He tells his dad he doesn't have to worry about picking him up in the morning. He can find his own way home.

Melissa strolls into the house sometime around three in the morning in some aqua-green scrubs and everyone greets her with a “Hey, Ms. McCall!” and she smiles like she isn't even a smidgen surprised to see them sprawled all over her living room.

Melissa disappears for a moment and comes back with a heap of pillows and blankets, which she passes out to everyone before bidding them a good night.

Everyone crashes after the last episode.

The house gets dark and quiet.

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Ramona's Old Fashioned Eatery on Mulholland Blvd is one of the most well known restaurants in, not only Beacon Hills, but all of the US of A. It’s even been on Diners Drive In & Dives, that one TV show hosted by Guy Fieri. A whole entire episode was even dedicated to the layout of their whole menu. It’s interior is cosmetically designed to look like a 50’s diner, with shiny red vinyl booths and checkerboard linoleum floors. Even the employees dress in vintage candy striped uniforms and paper waiter hats.

In the morning, Stiles is dragged to the infamous diner (apparently owned by Boyd's mom) with his new group of friends and they all cram into a booth together.

Malia asks for his phone and Stiles gives it to her with a curious frown, but she doesn’t do anything to it other than save her number. She slides it to Erica, who saves her number as well, before tossing it over to Danny, who shoots him a dimpled smile.

Stiles blushes but smiles back before hiding behind his menu as his phone gets commandeered by
Lydia, who bullies Jackson into giving up his number too before they hand it over to Allison.

Allison chucks it at Boyd, and he catches it easily. Stiles sends them a mass text once he’s handed the phone back, so they all can have his number as well.

In the daylight of the diner, Stiles gets cocooned by the sound of laughter, of inside jokes, and of voices trying to talk over other voices. He doesn’t say much still, just being as observant as he can. He keeps waiting for this to feel awkward or to feel out of place, but it never happens.

Scott looks over at him from time to time with a smile when he isn’t arguing fondly with Boyd about something small and insignificant. His smile says, *You’re okay with all this?*

Stiles’s quiet grin replies, *It’s cool. I like it.*

Scott grins harder before he throws a sugar packet at Boyd and continues their faux debate. Allison leans into his side and Scott fumbles with his words and he flushes happily.

Lydia smirks as Jackson whispers something in her ear as she types away on her phone.

Malia and Erica arm-wrestle while Danny plays referee.

The waitress swings by eventually, disrupting the commotion of their commingling conversations to take their orders. After she leaves, Lydia turns a keen eye on Stiles and says, “Are you dating anyone?”

Stiles chokes on his next sip of water.


Stiles coughs and wipes his mouth before wiping the table. “I, uh — no? No. No, I’m — not, uh —”

“No old flames back home?” Erica asks with a mischievous grin. Her eyes are gleaming. “Fuck buddies?”

Stiles flushes. He feels incredibly self-aware all of a sudden. “No,” he squeaks before he quickly clears his throat. “I don’t — that’s not something I usually think about,” he admits.

“What? No way,” Malia says as she braids the end of her low ponytail. She eyes him. “I mean, we’re teenagers. What else is there to think about?”

“Our education?” Danny interjects, and huffs when Malia sticks her tongue out at him.

“Chocolate?” Allison offers.

Scott says, “Video games?”

“Designer handbags,” Lydia quips, sipping her water and texting at the same time.

Boyd says, “Food.”

Jackson says, “Cars.”

“Just stop,” Scott pleads and sends Stiles an apologetic look. “You’re making him uncomfortable.”

“We share everything though,” Boyd points out, but not unkindly. “Sooner or later we’re gonna know his business too.”

No one disagrees.

Stiles doesn’t know what to think. He’s both fascinated and horrified by their openness when it comes to discussing sexuality. This is definitely not how things went back in his old neighborhood. You either had someone or you didn’t, but what you did with that person was never discussed outside of social media.

“So, Stiles,” Allison says, because she is a godsend. “Tell us about Los Angeles. Why’d you move?”

Stiles takes the easy way out and talks about his dad’s promotion and how moving to Beacon Hills had been a huge part of it. He rambles about what life was like in Los Angeles, and the things he used to get up to with his old friends. He also has to explain that, no, he hasn’t met many celebrities. Thankfully, that’s the only thing they find disappointing about his life story.

The waitress comes back with their orders, and everyone’s attention shifts.

Eventually they all start talking about what series they should get into next. It becomes a toss-up between Doctor Who and Smallville.

They let Stiles have the final say since he’s new, and he chooses Doctor Who because he’s already familiar with it. And by familiar, he means it’s been sitting in his Netflix queue waiting to be watched for a year now. (But everyone’s an offender of an untouched Netflix queue).

They begin to make plans, wondering what they want to do next Saturday.

Boyd makes the suggestion that they should all go ice-skating, and since his dad owns the rink, they could reserve it privately for free.

“Yeah, let’s do it,” Erica says, slapping her palm to the table like a judge making a final ruling. Everyone nods in approval, aside from Scott. He groans. “Come on, guys! You know I can’t skate!” he protests. Everyone ignores him.

Stiles gets distracted by a text from his dad informing him that they need to talk as soon as he gets home.

Malia asks, “Stiles?”

Stiles looks up and blinks when he notices they’re all staring at him with expectant looks. “Uh — what?”

“Ice-skating?” Lydia prompts.

“Oh,” Stiles says, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly. “Yeah, sure. As long as it’s any time after my lacrosse practice.”

Jackson, Danny, and Scott perk up with interest, but Jackson’s the one to say, “You play lacrosse?”

Stiles makes a face and replies, “That depends on how you define playing.”

Jackson shoots him a look. “I define it as you being out on the field and using your feet to get the ball from one end to the other.”
“Well,” Stiles drawls. “I’m certainly out on the field. If you count handing out towels or water.”

Scott gives him a sympathetic look. “I’ve got hair trigger asthma. I feel you, dude.”

Stiles kindly doesn’t point out that it’s not the same because Scott’s excuse is actually valid. Stiles just sucks.

Jackson must think along the same line of thought, because he shakes his head and says, “That’s pathetic, Stilinski — ow!” His knee jerks into the table and it shakes with the impact.

Lydia glares at him and Stiles isn’t exactly sure, but he thinks that she just stomped on his foot. “Jackson, be nice,” she hisses.

Jackson glares back at her before he shifts his gaze away and then says, “Danny and I practice sometimes.”

“You should totally join us,” Danny adds with a wide smile. “Between Jackson and I, we can get your coach to notice you.”

Stiles nods, dumbfounded.

“Then you can vouch for us when we try out next year,” Jackson says with a smirk.

Everyone rolls their eyes, unsurprised by Jackson’s motives.

“Uh, sure — I mean, if I have any pull,” Stiles promises unsurely.

Jackson still nods and says, “We’ll text you,” before he plays rock-paper-scissors with Danny and Allison to determine who will foot the bill.

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When Stiles gets home that Sunday, after being dropped off by Ms. McCall and Scott, he sees Mr. Henley (their next-door-neighbor) doing a bit of yard work in the front. “Hey, Mr. Henley. Doing some gardening?”

“If I have my way, Mr. Stilinski, this house will win the prestigious blue ribbon for ‘Best Landscaping’! There’s no way Mrs. Doyle from across the street will steal it from me again!” Mr. Henley explains from between two of the rose bushes he’s trimming. He pauses to wipe the sweat from his brow. He’s a man of average height, always suffering from farmer’s tan, littered with streaks of dirt and his wild, bushy eyebrows set in a determined furrow.

Stiles once joked with him that he keeps all his emotions in his eyebrows and he’s such a lighthearted man that he agreed. He grins and says, “You’ve got green fingers, Mr. Henley. If anyone can do it, you can!”

“Thanks, young man. Be sure to stop by some time. My wife would love to have you and the sheriff over for dinner. You both are such nice folks,” Mr. Henley praises before he disappears to the side of his house with his dirty hedge clippers.

Stiles smiles fondly as he continues into his own house. Based on the sounds he hears, he knows he’ll find his dad in the kitchen.

His dad is waiting for him when he gets home that evening. He’s got this nervous look on his face that Stiles isn’t used to seeing.
“What? What did you eat?” Stiles asks, and he makes a mental note to formally introduce himself to his dad’s deputies so he can have an insider who can inform him of when his dad is being less than square about his diet.

The sheriff snorts. “Nothing you wouldn’t approve of,” he replies, and he sounds a little bitter about it, so Stiles believes him.

“Okay, what’s with the face, then?” Stiles says, and really starts to worry when his dad makes a gesture for him to take a seat at the kitchen table. He sits.

His dad sits across from him.

Stiles folds his hands together and bounces his right leg for a few seconds before his dad stands up again and begins pacing the kitchen. “Uh, dad —”

He stops moving to say, “Give me a moment here, son.”

Stiles shuts his mouth and mimes a zipping gesture across his lips.

The sheriff goes right back to pacing.

Stiles scratches the back of his head before he leans back in his chair.

His dad stops pacing, turns to him, and oddly says, “You know how you always wanted a little brother?”

“Okay, that wasn’t what I expected you to say.”

“Just answer the question.”

“Um, yes? Vaguely? I don’t know,” Stiles says as he frowns at his dad before his gaze narrows. “If this is your way of breaking the news to me that Ms. McCall is pregnant, then —”

“What? No! Jesus, kid. No.” His dad rubs a tired hand down his face. He pulls out the chair across from Stiles and sits with a sigh. “The thing is — there’s been some recent developments.”

Stiles nods in what he hopes is an encouraging way, despite his confusion.

“And you should know that I would never make any major decisions without consulting you first, especially when it affects you,” his dad continues. Then he stops again, like he’s trying to find the right words.

Stiles figures he should be supportive and he says, “Whatever it is, dad — it’s fine. I mean, I was okay when you wanted to move. It sucked at first. Man, did it suck. Like it really, really —”

His dad gives him a pointed look.

“—anyway, it sucked but things are totally fine now. I’m adaptable. I’m like one of those animals that can do camouflage, or like that one lizard. What is it called? Didn’t they have a movie about it with Johnny Depp as the voice? What am I saying? Johnny Depp has been in a million movies. This one, though — it didn’t have Helena Bonham Carter in it, so that helps to narrow things down. I think they were in the wild west —”

“Stiles,” his father interrupts, sounding amused.

“Right,” Stiles says breathlessly, tapping the kitchen table with listless fingers. “I’m just saying that
I’m totally on board with whatever it is you’re trying to tell me.”

“I adopted a kid.”

“You adopted a kid,” Stiles echoes. He blinks and sits back, letting his hands fall into his lap. He opens his mouth and then closes it. He opens it again but then closes it again.

The sheriff snorts. “Is that what it takes to make you speechless?”


His dad nods in understanding. “Take your time.”

Stiles rolls his eyes. “Tell me about this kid. Why did you adopt him? Am I not enough for you? Just kidding. What’s his name? Will he being staying in the room that’s supposed to be your office but you never use it? Is he staying forever? Will he take your last name? Does he —”

“Whoa, whoa,” his dad says, lifting his hands, palms facing him in a ‘hold it’ gesture. “One question at a time. His name is Isaac Lahey, and he just turned twelve. He got mixed up in some bad dealings with his older brother and his dad. They’re both in jail now and Isaac had nowhere else to go. They wanted to release him to the state, but his therapist feared it would be the worst thing to put him in the system like that. He also, uh, grew attached to me over the past couple of weeks, which is understandable since I’ve been one of his only visitors while he stayed at the hospital. His therapist suggested that I think about taking him in. Well, I did, and I talked to him about it and he seemed receptive to the idea.”

Stiles nods and he begins to understand why his dad’s been so distracted lately. “So, is he — wait, what happened though? Why’d he have to see a therapist? Why was he in the hospital? What did his dad and older brother do?”

His dad looks really uncomfortable, but above all he just looks sad. Not a typical type of sad, either, but the type of sad he got after Stiles’s mother died.

Stiles hates that look. It shoots little pinpricks of pain straight into his heart and makes him want to cry. He quickly backtracks, “It’s none of my business. I’m sorry.”

“No,” his dad says as he shakes his head. “No, you’re not wrong for being curious. I’d rather Isaac talk about it himself then me. This is going to be a big change. It’s not just going to be only you and me anymore.”

Stiles hadn’t thought of it like that. “I don’t mind,” he says softly, and he really means it.

His dad smiles and huffs before leaning over to ruffle his buzz cut. “You’re a good kid,” he says.

Stiles blushes at the praise and grins, batting his dad’s hand away. “I learned it from the very best.”

“Right, butter me up, why don’t you,” his dad jokes.

“Now why would I do that? Butter is bad for your cholesterol,” Stiles counters, and snickers at the unimpressed look his dad gives him. “So when is he coming?”

“In a couple of hours,” his dad admits. “I got the room ready while you were gone. Well, come and see.”

Stiles follows his dad up the stairs and to the room that sits right across from his own. It smells like
the walls have been freshly painted, and there’s new furniture. It’s all watermelon themed colors. Green walls, red comforters on the queen-sized bed sitting against the wall between the windows, black dressers and a work desk. The desk has a laptop, speakers and a printer crammed on top of its surface.

“Really trying to make him feel welcomed, huh, dad?” Stiles quips, and his dad knocks their shoulders together.

“I can afford to feed and spoil an extra mouth with my new position. Not to mention the fact that it comes with a great insurance plan,” his dad whistles. “What more could a man ask for from his nine to five?”

Stiles snorts. “I’m going to go make dinner. Any special requests?”

“Lasagna,” is his dad’s automatic reply. “And would it kill you to put some actual meat in it?”

“Ground turkey is meat.”

The look on the sheriff’s face suggests that he would like to strongly disagree, but knows better than to argue the point. He eyes his son before saying, “You’re really okay with this?”

“Dad, it’s fine,” Stiles swears. It's not the way he imagined being an older brother, but he was a bit excited at the prospect still. “I’m going to go see what we have for snacks. What will you do?”

“Sleep,” is his dad’s automatic reply. “Growing up means you never get enough of it.”

“You work too hard. I feel like I never see you that much anymore. Or maybe you’re avoiding me,” Stiles jokes lightly.

“Spare me with that. Everything I do, I do for you, kiddo.”

Stiles laughs.

"Wake me when Isaac's here."

Stiles nods and watches his dad disappear into his room before he goes downstairs to start dinner. He’s putting the lasagna in the oven to cook. When he notices that there’s still a good thirty minutes left for it to sit in there, he decides to spend that time in the living room playing a few scenes of Assassin's Creed (Black Flag). He’s about to try and parkour the heck out of her latest escape attempt in the videogame when there's a knock on the door.

“Dad!” he yells and when there’s no response, he sighs and pauses the game. He jogs to the door and opens it before frowning. “You’re not Isaac.”

Peter lifts a brow. “I should hope not,” he replies. He holds up his left hand to reveal another stuffed animal.

It’s a black wolf this time.

“Oh, no,” Stiles says, sounding exasperated.

“Happy birthday.” Peter says brightly.

“Not this again.”

“You’re not opposed to black, are you?”
“Peter.”

“I admit, it’s still too early, but it’s almost April,” Peter supposes, ignoring the annoyed look crossing Stiles’s face as he eyes the stuffed toy in his hand with some consideration. “Anyway, about that paper. My professor didn’t find some of those facts useful.”

“This is why you need a librarian,” Stiles points out.

“I need you,” Peter simply says, staring at him very intently. “I wouldn’t be here if you weren’t of any use to me. Trust me —”

“Trust you?” Stiles says with a snort.

“—I don’t waste my time lightly,” he continues, ignoring the jab. “I like you, Stilinski.”

Stiles makes a face.

“Now, are you going to invite me in so I can complain more formally or do we have time to go back and forth like this? Good evening, Sheriff.” Peter flicks his gaze up and looks over Stiles’s shoulder.

Stiles turns to see his dad standing at the top of the stairs. He doesn’t look too concerned to see Peter Hale at their door. Curious.

“Stiles?”


His dad just nods. He greets Peter briefly before he returns to his room.

Stiles turns back to Peter and says, “This isn’t a good time.”

“Something smells wonderful,” is Peter’s irritating response. “Lasagna?”

Stiles glares at him. “You’re not leaving until I help, are you?”

Peter smiles big and wide. It’s still somehow carnivorous in nature.

Stiles sighs and moves out of the way so Peter can glide in. He knows the faster he can get this over with, the faster he can get Peter to leave. Hopefully. Also, considering recent developments, he’s interested in hearing what Peter knows too.

Peter suddenly says, “I have to use the bathroom,” and he dashes up the steps before Stiles can protest.

Stiles times him.

Peter comes back three minutes later and sits down at the kitchen table before looking at Stiles expectantly.

“So what facts did your professor not like?”

“I wouldn’t call it dislike. It’s more or less that some of them were a dead end. Particularly the section pertaining to El Chupacabra’s weaknesses,” Peter explains.

Stiles frowns. “I don’t understand. I was dead on about that.”
Peter makes a face like Stiles isn’t as clever as he thinks he is.

“Maybe you’re not getting it,” Stiles huffs. “The very thing that makes El Chupacabra what it is, is the very thing that makes it vulnerable.”

Peter lifts a brow but he says, “So the fact that it mauls on defenseless animals in the dead of the night is a weakness?”

“El Chupacabra thrives on heat and darkness,” Stiles elaborates. “It can’t survive in the daylight. It’s a warm-blooded creature, okay? It’s like something you’d read out of vampire lore. Where a vampire would need warm blood to live, El Chupacabra needs it to survive, to stay at a certain temperature, I guess. I also have some suspicions about its ability to use scent as a way to see, kind of like moles or Sinopoda scurion do.”

“Sensory modality,” Peter murmurs, his face clearing of all annoyance, like something is clicking for him.

“Right,” Stiles confirms. “Which means it can only scavenge during the night. Less light, meaning it’s less disorienting to the senses.”

Peter smirks. “When you put it that way, it makes perfect sense.” He moves to stand but Stiles lifts a hand and he pauses.

“I’ve got some questions for you,” Stiles says.

Peter sits and leans back in the chair, threading his fingers over his stomach casually, and waits.

“Does any of this have to do with what’s been going on around here?”

Peter widens his feet a bit and says, “And what’s been going on around here?”

“The missing and then not missing animals?” Stiles clarifies. “You know? The ones that profile exactly the same as the other reports tangent to El Chupacabra sightings.”

Peter looks heavily amused. “So you’re saying that you believe a contemporary legend is real and has manifested itself in Beacon Hills?”

Stiles cheeks grow red because yes, he is kind of implying that. “I just think it’s a little too close to a coincidence that you happen to be writing this supposed paper about the very thing that seems to relate to these events.”

“Yes. Coincidence.”

Stiles feels his right eyelid begin to twitch. “I’m not stupid,” he mutters.

Peter snorts and stands. “Why would I be here if you were?”

“That’s the thing!” Stiles flails a bit. “Why are you here?”

Peter opens his mouth but then pauses with a frown. He cocks his head before he looks intently at the door like he’s waiting for something.

Not even a second later, the doorbell rings.

“You should probably answer that,” Peter suggests lightly.
Stiles glares at him before he moves just to do so. He opens it to find a dark-skinned woman in a grey suit with her hand on a tall kid’s shoulder. The kid has blond curly hair like one of those cherub angels but half his face is covered with severe burns, like someone shoved him into a fire. He’s got his hands hidden from view in a grey hoodie with saggy pants. He’s so slender that he looks like he’s drowning in his clothes and he’s looks like he’s ready to sprint at any moment.

“Hi. You must be Stiles,” the woman greets him.

“I must be,” Stiles says, and glances at who he now suspects is Isaac.

The woman straightens suddenly as she looks over Stiles’s shoulder and Stiles stiffens when he can feel Peter looming behind him.

“Ms. Morrell,” Peter greets. “Fancy seeing you here. Your presence in town has been scarce as of late. I was beginning to wonder.”

“Peter,” Ms. Morrell replies in a rather indifferent tone. “I was unaware you knew the Stilinskis.”

“Oh, I know everybody,” Peter airily states. “And everything.”

Ms. Morrell just looks at him blankly.

Stiles feels like there is some kind of second conversation underlying their words. This town just keeps getting stranger and stranger.

“Well, I won’t keep you. I believe I hear the sheriff coming. Stiles, walk me to my car.” Peter ignores the beginnings of Stiles’s protests and gently pushes Stiles out the door and past Ms. Morrell and Isaac.

His dad is already at the doorway, ready to greet Ms. Morrell and invite her and Isaac in.

Stiles doesn’t even want to think about how Peter knew his dad was coming, because he’s too busy drooling over Peter’s red Lamboorghini, which is parked behind his father’s squad car in the driveway.

“It’s custom-made,” Peter remarks as he pats the hood before he leans against it. “Maybe I’ll take you for a drive sometime.”

“Why does that sound so dirty when you say it?” Stiles accuses.

Peter snorts. “Oh, the teenaged mind. So warped with unbridled hormones. Even the most innocent suggestion is twisted into flirtation.”

Stiles rolls his eyes.

“I meant the offer as a friend to a friend,” Peter clarifies. “Besides, I have a girlfriend, and you’re not my type anyway.”

Stiles huffs. “Wow, how disappointing. Who’d you trick into dating you?”

Peter slaps a hand over his chest where his supposed heart is and pretends to be offended. “I need no devilry. And you might already know her. Her name is Kathryn, but everyone else calls her Kate.”

“Kate? Kate Argent? Laura’s best friend?” Stiles could hardly believe it. Kate was a bottle blonde with a bad attitude and Laura’s co-captain for the school’s cheerleading squad. She took ‘Mean
Girls’ to a whole other level. And while she never gave Stiles any problems, he knew better than to not believe all the rumors he heard about anyone who was stupid enough to cross Kate. “How’d you manage that?” he asks because he just has to know.

“Not without difficulty,” Peter admits. “Assuming you mean with convincing Laura to let me. Outside of that, it was like cake. Ours is a forever kinda thing.”

Stiles would have loved to have been the fly on the wall during that conversation but he snorts at the other part of his sentence. “You’re something else,” he decides. “This is the last time I help you.”

Peter simply smiles. “Sure.”

“I mean it,” Stiles says because he really does. “Even your very intimidating nephew warned me about you. Well maybe not warned but the warning was implied — actually his voice was kinda monotone and growly at the time, so it’s hard to say if he even was — because I was trying not to burst into tears as he loomed over me in a very intimidating way—”

Peter straightens. “Derek? Derek talked to you?”

“Oh, yes. That is literally what I just said. But, you know, he didn’t really do a lot of talking. Mostly glaring and looming,” Stiles clarifies as he thinks about it. “It was a very nonverbal and confusing exchange.”

Peter smirks suddenly. “I’ll text you.”

“What? How would you even text me? You’d need my number to — Peter!”

Peter’s already climbing in his car and backing up.

“You better not have my number!” Stiles shouts as the car peels down the street and out of sight. He sighs and starts heading towards his house, and closes the door behind him when he gets inside. He makes his way to the kitchen to check on the lasagna.

His dad is giving Ms. Morrell a quick tour of their home.

Isaac is sitting quietly at the dining room table, looking at his lap and nowhere else. He looks very much as though he’d like to be invisible.

Stiles goes to the oven and pulls the lasagna out with an oven mit. He sets it on the stove and tests if it’s done by poking it with a butter knife. When he’s satisfied with it, he turns off the stove and begins cutting it up and serving it. He makes sure he doesn’t forget to grab the leftover salad from the fridge, because there’s no way he’s not going to serve at least some kind of vegetable with this dish.

Ms. Morrell sits down across from Isaac, so Stiles sits down across from his dad. She talks to his dad about grown-up things like the weather and the state of the country’s financial situation. Once or twice she asks Stiles for his opinion and Stiles tries his best not to go off on a tangent when he answers earnestly.

His dad just huffs in amusement when he does, used to his antics and overtly fond.

Ms. Morrell just smiles indulgently and thanks him for his input before she addresses Isaac, who just shakes his head and says nothing. She frowns with concern, but only briefly before she changes topics.

Stiles glances at Isaac throughout dinner and notices that he doesn’t really eat all that much. He just
pecks at his salad and his lasagna, but he never really takes any serious bites.

Ms. Morrell stands, shakes hands with his father and then turns to him and comments on how much she liked his cooking. She says goodbye to Isaac, but he doesn’t reply. Then she asks him to walk her to the door.

Isaac just stands, eyes firmly on the ground as they both disappear into the foyer.

Stiles is curious about what they’re talking about, but his dad cleverly distracts him by offering to help clean the kitchen. He knows Stiles will protest about him touching the food because Stiles doesn’t trust him not to “accidently” drop it in the trash or something as an excuse to order out for lunch tomorrow.

Isaac comes back a short while later and just sits quietly at the table, chewing his fingernails as Stiles and his dad work around him.

When his dad is done with the dishes, he hides away in the living room with Isaac in tow and he turns on some kind of movie.

Peter texts him randomly, saying: *Save this number. :))*

Stiles ignores the advice and bakes some peanut butter cookies, because he has a craving for them. He brings the finished cookies into the living room, and lets his dad have *two*. He then offers to share the rest with Isaac.

But Isaac just shakes his head and curls up on the end of the couch, chewing his nails as he watches the TV anxiously, as if he can never really let himself relax.

Stiles eats way more cookies than he should before he has to tap out and save the rest. He bids his dad and Isaac goodnight before he wanders up to his room.

Guess what he finds.

That stupid black wolf and white wolf sitting on his bed side by side like someone (*Peter*) put it there.

Stiles changes into a pair of pajama bottoms and grabs his phone on his way to bed, then shoots Peter a quick text.

*You’re not as funny as you think you are.*

Stiles drops his phone on his pillow before he grabbing his copy of *The Hobbit*, picking up from where he had left off. His phone buzzes a moment later.

**Who is this**

???

Stiles rolls his eyes as he snuggles the wolves close before he lifts his middle finger and takes a selfie with them, sending the photo to Peter.

Peter calls him three seconds after he sends the text.

“What?” Stiles complains.

“Who gave you my number?” Whoa, okay, that is so not Peter.
“Derek?” Stiles squeaks. He would recognize that voice anywhere. He fumbles to catch his phone when it slips from his sweaty palm. He barely manages to avoid it crashing to the floor and splitting into tiny shattered pieces. He thankfully catches it and presses it to his ear again. “Oh god, hello? Hello. Hi. Um. Oh my god. I thought — I thought this was Peter’s number. This isn’t Peter’s number? He texted me from this number and — and — why isn’t this Peter’s number? Isn’t there a rule against that? The words fraud and identity theft come to mind. You can correct me if I’m wrong — I know I’m not though.

“God. This is just like Peter. Mind you, I’ve only known the guy for a few days so I can’t really realistically say that this is normal behavior for him. It just — it just feels like normal behavior, you know? I mean the guy is shady three ways to Sunday. Or, uh, sorry. That’s your uncle and I’m not trying to insult you by insulting him or anything. I just wouldn’t — this has to be — yeah, um, I’m going to stop talking now.”

Derek is curiously quiet on the other end for a long while before he says, “I thought I told you to stay away from my uncle.”

Stiles flails, not that Derek could see anyway, but he flails wildly in frustration. “Maybe you should tell him to stay away from me. Seeing as how he’s always the one to initiate our interactions. I don’t think I’m the problem here.”

“Shut up.”

“Rude,” Stiles mutters, flinging his hand up in an exasperated gesture and rolling his eyes. The nerve and audacity of this guy, seriously. It must run in the family. Or at least skipped Laura, because she appears to be the only nice and sensible one.

“Why do you have my wolves?” Derek questions.

Stiles frowns and nearly kicks the stuffed animals out of his bed. But he doesn’t, because it’s not their fault that Peter sucks and Derek is being... Derek. “Also your uncle’s fault. I just — I don’t know how he keeps getting into my room but—”

“He’s been in your room?” Derek growls, and whoa, that’s — wow. That really shouldn’t be as impressive as it is.

“I — not — I didn’t invite him if that’s what you think,” Stiles explains and he really shouldn’t have to be explaining this but damn it, Derek makes him nervous and he either babbles out the truth or complete bullshit when he's nervous. “Why would you even care if he — it's not even like — I don’t even like Peter. He’s a menace. Swear to the sky. Look up the definition of menace and you will see your uncle's face.”

Derek huffs.

Stiles pauses at that. “Was that a laugh? Are you laughing? Am I funny to you?”

Derek merely says, “You’re odd.”

“I’m odd? How insulting. I'm not even the one —”

“Why did you send me that picture?” Derek interjects calmly.

Stiles’s mouth hangs open for a moment and a dawning sense of horror creeps into his awareness as quickly as heat blossoms in his cheeks. God, he’d forgotten he’d sent that picture. He is shirtless in that picture. “It’s not how it seems,” he swears, voice cracking a little.
“How does it seem?” Derek sounds amused.

“You know.”

“No. I don’t think I do. Enlighten me.”

Stiles blurts, “I’m not sexting your uncle!”

Derek goes quiet on the other end. Then he starts laughing very softly. “That’s what you consider sexting?”

Stiles grabs a pillow and slaps it over his face as he groans. He wants very badly to scream. The ground needs to open up and swallow him. Seriously. He needs to magically evaporate into thin air. He mumbles, “You can go ahead and lose my number any minute now. There’s no way I can be any more humiliated.”

Somehow Derek still manages to hear him and replies, “Or you can save my number under the correct name so you don’t mistake me for my uncle again.”

Stiles freezes at that. “Uh — you — uh —”

Derek continues, “I have to go now. This has been fun, I guess. Take care of my wolves.” Then he has the gall to just leave it at that and hang up.

Stiles gapes and just stares at his phone, trying desperately to figure out what the hell just happened. His brain must be on autopilot because he manages to add Derek’s number into his contacts.

He’s still a bit delirious when he calls Scott and tells him everything.

Scott’s more interested in if there are still leftovers than he is about anything else. But he assures Stiles that everything will work itself out because the universe is strange but it puts everything in balance and, wow, Stiles didn’t even know Scott could be so deep. Scott has actual depths. But then Scott ruins the effect when he starts talking about this cheat code he found online for Dragon Age, and he’s adamant they should both try it.

Stiles just smiles and says, “Okay, buddy.”

This is how he decides that Scott is officially his best friend.

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During lunch the next day, Peter strolls onto campus grounds looking like a million bucks. Or the lovechild of a pair of celebrities. Basically he looks like a model. He takes a seat beside his girlfriend, Kate (who is as equally good-looking as he is and it’s like, super unreal). Peter aims a grin at Derek and Laura, who are sitting across from him, eating their lunch and looking unsurprised by his presence.

Stiles hunches down in his seat and hopes that Peter won’t spot him. That hope is in vain, and only had a few seconds of life. He starts to feel Peter’s eyes burning holes into the side of his face as his pocket vibrates furiously, and he wishes he had stayed inside to eat.

He pulls out his phone and glances at the screen warily.

Peter texts: this is peter :))
save my number :))

stilinski :))

stilinski :))

stop being rude :))

i see you reading these messages :))

don’t ignore me :))

after all the trouble i went through to get this number :))

i had to beg derek to give it to me :))

he didn’t of course so i stole his phone :))

oh look derek is threatening to decapitate me if i don’t give him his phone back :))

he also has informed me that i am to never set foot in his bedroom again or yours :))

now he’s complaining to his sister that i keep stealing his things and giving them away :))

let the record show that i only ever took his childhood teddy bears or wolves if you want to be technical :))

i told him they’re in good hands and i would never just give away things like that to just anybody :))

that was a compliment :))

thank me for that compliment stilinski :))

now derek wants to know who i’m texting :))

should i tell him? :))

i told him :))

now he wont stop glaring at me :))

now he’s threatening to wring my neck if I ever speak to you again :))

my nephew is incredibly cute :))

did you save me some lasagna? :))

kate says hi :))

she thinks you’re cute too :))

oh look now Derek is glaring at the both of us :))
Derek texts: **Stop encouraging my uncle.**

Stiles sighs and drops his forehead to the table with a loud thud. He turns off his phone but he can still feel Peter’s smirk and Derek’s glare aimed in his direction.

Across the quad, Laura’s cackling is unmistakable.
nightmares

Stiles has no idea what it would be like to have an infant brother, but he’s losing such an adequate amount of sleep that it’s close enough.

To put it simply: Isaac gets these really extreme night terrors.

In the first three days of living with him, Stiles never knew how haunting a person’s scream could be in the dead of the night.

For three nights in a row, when Isaac screams, Stiles will jolt upright and tumble out of his bed in a drowsy effort to locate and identify the cry of distress.

For three nights in a row, he whips his door open and runs to Isaac’s room only to find that his dad is already there, cradling Isaac’s shaking form and shushing him.

For three nights in a row, Stiles exhales shakily and sags against the frame of Isaac’s door with such bone deep relief as his dad gives him a sad and apologetic smile. Stiles will just shake his head with an answering thin smile of his own before he turns and makes his way down the stairs and into the kitchen.

For three nights in a row, he’ll putter around the kitchen, grabbing a pot before pouring some organic milk in it and setting it on the stove to warm. He adds ginger, cinnamon, and honey, stirring it a bit before he grabs an apple from the fridge and carves it into neat slices. He sets it on a small dish before pouring the warmed milk into a mug and carries it all upstairs.

For three nights in a row, his dad will be sitting on the floor with his back against the bottom edge of Isaac’s bed as Isaac writes quietly in a leather-bound journal with the aid of the lamp on his nightstand. Stiles will hand Isaac the milk and the apple slices before he joins his father on the floor.

For three nights in a row, Stiles listens to the quiet scratching of a pen against paper, followed by a soft sigh and a sharp sniff. He listens as Isaac takes careful sips of his milk before chewing carefully on the apples with hiccupped sighs. Then there comes the clink of him putting the mug and the plate on his nightstand before he switches off his lamp. Stiles feels the motion of the bed move against his back as Isaac settles down for sleep again. His father once explained to him that Ms. Morrell thinks these nightly rituals are prudent to Isaac’s healing and recovery process. That Isaac should be aware that he’s not alone, and that Stiles and his dad bear him no ill will, only patient understanding and comfort.

For three nights in a row, he and his father will sit there on the floor, not saying a word, just breathing and listening to Isaac breathe, while at the same time offering their presence as a consolation. Stiles thinks of it like meditation. This goes on for about an hour before his dad carefully stands and checks Isaac before he nods at Stiles and then nods at the door. Stiles follows him out, and his dad closes the door behind him, but not all the way, leaving it cracked just in case he needs to come back.

For three nights in a row, his dad will rub the back of his neck, mouth moving to formulate an apology or to say thank you but Stiles will shake his head firmly and hug his old man, patting him on the back for good measure. He pulls away with a subdued grin before he waves and returns to his own room. He closes his door with a soft click and unhooks his phone from off its charger on his work desk before taking it to bed with him. He likes to keep it close in fear he’ll tune out his alarm because of his exhaustion.
It’s three in the morning on a Friday, and three hours later, Stiles wakes with groggy confusion before he switches off the alarm on his phone and throws himself out of bed before the temptation of falling asleep can get to him again. He grabs a towel so he can take a shower, and on his way to the bathroom he sees his dad up and about in his uniform, heading into Isaac’s room to wake him as well.

Usually his dad will let Isaac sleep as long as he can before he has to drag the twelve-year-old to sit at the station with him (not fond of leaving him in the house all by himself), but it just reminds Stiles that today is the day that Isaac starts his first day back to school. It’s a pretty big deal and, if Stiles is reading the implications right, it’s basically a milestone in Isaac’s recovery.

So Stiles takes his medicine, tries not to use up all the hot water because he’s got to be considerate to Isaac, and he jogs back to his room. He almost trips as he shuts his door behind him because his room is always a general disaster area. It makes sense when you think about it because Stiles is a scatterbrain so why wouldn’t his room be an equal manifestation of that? He kicks his way through a trail of clothes and presses different jeans and shirts to his nose in efforts to distinguish between what’s clean and what’s not and throws on what he deems is okay (which generally is anything blue or orange or both if he can get away with it).

Then he crams all his schoolwork in his backpack and pockets his phone before he sprints down the steps. He dumps his backpack on the couch and rolls up the sleeves of his blue plaid shirt before he sets to work with whipping together the best breakfast he can make. This pretty much means: toast, strawberry banana waffles/pancakes, turkey sausage/bacon, scrambled eggs and biscuits.

His dad comes ambling down the steps with a raised brow and Stiles greets him with a freshly brewed cup of coffee. He takes it and says, “What’s with all the—” He gestures to the spread of food.

“Isaac’s going back to school today,” Stiles says as he makes his own plate and sits down with it. “I think that deserves to be noted optimistically in some way.”

The sheriff takes a sip of his coffee as he cocks his head thoughtfully. “Yeah,” he sighs in pleasure before he smiles and pats Stiles on the head affectionately. “I think it does too. You're a good kid.”

Stiles butters his toast and drowns his pancakes and waffles in syrup while his dad fixes himself a plate.

“Paper?”

Stiles points to the counter where he put the newspaper.

His dad grabs it and shakes it out as he takes a seat across from him. "Well, look at that. Sunny skies all day today."

Stiles plays around with the order of the periodic table in his head as he shoves two slices of bacon in his mouth while his foot drums a subdued beat against the linoleum tiles of the kitchen floor.

His dad mumbles behind his paper, eating his food and drinking his coffee with typical absentmindedness.

Isaac eventually joins them. He’s wearing dark jeans with a grey t-shirt and a black scarf. Stiles has noticed that Isaac has this thing about scarves and he thinks that maybe Isaac is treating it like some kind of security blanket. He moves silently as he fills his plate with pancakes, biscuits, eggs and not much else.
Stiles still pens it down as a win because Isaac usually eats little to nothing. He smiles when Isaac sits down and says, “Good morning.”

Isaac says nothing but he flicks his gaze over to Stiles briefly before fastening it to his plate. He hunches over his food like he’s afraid someone will take it from him, but he eats gingerly like he has all the time in the world.

“Excited to be going back to school?” the sheriff asks from behind his paper.

Isaac says nothing.

Stiles moves to grab the orange juice and he fills up a cup for Isaac before he fills his own. “I’m sure your friends missed you while you were away,” he says.

Isaac stiffens and stops eating.

Stiles quickly backtracks. “So, seventh grade!” he blurts. “That’s — yeah. I remember when I was in seventh grade. It feels like it was yesterday. Science projects and decimals. Don’t get me started on Lord of the Flies. Though I’d take that over The Great Gatsby any day.”

Isaac says nothing still, but at least he starts eating again and his shoulders relax a fraction.

Stiles continues, “Dad, you remember my seventh grade science project?”

“No,” his dad grumbles bitterly. “And I certainly don’t remember having to pay over two hundred bucks to get the stains off and out of the living room furniture.”

“Heh, oh yeah,” Stiles says sheepishly. “I’m sure Isaac has much cleaner and neater ideas.” He turns to look at the quiet boy in question. “Not sure how they do it out here but back at my old school our science projects were due a week before school ends. If you want, or if you haven’t already done it, I can help you.”

Isaac doesn’t acknowledge the offer.

“Well, think about it,” Stiles suggests and he leaves it at that. He clears his plate and makes himself a second helping. He multitasks eating and texting Scott, as well as Danny, who’s extended the offer of practicing this afternoon out on the lacrosse fields of Beacon Hills Junior High.

Stiles graciously responds with acceptance before he finishes up his food and dumps his plate in the dishwasher. He then puts away any leftovers and sets to work with making his dad and Isaac’s lunch for them. He doesn’t bother with his own. He knows what he’ll be doing during lunch and it won’t be eating.

Isaac puts his plate and cup in the dishwasher and goes up to his room to get his backpack.

The sheriff stands and folds his newspaper up before he says, “I’m thinking of getting Isaac his own phone.”

“You should,” Stiles agrees. “In fact, why don’t we all get an upgrade?”

His dad huffs and shoots him a knowing look over the rim of his coffee mug.

Stiles just smiles innocently and takes his dad’s dishes for him.

“I got it,” his dad starts to fuss. “You go on. You’ll be late for school.”
“That’s a given,” Stiles confirms. “I plan on missing my first period anyway. I want to go with you when you drop Isaac off. I want to know how to get there anyway, you know, so I can pick Isaac up or drop him off when you can’t. Or I could just take on that responsibility. It’s no problem.”

His dad smiles fondly and shakes his head. “This is the only time I’ll make an exception for you ditching class. Go start the car for me.”

Stiles fumbles with his dad’s car keys when his dad tosses them to him. He shoots his dad a dirty look when his old man gives a hearty chuckle at his clumsiness. He crosses the foyer and strides out the door and down the porch steps to where his dad’s squad car is parked in the driveway. He unlocks the doors, starts the car and pops the trunk before he goes to where his mountain bike is lying out in the wet grass of their yard. He hauls the thing up, stumbles a few times before he gets to the car, and shoves his bike into the trunk as far as it can go. He gets the trunk closed with the aid of some elastic hook rope.

Stiles dusts his hands off in satisfaction and turns to head back into the house but he gets distracted by the moving truck parked just next door and the movers shuffling back and forth between the truck and the house. They carry furniture that looks like it came straight from the Victorian era and it makes Stiles wonder what kind of person or persons are moving in.

Stiles is very confused as to why the Henleys have left with little to no warning it seems. Not that they owed him any explanation, but he does wonder where and when they might have gone. They never really got around to accepting that dinner invitation they were constantly offering.

His dad comes out of the house with his backpack and Stiles gets distracted again. “You ready?”

“Yeah,” Stiles says and takes his backpack with a quick thanks. Then he says, “Hey, dad? What happened to Mr. and Mrs. Henley?”

The sheriff frowns in question and glances over at the house on the right. He frowns and says, “Huh. Didn’t know they were moving.”

“No,” Stiles corrects. “They already moved. Someone is currently moving in.”

“Really?”

Stiles nods.

“Huh.”

Stiles rolls his eyes and heads to his dad’s squad car and leaves him to his nonverbal speculation. He sits in the back because he’s fine with it and leaves the passenger seat open for Isaac when he comes.

His dad disappears in the house again, and comes back out with Isaac and his lunch in tow.

Isaac climbs in the passenger seat and buckles in.

His dad settles in the driver’s seat and spends a moment adjusting himself before he shifts the car in reverse. As he backs up out of the driveway, he says, “I’ll be home around nine, but you two can call me if you need me sooner.”

Stiles says, “Sure.”

Isaac says nothing.
The rest of the ride is spent with the three of them riding in silence as his dad’s radar beeps and chirps with a female dispatcher’s voice.

Stiles dismantles the Bills of Rights in his head and rearranges it in a different order before his thoughts goes off on a tangent about the gun politics and control policy in conjunction with the second amendment, and then that train of thought rides into a different tangent concerning the national death rate in heavily populated areas as a result of armed robbery.

It only takes ten minutes to get to Beacon Hills Junior High, which means that it’s only five minutes away from Stiles’s high school.

They all climb out and Isaac keeps his head down as they enter the school and walk through the halls in search of the main office.

Ms. Morrell is already waiting in the principal’s office for them when they arrive.

His dad turns to him and Isaac. “Why don’t you two wait out here for a moment,” he suggests lightly.

Stiles nods, even though he’s curious, and he goes to sit down in the reception area.

Isaac joins him, keeping his head low and his gaze firmly planted to the ground.

Stiles fidgets as he feels the stares everyone is sending Isaac. It bothers him how they whisper and stare at the burn scars all across Isaac’s face. It bothers him and he just knows it must really grate at Isaac. He’s not sure what to do.

Isaac looks so small and tense in his chair, clutching his backpack and the lunch Stiles packed for him like a lifeline.

Stiles, for the life of him, can’t think of anything to say, even despite being a motor mouth half of the time. He reaches out tentatively and places his hand over Isaac’s.

Isaac tenses further and stills.

Stiles doesn’t move his hand, waiting to see what he will do.

Isaac does nothing. He doesn’t say anything and he doesn’t even look anywhere else but his own shoelaces. But he also doesn’t push Stiles’s hand away either.

Stiles thinks maybe that counts for something.

Ms. Morrell and his dad, along with the principal, approach them.

Stiles stands but Isaac doesn’t budge an inch.

“Isaac,” Ms. Morrell says softly. “We’re going to your homeroom now. Are you ready?”

Isaac nods slowly.

“Okay. Let’s show Stiles and Mr. Stilinski your homeroom,” Ms. Morrell suggests.

Isaac stands silently and makes his way towards the door.

The rest of them follow.
His dad and Ms. Morrell talk in hushed tones, while the principal chimes in from time to time. The principal mostly just gloats about the school and praises her dad for allowing Isaac to continue his education there instead of one of the private schools. Stiles snorts because he knows his dad’s policy about public schools. He believes in the system of it because he went to them himself growing up. Of course the sheriff would be all for the funding and support of public education where other politicians and public figures such as himself would scorn and turn their attention elsewhere.

Isaac walks ahead of them with his head low and his shoulders hunched, and he moves like it’s a death march.

Stiles picks up the pace so he can catch up with him and he says, “So this is a cool school. Full of cool things and—school-y stuff.”

Isaac says nothing.

Stiles didn’t expect him to. He’s probably doing this whole ‘trying to be soothing’ thing wrong. He turns when Isaac turns and they walk up two flights of steps and down another hall. He’s not surprised that when they reach Isaac’s homeroom class, Malia is already lounging on top of a desk and chatting it up with two boys. When she sees him she springs to her feet with a grin and drags over her two male companions.

“Stiles!” Malia greets. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh you know,” Stiles says. “Just hanging around.”

Malia snorts and then glances at Isaac who shifts from foot to foot. “Hey, Isaac. Welcome back.” She offers a friendly hand in a gesture of high-five.

Isaac stares at it as he balls his own hands up into fists and hides them in his pockets almost shyly.

Ms. Morrell places a hand on his shoulder and he flinches noticeably. “Let’s walk over to your desk,” she says softly and ushers him away.

Stiles watches as his dad speaks to a brunette lady the principle introduces as Jennifer Blake, one of their full time faculty members. She has layered chestnut brown hair, a thin, dark blue dress with red birds patterned all over it and a soft smile made for the approach of younger children. She kind of reminds Stiles of the nice teacher from Matilda (Miss Honey).

“Stiles,” Malia says and he turns his attention back to her. “Aren’t you in high school?”

Stiles blinks in confusion. “Yes.”

Malia smirks at her two male companions, who are standing on either side of her. “See. I told you I knew a freshman.”

“It’s not our fault if we didn’t believe you,” the dark-skinned boy says. “You lie so much that I can’t take your word for anything.”

Malia rolls her eyes resentfully.

“Besides, why would a freshman want to associate with some lame ass seventh grader,” says the blond one.

Malia punches him in the kidney and he falls to his knees with a winded sound.
Stiles winces in sympathy but he marvels at how stealthily strong Malia is.

“I’m Mason by the way,” the dark-skinned boy says with a grin. “You’re really attractive.”

Stiles blushes and stammers.

Mason’s grin widens and he looks delighted.

“Ew, gross. Stop hitting on my friends,” Malia complains. “He’s out of your league anyway. I think he’s asexual.”

Stiles splutters.

“No way,” Mason says as he shakes his head. “I refuse to believe that.”

Malia opens her mouth to say something but the blond punches her in the arm. “Liam,” she snaps.

“Well don’t hit me,” Liam merely says, unapologetic.

They shoot invisible laser beams at each other with their eyes.

Stiles watches them in interest.

Mason wryly explains, “Step-siblings. They’ve been fighting like that for as long as their parents have been married. Like right around their sandbox days. It’s how they express their caveman love for each other. They give us middle schoolers a bad name in my opinion.”

“Ah,” Stiles says because that makes sense.

“Seriously though,” Malia grunts as she rubs her sore arm. “Why are you here?”

“Isaac,” Stiles replies. “He’s my — we’ve recently — he’s family.”

Mason and Malia look intrigued.

Liam seems not to care less. He’s still glaring at Malia. This kid seems like he holds a pretty mean grudge.

“Danny mentioned you were coming here anyway. Something about lacrosse?” Malia remarks.


“She introduced you to Danny? You introduced him to Danny? Why wont you do me the same favor? How come he gets to chill with Danny and I don’t?” Mason complains.

“Because he’s not gonna drool all over him and make himself look like an ass,” Malia quips.

“And neither would I,” Mason smoothly retorts before he glides away like he owns the whole school.

Malia snorts and waves a goodbye at Stiles before she drags Liam bodily to their seats.

His dad comes to retrieve him after that, and they say their final goodbyes to Isaac (who predictably doesn’t react or respond) before they exit the school. They climb into his dad’s squad car and his dad drives him to school.

Stiles pulls his bike free from the back and rolls it over to the bike racks after he successfully
convinces his dad that he doesn’t need to be escorted inside. He locks his bike up and strides into the building, navigating the empty hallways to find his locker.

The bell rings, signaling the end of first period, so Stiles heads to his second.

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“Here.”

Stiles jerks awake with a pained grunt when a heavy binder gets dumped on his stomach.

It’s lunchtime and Stiles is lying out in the quad under the shade of a tree. He was sleeping (and having a very great dream where Willy Wonka just gave him the keys and the deed to his chocolate factory), seeing as how he hasn’t been getting enough these days. He blinks through his pain as he rubs his stomach and sits up.

Cora Hale is looming over him with her arms crossed and her trademark glare. She's wearing some leather leggings with a soft cardigan pullover and some studded boots. Her hair is split into two messy pigtails. She looks like a mix between the girl-next-door and the neighborhood bully.

Stiles frowns as he turns the binder she's dumped on him over in his hands. “What’s this?” he asks, voice still etched with sleep.

“Notes, dumbass.” Cora shoots him an annoyed look. “You missed Biology, didn’t you?”

The question is rhetorical so Stiles politely does not answer. He’s still confused however. “You, uh, took notes for me?”

“No. I took notes for me. You can copy them,” Cora explains like she’s speaking to a brain-damaged child. She uncrosses her arms and puts her hands on her cocked hips.

Stiles feels his cheeks grow warm in embarrassment and he wipes a hand over his face to cover his reaction. “Thanks,” he mutters. “I didn’t know you cared. About, um, if I missed or not.”

Cora gets this constipated look on her face and she glances over her shoulder with a scowl. It looks like she’s glaring at Laura. “I don’t,” she denies. “But you’d do the same for me. So. There.”

Stiles opens his mouth to make an argument about how he wouldn’t, but that would be a lie because he totally would. He stands and brushes himself off. “I think the library’s got a copier,” he says.

Cora shrugs but she follows him when he heads inside.

The library is located on the first floor in the east wing of the school. It’s pretty busy around lunchtime so Stiles has to wait in line to use the Xerox machine. When it’s his turn, he quickly scans Cora’s notes before returning the binder to her.

Cora shoves it in her backpack with more force than grace and says, “I’m selling Kind bars to raise money for new instruments for the marching band.”

“You’re on the marching band?” Stiles asks, intrigued.

“I play the tuba,” Cora states flatly.

Stiles isn’t sure whether he’s supposed to laugh or not because he’s not sure if she’s being sarcastic. “You, uh...really play the tuba?”
Cora shoots him a dirty look. “Yes. So don’t make fun. It’s not attractive.”

Stiles hands spring up and he fumbles with the papers in his hand. “I wasn’t — I don’t think — I’m not trying to make it sound like — I just, uh, think that’s cool. Music is cool. My mom used to be a music teacher, so — it’s all cool. Tuba, huh? That’s just, you know, something. You must really have strong lungs. I figure people who play wind instruments act as the mitochondria. Get it? Because the mitochondria is the powerhouse and this is why I’m not going to pursue a career in stand-up. Your dead silence only solidifies that decision and confirms my humiliation.”

Cora lifts a brow. “Your punchlines could stand to use some work. Do you want to buy a Kind bar or not? You should buy one. It shows school spirit. We admire that above all else in this teenage wasteland of homework and hormones.”

Stiles snorts. "That's funny. You obviously have a knack for humor. Well, dry humor."

Cora shrugs.

“So, Kind bars, huh? What kind do you have? Ha, get it? Kind? What kind of Kind—”

“Almond and coconut,” Cora says between gritted teeth. She looks like she’s getting over this conversation real quick, and also like she might punch Stiles in the throat.

“Um, I — don’t really like coconut,” Stiles mumbles.

“Once again, you should buy one. It shows school spirit,” Cora insists.

“No, I get your pitch. I totally do. And it’s a good one. Great even. It’s — when I said I don’t like coconut, what I really meant is that I’m allergic. Like kind of seriously allergic,” Stiles explains truthfully. “I could die.”

Cora glares at him and cracks her knuckles. “You should buy one. It shows school spirit. No one said anything about eating it.”

“Yeah, sure,” Stiles agrees quickly and fumbles for his wallet.

Cora snatches the five from his hand and shoves five Kind bars into his chest. “Don’t eat them, dumbass,” she warns before she storms off and harasses a Junior into buying twelve.

Stiles shoves the bars in his backpack, along with his photocopied notes and tries not feel like he’d just been bullied into buying some granola bars. He grabs his phone and shoots Derek a quick text that reads: *Your sister is scary and aggressive and I strongly discourage a future in business, sales, or advertisement.*

He shoves his phone in his pocket after doing such because he's not really expecting a reply back and he walks off to his next class.

It’s Algebra II and he really dislikes it. Mainly because he’s so crummy at math. Sure, he’s decent in the way that counts, but it’s only enough to get him by. He sits in his usual seat in the back and slaps his spiral notebook and a pen onto his desk before dumping his backpack on the floor. He chews on his bottom lip anxiously as his leg bounces.

His teacher comes in, turns the lights off as she sets up the Promethean board, and asks one of the students to shut the blinds. She begins the lesson on exponential and logarithmic functions.

Stiles gnaws on his pen cap as he takes notes with a frustrated frown. He’s not really getting it and
he’s too shy to raise his hand to ask questions. It’s the anxiety of thinking how everyone will look at him if he dares to slow down the lesson with his inane questions. Well, he may need a tutor.

Halfway into class his pocket vibrates.

Stiles pulls out his phone as covertly as possible and glances at the screen from under the cover of his desk.

Derek texts: **Who is this**

Then: ???

Stiles feels his frown deepen. He didn’t expect Derek to reply, but he also didn’t think he’d be a jerk about it. Maybe he should have.

_Seriously???

The reply is instantaneous.

**Wanted to see what kind of picture you’d send me this time if I pretended not to know you.**

Stiles feels a slow flush crawl up the back of his neck and up to his ears at the implications. 

*You’re not funny and I am very offended.*

**I’m very funny.**

**What are you bothering me for anyway?**

*There’s the Derek Hale he knows. Rude and blunt as ever.*

Stiles tucks his phone between his legs for a moment so he can quickly write down the next set of notes his teacher has up. When he’s done, he grabs his phone to type his response.

*Your sister terrorized me in the name of school spirit.*

**Which sister?**

*I have several.*

Stiles feels the ‘idiot’ implied but not seen on the end of that text.

*Cora. She bullied me into buying a Kind bar even after I told her I was allergic to coconut.*

**She bullies everyone. She's "charming" that way. Nothing new.**

**Peter already bought thirty off of her yesterday because she "passionately insisted".**

Stiles snorts as he envisions it. His phone vibrates again.

**You’re allergic to coconut?**

*Yes......?*

**What did you do with the bars then? I mean, since you can’t eat them.**
Oh no, make no mistake. I ate them, and am obviously texting you from an ambulance because I have a death wish and poor impulse control.

Cute.

Stiles flushes again and shoves his phone between his thighs again so he can catch up on the notes. His hand is unsteady because he’s shaking with nerves and he keeps replaying that last text over and over in his head. It was almost…flirtatious. He’s probably making it more of a big deal than it is. Derek’s no stranger to sarcasm, so —

His phone begins to vibrate aggressively.

Stiles picks it up and glances at the screen warily.

Where are you really?

???

???

???

Jesus, Stiles thinks. This guy refuses to be ignored.

Algebra II.

Who’s the teacher?

Mrs. Cassidy.

She’s a bad teacher.

I’d be surprised if you learned something from her. She was my teacher back in junior high. I survived because I was better at math than she was.

Stiles doesn’t know how to reply to that. His grade is currently at the borderline of a C.

What level of math are you now?

AP Calculus.

Geez, and Derek is only a sophomore. Stiles is both impressed and jealous. He gets an idea.

You should take pity on me.

How so?

Tutor me?

No.

Come on, dude. Be a saint. I’ll even pay you.

No.

Stiles frowns, and tries to quickly put it out of his mind (despite the engrossing disappointment). It
was worth a try. He’ll find someone else.

I’ll tell Cora to ease up.

No promises that she’ll actually listen.

Maybe you should think about not making yourself an easy target.

*That’s victim blaming and I won’t tolerate it.*

Whatever.

*Whatever to your whatever.*

Stop texting me, it’s distracting.

Unlike you, I’m trying to learn.

*Hey! I’m trying to learn too. I’ll have you know most of my classes are honors.*

Yeah?

Sometimes I can’t tell with the way you carry on.

Stiles huffs but he replies with ‘Rude’ and pockets his phone.

Derek doesn’t text him anymore after that.

Stiles thinks it would be kind of ridiculous to be disappointed about that.

Luckily he’s not.

At all.

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Isaac’s standing out front waiting for Stiles as he rolls up on his bike to the school. He’s clutching the straps of his backpack really tightly.

“Hey,” Stiles says breathless. He was peddling pretty fast. “How was your day?”

Isaac clutches the straps harder.

Stiles guesses that’s not a positive reaction. “I was going to go meet some friends out on the lacrosse fields. You can hang out and watch — or I could take you home. But then I’d have to stay because dad doesn’t like you at the house by yourself.”

Isaac shrugs but he doesn’t say anything.

“Okay. Not sure what that means,” Stiles mutters as he considers Isaac. “We can go home.”

Isaac says nothing.

“Or maybe you’re fine with staying?” Stiles hedges.

Isaac still says nothing.
Stiles sighs quietly and starts towards the back of the school after he locks his bike up. He says, “I’ve got some granola bars in my backpack if you’re hungry. I don’t think we’ll be here that long, though.”

Isaac, unsurprisingly, offers no response.

Danny and Jackson are already warming up and stretching when they reach the lacrosse fields.

Lydia is sitting up in the bleachers, texting away on her phone as usual. Allison is sitting beside her and she’s look like she’s playing a game on her phone. She waves at Stiles with a dimpled smile.

Stiles stops to wave back but he stumbles when Isaac runs straight into his back, distracted.

Allison climbs down the bleachers and approaches them.

Isaac walks off quickly and sits down on the far side of the bleachers.

Allison frowns in confusion as she steps up to Stiles and glances to Isaac. She looks at Stiles.

“Don’t look at me. I have no idea either,” Stiles admits. He takes off his backpack and grabs his lacrosse stick. He’s already changed into some field clothes. “Can you give this to Isaac? I got some snacks in there that I gave him dibs on.”

Allison tucks a curl behind her ear and nods as she takes his backpack. “Is he —” She seems to be struggling with the words. “I just, I heard about what happened, you know?”

Stiles knows he shouldn’t but he can’t help it and he asks, “What? What do you mean?”

“Well about his dad and his mom being mixed up with some like heavy illegal drugs and they were a part of this international cartel until they double-crossed their dealer. I heard the dealer like sent some thugs after Isaac’s family and there was a fire. I think Isaac even had an older brother that died in the fire.” Allison looks over to Isaac. “I just feel bad, you know?”

“Yeah,” Stiles says quietly as his mind races. The guilt that he’s already been feeling has now doubled.

“Stilinski! Let’s go! We’re not going to wait for you forever!” Jackson yells and Danny shoves at him in reprimand.

“Uh, I better —” Stiles cuts himself off with a ridiculous gesture before he gets to work with setting his lacrosse stick together.

Allison just nods before she marches over to Isaac, who looks like he might flee. She sits down beside him and says something.

Stiles doesn’t get a chance to see Isaac not respond because Jackson’s huffing impatiently and dragging him by the arm onto the fields.

Danny is playing goalie.

Jackson lines up a streak of balls before he straightens and says, “Let’s see what you’re made of, Stilinski.”

Stiles nods and swipes up a ball before he sends it flying straight over Danny’s head, as well as the goal post. He groans.
Jackson claps a hand down on his shoulder with a smirk. “Obviously you’re not made of much. This doesn't surprise me.”

“Clearly.”

“Take a few laps. We’ll work on your endurance before we get to anything else,” Jackson decides before he takes Stiles’s place and starts whipping balls at Danny, making more goals than Stiles could ever hope to, even in his wildest dreams.

Stiles groans but he runs around until his whole body feels like it’s on fire.

It’s Danny who forces Jackson to take pity on Stiles and the three of them start doing other drills.

By the end of practice, Stiles feels sore in all kinds of places while it looks like Danny and Jackson barely broke a sweat.

Stiles collects Isaac from Lydia and Allison, who are being as friendly and chatty as possible with him, despite his lack of response. He says his goodbyes on his and Isaac’s behalf before they start walking home, grabbing Stiles’s bike on the way.

It’s dark and the street lamps are beginning to come alive.

The walk home takes fifteen minutes, and it’s spent in silence but Stiles doesn’t mind. He’s too tired to keep up a one-sided conversation anyway.

Isaac eats all five of the Kind bars he had in his backpack without a breath in between and Stiles has a sneaking suspicion that the kid loves coconut and chocolate. He makes a mental note to look up recipes. The thing about Stiles is that not only can he be blunt sometimes but he can also be invasive when he thinks it matters.

They reach the house and Stiles drops his bike onto the lawn carelessly as he notices the moving truck from this morning is no longer there.

The house next door is lit with lights and Stiles is nosey enough to go say hello. He tosses his keys at Isaac and says, “You go on. There’s still some leftover chicken and rice from yesterday. You can just toss that in the microwave.”

Isaac says nothing but his eyes do follow Stiles as he crosses their lawn onto the next.

Stiles trips up a bit as he stumbles over some garden gnomes with a mangled swear. He kicks the stupid things before he jogs up the porch steps and rings the doorbell.

“Kalliope! Kalliope, the door!”

“Stop shouting! I can hear you just fine!”

“Go get the bloody door!”

“Alright! Alright!” The door opens and a tall but portly woman with wild grey hair and a big fat nose sneers at him. "Understand me perfectly, dear. I'm not interested. If you're selling cookies, I'm not interested. If there is a cause you want me to support, I’m not interested. If you're trying to pitch the good word — Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and Buddha — I'm not interested. Got that? Not. Interested.”

“So?” Kalliope sniffs. “Why would I care about who my neighbors are, silly boy? Do you see a sign in my lawn that says, ‘Come one, come all’? No. So why would I care?”

“I guess you wouldn’t.”

"Exactly. My, there does seem to be some kind of a brain in that funny little head of yours," Kalliope huffs. "Ugh. Americans."

Another old and unattractive woman appears behind Kalliope, but she’s lean and very tall like a street lamp, almost taller than the doorway. “What's this now? What’s going on? Who is it?”

“Oh would you go away, Acantha! First, you demand I open the door when you won't, and now, here you come to stick your great big nose through it by being so meddlesome,” Kalliope complains before she gives a wet cough.

"Hush, yourself, sister dear. Mustn't hurt your little pea brain by using such pretty words.” The one called Acantha takes one look at Stiles and grins almost predatorily. “Well hello." She has a startling amount of teeth. "My, my. You’re a juicy one, ey?”

Stiles suddenly feels unsettled. “Um.”

Kalliope snorts. “A bit too thin for my tastes. Like a weed.”

“Greedy. Of course he’s not to your liking, piggy,” Acantha huffs before she smiles at Stiles. “Come now, give me your name, precious. Don’t be shy. You’re so lovely.”

Stiles is officially creeped out. “Well I think I better head home. I just wanted to introduce myself. My dad, the sheriff, will probably come over and introduce himself. So — yeah…” He slowly backs away.

Acantha hisses suddenly and Kalliope’s expression sours. She slams the door shut.

“Now look what you’ve gone and done, you big oaf. That was the sheriff’s son!”

“Oh bugger off! He won’t think anything of it. Mortal children are so stupid.”

Stiles flees, not interested in eavesdropping. He doesn’t let himself relax until he’s inside his house, locking the front door behind him, twice. He joins Isaac on the couch and says, “I think our next door neighbors are witches.”

Isaac doesn’t say anything but his spoon pauses midway to his mouth. Then he just goes back to eating and stares at the TV.

Stiles tries to follow the movie but he can’t stop thinking about how shiny Acantha’s teeth were or how the woman looked at him hungrily.

When his dad gets home, Stiles tells him all about the encounter and he can’t help but to notice the way his dad looks like he’s trying not to laugh. He promises Stiles that he’ll look into it when Stiles swears that they’re witches but Stiles doesn’t believe him.

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Stiles spends most of Saturday sleeping in because he can and because Isaac, like the previous nights, shouts him and his dad awake in the middle of the night. Stiles doesn’t think he gets to bed until five a.m. and the next time he wakes up, it’s almost four and his dad is shaking him.
“Hey, kiddo, you with me?”

Stiles grunts.

“Listen, I have to work late. I probably won’t be in until sometime tomorrow. I left some money for you and Isaac. Text or call me if you need anything.” His dad tosses a box onto his chest.

Stiles paws at in confusion.

“New phone,” his dad explains and smiles when Stiles springs up to hug him. He pats his back before Stiles pulls away and starts fiddling with his new phone immediately. “I got us all upgrades, per your suggestion. I went ahead and put Isaac’s number in your phone and he has yours and mine. I also bought him a bike of his own so he can keep up with you.”

Stiles nods.

“Are you still going ice-skating?”

Stiles nods distractedly.

“I’m assuming you’re taking Isaac with you. Just be sure you’re both in before eleven. Trust me, I’ll know if you’re not,” the sheriff warns. He makes his way out the door.

“Love you!”

“Love you too. Do your chores,” is his dad’s response.

Stiles rolls out of bed with his phone in hand and wanders over to Isaac’s room.

Isaac is lying on his stomach and writing in his journal, but he looks dressed for the day.

“Hey, I’m gonna knock out these chores and then I was gonna go ice-skating with some friends. Feel up to tagging along?” Stiles asks.

Isaac shrugs.

Stiles interprets that as a yes. He jogs down the stairs and wanders into the kitchen for a bottle of water. He notices the white marker board magnetized to the fridge with a note scribbled in his dad’s messy handwriting.

Boy, I left forty dollars for the two of you (twenty each). Isaac: clean the kitchen and the living room, and your own room if need be. Stiles: clean the bathroom and your damn room. I have no idea how you can stand it. Call if you need me.

Stiles snorts and notes that the kitchen and the living room look clean and orderly, which means Isaac has had plenty of time to do his portion of the chores. He’s not going to lie and say he isn’t thrilled that he now has help because he is.

He drinks his water down and gets to work with getting his room and the bathroom in order. After he finishes, he takes a shower and puts on some jeans and a stripped blue hoodie.

Scott texts him almost a billion times (he’s really excited) before he pulls up in front of the house with his mom. He and Isaac climb in the back and he greets Melissa.

Melissa twists her rearview mirror so that she can see Isaac and says, "Hello, Isaac. You look much lovelier outside of the hospital. It’s good to see you again under better circumstances."
Isaac shifts and fumbles with his seatbelt, looking for all the world like he wished Melissa wouldn't acknowledge where she knows him from or that she probably knows more that he'd like her too.

Stiles decides to lighten the mood in the car by saying, "Hey, can we listen to the radio? Anything but NPR. My dad's totally put me off to that."

Melissa nods and says something to Scott in Spanish.

Scott fiddles with the radio and puts it on what is presumably his favorite station.

Stiles glances over to Isaac, but he's looking out the window.

Melissa drops them off at the ice rink (V.M.B.'s Family Ice Center) without incident, and before they head inside, Stiles quickly introduces Isaac to Scott.

Scott gives Isaac one of his sunny smiles and says, “Nice to meet you, dude. I think I seen you a few times in the hall. Allison mentioned you too.”

Isaac fidgets and Stiles could swear he was blushing but he can’t really be sure because of the burn scars. He shifts from foot to foot like he’s anxious so Stiles gives Scott a pointed look and they all head inside.

Lydia and Jackson are already out on the ice, gliding around and doing moves Stiles has only ever seen in the Winter Olympics. He’s impressed.

Allison is still lacing up her shoes while Malia helps Erica untangle hers as they smirk at each other.

Boyd is sitting on the bleachers with Danny, sharing a huge bag of Doritos between them.

Scott leads Stiles and Isaac over to the shoe stand so they can pick out some skates for themselves.

Isaac declines after he stares at the different sizes like he wants to skate but can't convince himself to and he wanders back over to the bleachers to sit by himself.

Scott sighs sadly. “I feel bad for him. Is he always quiet like that?”

“Yeah,” Stiles says as he laces up his shoes.

“Man,” Scott marvels sadly.

“Yeah.” Stiles wobbles to his feet and huffs in satisfaction when his skates don’t pinch his feet uncomfortably.

Scott looks down at the skates in his hand, over to Isaac, back down, over again, back down, and then over again before he gets this resolute frown on his face. He puts the skates back and says, “I’m gonna chill with him. He shouldn’t have to sit by himself like that. I can’t skate anyway.”

Stiles smiles fondly. “Scott?”

“What?”

“You’re awesome.”

Scott smiles and gently punches Stiles’s side before he wanders over to the bleachers and sits down by Isaac.
Stiles makes his way out to the ice and glides around for a bit as Allison, Erica, Malia, and Danny do the same.

Boyd makes an announcement that he’s going to turn the disco lights on, as well as some music. Everyone starts shouting requests but he gives them all the middle finger and says, “My rink, my rules.”

“Boo!” Erica laughs.

“Unfair!” Malia adds as she skates circles around Lydia.

The lights dim in a wash of reds, yellows, and blues. Then the musical stylings of Ke$ha blares to life.

Stiles smirks as the others roll their eyes, seemingly unsurprised by Boyd’s taste in music.

Boyd joins them out on the ice and says, “Let’s play freeze tag. Not it.”

Danny, Stiles, Erica, Malia, Allison, Erica, and Lydia chime, “Not it!”

Jackson rolls his eyes because that means he’s it. He skates lazily for a bit, like he’s not even interested in playing along before he starts at them like a shark.

They come to the agreement that Lydia shall act as home base and give them immunity when they’re frozen.

Scott plays referee in the bleachers between the times he chats up Isaac, who fidgets constantly, but mainly from shyness.

Stiles evades Jackson as much as he can but the man is a beast on the ice and he gets frozen over a dozen times, and Lydia sweeps right up to him and taps his cheek with a wink so he can start skating again.

Its childish, but it’s funny and entertaining. Especially when Jackson really starts getting into it and starts up this competitive thing with Boyd, who, despite his large frame, has devil speed on the ice. This frustrates Jackson to no end.

The game ends when Jackson quits out of irritation and glares at them all when they laugh and tease him for it. The last thing they do before they get off the ice is form a train and skate around the rink as Blah Blah Blah blares through the speakers. When the song ends, they break up and start for the exit.

Once they’re back in their shoes, they all make their way over to Ramona’s Pizzeria (a place owned by Boyd’s mom) across the street.

Since it’s a Saturday night, it’s pretty packed, so they have to wait a few moments for some tables to be put together for their party.

Scott takes the opportunity to introduce Isaac to everyone while they wait, and Stiles gets distracted by the fact that he can recognize his high school’s basketball team occupying the right half of the restaurant. They’re loud and boisterous, and it reminds Stiles that they had a home game tonight.

Among the crowd, Stiles locates Laura, who’s in a cheerleading outfit and conversing with her fellow cheerleaders. He remembers that she’s the captain and that Kate is her co-captain. Speaking of Kate — she’s totally giving lip to the bus boy trying to clean up their mess with a disgruntled
expression.

Stiles tells his group that he’ll be right back and he makes his way over to Laura.

Laura brightens when she sees him and she shakes her pom-poms in his face cheerfully and says, “Hey you! What are you doing here?”

Stiles wiggles his nose because the pom-poms tickle and says, “Hanging out with some friends. Did we win another game?”

Cora slides up to them, band uniform and all. Her full lips are shiny with pizza grease, and she has a slice of pizza crammed with what looks like every meat on the planet on top in one hand and a red glass of dark soda in the other. She says, “You say ‘we’ like you contributed.”

“Nope, that’s just my school pride talking,” Stiles corrects. He pauses and frowns. “How did you even hear what I said in all this noise?”

Cora rolls her eyes and mutters, “Dumbass.” Then she wanders off to return to her bandmates, ignoring when Laura scolds her for being so rude.

Stiles is continually perplexed by that girl. He turns back to Laura and says, “What?” because Laura is eyeing him.

“You’re always wearing some variation of blue,” Laura supposes.

Stiles blushes because she’s actually noticed. “My favorite color,” he mumbles.

Laura grins and says, “I’m gonna have to start calling you Blue now.”

Stiles fidgets and rubs the back of his head sheepishly before he says, “What was the score?”

“Thirty to sixteen. Derek made most of the points, as usual,” Laura reports.

“Ball hog, huh?” Stiles supposes and he shakes his head. He can see that, even though he’s never actually seen Derek in action.

Laura smiles fondly at him and says, “Peter’s going to be mad that he missed you.”

Stiles points to his open mouth and makes gagging noises.

Laura laughs, “No really. He’s really fond of you.”

“Good or bad thing?”

“Depends,” Laura airily states with a cryptic grin.

“Where’s the creeper anyway?” Stiles asks as he looks around.

“He’s with Derek,” Laura says. “Derek gets pretty wound up after a game, so Peter stays behind to pull him back down to Earth.”

Stiles hums thoughtfully.

“You should come out to one of the games,” Laura suggests.

“I’m not a basketball fan.”
“Don’t let Derek hear you saying that.”

Stiles grins and he doesn’t know why but something about that amuses him. He kind of wishes that Derek would hear him saying that (just to get a reaction). “When’s the next game?”

“This Thursday. Right before the start of spring break. Another home game.”

Stiles huffs and says, “Can’t do it. It’s my, uh, birthday. I’m almost positive my dad’s gonna take me out.”

Laura perks up excitedly. “Your birthday’s this week? You goober. I’m going to have to get you something!”

“Please don’t,” Stiles protests earnestly. He doesn’t like people making a big fuss over him on his birthday because then he’s gonna obsess over returning the favor. He’s stupidly competitive when it comes to gift giving. “Saying happy birthday is enough.”

“Sure,” Laura says whimsically. She looks like she’s plotting something anyway and it’s worrying. “I hope you have a very good one. The best.”

“Uh, thanks,” Stiles says, a little caught off guard by her earnestness. “Why are you so nice to me?” he blurts and it isn’t something he means to say but his filter has been defected since birth.

Laura frowns and cocks her head. “Don’t say it like that. Like I’m some stuck-up snob.”

Stiles instantly stammers over an apology.

Laura lifts her hand to stop him and she smiles softly. “I am very picky about who I associate with,” she concedes. “It works against me sometimes because I often miss what’s right in front of me, and Stiles,” here she looks him straight in the eye. “You are definitely worth noticing.”

Red blooms in both of Stiles’s cheeks with indulgent pleasure and he suddenly feels lighter. Who doesn’t like to hear that they matter? “I — that’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me,” he admits quietly, which is probably a bad idea since it’s still pretty noisy in the restaurant.

Laura still winks at him like she gets it anyway. “You should come over for dinner sometime.” She adds, “Mom would love you.”

Stiles blinks at the invitation and something in the back of his mind is taking note of this moment as significant but he can’t quite put his finger on why that is. He says, “The offer is really tempting, but I have a feeling that Derek and Cora would glare at me the whole time.”

Laura waves it off and replies, “You let me worry about my knuckleheaded siblings. They’ve got the biggest hearts out of all of us but they’re also too stubborn for their own good. Just know that there’s an open seat for you at the Hale table whenever you want it.”

Stiles smiles shyly and nods.

Laura grins and shakes her pom-poms at him again. “Now go back to your friends. I’ve monopolized your time enough. I’ll see you at school. Come sit with me at lunch.” She blows him a kiss before she sashays back to her group of friends, dragging Kate away from the bus boy she’s waving a fork at threateningly.

Stiles heads to the other side of the restaurant and his own group of friends welcome him back into their fold warmly. They’ve already ordered four sets of pizzas (which is on the house, aka free, since
Boyd's mom owns the pizza joint). Being friends with people in a small town is really showing its perks.

Stiles sends Derek a text before he starts eating and it reads: Congrats on the game.

There’s no response.

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Isaac and Stiles carpool with Scott again when Melissa pulls up to the pizzeria fifteen minutes before eleven. Erica and Malia carpool with Allison, while Danny and Jackson carpool with Lydia, and Boyd has his older brother pick him up. But they all exchange numbers with Isaac before they all head their separate ways and Stiles is grateful for the welcoming even if Isaac isn’t as responsive to it. The twelve year old needed all the friends he could get.

Melissa pulls up to their house and she smiles at them kindly as they exit her car.

Scott sticks his head out the window and says, “Spring break is coming up. We’re going to do our marathon club at Jackson’s house this time.”

“Okay,” Stiles says and does his special handshake with Scott as Isaac wanders towards the house. “Should I bring anything other than myself and Isaac?”

“Change of clothes. We’re starting with the Ninth Doctor, but even if we spend the whole weekend just binging it so we can get to the latest, we still wouldn’t be able to get it done. We —”

Isaac yells and Stiles jolts in surprise and curses as his hand knocks into the car. He runs over to see what’s wrong and he doesn’t have to go far because he sees it as soon as his foot hits the first step of his porch.

There’s a creature gutted up in a heap at the front door, and it looks like someone used its blood to write ‘Welcome to the neighborhood, Sheriff!’ across the front door.

Stiles feels sick and Isaac stumbles down the steps and back to Melissa’s car, face ashen and pale. He doesn’t blame him. He just stands there, staring at it as his brain pieces together the anatomy of the wild thing. The creature has furry reptilian skin, with long, feathery spines that run from the back of its head down the spine, ending at the rump. The teeth on it though, god, it’s as terrifying as it’s long claws are. Its eyes are alien-like and stares at him with dead red pupils.

Stiles immediately thinks, El Chupacabra, and then grows furious as he thinks of who could be responsible for it as Scott jogs over to him in concern. He says that his mom has called his dad and he’s on his way but Stiles can’t stop staring into the dead eyes of the thing. He finds himself taking a picture of the scene and he attaches it to a text he sends Peter that reads: If this is your idea of a sick joke or some prank then you really need to get a new sense of humor.

When Scott notices what he’s taken a picture of, he begins to freak out and drag Stiles back to the car, almost in fear that the creature will somehow come alive.

Stiles doubts that possibility very much since its internal organs are strewn across his porch in vicious decoration. He lets Scott shove him in the back of his mom’s car with Isaac. He sits in a daze of shock as his mind races before his dad eventually pulls him out again as the street gets washed in the red and blue of police lights.

One of his dad’s deputies starts taking Stiles’s statement down when she learns pretty quickly that Isaac won’t utter a word on the matter or be of much help.
His dad hovers the whole time out of concern before he walks off with the deputy to set up some kind of parameter, leaving Stiles alone on the curb with a shock blanket on. It hasn’t escaped his notice that his dad doesn’t seem surprised by any of this which makes Stiles wonder if his dad has been receiving these kind of threats ever since they’ve moved here. He’s unable to dwell on the thought long because there’s some kind of commotion and Stiles straightens when he recognizes Peter’s voice calling his name.

Peter rips his way through the yellow police tape his dad’s deputies have up and he storms up to Stiles with a wild look in his eyes. “Stiles—are you okay? You're not—are you hurt?” he questions urgently as he grabs Stiles by the shoulders.

Stiles glares at him. “Don’t pretend like you care. I’m not stupid. This has you written all over it.”

Peter snarls and the pure animalistic sound of it makes Stiles flinch. He says, “You think I had something to do with this? You really think I would be so stupid as to threaten you or your family? What kind of mons—”

“‘You’re a very good liar, so what am I supposed to think?’ Stiles shouts back as his shoulders shake. He shoves at Peter but even though Peter’s lithe he’s still solid like a brick wall. He tries to wiggle out of Peter’s grasp and ignores the alarmed look in Peter’s blue eyes. “Let go of me! Let me go! You’re sick. You and your family of weird—”

“Don’t,” Peter warns lowly and he snatches his hands away as he bows his head for a moment, hiding his eyes. His hands open and close at his sides as his shoulders tense. He straightens suddenly and glares at Stiles’s house like he resents it for even being there. “I didn’t do this,” he says calmly.

Stiles swallows as anger swells hotly in his throat. “I don’t believe you.”

Peter winces and whips his gaze towards Stiles. He opens his mouth to say something but he tenses with a dark look.

A second later, the sheriff approaches him from behind and claps a hand over Peter’s shoulder and says, “I think you better go home, son. I’m going to want to question you about all this come tomorrow morning since my son seems to think you’ve got some involvement.”

Peter nods tightly and clenches his jaw. He tosses Stiles one last look before he spins on his heel and whips out his phone, typing furiously on it before he presses it to his ear.

Stiles watches him go before he turns his attention to the arrival of forensics, who sweep across the porch and starts collecting the remains and taking pictures for evidence.

His dad tries to convince him into spending the night with Scott, but he refuses to leave, preferring to wait it all out so he can tuck away in his room. His dad sighs and leaves him be when he sees that Stiles can’t be persuaded. He wanders off to help his deputies herd the nosey neighbors away and run off any local news reporters.

Stiles shivers against the cold of the night and sits on the curb again as he waits for forensics to finish up.

Isaac joins him on the curb sometime around midnight and Stiles is a bit surprised by it. He would have thought that Isaac would have gone with Scott and Melissa. But here he is, sitting shoulder to shoulder with Stiles as he chews anxiously on his fingernails and watches everything around them warily.

Forensics finishes some time around three in the morning and by then Stiles is already nodding off
when his dad gives him and Isaac the okay to enter the house after him and his deputies have swept though it to be sure there hasn’t been a break in or any other nasty surprises.

The three of them march quietly into the house and go their separate ways to tuck into their rooms to reflect.

Everything goes dark and quiet in the house, and Stiles lies awake in his bed, his mind plagued with the image of guts and blood. He can’t fall asleep without jerking awake a minute later to untangle from the beginnings of a nightmare. He edges along the start of a panic attack every time he snaps awake, never fully letting himself drift off because of an unknown fear prowling around in his subconscious. He tosses and turns until he huffs in frustration, moving to his dresser to grab those damn wolves and giving into the temptation of cuddling them close.

Stiles falls asleep embarrassingly quick after that with his nose buried into their faux fur, and he doesn’t wake until noon the next day; all because the smell of vanilla and jasmine calms his anxiety like nothing else can.

It’s both comforting and damning in its own way.
On Monday, during lunch, Stiles lies on the floor of the music room behind a row of propped saxophones with his hands behind his head and the ends of his sneakers pointing in different directions as he drifts, blinking dazedly up at the unlit florescent ceiling lights. He hasn’t been getting any decent sleep. He has nightmares about what happened Saturday night. Sometimes, it’ll be his dad taking the place of that creature, or Isaac, or even himself.

He’s also been avoiding Laura and Cora, who’s been adamant about trying corner him in the halls to ask him about what happened. Surely Peter must have told them though. He must have laughed. They probably all laughed about it with him.

Stiles hates his new status in school, which makes him the talk of every grade level because of the incident. Where he was once invisible, another nobody in the crowd, a nameless freshman, well, now he’s starting to hear his name in everyone’s mouth as they stare and watch his every move. Like he’ll snap or break down in tears at any given moment. He tries to look as indifferent as possible or put on a brave face, but it’s hard. He knows about some of the rumors accusing him of doing it as some kind of prank for attention. That bothers him the most. As if he were even capable of such a thing.

Stiles stiffens when he hears someone enter the empty room and the lights turn on because they’re motion sensitive. He listens to light footsteps putter around with a soft sigh, followed by the clatter of an instrument being rearranged, a bench seat being positioned (and the creak that follows when weight is applied on top), and the ticking of a metronome. He turns and peeks out from where he’s hiding to see a short brunette with pale skin, flushed cheeks, long wavy hair and dark eyes the color of untouched coffee. There’s a beauty mark under her left eye that Stiles takes note of more than anything else. She’s pretty, and she has silver braces that are really hard to miss.

“What are you staring at?” she asks without even looking at him as she positions her thin fingers on the cello cradled between her knees.

Stiles thinks about pretending he isn’t there but that seems senseless. He mumbles, “Nothing. Sorry.” He lies back down and stares up at the ceiling. “Just wanted some quiet.”

“You won't find any in here,” she points out as she begins to play. First slowly and softly, like she’s trying to ease into it, before she picks up the pace and her wand goes flying against the strings.

Stiles closes his eyes and loses himself to the music for a moment. It reminds him of when he used to hide under his mother’s desk in her music room and listen to her play the piano. He presses the memory out of his mind before his eyes get the chance to water or his heart gets the chance to get heavy and full with sorrow. He was really close to his mother and times like these made him long for the days when she was still alive.

The music is interrupted when someone new comes stomping into the room.

The brunette hisses and between gritted teeth says, “Kathryn.”

Stiles opens his eyes and blinks before turning his head to see Kate circling the brunette with a mean smirk. She's like a vulture circling a fresh corpse out in the oppressive heat of the desert.

Kate says, “How cute. It knows my name.”

The brunette scowls and her silver braces gleam almost threateningly. “What do you want? Other
than to waste my valuable time."

"Oh sweetheart..." Kate plays with her hair as she makes a 'tsking' sound before she slides her eyes over to where Stiles is. "I need a little privacy. So scram, Princess Metalhead."

"Ugh!" the brunette spits, looking enraged, but she still packs up her things and snatches her backpack off the ground. "How typical. You know, this room is for everyone. You can’t just kick me out because you want to suck face with someone,” the brunette complains. “And my name is Paige. Not princess. Be original for once by not pointing out the fact that I have braces. There’s nothing wrong with wanting to correct your teeth. You might benefit from that kind of work too. Just fyi."

"Yawn. Bored now.‘’ Kate dismisses Paige with the flick of her hand.

Paige glares at her and then glares at Stiles like it’s somehow his fault too before she makes a noisy exit, slamming the door shut behind her.

Stiles sits up before standing as Kate makes her way over to him.

“You and I need to talk, Stilinski,” Kate says as she stands on the other side of the saxophone rack. She fiddles with the mouthpiece of one and continues, ‘Laura’s paying me a hundred bucks to play the voice of reason, so listen closely because my boyfriend won’t stop brooding over the way you’ve been ignoring his texts and calls.” She huffs and mutters, “I’m so over this high school bullshit.”

“I don’t want to talk to you or Peter or anyone,” Stiles says, wincing at Kate’s harsh language but he crosses his arms defensively. "So you can just go back and say you did. That way you can keep the money and you can leave me alone."

“Oh grow up, buttercup,” Kate snidely counters. “Get over your delicate, little feelings and use those two holes sitting on the sides of your head for their intended purpose.”

Stiles exhales slowly and drops his arms to his sides so he can look at her expectantly.

"Good boy," Kate praises sarcastically. "Look. You need to face some facts here. Someone is out to get your dad, and it’s certainly not some twenty-two year old who has all his underwear imported from Malaysia because he’s that goddamn specific about the quality of the thread that gets to touch his rather impressive junk.”

Stiles makes a face, resentful over the visual she just gave him about Peter.

“I know what people say because people talk, and there’s a lot you’re not getting here because there’s so much more going on then what you think,” Kate goes on to say as she puts her hands on her hips. “This town was built on secrets, and honey, I know you’re feeling out of the loop, but trust me, ole Petey-Pie is the least of your worries. Do you know who my father is?”

Stiles blinks and says, “Yes.”

“And remind me who he is.”

“The mayor?” Stiles is getting really confused by the sudden turn of this conversation.

Kate smirks like she approves of his answer and she says, “Do you know how my dad got elected to office?”

“No, but I have a feeling you’re going to tell me.”
“Dirty politics,” Kate reports. “Before he was mayor, they used called him the Kingpin of Real Estate because he owns almost every piece of property there is in Beacon Hills. Do you know how my dad got his hands on all of it? Well, Gerard has his fingers in a lot of jars. I know at least what three of those jars are, and even then I don’t really know. He’s a crafty old man, and a bit of a control freak. You still with me, slim?”

Stiles blinks. “I, uh — think so?”

“His control on the real estate market helps him squeeze a majority of the votes he needs out of these halfwit, small town folks. Threats of foreclosure and evictions are what keeps him sitting so pretty in office. So, your dad’s little election as sheriff was done without my father’s knowing,” Kate clarifies. “My old man already had a guy in mind, when the old sheriff went and kicked the bucket. But then a few select members of this queer little town had your dad drafted in because he has a handful of skills that the other guy didn’t. One of which includes a firm backbone and a moral compass. Still with me?”

Stiles nods slowly.

“I’m not giving this information for free, you know,” Kate goes on to say. She tilts her head and eyes him like she’s seeing right through his soul. “Between you and me, I care more about saving my neck than anyone else. However, I have this really annoying fucking yet all-consuming soft spot for the Hales, and I’m a little too into Peter to just sit idly by while you point your finger at the wrong people. You want to help your dad? Then start looking into why he’s really here. Start looking into how there’s a new election coming up for the mayoral position and how your dad being sheriff is screwing with my old man’s chances for another term.”

Stiles nods dumbly.

Kate smiles meanly and pats him on the cheek like she pities him. Then she dusts off his shoulders in a physical display of intimidation. “Peter does two things: he finds your weakness and he uses it to his advantage. But the little sap wouldn’t hurt a fly. To be honest, I guess you could say that I’m the muscle in this relationship.”

Stiles can totally see that. He's fidgeting under the all too careful grip she has on his shoulders.

"My guy..." Kate pauses to laugh bemusedly at something Stiles doesn't really understand. She lets go of him finally. "He’s good at pretending to be the bad guy, you know? He’s got some history, sure, but don't we all. You think he’s voluntarily staying with his older sister and her happy little family? You do get that something happened to his parents, right? You think Isaac Lahey is the only kid to have ever lost everything in a tragic fire?"

Stiles feels his confusion wash into a foreboding cold. He watches, stupefied, as she tosses her hair over her shoulder and strides towards the door.

Kate pauses when she opens it and says, “You want to know why Peter bothers with you?” It’s a rhetorical question. “He’s very good at spotting potential. He bothers with you because you’re smart and capable, and also because you remind him of the little brother he lost. Maybe you should consider giving him a fair chance before you chase him off.” She leaves it at that and exits the room.

Stiles scrubs his face tiredly before he grabs his backpack when the next bell rings. He zones out for the rest of the day, utterly lost in his thoughts.
Peter is sitting out on the porch steps with another stuffed animal when Stiles and Isaac roll up to their house on their mountain bikes after school.

Stiles hands the house keys over to Isaac so he can head inside. He approaches Peter, who makes no move to stand, and eyes the grey wolf in his hand warily. “How many stuffed animals does Derek have?”

Peter flashes him a sharp smile and says, “Enough.”

"Enough for what?"

Peter just smirks.

An awkward silence falls over them.

Stiles fidgets. He doesn’t deal very well with awkward silence. “Your girlfriend is scary,” he says when he can’t find anything else to say.

Peter stares at him and says, “She’s a bitch.” Then he adds, “But that’s mainly why I like her.”

Stiles frowns at that. “That’s an odd preference,” he remarks.

Peter just sits up and grabs his wrist, positioning Stiles’s fingers to rest on the pulse on the side of his neck and under his chin. He stares at Stiles with meaningful focus and says, “Ask me if I had anything to do with what happened. If my pulse jumps, you’ll know I’m lying. If it’s steady, then it's the truth.”

Stiles fingers twitch against Peter’s abnormally warm skin and mumbles, “You feel like you have a fever.”

"That's one way to view it, I suppose,” Peter replies, and he has that same bemused expression that Kate did earlier. Like he's laughing at something that Stiles doesn't understand. "Ask me,” he insists.

Stiles sighs and asks, “Did you have anything to do with what happened with what was left on our doorstep and the...message left?”

Peter’s pulse is steady when he answers, “No.”

“But you knew that thing was real the whole time?” Stiles asks. “I saw it, Peter. That wasn’t a gag. That was the real thing.”

Peter purses his lips and reluctantly grits out, “Yes.”

Stiles reigns in the urge to hit him and Peter suddenly smirks like he knows. It’s infuriating. “Now is definitely not the time for one word answers,” he warns. "You were never really writing a paper, were you?”

That wipes the smirk off of Peter’s face. He sighs and says, “No.”

“Did you even really need my help? What were you trying to do anyway? Hunt it down? Capture it? Take pictures for money?”

“One question at a time,” Peter lightly suggests. His hands are twitching into fists where they rest on his lap.

“Did you need my help?”
“Yes.”

“Why?”

“You’re a fantastic sounding board, and your research skills are better than most.” Peter reluctantly adds, “Even mine.”

Stiles refuses to be thrown by the compliment.

Peter sighs. "Call it a test, if you will. One you passed thoroughly.”

Stiles frowns. “Do you even go to college?”

“Slightly off topic, but yes. Online mainly.”

Stiles switches gears again and asks, “What were you trying to do with the information I gave you?”

“Take it out to dinner,” Peter replies sarcastically and his pulse stutters but not significantly so. He says, “Capture it.” Steady pulse.

"But why?"

“Why not?” Peter growls and his eyes flash dangerously and Stiles could almost swear he sees them change color but it has to be a trick of the light. “You saw it. Should I have let it roam free, pouncing on every deer and Pomeranian it crossed paths with until it started craving bigger game? Say an infant child?”

Stiles glares at him, but he gets it. “Why is it your responsibility to take care of that type of thing?”

Peter doesn’t answer. He smiles wolfishly and says, “Ask me something else. I don’t think you’re ready for that answer.”

“El Chupacabra was hacked to bits on my porch and you don’t think I’m ready for whatever you and everyone else aren't telling me?” Stiles fumes and snatches his hand away out of frustration. “Screw you.”

Peter’s smile dims down into a flat line. “Believe me when I say that I want to tell you. But sister dear has expressly forbid me from doing such,” he explains, looking deeply annoyed. “Talia already thinks me a fool for involving you in this much, even though your father is sheriff.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means,” Peter says as he stands to his feet and stalks forward, right into Stiles’s personal space. “That you should talk to your father about why it is he took the sheriff’s position.”

“You’re the second person to tell me that today,” Stiles mumbles as he fidgets under Peter’s forceful gaze. “Why can’t you tell me since you know everyone and everything.”

Peter isn’t fazed by having his words thrown back in his face. “I told you. I can’t. I would, but I can’t.”

"Well how convenient for you, Peter.”

Peter flashes him a sharp smile but refuses to be cowed by the sarcastic and accusatory tone aimed in his direction.
Stiles exhales his frustration and says, “Do you know who put that threatening message on the door?”

Something in Peter’s expression goes dark. It’s like watching thunder clouds appear out of nowhere in a clear, blue sky. “I have some theories,” he says tightly.

“Yeah?” Stiles says and watches Peter closely when he adds, “Is Mayor Argent one of them?”

Peter looks caught off guard by the question and he scowls. “What did Kate say to you?”

“Not nearly enough, that’s for sure.”

Peter shoves the grey wolf at Stiles’s chest so he can retrieve his phone. “That woman is too trigger happy,” he mutters resentfully before he types a number into his phone and presses it against his ear. Then he walks away and towards his car, leaving Stiles there without a goodbye.

Not that Stiles cares, but he still had a few more questions he wanted to ask. He sighs as he watches Peter fuss into his phone before climbing into his car so he can peel out of the driveway and down the street.

Stiles treads towards his house and tries not to feel like he’s being watched. When he looks over to the neighbor’s house, he can swear he can see one of the curtains in the window flutter close quickly. He narrows his eyes before he unwillingly shrugs it off, too concerned with other things to really start in on his witch theory again.

He still locks the door when he makes it inside though.

Stiles thinks about everything that’s been said by Kate and Peter as he putters around the kitchen to start dinner. As he sets the pot-roast in the oven to simmer, he thinks about what he wants to say to his dad. He sits down at the kitchen table and does his homework as he waits for the pot-roast to cook through.

Isaac joins him a little bit later with his own homework and they work in tandem and in silence.

Stiles thinks that Isaac may be getting used to him and his dad because he’s a lot more open in subtle ways at home than he is everywhere else. He still isn’t really verbal or responsive, but Stiles knows that these things take time.

His dad comes in about a quarter to eight and the first thing he does after he greets them both is go straight to his room to change out of his uniform.

Stiles clears off his books and his schoolwork from the table, carrying it up to his room to dump on his bed. He returns to the kitchen just as Isaac finishes up and clears off his side before disappearing with it.

The table gets set and Stiles serves everyone and eats without waiting for them. Isaac and his dad eventually join him and digs in.

Predictably, his dad says, “How was your day?” The question is directed at Isaac, who just shrugs and concentrates on eating. His dad turns his gaze on him. “How about you?”

“Fine,” Stiles says delicately. “I was actually wondering if we could talk?”

His dad frowns in concern but he nods and it gets left at that.
Isaac clears the table for them and puts the dishes away into the dishwasher before he wanders into the living room to watch *Dance Moms*. He’s surprisingly super into that show.

Stiles puts the leftovers in some Tupperware before cramming it into the fridge and turning to his dad, who is sitting at the table with a patient sort of silence. He sits across from his old man and drums his fingers on the table as he thinks about how he wants to start.

The sheriff raises both his eyebrows and says, “What’s on your mind, son?”

“Why did you take this job?” Stiles blurs and silently reprimands himself for it. He was trying to build up to that question.

His dad looks caught off guard but there isn’t a lick of guilt on his features. “Because this town needed someone to look after it,” he puts simply. “Someone who wouldn’t turn a blind eye.”

“But what would you be turning a blind eye on?” Stiles probes. “Dad, what’s going on? I — you know you can tell me anything, right? Like even if it seems crazy. I have an open mind.”

His dad just smiles sadly. “I know. You’re like your mother that way.”

Stiles is quieted by this comment.

His dad sighs and leans back in his seat. “I don’t want you to worry about it. If that thing from the other night has you concerned about my wellbeing —”

“Dad, no,” Stiles interjects. “I mean, yes, it does. But it’s more than that. You get that I know what that thing was? El Chupacabra? Is this ringing any bells for you?”

His dad’s face goes through an interesting range of emotions before he settles on resignation. “You’re too goddamn curious,” he mutters, but he sounds proud. “Beacon Hills — it’s a special place.”

“How special? Are we talking like Harry Potter special or — does it — is it like the Hellmouth? Wait, are you Buffy in this scenario or is Peter? What am I? Am I Giles? I don’t want to be the Giles to Peter’s Buffy. I’d rather be Xander or even Willow. Even though I can’t do any magic.”

His dad looks amused. “You watch too much TV.” But then he says, “I guess that comparison isn’t too far off. The Hellmouth theory, I mean. It’s still a bit of a stretch, but it’s close enough. I’m still making sense of things myself. The last sheriff didn’t feed me much information with the manual he left behind, which has apparently been passed down since the town’s early beginnings. A lot of it’s outdated too. I’m stumbling as I go.”

“Whoa,” Stiles says as he takes that in. He’s partially shocked and partially in awe. It’s pretty cool that his dad is hip to the supernatural world like this. “I’ve got so many questions —”

“No,” his dad says, shooting him down as gently as possible. “I’ve already said too much. You’re not even supposed to be asking me these kind of questions as is. It’s compromising to my job. This is about the safety of the people. That comes first.”

“But I’m your son,” Stiles complains. “I won’t go running my mouth. I can keep a secret. Why can’t you tell me?”

“It’s for your own good,” his dad insists. “I can’t stop you from researching or piecing things together on your own but I don’t want you getting too heavily or physically involved. I had a firm little talk with your friend Peter.”
“Peter’s not my friend,” is his automatic response, as if distancing himself from Peter will help his case. It doesn’t. “And what does he have to do with this? Is he like a consultant for you? You know he’s been getting information from me right?”

Her dad’s eye twitches and Stiles silently wonders if he’s raising his blood pressure. “Just leave it alone, Stiles,” his dad warns. “Like I said, I can’t stop you from researching, but I’m constricting it to that. It’s going to stay at a level of pure academic curiosity. Understand? You let me deal with the rest, all right? I don’t want to have to worry about you.”

Stiles gives him a subdued smile. “So then I’m supposed to worry about you?” he retorts.

The sheriff shakes his head with a firm frown.

“Okay,” he says and feels a little bit bad that he’s partially lying. “But what about our next door neighbors? Are they witches?”

“Not as far as I can tell,” his dad says and, wow, okay. That means witches do exist. “Don’t worry about it.”

Stiles nods but there’s nothing to help the fact that he does worry about it.

His dad pats him on the shoulder before he moves to join Isaac in the living room.

Stiles goes up to his room and cracks his laptop open. He starts pulling up local news articles from the last eighty years and he dives in.

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Two hours after midnight, Stiles feels led to connect the final dot of his research. He knows what he has to do in order to do that. So he slips on a hoodie and slips into his sneakers before he tiptoes over to Isaac’s room. He shakes the sleeping preteen awake with a wide smile.

Isaac narrows his bleary eyes at him in question.

“So, um — you wanna go and find a huge sacred tree trunk with me? You don’t have to but I’d rather not go by myself. Think of it as a bonding experience? There’s minimal chance of us stumbling into danger,” Stiles babbles and he almost laughs at the skepticism that creeps into Isaac’s groggy features. “Fine. Go back to sleep. I’ll go by myself, and you can lay in this nice warm bed and wonder if your wonderful, lovingly patient and kind big brother has been mauled to death.”

Isaac sighs softly and starts sliding out of bed to change into some warm clothes.

Stiles fist pumps and bounces on his heels as he waits for Isaac to get dressed. Then they tiptoe down the steps together and out the back door before rounding the house to grab their mountain bikes. Stiles has a flashlight he nicked from his father's toolbox carefully placed in his back pocket.

It’s cold and the pavement is damp, so Stiles takes care as he peddles his bike. As their community shrinks behind them, he leads Isaac to Scott’s house and he notices Melissa’s car is gone, which means she must be working a graveyard shift at the hospital. So he climbs the tree by Scott’s window before he climbs into the open window. He dives on top of Scott and savors the way Scott shrieks.

“Dude!”

Stiles rolls onto the floor in a fit of laughter.
Scott throws all his pillows at Stiles. “What are you doing? You almost gave me a heart attack. What time is it?”

“Two something,” Stiles says when he finally calms down. “Isaac and I were going to go into the preserve to look for what used to be a mystical tree maybe.”

Scott looks at him like he’s lost all sense.

“This is important!” Stiles swears and makes an ‘X’ over his chest where his heart is. “Do you want to come with us or be lame and stay here?”


“Nah, we’re good. It’s not even a full moon. It’s a new moon. Which, if you can believe the folklore, means that most supernatural creatures are at its weakest.”

“What?” Scott exclaims. “What do you mean most?”

Stiles just throws a pair of jeans at him and it lands on the top of Scott’s head. “Just get dressed. I’ll explain along the way.”

Scott grumbles but he climbs out of bed and hops into his jeans before he goes in search of a sweater (and his inhaler).

Five minutes later they’re walking out his front door and meeting Isaac on the side of the house. The three of them all straddle their mountain bikes and start down the road towards the preserve as Stiles visualizes the mental map he drew in his mind when he used Google Earth for directions.

Stiles yammers on and on about his confrontation with Kate, then with Peter, and his conversation with his dad. Then he tells him about how he read about all these strange happenings in Beacon Hills in old articles that just cover up the mythical incidents by writing them off as general animal attacks or an occult. But they’re not that at all. Some of them were the work of mythical beings (like El Chupacabra).

“But what do the Hales have to do with this?” Scott pants as he pedals his bike on Stiles’s left, while Isaac does the same on Stiles’s right.

“That’s the thing. I’m not that sure, but I think they’re like some kind of guardians or slayers or something,” Stiles supposes, as ridiculous as it sounds. “They work along with the sheriff to keep the town safe and stuff.”


“I know,” Stiles agrees. He speeds up and veers off the road and onto a bike trail called the ‘Twisted Wolf Trail’. “We’re almost there,” he announces as they wind further and further down the trail.

Small branches snap and break under their wheels as they go deeper into the preserve. He stops suddenly and this forces Isaac and Scott to swerve to a stop. He climbs off his bike and throws it down as he dashes forward through a thrush of trees and into an open area. He pauses when he gets his sights on the final dot of his research.

Scott stumbles up beside him when he catches up, panting, and Isaac shoves his hands in his pockets as he looks around.
Stiles grabs the flashlight in his back pocket and shakes it on. He moves forward towards the huge tree trunk residing in the middle of the open area and he circles it, taking in every detail.

Scott draws closer and says, “So what does the old tree have to do with all of this?”

“Well, would you believe that none of the supernatural stuff happened until this tree was cut down? The tree was set in place by the founding tribes of this town back in the 1800’s. There’s this whole article covering its history, and as old as it is,” Stiles explains before he steps onto the focal point of the tree trunk. “There’s this legend that says that this tree used to be an actual living being. Some kind of Guardian that protected Beacon Hills before it was captured by some benevolent being.

“The being was something called a Trickster, I think, that trapped the Guardian in this final form.” He jumps down before he drops to his knees and crawls around, using the flashlight to look for some kind of insignia at the base of it. “I also read that tribes all across America used to come here and do rituals before it was finally cut down. Couldn’t find out what kind of rituals or what kind of tribes they were referring to though. I’m thinking maybe these tribes were not doing the nice kind of sacrifices,” he says. "And that's why they cut it down. To discourage whatever was happening here. It also stop raining around that time too, which must be really significant. But that's only a guess.”

Scott shivers against the cold and says, “I’m feeling unsettled. Can we go back now? You’ve found your creepy, sacred tree. Let’s go back.”

“But Isaac's not ready to leave yet,” Stiles says as he continues to crawl along the edge of the trunk. He doesn’t miss the quick huff from Isaac and he smiles a little, pleased that he could solicit that response from the quiet preteen. “You guys are lame, you know that? Where’s your sense of adventure?”

“At home, safe and sound. Which is where I should be. Oh man, my mom would kill me if she knew I was doing this.” Scott sounds so very conflicted. “What if a bear springs out? What if it's a coyote or a mountain lion? I don’t want to be mauled to death. Why did I let you talk me into this? An axe murderer could lunge out from the woods at any moment. I’m too young to die.”

“So are most animals in the wild, but you don’t hear them complaining. Mostly because they’re dead but — okay, I’m getting off topic. Don’t be so dramatic,” Stiles says as Scott shakes his inhaler and sucks in a puff of air as his panic triggers the beginnings of an asthma attack. Stiles stops and hunches down when he sees an inscription on one of the roots. He reaches out towards it, his palm growing curiously warmer as he does so. “Hey, I think I found — ow!” he cries as his hand flies up to the sore spot on the back of his head and his gaze flicks to the white stone rolling onto the ground and into the wet grass. He whips his head around in time to see Peter stepping out from the shadows with a triumphant smirk, bouncing another white stone up and down in his left hand. It should really say something about Stiles that he gets relieved when he sees it’s just Peter.

Scott, however, starts freaking out immediately and scrambles behind Isaac for cover.

Stiles rolls his eyes and says, “Scott, relax. It’s just stupid Peter.”

Peter cocks his head in amusement.

“Oh,” Scott breathes. He steps away from Isaac. “I’m Scott,” he says because why wouldn’t he say that. “I just would like to say thank you.”

Stiles groans in embarrassment because he can see where this is going.

Peter looks intrigued though. “Thank me? For what?”
“For all the — don’t you slay the bad guys or things?” Scott asks, oblivious to the way Stiles is shaking his head rapidly in warning. “Stiles says you and your family are like guardians.”

Stiles groans again and smacks a hand against his forehead.

Peter looks unutterably amused. “Is that right?” He looks to Stiles. “Guardians?”

“I have a theory,” Stiles mutters resentfully, even though his cheeks are red. “You’re not exactly denying anything.”

Peter puts his hands behind his back as he smirks and he says, “You kiddies shouldn’t be out here.”

“And you should?” Stiles shoots back with a glare.

Peter merely shrugs. “Half of this preserve is owned by my family.” His smirk stretches out into a smug grin that’s all teeth and frankly rather frightening. “Guess which half you happen to be on?”

“He’s right!” Scott squeaks. “Which is why we’re leaving. Right? Stiles?”

“Fine,” Stiles huffs and jumps down from the stump. He aims the flashlight and his phone back towards the roots. “Let me just take a picture of something.” His tongue peaks out in concentration as he looks for the insignia again. He frowns when he can’t find it. “Wait — but it was right there.”

He drops to his knees and leans closer. There’s nothing.

Stiles sits back on his knees, baffled. He jumps a bit when Peter claps a hand over his shoulder.

“Come on. It’s time to go,” Peter decides and bodily lifts Stiles like he weighs nothing before righting him on his feet. He shoves Stiles in the direction of his bike. “Go.”

“But —” Stiles starts to protest and stumbles as Peter keeps shoving at him. “God, okay!” He marches stormily with Isaac and Scott trailing after him until they reach their bikes. Stiles isn’t surprised to see Peter’s Lamborghini rumbling quietly from where it’s parked on the side of the trail. He straddles his bike and says, “How did you even find us? How did you know we were out here? Are you patrolling?”

Peter follows them all the way back to Scott’s house, where Isaac and Stiles see him off.

Scott is unquestionably relieved when he notes that his mom’s car is still missing. He shoots Isaac and Stiles a thumbs-up before he disappears into his house.
Peter honks his horn gently and makes an impatient gesture for them to continue on.

Stiles rolls his eyes but he follows after Isaac when he starts peddling off in the direction of their street.

They roll up to the front lawn sometime later and they toss their bikes down as Peter pulls up to the curb.

“Go on without me,” Stiles tells Isaac quietly.

Isaac hesitates and glances over Stiles’s shoulder at Peter before he looks back to Stiles.

“Just go, I’ll be right behind you,” Stiles promises.

Isaac looks back at Peter thoughtfully before he shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans and treads toward the back of the house.

Stiles waits until Isaac is out of sight before he walks over to Peter’s car.

Peter lets down his passenger window so Stiles can lean into the space and he looks at Stiles expectantly.

“So that stuff that Scott said earlier about the — he’s my best friend, okay? I tell him everything. He’s not going to say anything to anyone else,” Stiles swears.

Peter drums the fingers of his left hand against the top of his steering wheel and calmly replies, “I should hope not.”

“He wont,” Stiles insists. “And — neither will I.”

Peter’s gaze flicks over his face as he wears a pensive expression and he says, “You don’t have to convince me of that.”

“Right,” Stiles says. “Because we have to remember that you approached me with all of this. So it’s your fault I know so much.”

Peter smirks slowly. “You don’t know nearly as much as you think you do.”

“Ugh, again with the cryptic remarks,” Stiles complains and points a finger at Peter’s face. “Why don’t you give me the missing pieces to the puzzle then?”

“Now why would I do that?” Peter says because he’s a jerk who doesn’t like to make things easy for Stiles. “Go inside.”

“You go inside,” Stiles mutters before he glances over his shoulder at the neighbor’s house. “I think they’re witches. Can you confirm this? Because my dad wont.”

“I don’t think they’re anything,” Peter replies. He barely glances in the direction of that house.

Stiles shoots him an annoyed look. “Well isn’t there some way you can tell? You’re the slayer here.”

Peter quirks an eyebrow. “You are very misinformed.”

“Until you tell me something different or offer some other explanation that’s better than this theory, I’ll keep to this belief, thank you,” Stiles quips, unapologetic.
Peter sighs. “Go inside.”

“But the witches —”

“I’ll look into it,” Peter interjects impatiently. “Go inside.”

“Fine,” Stiles huffs. He moves to do just that but Peter reaches out really quickly, quicker than what should be possible, and grabs Stiles’s wrist, arresting his movement. “What?” he complains. “I can’t actually go inside if you don’t let me.”

“If I ever find you or your little friends out in the woods during this time of night again,” Peter says lowly. “I won’t hesitate to send our watch dogs after you.”

Stiles stares at Peter before he says, “Are they — are they really dogs or is that a metaphor for some other kind of creature because —”

Peter just smirks.


Peter releases his wrist, satisfied. “Good. Get some sleep. You’ve got a lacrosse game tomorrow.”

“What? How do you even —” Stiles watches in frustration as Peter drives off before he can even get the question out. He grumbles to himself as he makes his way to the back of the house to return his dad’s flashlight to the toolbox sitting at the back door. He grows quiet as he makes a stealthy retreat in the house and up to his room. When he feels like it’s safe, he grumbles to himself, disappointed that he was so close in finding just what he was looking for. He knows that the tree may be the key to unlocking so much. The thought swims around in his mind as he strips out of his clothes and climbs into bed to curl around Derek’s wolves.

Before he falls asleep, he gets this brief thought of naming them Chaos, Sly, and Truth.

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It’s ironic really how while making breakfast that Tuesday morning he sprains his wrist. Don’t ask him how he does it because this is Stiles. He can manage the clumsiest feats without any effort. And it’s not like Coach Finstock is going to let him do anything but warm the bench, but two days before his birthday. Who gets a sprained wrist two days before their birthday?

Stiles Stilinski apparently. He’s just lucky it wasn’t his writing hand.

His dad had already left, so he has to fumble with the first aid kit by himself in a sad attempt of wrapping his own wrist before Isaac descends down the steps and wordlessly takes over. He wraps Stiles’s wrist like it’s an art form, and it makes something like distress settle heavily in his stomach when he realizes that Isaac can do it so well because he is familiar with doing it.

Stiles doesn’t ask as he watches him work. He bites down his tongue until he can taste blood and doesn’t ask.

Isaac secures the bandage at a point below Stiles’s wrist with a small metal clip before he wordlessly stands and switches off the fire on the stove, and then dumps the burnt bacon still simmering in the pan on the stove in the garbage. He puts the pan in the sink and turns on the faucet before he grabs two bowls, two spoons, and the box of organic grainless apple cereal Stiles tries to force his dad to eat from time to time. He makes Stiles a bowl and then himself. He pours milk in both bowls,
dumping the spoons in before he takes his bowl to the other side of the table and eats silently.

Stiles feels something warm and fond expand in his chest at Isaac’s consideration. He turns in his seat and eats his cereal with his uninjured hand. When he’s done, he cleans up the mess he’s made with the first aid kit before he returns it to its designated spot under the sink in the upstairs bathroom. He then shoves all his school work and books into his backpack before he throws his lacrosse jersey on over his white t-shirt and marvels at himself in the bathroom mirror, eyeing the ‘24’ and then turning so he can look at his last name written across the back.

Isaac’s ready to go when he returns to the kitchen, and he’s clutching the straps of his backpack anxiously.

Stiles locks the front door before they jog down the steps and straddle their bikes, peddling to Isaac’s school like they usually do every morning. He says, “Thank you. For my wrist. I...thanks.”

Isaac just looks at him for a long moment before he rolls his bike over to the rack and locks it. He heads inside without a word.

Stiles watches him go before he starts for his own school.

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In AP Biology, Stiles has a hard time paying attention because the wrist of his left hand aches like it wont quit, and it’s only first period. It also doesn’t help that he only got about thirty minutes of sleep.

His teacher hands out a pop quiz based on last night’s reading and Stiles is more than sure that he wont get anything other than a B. He rubs his forehead and passes his test toward the front when the teacher announces that their time is up. Then the teacher announces that he’ll be turning on the movie Contagion, and explains that they’re expected to take notes so they can write a summary paper about how the movie relates to what they’re doing in class at the moment.

“It’ll be due Friday, so use the grace period wisely,” Mr. Harris says as he glares around the room like they’re all the exact kind of furniture he hates. “Sit where you want.”

Stiles sighs and fishes for a spiral notebook and a pen before he slaps it on the counter of his station. The lights are turned off and the movie begins to play on the Promethean board as a light breeze floats through the room from the floor fan that’s parked by the classroom door slowly rotating from left to right.

Stiles chews on his bottom lip and bounces his leg under the table as his foot taps quietly. He fidgets on his stool as he tries to concentrate on writing down some coherent notes but his wrist aches and aches and aches.

Cora slides into the empty seat next to his with a put-upon sigh and grabs his injured wrist.

Stiles tenses in surprise, fully expecting her to do something mean like snap it or apply even more painful pressure.

Cora, true to her bewildering nature, does the exact opposite. She just holds it loosely with her right hand while she uses her left to take notes.

Stiles straightens when he notices that the pain in his wrist is slowly subsiding into a dull but ignorable twinge. He shoots her a quizzical look because Cora’s hand is like a hot brand, even through the bandages.
Cora doesn’t even glance at him when she says, “Human contact helps ease pain.”

“Plausible. But how did you know I was in pain?” Stiles questions, maybe a little too loudly because some of their classmates turn to look at them and Mr. Harris glares from behind his desk.

Cora shushes him and replies, “You’re easy to read. Obviously. You make faces.”

“What faces?”

“Very stupid, irritating faces — like you need someone to put you out of your misery,” Cora grits out and her fingers twitch around his wrist like she’s resisting the urge to do something violent. “The kind that always make me want to punch you.”

Stiles clamps his mouth shut and figures he shouldn’t press his luck with this one. He makes a mental note to research human contact and pain, because Cora is a Hale and that means something. He just hasn’t figured out what.

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Stiles exits his stupid second period class to find Cora waiting for him.

Cora shadows him during their next two classes (AP History and English) like it’s nobody’s business, and every time he begs her off with a promise to go to the nurse’s office for some Tylenol, she gets this constipated look on her face and says, “I don’t like the way medicine makes you smell. Now shut up and pay attention.”

Stiles, considering things, is very curious to know just what the hell that means and how the hell she knows what medicine smells like on people. But, of course, when he tries to ask, she always shuts him down with a mean glare or ignores him altogether even though she is practically holding his hand.

He can’t win for losing.

Stiles soon finds himself dumped at Laura and Kate’s designated table in the school’s quad at lunch. They don’t even seem concerned that Cora is pushing him around.

Laura greets him with a smile and Kate steals his jello without asking.

Cora sits down beside him with her own tray and grips his injured wrist again as she juggles eating and studying for her AP French class.

Laura snickers at his face.

“Is this not weird? Am I the only one who doesn’t find this weird?” Stiles questions desperately, almost delirious with how out of the ordinary this situation is. "Cora Hale is holding my hand but everyone and their grandma seems oblivious to this oddity. Am I in an episode of the Twilight Zone? I feel like I'm in an episode of the Twilight Zone."

“Awe, she likes you,” Kate teases as she goes to town on his jello.

“No,” Stiles disagrees. “She wants to see me trip on my face and co-mingle my tears with the blood of my broken nose.”

Cora snorts but she doesn’t comment with an affirmation or denial.
"Also, I was going to eat that," Stiles states with a frown.

Kate just says, "Dibs."

"You can't just say dibs after you steal someone's food," Stiles vehemently argues. "It's unconstitutional!"

Kate just shrugs and licks at her plastic spoon like a kitten licking up milk.

Laura says, “What are your birthday plans?”

Stiles exhales very slowly because apparently they were all just going to ignore his incredulity. He says, “I don’t know. Haven’t talked to my dad yet.”

“What would you like to do?” Laura asks.

Stiles shrugs.

Laura huffs. “Fine. Be difficult.” Then she says, “So, you have a game tonight?”

“I don’t have a game. I’m just there to play benchwarmer,” Stiles reports. “I doubt Coach would even let me.” He lifts his injured wrist, the one Cora is still latched on to, and shows her what he means.

Derek chooses that moment to stroll up with his right hand in the pocket of his jeans while he cradles a basketball under his other arm. He frowns when he sees Stiles and then frowns even harder when he looks at Cora’s hand on his wrist.

Stiles gingerly lowers his injured wrist from view.

Derek sits down on the other side of Laura and furrows his brow before he lifts them as he looks at Stiles. “What happened to you? Did you trip over a feather or something?”

Stiles blushes, embarrassed and irritated by Derek’s obvious opinion of his coordination, or lack thereof. He simply says, “No.” and refuses to elaborate or confess to what really happened.

Derek just starts twirling his basketball on the pointer finger of his left hand in a way that seems effortless. He appears to be in a good mood.

“By the way, what’s this I hear about you and some kids stumbling onto our land last night? Peter says you were all over some tree stump like you were fishing for gold,” Laura questions as she chows down on a double cheeseburger.

Stiles watches her devour it in fascination. He’s never seen a cheerleader demolish red meat so enthusiastically. He says, mainly because he feels like he’s in good company, “Uh — no. I mean yes. But, listen, it wasn’t just any tree stump. It was a magical tree stump.”

Kate snorts and says, “Ooh. Crazy.”

Laura jabs Kate in her side with her elbow and says, “What makes you think it’s magical?”

“Just because,” Stiles mumbles as he pokes at his turkey club sandwich with the spoon he had been planning on using for the jello. He’s not all that hungry. Just tired. He yawns and scrubs at his eyes.

Derek tracks his movements closely as he tosses his basketball back and forth between his hands.
Laura says, “Just because what?”


Laura grins like she knows and starts in on her third double cheeseburger. She says, with her mouth full, “You should eat.”

Derek makes a disgusted face. “Gross, Laura. Who could stomach anything with your manners?”

Laura turns to him and widens her mouth to really give him something to look at.

Derek scowls and snaps his teeth at her finger when she tries to poke his nose.

Laura just cackles.

“He’s done it again,” Derek says as he stares at Stiles like he’s accusing him of something. “My Uncle Peter. He’s been in my room. What did he give you this time?”

“Oh,” is Stiles’s intelligent rebuttal. “A grey wolf? But dude that's, I mean — how many stuffed animals do you have?”

“Oh Derek never had a shortage of toys when he was little,” Laura answers. “He likes to cuddle. His most redeeming quality if you were to ask me.”

“ Weird, cause no one did,” Derek grumbles.

Laura ignores him and continues, ”You could always find him in a puppy pile with a whole animal kingdom of plushies.”

Stiles glances over at Derek for confirmation and Derek just shrugs, unashamed. “So you’re a fan of cuddling?”

Derek gives him a smile that’s all teeth and his gaze is knowing. “So do you, it seems.” He leans forward a little, green eyes brimming with mischief. It sends a shiver up Stiles's spine. "How are my wolves?”

Stiles flushes all the way down to his collarbone.

Derek looks unreasonably smug as he watches the reaction. He must know Stiles has been spooning them every night and his immediate silence probably just confirms it.

Stiles just hates him so much.

“My jello’s gone,” Kate says in pouty disappointment. “Bored now.”

Stiles pushes his tray over to her when he recovers from his mortification.

Kate starts eating his food without question.

Laura frowns in concern. “You didn’t eat.”

Stiles says, “I’m not hungry.” He rubs tiredly at his eyes again. “I’m too exhausted anyway.”

“Maybe you wouldn’t be if you weren’t stumbling around the woods like easy prey,” Derek remarks, unhelpfully.
Stiles mutters, “What I do in the woods at three in the morning is my business.”

“Unless it’s on our land,” Derek counters. “Then it’s called trespassing.”

“Yes, thank you. I know. But what I didn’t know was that it was private property,” Stiles retorts. “Not really my fault.”

“I doubt it,” Derek insists. “You’re clumsy and intrusive. It’s going to get you killed.”

“Yeah? Well —” Stiles fumbles with a comeback because the nerve of this guy. He doesn’t even know Stiles. He can’t just make snap judgments like that. As payback, he jabs him where it hurts and says, “Basketball sucks. It’s highly overrated. And also, you are very mediocre at it.”

Derek bristles, predictably, as his basketball almost goes flying out of his hands in outrage. He stares at Stiles like he’s the craziest weirdo he’s ever met. “You — that’s —”

Laura cackles.

Cora even snorts.

Derek glares at them all before he storms off, annoyed.

Stiles pens it down as a win.

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In the middle of that last period of the day, Stiles gets called to the main office. When he gets there, the receptionist merely points to the bench that’s parked right outside of the guidance counselor’s office.

Paige is already sitting there, fiddling with her phone and looking generally disinterested.

Stiles sits down beside her and he shoots her a friendly smile that she just raises a brow at before she ignores him altogether. The response is pretty fair seeing as how their last interaction wasn’t all that positive.

Paige sighs as she types away on her phone and says, without even looking at him, “What are you staring at?”

Stiles blinks, suddenly realizing that he’s been staring at her for the past minute and he says, “Sorry.” Then he says, “Also, sorry about Monday. Kate was wrong to kick you out. Especially since you were making what sounded like the most beautiful sounding music I’ve ever heard.”

Paige smirks. “That’s quite an apology.” She puts her phone down and looks at him while she licks at her braces (prodding mostly at the rubber bands connected at the sides). “Though, you’re stupid for associating with Kate. You know she’s bad news right?”

Stiles says, “Are we talking in a Mean Girls type of way or a Spring Break type of way.”

“Spring Break. Unrated.”

“Oh,” Stiles says. He’s seen the movie more times than he’d like to admit. He had a (indefinable) thing for Vanessa Hudgens when he was younger. At one time in his life there was a High School Musical phase. “I wasn’t — we didn’t really — I don’t know what you think we were doing. We were just talking. She has a boyfriend.”
“You shouldn’t care what I think,” Paige simply thinks. “And everyone knows that her and Peter have a very odd relationship, so you might want to stick to a different argument.”

Stiles is surprised at the little twinge of defensiveness he gets on Peter’s behalf. But all he says is, “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Paige just goes back to typing away on her phone.

“So,” Stiles says because he’s never quite done. “What are you in for?”

Paige thumbs pause over the screen of her smartphone and she says, “You did not just say that.”

“I did, actually. I say a lot of things,” Stiles remarks. “How long have you been playing the cello?”

Paige mutters, “Scatterbrain.” Then louder, she says, “Since I was six. My father is determined to live vicariously through me. I’m expected to enroll into Juilliard after I graduate. He’s just lucky that I enjoy the cello on my own.”

Stiles says, “You’re really good.”

“I know.”

“Well,” Stiles says. “I can play a little piano. My mom tried to teach me, but my attention span became a hindrance. My *Twinkle Twinkle, Little Star* would start to sound like *A Whole New World* midway through and then that would start sounding like *Chop Sticks.*”

Paige snorts. “Yes. That is a problem.”

Stiles smiles a little self-deprecatingly.

The door to the guidance counselor’s office opens and a Senior boy walking on crutches limps out with tears streaming down his face.

Stiles becomes a little apprehensive to enter the office when Victoria Argent steps out and gestures for him and Paige to enter.

Paige sits in one of the cushioned chairs and Stiles sits in the other.

Victoria clicks her way around the desk and seats herself behind it. She shuffles a few papers before she types away on the keyboard of her computer and says, “Mr. Stilinski.”

“Present,” Stiles says softly because he would very much like not to be. She’s a rather frighteningly intimidating woman. It’s hard to believe that sweet, dimpled Allison came from her loins.

“I’m told by Mrs. Cassidy that you’ve gone to her with a request for a math tutor,” Victoria says, distracted. She’s eyeing the screen of her computer as she says, “From what I can see of your grades, you’re doing remarkably well in all of your classes. Outside of Algebra. You’re on the borderline of a D.”

Stiles straightens at the information. “I am?”

Victoria doesn’t repeat herself. She says, “Paige is a Junior who’s succeeded in advancing all her math electives with the highest completion rate. She has agreed to tutor you. Are you amenable to this arrangement?”

Stiles glances over at Paige but she’s too busy eyeing Victoria’s name plaque with an indifferent
frown. “Uh, yes.”

“Good,” Victoria simply says and presses down on some keys that causes a set of papers to expel from the printer she has in the corner of her office. She stands and clicks her way over to retrieve it before she brings it to Stiles. “This is an academic contract that you must go over and sign. Then you and her will come to an agreement about the days on which you will meet. If you fall out of compliance with these terms, Paige is allowed to drop you as a tutee and you’ll be forced to enroll into summer school. Likewise, if she fails you as a tutor, you will be assigned a new one. Understood?”

Stiles nods, already reading through the contract. The terms of it seems pretty fair, so he signs and dates it.

Paige does the same.

Victoria dismisses them before she moves to retrieve the next student.

As they walk out into the empty halls, Paige says, “Sundays are best for me. I work part-time, and have recitals all other days. That’s as flexible as I’m willing to get.”

“Sunday works,” Stiles agrees.

Paige tucks some of her wavy hair behind her ear as she holds out her phone for him. “Give me your number.” When he does, and she takes it back, she says, “I’ll text you so you can have my number. Do you know where the town library is?”

“I can figure it out.”

Paige nods before she abruptly breaks out into a happy smile, looking at a point over his shoulder. She brushes past him and jogs up to Derek, who greets her warmly with a hug.

Stiles doesn’t stick around to see them press their lips together.

The ache in his wrist is gradually returning.

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Coach Finstock takes one good look at Stiles’s wrist before he shakes his head and sends him home.

He doesn’t even get to stick around for the game. It sucks. But he doesn’t say a word as he peddles to the Beacon Hills Police Station. He laughs resentfully as his eyes begin to water, and the sky starts to rumble above his head.

Stiles blinks and looks up quickly at the grey clouds that seem to be forming but not a drop of rain forms. He waits and waits but almost rolls his eyes at himself when he realizes that nothing will happen. It hasn’t probably rained for decades — why would it start now? He sniffs and the sky rumbles again.

He’s just really frustrated that he can be so easily dismissed — that his value to the lacrosse team is just so. He scrubs at his eyes before a tear can drop as he makes it to the front entrance of the station. He shoves his bike on the rack before he roughly locks it. Then he storms inside and peels off his lacrosse jersey — the jersey he wore for nothing.

Deputy Tara is there to greet him from behind the front desk with a wry smile. She informs him that his dad is in his office with Isaac.
Stiles treads all the way to the back of the station where his dad’s office is located and enters just as his dad is putting on his coat. “Don’t bother,” he says. “I’m not playing.”

His dad pauses and takes a good look at his face and he just knows. “Awe, hell. Son —”

Stiles shakes his head sharply before he sits down in one of the cushioned seats in front of his dad’s work desk.

Isaac is curled up on the couch next to a file cabinet with a schoolbook.

His dad still puts on his coat with a sigh and says, “Let’s go get some victory ice cream anyway.”

Fifteen minutes later finds them sitting in a booth at Ramona’s Ice Cream Parlor across the street from Ramona’s Whole Foods the biggest supermarket in town. It makes Stiles wonder just how many buildings are owned by Boyd’s family.

His dad is sitting across from Isaac and Stiles, ignoring the looks of disapproval Stiles is shooting him for ordering the double whammy sundae.

Stiles just pokes and pokes at his slice of Oreo ice cream cake while Isaac goes to town on a two-scoop coconut ice cream waffle cone.

His dad says, “I don’t want to give you two mixed signals.”

Stiles frowns as he stabs at a piece of Oreo. “How do you mean?”

“We’ll get to that, but first I want to talk about your wrist. How did you do that?”

Stiles blushes and mumbles something about ”Eggs...” like that explains everything.

His dad sighs. “Alright. Is this why your coach sent you home?”

Stiles nods.

“That was unfair of him to do. But son, there will be other games. Don’t let that put you off. Life is going to be plenty full of no’s. You just have to learn to take them with a grain of salt,” his dad sagely advises.

Stiles nods somberly.

“Good.” Then his dad pins him with a look.

Stiles fidgets. "What?"

"I’ll tell you what," the sheriff assures, straightening in his seat. “Now, don’t think because I’m playing nice by taking you and Isaac out for ice cream that I’m not going to bring up the fact that one of my deputies saw you two the other night with Peter Hale trailing behind you in a hard to miss hot red car. Care to explain why a soon to be fifteen year old and a twelve year old thinks that curfew or my rules don’t apply to them?"

Stiles nearly chokes on his own spit in surprise.

Isaac tenses beside him and his spoon pauses midway to his mouth.

His dad continues eating his ice cream without letting up on the ‘dad stare of doom’ he has aimed at them. “I can wait all night,” he informs between bites. “Apparently so can you.”
Stiles groans and hunches down in the booth. “Dad — it’s totally not — okay, I admit that it was wrong of me to do. But Isaac deserves total immunity because I forced him to go —”

“I highly doubt that you could force him into doing anything he didn’t want to. He may not seem it, but this kid is stubborn,” his dad interjects. “You’re persuasive, but you aren’t as persuasive as you think. If Isaac didn’t want to go, he would have stayed firmly in that bed where he belonged. The problem here is that he’s become entirely too fond of you and looks up to you like you’re the second coming.”

Isaac flushes and fidgets but he keeps his silence.

Stiles lets that sink in because heavens above Isaac likes him. He has proof now. He tries so very hard not to preen.

By the flat look his dad shoots him, he doesn’t do a good job. “You realize that being older means being more responsible.”

“The tree —”

“I don’t even want to hear about the tree stump, and yes, I had a little talk with Peter Hale when he came into the station for a different matter. He seems to agree with me that you acted irresponsibly.”

Stiles is going to strangle Peter.

“And what’s worse is that you put Scott and Isaac in harm’s way. Anything could have happened,” his dad continues. “With that being said, and because I consider myself a fair man, starting after your birthday, you’re grounded until further notice.”

Stiles’s jaw drops.

“You too, Isaac. And believe me, I have plenty for you two to do during spring break. I’ll be leaving a list. There’s a lot of yard work I haven’t gotten around to but I’m sure you will,” his dad says.

Stiles looks to Isaac for some back up but he’s just accepting his fate gracefully. He shakes his head sharply at Stiles in warning as he keeps his gaze pinned to his lap.

Stiles closes his mouth and swallows down his rising protests before he crosses his arms and sulks.

“Smart kids,” his dad praises. “Finish your ice cream. It might be a while before you get anything good like this again.”

Stiles just stabs at it and firmly believes that his dad is enjoying this too much.

So unfair.

He fishes for his phone and types angrily while he still has the luxury of using it.

Stiles texts: Way to have my back you dick!!

Peter responds: :))

I got grounded indefinitely because of you and your stupid car and your stupid mouth!!

:))

You better not show your face for two decades!!
I mean it Peter!!

You're dead to me!!

:((
There’s an orange cat.

You know, one of those neighborhood cats you always see around?

The thing about it though is that it’s twice the size of a normal domesticated cat. Even more so for a street cat.

Or is it an alley cat? Stiles has trouble remembering these things.

Look, the point is that there’s an orange cat that Stiles always sees hanging around. Maybe not hanging around, hanging around, but, more like stalking. Like clockwork, every night around eight, it’ll sit across the street on the corner under the glow of a streetlamp and stare with its little cat eyes at the neighbor’s house (the one with the witches) and also at Stiles’s house.

It will sit there on its little hind legs on that curb like a king would on a throne and stare for a full hour, okay? Stiles doesn’t know any other alley cats that do stuff like that.

It’s Beacon Hills, sure, but still.

This type of thing is turning out to be a commodity.

Stiles notices the cat maybe a day after the next-door neighbors move in.

Then circumstances arise which cause him to forget the whole bizarreness of this orange cat.

But it comes back later to bite him. Boy does it come back to bite him. Okay, so maybe not literally but you get the point.

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It’s late Wednesday night and Stiles, Isaac, and Scott are camped out in Stiles’s living room in front of the big screen TV as they marathon episodes of *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* off of Isaac’s profile on the sheriff’s Netflix account.

Melissa and his dad had graciously allowed Scott (also grounded, his dad spilled the beans to Melissa) to spend the night over since neither of them would be able to be sociable for a while. Seeing as how Stiles’s birthday is only the very next day, his dad had taken the three of them to the store so they could get their fill of sugary confections and salt-loaded snacks.

His dad is the best, and Stiles savors the generosity while it’s still there because come Friday, there will be no more *Mr. Nice Dad*.

Isaac is crunching his way through a tall bag of pretzel sticks and M&M’S while he stares at the screen in rapt fascination. This kid has laser focus.

Stiles is sprawled out on the couch as he goes to town on a bag of sour gummy worms and skittles combined. His body is beginning to vibrate with the sugar rush, and he’s close to seeing colors swimming in his vision.

Scott leans back against the edge of the couch from where he’s sitting on the floor by Stiles’s feet with a bowl of caramel popcorn in his lap, and another double stuffed Oreo in the fingers of his right hand as he squirts yet another swirling tower of spray cheese on top, *gross.*
“Sorry about getting you in trouble,” Stiles mumbles as he licks sour sugar from his fingers.

Scott shrugs as he jams the cookie in his mouth, along with a handful of popcorn. He swallows and says, “It’s okay. I don’t mind. We’re kids. I think we’re supposed to give our parents a hard time so they can dish out punishment. Isn’t that how it all goes?”

Stiles smiles to himself before he knocks a socked foot into the back of Scott’s head. “You’re so deep, dude,” he jokes.

“Dude, I know! I have amazing depths,” Scott retorts before he stands and tackles Stiles onto the floor, still surprisingly mindful though of Stiles’s sprained wrist.

Isaac ignores their antics and turns up the volume on the TV so he can drown out their grunting laughter and the sound of their bodies thumping around and bumping into furniture.

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The morning of Stiles’s birthday finds him at Ramona’s Old Fashioned Eatery, sword-fighting Scott with the use of their utensils as his dad sighs from where he’s sitting across from them in a booth by the window.

Isaac is cutting into his pancakes beside him and generally acting unmoved by Scott and Stiles’s childish behavior.

The sheriff is treating them all to a big breakfast before he herds the three of them off to school.

Stiles gives Scott an affectionate bro hug before he lightly hip-checks Isaac with an unapologetic grin that Isaac rolls his eyes at before he wordlessly heads inside the school.

Scott stumbles after him as they meet up with Lydia and Allison.

Stiles quickly climbs into his dad’s squad car and tells him to go before he can get ambushed by his friends because there is no way Scott won’t run his big mouth about the fact that it’s Stiles’s birthday.

His dad drops him off in front of the school five minutes later without even divulging what the plans are for the evening.

Stiles is never a patient guesser. He doesn’t dwell on it long because he’s navigating the crowded halls, keeping a wary eye out for Laura or Cora, or god forbid, Peter.

When he reaches his locker without incident, he lets himself relax as he enters the combination. The lock pops free and he opens the small metal door — Pow! — only to have a handheld confetti cannon blast off at his face and cover the whole upper half of his body with silly string, glitter, and blue and white confetti.

Stiles spits and blinks glitter from his eyes as people titter around him, pointing in amusement and watching as he tries to brush himself off. It’s no use really so Stiles gives up with a long-suffering sigh and grabs the books he needs for his first and second period class.

When he reaches his biology class, he stomps to the back and dumps his confetti and glitter covered books and notebooks onto his station as he fumes. He’ll have some choice words for Laura.

Cora comes striding into the room three seconds before the bell rings and she has on her marching band uniform. When she sees Stiles, she smirks.
Stiles glares. He has a gut feeling that Cora is the one responsible for his little locker fiasco.

When Cora doesn’t stop smirking the whole period, ignoring his glares this time around, he feels like that just really confirms it.

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During second period, Stiles doesn’t bother taking notes because he’s too busy replying to all the texts blowing up his phone from family and friends. Lydia, Allison, Erica, and Malia sending him birthday emoticon after birthday emoticon, like they want to torture him. Boyd’s texts are mainly straight to the point: hb man enjoy it ;), as are Jackson’s: congratulations for making it this far Stilinski your not a complete moron!. Danny’s text is genuinely thoughtful: happy birthday. hope you spend it well. if you don’t then you have plenty more to look forward to (:.

Stiles doesn’t even know how Mason and Liam got his number but he suspects it’s Malia doing, and all their texts says is happy birthday dude!!! and not much else.

Midway through class, the school’s speaker system comes to life and a voice says, “Good morning, Beacon Hills High students and staff. I was paid one hundred and fifty bucks by a Peter Hale to give a shout out to freshman Stiles Stilinski. Happy birthday, Stiles. Everyone please show Stilinski today on this day of his birthday some love. The —”

“What are you doing?! You can’t be in here!”

“Grab the microphone, Barbara!”

“I’m trying, he’s struggling — don’t you run from me young man! That’s a detention!”

“For god sakes, turn it off. It’s still on!”

The speakers screech and everyone cringes before they turn slowly to look at Stiles, who groans and sinks in his seat as he covers his reddening face with his injured hand.

Mrs. Cassidy, in rare form, says, “Well, since our time has already been wasted, we might as well wish Mr. Stilinski a very happy birthday. Make it good, this'll be the only exception.”

Everyone snickers as they just do just that. They hoop, and holler, and cheer.

It's the worst.

And Stiles?

Stiles is going to strangle the life out of Peter.

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It doesn’t get better.

Stiles feels like the butt of a joke as he cruises through the hallways, only to be patted on the back or acknowledged in some kind of way with all sorts of colorful birthday well-wishes. That staged announcement has officially put Stiles on the scope of everyone’s radar.

This is not how he wanted to be noticed.

And Cora is just yucking it up, smirking insufferably at him from her side of the room during their next two shared classes together.
Stiles glares at the front of the room, his grip so tight on a pencil that it threatens to snap. Just like him.

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At lunch it gets even worse, okay? So much worse.

Laura and her whole cheerleading team climb on top of the lunch tables to do a choreographed — are you utterly serious — dance that Laura loudly announces is dedicated to her favorite birthday boy, oh god, why?

Stiles flushes all the way down to his toes as a few junior varsity players from both the lacrosse and basketball team carry over a small cake in the shape of 24 with fifteen lit candles as Laura and her evil mob of cheerleaders dance and dance and cheer to the beat of Katy Perry’s Birthday.

Stiles is mortified. His body is so hot with his blushing that he’ll soon melt into his shoes with the force of his mortification.

And you know what Derek does? That stupid plushie loving jerk records the whole scene with his phone as Cora cackles with her bandmates, wiping literal tears of glee from her eyes.

Stiles finally figures out what the Hales are.

They are demons.

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Stiles has never been so happy to see the end of a school day. His arms are loaded with gift bags, a gigantic stuffed toy in the form of a blue and orange basketball (Derek really thinks he’s being funny with that one), and balloons. It won’t fit in his locker so he has to carry it around with him, and if everyone wasn’t already paying attention to him, well they are now, which really isn’t helping his case.

He gets that Laura means well, but he could have done without all the razzle-dazzle. He really could have. They’ll have to talk about this at some point.

It’s more than a relief when the last period of school is spent with every student crammed in the school’s gymnasium for a pep rally. For one blissful hour, Stiles isn’t the center of attention.

The focus is on both the basketball and the swim teams, who both have home games tonight. They announce each player and the students make a show of cheering (as it is a point of showing school pride). The cheering gets earsplitting when Derek is announced, and Stiles has to roll his eyes in grudging amusement as Derek cups a hand to his ear, pretending not to be able to hear them chanting his name. He’s got such a showy and smug attitude as he shoulders the student body attention like a king that’s due his praise. He can only imagine what Derek must be like at an actual game.

Soon after, Cora and the rest of the marching band steal the show when they perform a mash-up of Nicki Minaj’s Superbass and Maroon 5’s Payphone, along with Laura and her squad, who dance to the rhythm of their playing.

Laura and Kate do the kind of backflips gymnasts would be jealous of while Cora takes on a solo that blows all other tuba routines out of the water.
When the crescendo of sound ends, Stiles claps along with everyone else because that was one impressive display of entertainment.

Stiles is almost sorry that he’s going to miss the games tonight.

Almost.

---

His dad takes him and Isaac out for the best tacos in town at Ramona’s Taco Treasure (Boyd’s family must be loaded) after they swing by the house so Stiles can deposit his gifts in his room for further inspection later. It is more than he expected to get, but he’s never really been all that materialistic to begin with (except when it comes to books and comics).

Stiles gorges himself on chicken and steak tacos as his dad looks on in amusement while he and Isaac share a platter of loaded nachos.

His dad thinks its really funny when he pays a mariachi band to sing happy birthday in Spanish to Stiles as he takes pictures, which he claims will be framed and placed on top of his desk at the station for all to see.

When it seems that Stiles has had his fill of both tacos and the mariachi band, his dad sends them on their way. He says, “Okay, kiddo. Present time.”

Stiles frowns and takes the thin piece of paper his dad hands over to him. “Uh, dad — not to sound ungrateful but — I thought you said I wasn’t on punishment until tomorrow and this seems like —”

“Just look at the paper,” his dad says, forever fondly exasperated.

Stiles frowns again as he straightens the wrinkles out of the paper so he can read it. He blinks. It’s a receipt.

For a driver’s ed class.

In the summer.

His dad chuckles as Stiles makes his way around the table and thanks him excitedly with a smothering hug. He hugs Stiles back before pushing him away gently. “Let Isaac give you his gift,” he says.

Stiles sits down and looks at Isaac expectantly.

Isaac hands him a pack of his favorite flavor of Fruit Roll-Ups, and a limited edition Spider-Man comic, the one he distinctly remembers yammering about during dinner three nights after Isaac first moved in. The fact that he had actually been listening gets Stiles so choked up that he doesn't even know what to say.

Isaac waits patiently regardless.

Stiles clears his throat several times before he says, “How — how did you get this?”

Isaac gives a humble shrug but taps the side of his nose before ducking his gaze. "I just — I cant believe —" Stiles snaps his mouth shut before squaring his shoulders. "Can I hug you? I really want to hug you. The love I feel in my heart is demanding that we hug it out.”
Isaac keeps his gaze low, and he grins a little shyly, but he seems pleased that Stiles really likes his gift.

“Or I could just hug you spiritually,” Stiles swears, not wanting to make Isaac uncomfortable by forcing physical contact on him, even if it is affectionate gratitude. He's doing his best to learn Isaac's boundaries.

Isaac huffs but he doesn’t say anything as he reaches out and drags Stiles's plate closer so he can start in on the leftover steak tacos that Stiles hasn’t gotten to.

Stiles is so grateful to him for his gift that he hardly complains (as he would normally because tacos are his thing and he always means serious business when it comes to it), but Isaac gets a free pass. Just this once.

On their way out of the restaurant, Stiles recognizes the face of one of his classmates from his last period class attached to one of those ‘MISSING’ signs tacked to the restaurant’s bulletin board.

It dwells in the back of his mind for the rest of the night.

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His dad doesn’t let them sleep in on the Friday that follows Stiles’s birthday. He herds them down into the kitchen and confiscates their phones, pointing to the newly installed house phone he has on the small counter between the stove and the refrigerator. Its a coral colored phone (made entirely of cheap shiny plastic), and it practically looks like some kind of toy phone from the 90's. The spiral cord connecting the phone to it's base seems to go on for miles and miles. You could practically jump rope with it.

Stiles feels inspired to tell his dad so, but since he's already in hot water, he refrains from doing so.

The sheriff also confiscates their laptops (including the brand new tablet he surprised Stiles with last night when they got home). He changes the password on the Wi-Fi, and on his Netflix account; locks every channel on their digital cable apart from C-Span, and removes all the game consoles from the living room because he is a crafty man. Since he already wouldn’t let Isaac nor Stiles have a TV in their room to begin with, there was no need to confiscate anything else.

“I will be calling periodically to ensure that you are where you should be. Once at noon, again at three, and once or twice before I come home,” the sheriff announces. “I should hear two voices when I call, understood?”

Stiles and Isaac nod drowsily, still wiping the sleep out of their eyes as they stretch with jaw-cracking yawns before blinking away the moisture in their eyes.

It’s spring break and they’re up at six in the morning.

Being grounded sucks.

“Notice that I have written a handful of household chores and yard work on the white board listed under your names,” his dad goes on to say as he gestures to the refrigerator like a model would to a brand new car on some kind of game show with glossy prizes. “I expect them to be done by the time I come home tonight, which will be around seven. Is that understood?”

Stiles and Isaac straighten at the sheriff’s very pointed tone and nod again.
The sheriff nods, satisfied. “Make this easier on yourself, boys. If I get the feeling that you’ve learned your lesson, I might just grant you early release. It depends. Devices have to be earned back.” He exits the house without another word.

Stiles and Isaac go their separate ways and start in on their chores. It's alright at first, but Stiles gets anxious after a while just being by himself. Now that he's gotten used to having Isaac around, he's become kind of content with not always being at home by himself. So once or twice he'll (as subtly as he can) check up on Isaac and see what his progress is for his half of the chores (mainly just to reassure himself that the preteen is still there).

If Isaac notices, he says nothing about it — as he does with most things.

By noon, Stiles’s got a good portion done and he and Isaac are standing by the house phone in the kitchen with the sheriff on the other end. Stiles talks and Isaac just hums without saying actual words. When his dad is satisfied that they’re where they should be, he hangs up.

The completion of all of their assigned chores happens around four, at which time, Stiles tries to proactively think of what they can do to kill time since all their electronic devices have been sequestered.

No one should have to lounge around in the living room, bored out of their minds as they stare at the walls like zombies while C-Span drones on in the background. This is more government than what their young minds deserve.

“That’s it,” Stiles says, peeling himself from the couch. “I can’t take this anymore. My mind wasn’t made to be idle. I’d rather be forced to search for a piece of hay in a needle-stack — or is it needle in a haystack? Whatever, still applies.”

Isaac says nothing from where he’s curled up in the armchair with a string of mozzarella he’s idly chewing on but he watches Stiles pace the living room floor with flailing arms.

“We have to do something. Something other than just waiting for my dad to get home,” Stiles moans, wincing when he accidentally knocks his knee into the corner of the coffee table. He hops around, gripping his knee with both hands before the sting of the impact dulls down into nothing. Then he resumes his pacing and says, “Here, throw out some ideas. Just throw them at me. Anything on your mind, just swing it my way.”

Isaac stares at him blankly as he bites off another piece from his mozzarella string.

“Awesome,” Stiles replies, clapping his hands together. “Those all sound like a fun ideas, but for now, we’re going to put that in the ‘maybe pile’.”

Isaac huffs in amusement, but he doesn't quite roll his eyes.

Stiles bounces on the soles of his feet. “I would suggest swimming but we don’t have a pool and even if we did, well, I don’t know how to, so I’m not ready to die anytime soon. Um. But I think there’s a trampoline in the garage. It’s not put together but we can put it together. It’s pretty wide so the setup might take a while.”

Isaac shrugs but that's enough of a green light for Stiles.

The assembly of the trampoline takes approximately an hour because none of the instructions are in English, and lucky for them, Stiles knows enough French to get a general idea of where everything is supposed to go.
His dad comes home with Chinese takeout and finds them bouncing up and down, or flipping (mostly Isaac is because Stiles doesn’t have the coordination to flip) on the rectangle trampoline in the back of the house. “Be careful,” he warns, voice colored with fatherly concern. “You’ve already got a sprained wrist. No need to add to that.”

“Dad, it’s cool. It’s cooler than cool. It’s ice cold,” Stiles pants as he bounces. “We’ve totally safety-proofed it!” He points to the net enclosure fixed to the edges of the trampoline.

His dad looks slightly skeptical but he shakes his head in dubious approval and disappears inside.

“Do that flip again,” Stiles excitedly begs to Isaac and cheers when the preteen does a perfect layout.

Isaac gives a showy bow that hides his small smile and Stiles laughs as he keeps cheering as much as Isaac keeps flipping.

After dinner, Stiles talks Isaac into camping out with him on the trampoline since it’s the perfect weather for it. They alternate between jumping around their blankets and pillows, to thumb wrestling (Isaac hasn’t got a chance, Stiles is pro at this), before they slip into some heated rounds of rock-paper-scissors (Stiles doesn’t stand a chance because apparently Isaac is pro at this).

From there they settle down side by side and gaze up at a cloudless starry sky.

Stiles points out different constellations in no real order and Isaac follows his finger as it jumps from star to star like a cat would if you jingled some string in front of it. He quiets down after a while and hums as he drums his fingers against his chest. He only notices fifteen minutes later that Isaac has fallen into a peaceful slumber beside him.

Isaac’s lying on his stomach and clinging to his pillow like he’s afraid it’ll be taken from him, as he does with most of his things.

It makes Stiles wonder sometimes.

He traces his eyes over the burn marks covering a good portion of Isaac’s face and neck, the delicate scarring of pale flesh looks almost pink and soft like an unripe peach. He gets this brief swell of greedy affection for the preteen, before it morphs into anger at how someone could treat or hurt Isaac in any way. Maybe it’s selfish or wrong of him to be glad that Isaac’s family is in jail, especially since he doesn’t know the whole story.

He kind of doesn’t want to.

Right before he falls asleep himself, he lets himself think about how much it’s going to suck to be on punishment when there’s no school, but he’s also grateful he’s not spending it alone.

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No, but here’s the thing.

Isaac is awesome. Especially when he goes along with things without questioning it. Not that he speaks much, or at all — Stiles isn’t going to push — but he’s really enjoyable.

Here’s why:

After they finish some light yard work that Saturday morning, Stiles gets this idea that they should do some prank calls. It’s one in the afternoon and they’re sitting side by side on the kitchen floor.
Isaac has a phone book in his lap and he dials whatever number he wants to before he hands over the receiver. He’s also the one conducting the script for the prank calls using the whiteboard to wordlessly communicate what he wants Stiles to say (and boy does this kid have quite the imagination).

Stiles thinks Isaac is a comedy genius because he’ll have Stiles say things like, “Listen, buddy. Let’s get down to brass tacks here. There is — and firstly, let me just say I’m not blaming or accusing in you in any way — but somebody just keeps calling here and threatening to shave my poodle.”

The person on the other end starts fussing and Stiles has to cover his mouth as he snickers.

Isaac has an amused grin working its way onto his face as he continues to write on the white board. He aims the face of the whiteboard at Stiles and points.

Stiles nods quickly, clears his throat, and continues, “Sir! Sir! Sir, that is a prize dog and if anyone shaves my poodle we won’t be able to go to the nationals this year. Do you know what that will do to my reputation? To my family’s reputation? I come from a long line of poodle breeders, sir. My father was a poodle breeder, my grandfather was a poodle breeder, and his father was a poodle breeder. Try to understand — no, no, sir, listen. Are you some kind of new age cat lover? Is that what this is? Are you in on it too? Are you working for the cats?”

The person hangs up and Stiles falls over, choking back tears as Isaac hunts for another number so they can do it again.

It’s a woman this time and Isaac scribbles out a script on the whiteboard and makes Stiles say, “This is Obadiah from the cable company and I am calling to ask who in your house is downloading adult movies? Ma’am — ma’am, no — listen, I’m looking at it right now. Our system is showing that someone is downloading thousands of man on horse films and we are going to have to suspend your service.”

The woman on the phone starts screaming accusations at her husband and Stiles hangs up just as he starts to lose it.

They keep this up until his dad calls at three to check up on them. He seems amused and confused, if not slightly concerned, as to why Stiles keeps gasping out giggles as Isaac huffs out quiet little laughs. He hangs up on them when he can get no explanation and that’s the end of that.

Stiles says, “We should play fruit poker.”

Isaac says nothing but he shrugs.

Stiles learns to take that as the affirmation it is. He grabs a bag of red seedless grapes, and literally counts every single one and eats the last because otherwise it’ll be an uneven number before he divides it between them.

Isaac may be better at fruit poker than he anticipated, but Stiles gets his pride back when they switch over to UNO.

Stiles is king at UNO.

Isaac takes his losses with a grain of salt, quietly eating his share of winnings while he watches Stiles organize the UNO cards by number and color for no apparent reason after their last game.

After his dad calls around seven to say that he might not make it back tonight (while ignoring Stiles’s prying questions of why that is), Stiles decides to show Isaac how to make Mexican pizza with chili-
spiced black-bean puree, tomatoes, olives, shredded lettuce and low-fat Jack cheese on a whole-wheat crust.

Isaac is an astute listener, and he seems to pick up on Stiles’s instructions really easily, so Stiles makes a mental note to cook with him more often.

They end the night camping in Isaac’s bedroom as Stiles looms on his knees by the window that faces the house next door and uses his dad’s binoculars to spy on the next door neighbors while Isaac lounges on top of his bed with a comic he’s borrowed from Stiles’s modest collection.

Stiles says, “I swear to god, they’re Witches. Or Casters. Definitely not Wiccan, though. There were a lot of those at my old school and they were a peaceful bunch. Did do a lot of protesting about the lack of Vegan options in the school cafeteria. Other than that...”

Isaac hums, which is major progress in Stiles’s books because he’s making sounds now — sounds *at* Stiles. He usually only bothers with sounds when his dad is involved.

Stiles is weirdly pleased that their relationship has progressed from nonverbal to slightly but still kind of nonverbal. He says, “But these guys...ladies...persons...I mean, *them*, or they — it’s like they never leave the house or come outside. Like ever. And I definitely never have seen them in the daylight. God, I wish I could look this stuff up. There’s something wrong with them.”

His dad had taken his encyclopedia of folklore and mythology as part of his punishment.

Stiles is pretty much out of luck until further notice. He glares through the binoculars and looks from window to window. “This isn’t just agoraphobia either because I can tell the difference between — oh dude, *dude!*”

The neighbor’s back door swings open and two black boars come shuffling out.

Isaac is instantly at his side with a concerned but curious frown as he peers down into the backyard next door.

Stiles hands him the binoculars and they both watch the fat boars hobble down the steps and up the side of the house before they disappear out of sight down the street.

“What the hell was that?” Stiles asks. “Is that — do you think that was them? Did they shapeshift into some pigs? How evil. At least, I think so.”

Isaac huffs and hands him back the binoculars so he can return to his spot on the bed.

“I mean it,” Stiles grumbles as he watches the house through the binoculars. “They’re up to something. This is serious!”

Isaac makes himself comfortable on his bed and resumes reading the comic in his hands.

Stiles frowns in disappointment. "Man, why is no one taking this to heart but me? And there's only so much I can do now that we're grounded. And if — if I can’t follow them, then I’ll wait and see if they come back as themselves.”

Isaac doesn't comment on this plan.

Stiles stays faithfully by that window all night, even long after Isaac tucks in for bed.

The black boars don’t return until dawn, fur caked with mud and something else Stiles can’t quite
make out.

His gut is telling him that he needs to keep an eye on this.

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Sunday afternoon finds Stiles at the Beacon Hills Library. It’s the biggest library he’s ever seen. Okay, maybe not the biggest, but it’s definitely in the top 100.

When Stiles explains to his dad that he needs to leave the house for tutoring, his dad just drops him and Isaac off and says, “I’ll be back in an hour.” before he drives off to do weird dad stuff (whatever that entails).

Isaac goes straight to the manga/comic section while Stiles marches over to the reference desk to ask the lady sitting behind it if she can direct him to the study room reserved under Paige’s name.

The room is located on the fourth floor.

Paige is typing away on her phone when Stiles arrives and she doesn’t look up as she points to the round table where she has a range of practice sheets spread out.

Stiles sighs and sits down before he gets to work. It takes him thirty minutes to complete all five worksheets, and ten minutes for Paige to go over them with a contemplative frown.

Paige says, “This is terrible.”

“I know.”

Paige snorts and says, “Now I have an idea of what you need help with.”

“Everything?” Stiles jokes and sits up as she starts making corrections with a strongly scented red marker.

Paige explains the corrections as she goes, and then she copies them onto some flashcards so he can take it home with him and study it. She then goes over them again until she feels confident that he understands.

Stiles is relieved to see that he is actually getting it, which makes him only trust even more in Paige’s capability.

Paige gathers her things and says, “Same time next week. Bring all the homework you've done so far.”

Stiles nods and watches her leave with her gaze back on her phone again (in the back of his mind, he notices Derek's name flash across the screen). But he hardly gives it any thought as he looks at the clock on the wall and is surprised to see that he still has five minutes until his dad comes to collect them. So he wanders down to the first floor and eyes the bulletin board.

He sees that same ‘MISSING’ sign from the other night crammed between three other ones. An alarm goes off in his head coaxing him to take notice, and before he can let himself think about it, he’s glancing around discreetly before he yanks down the signs, folds them, and pockets them.

He doesn’t let himself forget to look up the Hales in the phonebook when he gets home so he can somehow get ahold of Peter.

The number listed is disconnected.
Stiles tries to talk his dad into giving him his phone back but to no avail.

Those folded missing signs he has in the back pockets of his jeans feel like tiny anchors.

He resigns to the fact that he’ll have to wait it out.

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Monday afternoon goes like this:

Stiles is sitting out on his front porch steps with the Sudoku book Paige forced on him when Erica, Lydia, and Allison pull up and climb out of Mrs. Martin’s car. She waves at Stiles briefly from through the passenger window before she starts barking into her phone like she’s screaming at the actual phone and not the person on the other end of it.

Erica tries to creep up on Stiles and scare him (with no luck) while Allison shoots him a dimpled smile and knocks her fist lightly into his shoulder.

Lydia doesn’t say much of anything. She’s got bags under her eyes. She seems really subdued. Stiles can probably guess why that is. He’s heard from Scott a while back that Lydia’s folks weren’t doing so great, and it was looking like divorce was inevitable. He feels bad for Lydia. That kind of thing can suck.

“You guys are such losers for getting grounded during spring break,” Erica complains as she aims the slingshot in her hand at the leaves of the large tree in the Miller’s yard next door. She looks like a female version of Bart Simpson. “This is like visiting a friend in prison. And I would know — I’ve actually done that.”

“Why does that not even surprise me?” Stiles puts his Sudoku book down and gives them all his full attention. “Where’s the rest of the gang?”

“Well, as you already know, Scott is at the hospital with his mom because she doesn’t trust him by himself now that he’s grounded. We sat with him for a quick second before Ms. McCall chased us off. Man, Scott was so bored, he looked close to tears,” Erica rambles and she sounds heavily amused. Her gaze is still focused on that tree though, like she’s waiting for something. “Boyd and his family went to Haiti for some kind of family reunion. While Malia is vacationing in Mexico in Cancun with her family. Danny and Jackson haven’t seen the outside of a workout gym, and we’re just here with you in all your grounded lameness.”

Stiles says, “Don’t be rude.”

“Don’t break curfew and get caught,” Erica retorts cleverly as she looks at him and releases the sling, sending a stone flying at a speed faster than a dart shot from a tranquilizer gun.

There’s a pained squawk, followed by the collapse of an owl.

Erica grins triumphantly, jamming her slingshot in her back pocket and stalks towards it like she plans on ripping it apart with her delicately slim fingers and eating it.

“Oh, come on, Erica,” Allison complains, looking a little green. “You have to stop doing that.”

Erica shrugs, licking at her front teeth like she’s trying to root out a piece of food, and cocks her head as she pokes the immobile bird with her foot. “What? It’s just a bird. Oh, wait — I forgot who I was talking to. My bad, Ms. Viola Vegetarian.”
Allison glares as her cheeks warm with a healthy shade of red. “You can be such a dick sometimes,” she complains.

“This is very true. However, how do you know I didn’t just balance the scales of nature? You wouldn’t yell at the owl for eating a rat, which I’m sure he did,” Erica says rubbing at the tip of her nose as if to rid herself of an itch. She shrugs at them all like she’s made a valid point. “Whenever my dad takes me and my brothers hunting, he always says that there are no rules in the Wild Kingdom. No guilt in the Circle of Life. Survival of the fittest. You all know how that saying goes.”

“We’re not in the wild kingdom, and the Millers will call the cops on you if you don’t get off their lawn,” Stiles warns lightly, making a face when Erica picks up the dead owl like it’s no big deal before launching it onto the roof of the Millers house and out of sight. “You’re bad.”

Erica grins and shapes her hands into guns before shooting invisible bullets his way. Her grin widens when he goes along with it, pretending to be hit as he jerks his body with a pained sound. “The apex predator shows no mercy,” she intones with a deep voice.

Allison rolls her eyes as she drops down in the space to Stiles’s left. “So, um — where’s Isaac?” she asks, maybe a little too casually.

“In the house. Napping,” Stiles replies and willfully ignores the way she keeps glancing at his front door like she wants to go inside and find him. “We made some coconut ginger snaps and I think it wore him out.”

“Ooh, I want some,” Erica says and grabs Allison by the hand so she can drag the brunette in with her. “Where is it?”

“Kitchen table, and sure, go ahead into my house. Make yourselves at home,” Stiles mutters, but mostly to himself since the two girls have already disappeared inside. He sighs and shakes his head before he notices that Lydia is just standing there at the base of the steps, her gaze pinned to the house next door with this sort of haunted look. “Lydia?”

Lydia twitches as her eyes begin to water. Quietly, almost like a whisper, she says, “Do you hear that?”

Stiles frowns with concern. “What?”

“That,” Lydia insists lowly as her hands open and close at her sides. “Don’t you hear it? The whispers. Like they're in the trees. Voices of children. Weeping.”

Stiles stands and tries to listen. He can’t hear anything other than the sprinklers from across the street and the lawn mower humming loudly from two houses over. He walks down the steps until he’s right in front of her but she doesn’t look at him. “What whispers, Lydia? Are you talking about my neighbor's house?”

Lydia shakes her head as she folds her trembling lips together in a flat line. Her gaze is clouded in dread. Her shoulders start to quiver.

Stiles reaches out to touch her. “Lydia — what whispers? What are —”

“I have to go,” Lydia says quickly, flinching away. She seems at a loss, like she’s not altogether there. Her gaze is still unfocused. But more than anything, she appears freaked out. “I have to — can you tell them to come on or I’m leaving with — without them. I have to leave.” She turns and strides quickly to her mother’s car.
Stiles watches her wrench open the door and climb in. She stares straight ahead as she rocks back and forth, back and forth, back and forth before she claps her hands over her ears. Her mother immediately kills the call she's on to rest her hands on Lydia's shoulders, and it looks almost like she's trying to talk her daughter through a panic attack.

Erica and Allison come back out on their own.

“It’s not —” Stiles is a little thrown. His coherency is escaping him. "Lydia’s not feeling good, I don’t think,” he announces as he turns to look to them. "I don't really know what happened. She said she could hear —" He shakes his head. "I don't know what she said," he lies.

Erica’s cramming two cookies in her mouth and shrugs like she could care less as she wipes crumbs from the corner of her lips.

Allison looks towards the car with a furrowed brow, though. “Okay — yeah, okay. We’ll see you later, Stiles,” she says starting down the steps and brushing past him. “Erica, come on. We have to go.”

“God,” Erica complains as she grudgingly follows. “Lydia having another one of her episodes again? I'm so sick of this. She needs like, professional help or something. She's always been so twitchy. I mean I get that she's autistic or whatever...”

Stiles watches the two of them climb into the car before it pulls off. He looks towards the neighbor’s house in question and watches as the curtains in the front window flutter close quickly.

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On Tuesday morning, while Stiles is mowing the lawn, and covertly (but maybe not so covertly) watching the house next door, Danny and Jackson roll up on their mountain bikes with their lacrosse gear.

Danny says, “We heard you were grounded. We just want to make sure you’re not any worse off because of it, if that makes sense. We always practice whenever we can. So since you couldn’t come to us, we came to you.”

Stiles smiles and Danny gives him a dimpled grin.

Jackson rolls his eyes and says, “Alright, enough sappy shit. No slacking during spring break, Stilinski. Gear up.”

“Watch your mouth,” Stiles mutters but he jogs into the house and up to his room to change. He stops by Isaac’s room on the way back out and says, “Wanna watch me practice? I suck eggs, so it should be epic. Wouldn’t want you to miss it.”

Isaac huffs quietly but he rolls out of bed, slips into some sneakers and follows Stiles out the front door. He doesn't acknowledge Danny or Jackson (which isn't all that surprising).

Danny tries a few times to engage Isaac in some light conversation (elbowing Jackson to get him in on the action much to his reluctance) but the younger pre-teen isn't having it. He basically ignores everyone but Stiles as he gears up until Danny and Jackson get the point.

Stiles can't figure out if this behavior is because Isaac's shy or he's stuck up. Isaac sometimes reminds him of a cat.

“My backyard’s pretty decent,” Stiles supposes when he meets Danny and Jackson at the bottom of
his porch steps. “Let’s go back there.”

Jackson makes him stretch and then forces him into suicides before they do some actual drills the moment they step foot in the backyard.

Danny guides him with a tender hand, patient and understanding.

Jackson is a lot firmer, more demanding and unyielding.

They come at him as a united front.

Isaac looks on at them like he pitied Stiles, or maybe that’s just Stiles projecting.

Three hours later, Stiles is sprawled on his back like a starfish as he gasps wetly at the darkened blue sky.

Danny and Jackson leave him there with a list of things to do everyday on his own. Danny pats him on the shoulder and praises him while Jackson shakes his head at him like he’s hopeless.

They mount their bikes and leave.

Isaac is the one to drag him into the house and he shoves him up the steps towards the bathroom.

Stiles can take the hint.

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On Wednesday, his dad has a day off and he takes Stiles and Isaac with him when he goes grocery shopping. Mainly because Stiles begs him.

“Hey dad, what does it say about me that this is the most fun I’ve had in what feels like forever?” Stiles asks as he goes flying down the aisle with the shopping cart he’s straddling.

“It says my punishment is working,” his dad replies as he drags his gaze back and forth between two boxes of cereals, bouncing them up and down like he’s acting as a human scale. “I honestly don’t see the difference with this. They both taste like cardboard.”

“It’s heart healthy, and very high in fiber,” Stiles remarks as he rolls up and bumps into his dad’s hip purposely with the end of the shopping cart.

Isaac dumps a box of cookies and creme pop-tarts in the cart.

Stiles puts it back and switches it out for yogurt flavored granola bars. He ignores the look Isaac shoots him and says, “Sorry, buddy. Can’t have anything in the house that’ll tempt the old man. You saw what he did to those cookies you made the other day. We want to keep him ticking for a little while longer. Unfortunately, he needs our help in order to do that because he’s got no self-control.”

“I have plenty of self-control,” the sheriff argues and tries to sneak a porterhouse steak into the cart (and when did he get that and where has he been hiding it?).

Stiles switches it out for five packs of tilapia instead once they hit the frozen food section.

“I’m the sheriff. I should be able to eat what I want,” his dad grumbles as he follows Stiles over to the produce section. He makes a face when Stiles starts comparing eggplants. “I am very sure that you are going to make those disgusting things into a pass for lasagna and I have to draw the line there.”
“It’s called eggplant parmesan. Also, experts believe that substituting meat regularly increases health faster than vitamin supplements taken daily,” Stiles argues.

“Lies,” his dad mutters. “I want you to stop reading things like that. I sure as hell will not be eating woodchips just because you read somewhere that some governance scienticians gave it the okay.”

Stiles cracks up at that.

His dad smiles wryly. But then he frowns when Stiles puts more eggplants into the cart. “Stiles…”

“I’m prolonging your life out of love,” Stiles quips and tosses a variety of vegetables into the cart.

“I should have left you at home,” his dad complains. His dad throws his hands up when Stiles puts some asparagus in the cart. “That’s it. I’m getting some powdered donuts and you will damn well let me.”

Stiles snorts and watches his dad storm off, taking Isaac with him like he’s starting a rebellion or something. He turns his cart and collides right into Laura’s.

Laura looks really annoyed at first, but when she sees that it’s just him, her whole demeanor changes. She smiles so widely that her brown eyes light up with it. “Hey, Blue! Long time no see. You’re just the person I wanted to run into. No pun intended, of course.”

Stiles snorts at the irony but then he remembers Thursday and he frowns meanly. “I’m still mad at you,” he swears. "I told you not to do any of that kind of stuff. I was mortified. Cora was loving it, which seems to be a running theme that if I'm unhappy, she's happy, and if she's unhappy, I'm even unhappier.”

Laura gives him a grin that could rival the Cheshire cat. "Sorry, Stiles. I just wanted to do something nice, and yes, I may have gone overboard." She raises her right hand like she's making a vow. "From now on, I'll do something very low key for your birthday." Then she wrinkles her nose and says, "Why do you smell like — do you have a cat — two cats, maybe?"

Stiles is getting to the point where when any of the Hales say things like this to him, he isn’t even phased. He says, “No. I don’t. Why? Are you saying I smell like a litter box?” He turns his head and sniffs at his shoulder. He doesn’t smell a thing. “I took a shower this morning,” he says quietly, mainly to himself in question.

Laura’s nose is still wrinkled like the smell couldn’t be any clearer. Then she says, “Consider taking another, Stiles.”

Stiles rolls his eyes. “Thanks, Laura. You make me feel so good.”

Laura winks. “Don't be so sensitive. It's coming from a good place. Oh! Next week is spirit week. I fully expect you to participate.”

“Spirit week?” Stiles echoes and it dawns on him. “Homecoming.”

Laura nods and says, “You should go.”

“It’s a dance, right? I’m terrible at those. Parties make me so nervous. I'm always never sure like how into it I'm supposed to be, you know. Like should I be socializing more, or do I just hover around until I'm included? Do I talk to the people I know? Do I try and go outside my usual circle? Does everyone see I'm trying to hard? Am I not trying hard enough?” Stiles rambles. “You see? It’s more stressful than fun for me.”
“You've certainly put a lot of thought into it, but I got your back. If you really overthink these things, then go with me and I'll distract you.”

Stiles blinks. “You want me to do what now?”


Stiles stares at her and then looks around because he’s very confused about what’s happening here.

Laura waits patiently with an amused smirk.

“I — you want to — why would you want to go with me?” Stiles asks.

Laura counters the question by saying, “You don’t want to go with me?”

Stiles flushes because of course he does. He’d probably follow Laura into a slaughterhouse like a good little lamb if she smiled very prettily at him but she really doesn’t need to know that. He'll definitely have to keep the fact that he idolizes the hell out of Laura to his grave. It's just that...socially, she's everything that he'd want to be. “Isn’t there someone else you had in mind as first choice?” he presses, shaking off the thought.

“Yup,” Laura quips. “I’m talking to him.”

Stiles is understandably suspicious. "I meant an actual date."

Laura laughs. “Just sleep on it. No pressure or anything. Hello, Sheriff.” She flicks her gaze up and over Stiles’s shoulder. She cocks her head when she looks at Isaac, who shies away from her gaze by standing behind the sheriff. Then she wrinkles her nose with a teasing grin. "Huh. The cat smell is starting to make sense."

Isaac glares at her and hides further behind the sheriff.

Stiles is understandably confused.

His dad dumps a large container of powdered donuts in the cart as he says, “Laura. How are you?”

“Very well, thank you.” Laura looks at Stiles briefly and then back to the sheriff, then back to Stiles with a mischievous gleam in her eye before she says, “You know, it’s good you’re here. I wanted to ask if it would be okay if Stiles joined us for dinner this Saturday? We might go to homecoming together, and my mom will want to meet him beforehand if that’s the case. You know how parents can be these days.”

Stiles flushes as his dad lifts both his brows in surprise and then tosses him an appraising look that clearly relays how impressed he is that Stiles has someone like Laura asking after him like this. Stiles has never been the type to make nice with cheerleaders. He says, “He’s grounded, but — I’m sure I can make some allowances.”

Laura beams. "I certainly appreciate it. I've become very fond of Stiles."

His dad nods before he looks between them. Then he takes the cart and mutters something about heading towards the check-out line, dragging Isaac with him as if to give them a moment alone.

“You are just as devious as Peter,” Stiles accuses when his cheeks return to normal color. “Seriously. Are all you Hales this willful?”

“Most likely,” Laura supposes lightly. "You'll have to come over and meet the rest of my family to
be sure, you know. Might help you understand us all a little better.” She digs into her purse and writes down her number, along with her address on the back of an old receipt from the dry cleaners before she hands it to him. “See you Saturday. Let me know about homecoming, okay?”

Stiles watches Laura glide away, baffled and slightly stupefied. It’s not until he’s helping his dad load the groceries into the trunk of his squad car does he realize that Laura’s cart had been filled with nothing but red meat.

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All of Thursday and Friday finds Stiles and Isaac on their own. His dad mumbles something about grave robberies and that’s the most Stiles hears about it.

Stiles is so unbelievably curious about what’s been going on in the community. He’s hasn’t been able to keep track since his dad always nabs the morning paper before he can get to it (another crafty addition to his punishment). Plus his dad refuses to share any of what he reads, and he definitely doesn’t budge when it comes to his job.

So Stiles has to distract himself by baking like Martha Stewart, or monopolizing Isaac’s attention or trying to pick the lock of the basement door where his dad is keeping everything (his books, the electronics, etc.).

It’s so torturing. Stiles is forced to do math for fun. *Math.*

His only other source of entertainment is spying on the next door neighbors or timing that eerie orange cat when it sits on the curb across the street under a glowing lamp like some kind of character out of *Harry Potter.*

The two old women from next door never leave their house faithfully. It’s unnatural. Just about as unnatural as the black boars they let out every night, which Stiles is just a smidge suspicious could just be them in disguise.

But Stiles doesn’t know because he doesn’t have the equipment he needs to *research.*

It figures the one time Stiles kind of hopes Peter pops up on his doorstep, he doesn’t actually.

Life, at the moment, sucks.

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Saturday evening, Stiles is forced to wear something nice by his dad because apparently first impressions are important. So he puts on some dark jeans, a dark blue button down shirt his grandma bought him like two Christmases ago, and a white tie. He feels awkward about it as he stands in the kitchen, trying to decide whether or not he should tuck his shirt in.

His dad approves from where he's settled at the kitchen table in his uniform, even though he does raise his eyebrows at how snuggly fit Stiles's shirt is. “Really trying to give Laura and her family an eyeful, huh?”

Stiles shoots him a look. "Funny, dad. Hilarious."

Isaac spares him a quick glance over another one of Stiles’s comics he’s borrowed as he sits on the opposite side of the table. He gives Stiles a once over, lifts a brow before returning his gaze to the comic in his hands like he couldn't be bothered to comment.
Stiles blushes anyway because that one look was enough and he just flails his hands because it’s the only button down he has and it’s not like that. Laura and Stiles have a platonic relationship. Platonic. Like brother and sister.

His dad leaves him alone and thankfully doesn’t say anything else as he rises to his feet.

Isaac continues reading as he follows them out the front door and settles in the back seat with Stiles when they reach the sheriff’s squad car.

Outside of when his dad stops by Ramona’s Flower Shop and buys a bouquet of tulips for Stiles so he doesn’t show up empty handed, the rest of the ride is spent with the three of them riding in silence as his dad’s radar beeps and chirps with a female dispatcher’s voice.

Stiles dismantles Hamlet’s infamous ‘to be or not to be’ speech in his head as a way to distract himself from how nervous he is. That line of thinking just jumps into a recalled scene from an old Godzilla movie (the one where it battles King Kong), before he ends up just thinking about Buffy and comparing her to Peter (once again).

His dad pulls down a private road once they reach the preserve and goes all the way up the drive until they reach a beautiful three-story house.

Peter’s sitting on the porch in a rocking chair. He’s lazily flipping through the pages of a large book (Montessori Learning in the 21st Century) on his lap.

There’s a gang of kids and preteens running around, chasing each other and tackling one another into the grass. Most of them don’t even have their shirts on (or their shoes).

Stiles glares at the back of his dad’s head because he feels extremely overdressed. “Let’s turn around. Say I’m sick.”

His dad snorts. "I don't condone lying, son. You'll be fine."

"Why do you hate me?"

"Stiles, it'll make a good first impression," his dad promises.

“Dispatch to Sheriff Stilinski.”

His dad picks up and says, “Go ahead.”

“We’ve got a 10-54 and a 10-57 being reported from Deputy Tara at Prairie Hills. She’s already at the scene. She’s requesting your presence. It’s already generating a lot of media attention.”

The sheriff sighs. "Well, it's Prairie Hills. We know what tax bracket resides there."

"Should I tell them you're on your way?"

"Please do."

"Copy."

Stiles perks up. “Dad — that’s a possible dead body and a missing person right?”

“How do you —”

“Can I come? If you’re taking Isaac, then I should get to come too,” Stiles argues.
His dad shifts around in his seat to glare at him. Then he climbs out and opens the back door for him as he shoves the bouquet of tulips in his arms. “You will not be rude. You’re staying here for dinner, and Isaac is going to be dropped off at the station. Now get out of here before I drag you out.”

“But —”

His dad gives him a look that has him stumbling out of the squad car.

“I’ll be back to pick you up later. Please behave,” his dad urges before he climbs in.

Stiles watches him turn the car around as he waves lazily. When he turns, all of the kids are watching him with curious eyes. “Uh —”

“Let’s get him!” someone shouts.

Stiles widens his eyes and squawks out an embarrassing array of sounds as they all tackle him into the grass like mini-football players. He let’s out a soft oomph as they pile on top of him, squirming like worms, and sticking their noses on different parts of his body and oh god is someone licking him?

“Okay, that’s enough. Scram, you little fiends,” Peter tsks as strolls over before he nods his head towards the back of the house. “I think Mr. Ravenhill found those accursed bubble sticks you’re all so fond of. Go and check.”

Everyone climbs off of Stiles and runs towards the back of the house with excited yips and yells.

Stiles continues to lie out on the grass under the remains of mauled and shredded tulips. “Who is Mr. Ravenhill?”

“Our groundskeeper,” Peter merely says and pauses as if to say more. In the end he just shakes his head towards the back of the house. “Are you planning on lying there all evening?

“I should have known,” Stiles says dazedly. “That this wasn’t going to be some normal experience.”

Peter smirks and offers his right hand.

Stiles doesn’t take it. He rolls away and stumbles to his feet without his help. He sniffs and dusts himself off. “Who were all those kids?” he asks.

“More family. Cousins mostly. A few nieces and nephews included,” Peter explains as he shoves him towards the house. “It’s spring break, so the house is at its fullest capacity. Don’t you look nice? What’s the occasion?”

Stiles blushes and bats away Peter’s hands. “I — my dad made me wear this okay? Laura invited me to — wait, she didn’t tell you?”

“No,” Peter admits with a thoughtful frown. “This means she’s up to something. I’m hurt she’s not cluing me in. I do love schemes.”

Stiles rolls his eyes because that couldn’t be more true. “Where is Laura anyway?”

“Out and about with the other grownups, stalking this evenings kill,” Peter replies and flashes him a sharp smile that’s all teeth. “Derek and Cora are around if you want to say hi.”

“Uh — no. I don’t — no thanks. That’s gonna have to be a hard pass from me,” Stiles says meekly. He has a feeling that if Peter didn’t know he was coming, neither did they. “The women next door to
my house are — you remember when you said something about your library?"

Peter nods as he returns to the rocking chair and his book.

“Could I — do you think maybe it’d be okay if — I’d like to, you know,” Stiles stammers. "You said you had a collection of your own."

Peter looks deeply amused. “Sure. I’ll get one of the munchkins to take you,” he decides.

Stiles nods, unsure.

Peter turns his head and softly says, as if the kid is right beside him, “Tyson. Come show our guest to the family study.”

Stiles watches in amazement as a red-haired preteen boy with brown freckles and blue eyes appears from around the side of the house not even a moment later with an annoyed frown.

“Why do I have to take him? Will you pay me for this? I’m twelve now, I don’t do things for free anymore,” Tyson complains but he doesn’t protest when Peter tugs him close and whispers something in his ear. Tyson lights up and smirks devilishly with a snort as he glances at Stiles calculatingly.

Stiles is slightly worried. “What? What is he saying to you? Whatever it is, please don’t.”

Peter pulls away from Tyson with a blankly innocent face and returns to his book.

Stiles is super worried.

“Come on, dipstick,” Tyson says as he brushes past Stiles, taking care not to physically touch him in anyway, and heads toward the door.

“My name is Stiles. Stiles.”

“Good for you,” Tyson says as they walk inside and wow. It’s even nicer indoors then it is out.

Stiles marvels at the real warmth and homely feel of it all. Most homes you go to give off that synthetic “our house is better than your house and we’re proving it by how much materialistic stuff we have” vibe. But this place just feels so very lived in. There’s different toys randomly placed, as well as books that are cracked open like someone has just been reading them not even a second ago.

There are framed pictures on the walls and on the furniture. Different articles of clothes strewn here and there like they’d been tossed in someone’s haste to get them off. There’s musical instruments that are as randomly placed as the sports gear. Some things are even labeled with someone’s name on it, but most of it just has the inscription of some swirly kind of insignia or says Hale if not. The house is — it’s so — it feels just as alive as the people that reside there.

Stiles never thought it could be possible to fall in love with a place — with someone else’s home. But he’s — he doesn’t know what he is. He just feels so very comfortable here. Like he belongs, or like he’s been here before. It’s a float-y kind of sensation that borders on the resemblance of déjà vécu. Not that Stiles would personally know, but he’s read things (stories, accounts, etc.) and he figures this must be like that.

As Tyson leads him up a spiraling staircase and down the hall, past doors that are named with the person it belongs to, Stiles realizes that the smell of jasmine he always picks up from Laura and Derek and Cora and Peter is from this house. It smells heavily of jasmine.
Stiles follows Tyson through a set of double doors at the end of the hallway with that same swirly insignia carved into the middle of them. They open up to a large study lined with tall walls of bookshelves that are brimming with books — the spines of them different textures — and some of them are weathered and worn, while others are in perfect mint condition.

Stiles has found euphoria. It's like a scene out of Beauty and the Beast.

Tyson treads over to a tall stepladder and climbs it. “Uncle Peter thinks you’d like this one the best.”

Stiles stands at the base of the ladder when Tyson motions him closer.

“Oops, look out.”

Stiles doesn’t have time to duck when the book comes flying at his face, and he falls onto his back with a groan and cradles his throbbing nose. When he pulls his hands away, he can see blood. He groans louder and cradles it again as his blood drips warm and sticky down his mouth and chin and onto his shirt.

“What did you do?” a voice growls from the doorway.

Stiles blinks away some watery pain as Derek falls into his line of sight. He’s staring down at him with his brow furrowed in annoyed concern. “I hope —” Stiles pauses so he can choke back another groan because the pain is intense. “I hope you’re not blaming me for this.”

Derek frowns deeper and says, “What are you even doing here? And I know Laura invited you, but I meant in this room. It was Uncle Peter wasn’t it?” He doesn’t wait for an answer because he’s bodily lifting Stiles onto his feet and okay, are all of them this freakishly strong? Derek glares over at Tyson accusingly.

Tyson tries to look as innocent as possible. “It was an accident. I had one of those, um, those — clumsy slips.”

Derek gives him a flat look before he ushers Stiles out of the study with insistent hands and towards his room and then into it.

Stiles glances around, barely catching glimpses of the basketball posters on the walls before Derek shoves him into a large bathroom and onto the edge of the tub.

“Tilt your head forward. It’ll stop you from choking on the blood,” Derek says as he shuffles through the cabinets noisily for some kind of hand towel. When he finds one, he wets it with lukewarm water.

Stiles blinks wetly at the tiles on the floor until Derek looms over him with the towel before he drops to his knees and gives him an expectant look.

“Move your hands.”

“No.”

“I can’t help if you don’t let me see.”

“I don’t want your help so you don’t need to see.”

Derek shoots him an impatient look.

“No,” Stiles protests as Derek wraps the impossibly long fingers of his left hand around both of
Stiles’s wrists and geez, how big are his hands? “It’s broken. I’ll probably have to get cosmetic surgery because your cousin deformed me. Why are all you Hales so evil?”

Derek rolls his eyes and gently pries Stiles’s hands from his face. His eyes flicker over every detail of Stiles’s face in a way that makes him fidget.

Stiles feels his cheeks slowly fill with heat when Derek traces his pointer finger down the bridge of his nose gently before pulling his hand away.

“Not broken,” Derek decides quietly and stares at the blood on his mouth for two beats of silence, nostrils flaring. He leans forward a little like he’s hypnotized before he jerks back with wide eyes and tosses the towel at Stiles’s face.

It lands with a wet smack, and when Stiles tugs it off to complain, Derek has already vanished. He doesn’t get a chance to even question the other teen’s weird behavior because the door on the other end of the bathroom opens and Cora strolls in.

Obviously she and Derek share a bathroom.

He briefly wonders what that must be like and he gets this amusing thought of the two of them in some type of old western (cowboy) stand-off over who gets to take the first hot shower.

“Thought I smelled blood,” Cora says, grabbing his attention before his thoughts can really run away with him. She eyes him thoughtfully.

"You can smell blood?” Stiles mumbles skeptically.

Cora disregards the question to ask, “What happened to you?”

“Your cousin Tyson,” Stiles mutters disdainfully as he walks over to the mirror and starts wiping his face clean.

Cora snorts like she’s not even surprised before returning to her room and slamming the bathroom door behind her.

Stiles stares at his reflection in the mirror and sighs at the spreading bruise forming on the bridge of his nose where the edge of the book made contact. Then he sighs even harder at how utterly ruined his shirt and tie is by the blood. He doesn’t even have a change of clothes.

Derek is sitting on his bed with his back to the headboard when Stiles exits the bathroom. He’s tossing miniature basketballs at the rim mounted to the wall by the bathroom door.

Peter strolls in and with a totally insincere look of concern, says, “I heard what happened.”

“I don’t like you,” Stiles fumes.

Derek snorts and makes another shot. Nothing but net. Show off.

Peter feigns a look of hurt. “Really? I was only trying to do something nice. It’s not my fault that Tyson took it upon himself to get creative. You should know that I punished him for it.”

Tyson literally walks pasts Derek’s open doorway with — are you serious — two scoops of freaking chocolate mint ice cream.

Derek lifts a brow, but he still seems a little amused.
“I am going to strangle you,” Stiles threatens.

“Why?” Peter looks genuinely confused but Stiles doesn’t buy it for a second.

“That’s not a punishment. That’s a *reward*, you potato with eyes,” Stiles complains, pointing an accusing finger at Peter.

Derek barks out a laugh and misses his next shot.

Stiles swears he hears Cora cackle in the next room.

Peter frowns, looking deeply hurt and appalled. “Trust me. That’s a punishment. He hates ice cream.”

“*Lies.*”

“Derek, you should loan Stiles one of your shirts,” Peter airily remarks with an indifferent expression. “His current attire is in a rather unacceptable state.”

Stiles grits his teeth.

Derek suddenly looks uncomfortable. “I — that’s not — you have shirts too. Lend him one of yours.”

“I would but he’s not my size,” Peter says. Then he looks towards the windows. “I think I hear the others coming. I should probably lend a hand.” Then he’s gone before Derek can complain.

"Cora..."

"*No chance! Just suck it up!*" Cora yells from the other room.

Stiles fidgets as they’re left alone in an awkward silence. Since he doesn’t do so well with those, he says, “Its fine. I can — flip my shirt inside out?”

Derek makes a face before he sighs in resignation as he makes his way over to his dresser posted under his windows. He grumbles lowly as he yanks open the second drawer and rifles through it.

Cora cackles from the next room again, but it’s probably totally unrelated.

Derek marches over to him with a grumpy look and holds out a pea green short-sleeved Henley shirt.

Stiles gingerly accepts it but still asks, “You don’t — and listen, I’m not trying be annoying or anything — but you wouldn’t happen to have a different color because green really isn’t —”

Derek glares at him.

“Yup, this is fine,” Stiles says quickly, almost tearing the buttons of his shirt in his haste to get it off before remembering that it’d probably be a smart idea to take his tie off first. He would ask Derek, but he’s a little too prideful for that. He chooses to struggle instead.

Derek tracks his movements with a judging head shake. “You’re a piece of work.”

“Yeah. *Top quality* work,” Stiles mutters as he continues to wrestle with his tie.

Derek sighs and bats his hands out of the way so he can take over.
Okay, so, this is one of those unforgettable moments that will not be forgotten because Talia Hale walks into the room.

Stiles and Derek both freeze, and honestly out of context this probably seems shady, because Stiles is standing there with an open shirt and Derek’s hands are slipping off his tie like he’s been the one undressing him. Not to mention the blood on his clothes.

Talia crosses her arms.

Derek’s back goes ramrod straight and he removes his hands like Stiles is a well-lit fire he shouldn’t be touching. “We were — mom, it’s not —”

Talia raises her hand and he quiets immediately. She pins Stiles under her heavy gaze and says, “I know. I’ve dealt with Tyson.” She smiles kindly and Stiles finally feels like he can breathe. “You must be the Stilinski boy I’ve heard so much about from my brother Peter and my daughter Laura. But I’ve also spoken at great lengths with your father, and he tells me how inexplicable you can be.”

Stiles says, “My dad likes to exaggerate.”

Talia chuckles. “As do all parents,” she agrees. “Derek, why don’t you go downstairs and help set the table? Dinner’s just about ready to be served. Take Stiles’s clothes with you and give them to your Nana so they can be washed.”

Stiles quickly takes off his shirt after he manages to slip his tie loose before he hands it over to Derek in exchange for his clean shirt. He slips it on and watches Derek slide past his mother, pausing when she cups the back of his neck gently to whisper something in his ear.

Derek’s shoulders tense up before they fall meekly.

Talia kisses his temple before urging him out the door.

Stiles fidgets when Talia’s probing gaze finds its way back to him. He says, “You have a — very lovely home, Mrs. Hale.”

Talia smiles and whoa, Stiles can see where Cora, Laura, and Derek get their good genes from. She straightens with pride and says, “Well thank you for saying as much. And please, call me Talia.”

Stiles just nods dumbly.

“Come walk with me, I’ll introduce you to everyone,” Talia says, cupping a heated palm over the back of his neck when he’s within reaching distance and guides him down the stairs and into a huge living room filled with people.

Stiles gets introduced to what feels like a miniature community. Each of them looms in his space, darts a glance towards Talia, who gives a subtle nod (weirdly), before they touch his right hand with their own right hand in a firm grip (always his right hand for some reason) and smiles hospitably. On and on this pattern continues through a line of cousins, uncles, aunts, sisters, brothers — one after the other — all of them with the same distinctive features of dark hair (or dirty blonde) and hazel (or blue) eyes. There’s only about four kids who have red hair and green eyes, but that’s it.

Stiles knows that he should be paying attention to the significance of these exchanges but it’s hard to do because Derek is watching him with a distracting amount of intent from where he’s leaning against the wall with huge fluffy wolfish looking dogs with black, white, and grey fur sitting at his feet, along with their puppies.
Stiles recognizes the breed as Tibetan Mastiff. He’s read an article about them through his old subscription of *Zoobooks* back when he was six and read practically anything he could get his hands on.

Talia notices his shifted focus, and after she introduces him to Nana Hale, who kisses the back of his right hand before patting it sweetly as his cheeks go a little red at the way Peter smirks when all the kids titter in amusement at the gesture, he’s ushered over to Derek.

Talia gives her son a significant look and says, “Walk your brother-cousins and introduce them to Stiles. Fifteen minutes. Not a minute later.”

Derek nods and straightens, whistling sharply until all the dogs are standing to attention.

Stiles watches in fascination as the dogs trail behind Derek in a perfectly neat line as they follow him out the front door. He stumbles after them and down the porch steps, out towards the thrush of the woods. He catches up with Derek eventually.

Derek says, “There’s a stream we like to take them to.” and he leads Stiles there.

When they reach the wide creek, the dogs sit on their hind legs and look at Derek expectantly. He smiles softly and nods his head towards the river like he's wordlessly giving them permission and they all scatter, barking happily.

Stiles watches Derek watch them with a fond sort of half-smile, and he smiles a little himself before he can help it. He turns his face away quickly when Derek glances at him. He says, “What are their names?”

Derek goes down the line, pointing to each of them, big and small, and starts with the fully-grown ones before he ends with the puppies.

Stiles says, “This — it’s so cool. I wish I — and they’re so well-behaved too. Do you ever sell — are they individually owned or —”

“Stiles,” Derek says, sounding amused. “You’re all over the place.”

“Stiles,” Derek says, sounding amused. “You’re all over the place.”

Stiles closes him mouth and grins sheepishly. “Yeah, I — sorry. That happens.”

“I noticed.” Derek suddenly looks embarrassed and uncomfortable. He shifts away to watch the puppies fight over a stick. “Each of us have our own. They’re gifted to us at a certain...point in our lives — but it’s different for everyone as far as *when* it happens — it’s kind of a complicated process. They’re more than pets. More than companions.”

“They’re family,” Stiles supposes and that gets Derek to look at him with this surprised and complicated look on his face. “Is that why your mom called them your brother-cousins?”

Derek nods but he doesn’t elaborate.

“Which one is yours?” Stiles asks as his gaze jumps around to each one. He’s counted at least a dozen so far. There could be more, but he’s not sure. They’re all over the place.

“Guess,” Derek says.

Stiles frowns and shoots him a skeptical look. “How would I do that?”

Derek shrugs with an insufferable grin.
Stiles sighs and rolls his eyes before he thinks. His mouth fidgets with a grin as he gets an idea.

Derek eyes him warily, suddenly alert.

Stiles widens his eyes to say, “Hey...what is that?” and points.

Derek actually falls for the oldest trick in the book and looks.

Stiles wastes no time and tackles him into the ground.

Derek growls and rolls them over until Stiles is pinned under him. He looks grudgingly impressed as a medium-sized Tibetan Mastiff with white fur gallops over and assesses the situation with twitching ears. “It’s okay, Jordan,” he says and pushes away from Stiles to stand up.

Jordan cocks his head curiously before he brushes against Derek’s leg like a cat would and licks the inside of Derek’s palm. Then he noses his way around Stiles, sniffing at his shirt before he butts Stiles’s right hand affectionately.

Stiles smiles and scratches his ears as Derek watches quietly. He sits up as Jordan barks and sprints off to playfully wrestle with some of the other dogs. “So,” he says.

Derek looks at him questioningly when he doesn’t continue. He leans over and carefully grabs Stiles’s left hand with his left hand before he hauls Stiles to his feet like it’s nothing.

Stiles tries to look as serious as possible when he says, “Jordan, huh?”

Derek lifts his eyebrows before a bit of color starts to creep into his cheeks when he understands the implications in Stiles’s voice. “Shut up.”

“What?” Stiles says, and he’s going to milk this. “I think it’s cool you named your dog after one of the greatest basketball players of all time, oh my god, you complete fanboy.”

Derek’s flush deepens and he scowls but he doesn’t deny it as he grumpily crosses his arms.

Stiles laughs and says, “Did you think I wouldn’t get the reference? What did you used to name your stuffed animals then? Let me guess — all of the greats from the Harlem Globetrotters?”

Derek looks stricken, like he’s just been found out and Stiles just loses it. He laughs so hard that all the dogs shuffle over to him curiously and sniff at him inquisitively.

Stiles just pets them all, sniggering on and off again.

Derek threatens to throw him into the river if he doesn’t shut up before he marches back towards the house like the moody teenager he is.

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Dinner is a lively affair, though Stiles had had a feeling it would be.

All kids under the age of thirteen have been shepherded into the kitchen where the kiddie tables are. Meanwhile, everyone else sits in the dining room around a long and wide oak table, which has names carved into it in a very untraditional way, but Stiles still likes it. It’s quirky but it fits the personality of this house, of this family.

Stiles is sitting between Peter and Laura. He doesn’t know how that happened. Black magic probably.
Derek’s sitting across from him, cradling his sleeping infant sister (Olive) in one arm as he uses his left hand to eat plate after plate of food.

And there is plenty of food.

There’s so much meat. From barbecued ribs to smoked brisket — everyone just has at it like there isn’t enough to go around. His dad would have had a field day if he were here.

The way they eat is unlike anything Stiles has ever seen. He feels like such a bird the way he knocks back two hamburgers, some potato salad, green beans, and spaghetti, in comparison to what looks to be everyone’s fifth plate of food.

“Lightweight,” Laura teases, starting in on her second pork chop and third burger.

“You guys have crazy appetites,” Stiles says lowly but he still notices the way they all shoot each other humored looks.

The lights begin to flicker as a wave of thunder crashes outside.

There’s some noticeable whimpering coming from the kitchen and Cora gets up from the table to go check on it when her mother okays it.

Derek shushes his baby sister when she squirms fitfully in his arms at another crack of lightning that make the house lights flicker again.

“That doesn’t seem good,” Peter remarks lightly as he chows down on a bratwurst.

Talia, who is sitting at the head of the table with her husband, moves to answer the house phone when it rings, and she disappears from sight into the kitchen.

The crack of thunder continues to rumble above their heads, and it sounds like it’s happening under them and not over. It’s strange and unsettling; and then there is a storm siren that rings off in the distance. It sounds like something you would hear when you need to be warned of an incoming national emergency.

Stiles is confused because he was under the impression that it never rained in Beacon Hills.

Talia returns and says, “That was the sheriff’s department. They’ve been given the greenlight from the mayor’s office to issue an official lightning storm warning.”

Peter must notice Stiles confused expression because he explains, “We experience the occasional weather anomaly here. You see, just because it doesn’t rain, doesn’t mean we do not get thunder storms.”

“Yeah, we're sort of famous for those,” Laura adds. “Like tornadoes in the Midwest. Our lightening storms are just as dangerous. The bolts strike the ground more often than what should be statistically possible.”

“And as a consequence, the whole town is urged to stay indoors until it passes,” Peter finishes.

Talia looks to Stiles and makes a gesture for him to join her in the kitchen.

Stiles follows her and they stand by the stove. “Is everything —”

“No worries,” Talia quickly interjects. “Your father asked that I allow you to stay for the night. I wanted to be sure this is okay with you, though there isn’t much choice in the matter. My brother and
daughter were right. Lightening storms in this town is just as dangerous as tornadoes anywhere else I’m afraid. No one is allowed outside when the warning siren is on.”

Stiles nods slowly and tries not frown.

Talia smiles gently and hands him the phone. “Call your dad,” she says knowingly. She cups the back of his neck and gives him affectionate squeeze before she leaves him to it.

Stiles dials his dad’s number as he eyes all the finger-paint artwork posted on the doors of the fridge. He does feel a lot better after he hears his father’s voice. His dad assures him that he and Isaac are safe and sound, though they’re going to be holed up at the station until the storm blows over, which most likely won’t be until dawn. He promises to come get Stiles as soon as he can and he asks him to behave and to remember that he’s still on punishment, so no funny business.

Stiles rolls his eyes with a fond grin and he promises. He hangs up and returns to his spot at the table. He nods gratefully at Talia when she catches his eye and she smiles back before returning her attention to her mother as her husband kisses the back of her left hand lovingly.

The dessert that follows dinner is just as impressive, and everyone disperses when they’ve had their fill.

Laura commandeers him and takes him to the basement where they have an awesome little bowling alley and they play a couple of games as Stiles outlines in great detail how epically miserable his spring break has been so far.

The flashes of lightening and the crackling of thunder come and go (frequently interrupting their conversations).

Peter eventually joins them, but with a different book this time *(Slaughterhouse-Five)*, and Cora worms her way into the game while butting Stiles out.

Stiles takes a seat by Peter as he watches Laura and Cora play a few games, and Peter informs him that Cora gets easily jealous over her big sister, and in response to the remark, Cora hurls her bowling ball at him, but he calmly ducks before he flips to the next page in his book like its no big deal.

Stiles has never seen anything like them.

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Since all other rooms are filled to capacity, Stiles gets paired with Derek, who looks resentful and completely opposing of the arrangement.

Peter just pats Derek on the shoulder condescendingly before he strolls to his own room, which is on the third level of the house and right above Derek’s room (ironically enough).

Derek’s dad stops by to check on them just as Derek is shoving his comforter and pillows at Stiles. He says, “You boys have a good night. Derek, turn on the caption if you’re going to do something with your TV. Your mother just put your sister down.”

Derek nods and smiles warm-heartedly when his dad knocks their foreheads together affectionately before he exits the room, closing the door behind him with a quiet click.

Stiles makes a bed for himself at the bottom edge of Derek’s bed before he lays down and watches Derek attach a pull up bar to the doorway of the bathroom. He does like a million pull-ups before he
drops down to his feet so he can putter around and get ready to settle down. He even lends Stiles a pair of his pajama bottoms before he disappears into the bathroom.

Stiles changes into them while Derek is in there and takes a moment to appreciate how polar opposite Derek’s room is from his.

For one, it’s neatly organized, almost compulsively. The color scheme is different too. There’s lots of greys and greens. He’s also got an impressive entertainment system in the corner of the room where his walk-in closet is. There are thick books placed here and there with no titles on them for Stiles to know what the content of them might be. There’s a flat screen TV mounted on the wall above an impressive collection of game consoles, DVDs, and video games.

Stiles feels a small surge of envy at how Derek seems to be rich in both loved ones and material things but it passes quickly because he realizes how obnoxious it would be to hold something Derek couldn’t control over him. He scrubs at his face tiredly as Derek exits the bathroom.

“What’s wrong with you?” Derek asks without looking at him as he turns on his TV, muting it quickly before he switches on one of his game consoles.

Stiles says, “Nothing.”

"Your face says different."

Stiles snorts bitterly. He’s heard that before from Cora. "It's nothing," he insists.

Derek shoots him a look at the lie but he doesn’t push. He says, “What do you want to do? I don’t really care either way. Guest's choice.”

“Uh — I don’t want to pick because then I’ll be guilty of breaking the stipulations of my punishment and I swear my dad would know somehow. So you pick.”

Derek snorts. “How would that be any different? You’d still be here participating.”

Stiles shrugs as Derek cocks his head towards the door with a frown. He watches Derek walk over and open it, just as his dog, Jordan, trots through before hopping up on the bed and lying in the middle of it.

Derek closes the door again before he returns to his entertainment system. “How about a horror film?”

“How about not,” Stiles complains but Derek puts one on anyway with a taunting smirk. “Don’t turn off the —”

Derek turns off the lights, laughing quietly as Stiles makes a frustrated sound. He climbs into his bed and uses his controller to navigate past the menu and plays the movie as he texts on his phone.

Stiles hugs Derek’s pillow to his chest and gnaws on his fingernails as his heart hammers away in anxiety through most of the movie. He hates horror films for that reason exactly. It always feels like he’s toeing the line of a panic attack.

Derek says, “Relax.” like he knows Stiles’s heart is racing or something.

Stiles ignores him and kindly does not calm down. The killer is in the next room, how do they not see that? Oh god, oh god, oh god. He jumps with a choked shriek when the killer comes bursting out of his hiding place. The TV is muted and Stiles still jumps.
Derek sighs and starts throwing foam basketballs at his head.

“Oh my god, I hate you,” Stiles groans and uses Derek’s pillow as a shield.

Derek snorts but he doesn’t let up.

Eventually it distracts Stiles enough that his heartbeat goes steady and calm again.

Derek leaves him alone then, again, eerily, like he knows or something. He shows Stiles a bit of mercy by switching the movie off and going into his Amazon Prime account to switch on some ‘I Love Lucy’ reruns.

Stiles gets overwhelmed by the familiar smell of vanilla and he’s out like a light a second later, groggily noticing that the floor under Derek’s bed is crammed with all his stuffed animals like some kind of plushie stash.

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Talia shakes him awake early the next morning and quietly says, “Your father is waiting for you out front.” She leaves a moment later when she’s sure he’s up.

Stiles rubs the sleep from his eyes and fishes for his jeans, doing his best not to disturb Derek, who is still sleeping soundly, shirtless and on his stomach with Jordan curled against his side.

Stiles gets this mean thought of wanting to draw on Derek’s face but he dismisses it and climbs into his shoes before he tiptoes his way out of the abnormally quiet house.

His dad’s cruiser is rumbling quietly in front of the house and Stiles slides in the back beside a dozing Isaac, who jerks awake when the car shakes after Stiles slams the door shut.

Stiles says, “Sorry.”

Isaac just yawns and stretches before he pauses and wrinkles his nose, shooting Stiles an odd look.

“What?” Stiles says and sniffs at his shirt — Derek’s shirt — the one he’s still wearing and forgot to take off. “Do I smell or something?”

Isaac shrugs and frowns like he isn’t sure.

Stiles looks at his dad, who’s concentrating on the road, and says, “Do I smell funny?”

His dad snorts. “No more than usual, son.”

Stiles rolls his eyes. “Ha, ha. Yuck it up, old man.”

His dad smiles but then frowns when he catches sight of him through his rearview mirror. “Jesus, kid — what did you do to your nose? Did you get into a fight? And what happened to your shirt?”

Stiles flushes, embarrassed. “No. I had an accident. That’s all.”

His dad sighs and just leaves it alone.

Isaac quietly rubs his nose with the back of his hand the whole ride home. His eyes are watery and red.

Stiles wonders if he’s allergic to dogs or something.
When Stiles meets Paige at the library in their usual spot for his tutoring session that Sunday afternoon, he notices right away that something is wrong. Her eyes are rimmed with red and puffy, the tip of her nose equally red and her voice hoarse.

Stiles tries to ask her what’s wrong, to assure her that they could meet some other time, but she’s adamant to see their session through.

Paige’s voice trembles the whole time as they go over some worksheets and old homework together. Even when she praises his concerted efforts, her voice shakes.

Stiles feels uncomfortable and guilty.

It’s not until Paige is packing up everything, assigning him more worksheets to practice along with a stack of flashcards of things he hasn’t picked up on yet, does she look him right in the eyes and says, “Derek told me you came over for dinner. You even spent the night. Do you think — that’s so completely — it’s just — you’ve been here for two months and you get the red carpet treatment.” She lets out a hiccapped sob. “I have been dating Derek for two years and I can’t even hold a conversation with his mom, or his sisters, let alone be invited over for dinner. I understand how private they can be. I know they’re private. I’m sorry, I can’t —” She shakes her head and rushes toward the door as she starts to choke up. “I just don’t understand.”

Stiles doesn’t either.
Monday morning finds Stiles off to a restless start.

He gets up earlier than he usually would to get ready for school. He’d done nothing but toss and turn all night because of the surmounting guilt he’d felt for Paige’s situation. It plagued his thoughts, and agitated his nerves. When the sun rises and he can no longer mope in a sinkhole full of anxiety (made of his own design), he decides to distract himself by cleaning his room.

It's a small accomplishment and he rewards himself with a long hot shower. It does slightly lift his mood a bit, but being under the hot spray of his shower dehydrates him in a way, makes him thirst.

So he climbs out when he’s squeaky clean and lightheaded, and wraps one of his towels around his waist. He’s still wiping sleep from his eyes when he treads down the steps and into the kitchen, body still wet, and dripping everywhere, probably leaving watery footprints in his wake.

Laura is sitting at his kitchen table in a bright red Elmo adult-size onesie, texting away on her phone like she’s been there all morning.

Stiles jumps and shrieks a little in surprise because, oh god, he’s naked under the towel wrapped around his waist.

Laura looks up at the sound, blinks, and then starts laughing.

Stiles feels his flush spread all the way down from his cheeks to his sternum. “Why are you in my house?” he demands as he awkwardly covers his chest with one arm.

Laura stops snickering long enough to say, “Your dad let me in before he left.” She nods toward the stove. “I made you guys some scrambled eggs with that nice gourmet moose cheese you got in the fridge. Didn’t realize your family was so fancy. That stuff costs like five hundred bucks a pound, right?”

Stiles rolls his eyes. “Yeah, but it’s not a big deal because my dad gets it for free from the deli shop when he busted a robber that was trying to make away with their safe. So we’re pretty much up to our eyes in cheese. Anyway, you’re the one that lives in a mansion,” he points out.

“Eh, tomato, potato,” Laura replies, waving him off. “Still think it’s you that’s got it made in the shade. Though I will say that this place is sadly lacking in meat. If that deli is so grateful, why aren’t they floating you a couple of free steaks?”

Stiles says, “This is a heart healthy house.”

Laura hums, her nose twitching briefly, but the grin on her face is one of amusement. “Well, today is pajama day at school, so I took the liberty of getting you something.”

Stiles fumbles with the Cookie Monster onesie she tosses at him. “You bought — how do you even know my size?”

Laura just wiggles her eyebrows suggestively.

Stiles makes a distressed sound as he looks the onesie over. “At least it’s blue,” he mumbles. "And my favorite Sesame Street character."
“Of course. What do you take me for?” Laura scoffs before she brightens happily like an excited toddler. “Look, the feet even light up with every step.” She stumps her feet onto the floor very quickly and the edge of her footsies glow a yellow, red, and white.

“Hey, no way!” Stiles says and he claps the footsies on his pajamas together and sure enough they light up with blue and white. “Okay. That’s cool.”

Laura hums in agreement before she stands. “I bought some for Isaac too since Beacon Hills Junior High’s spirit week is the exact same as ours.” She flicks her gaze to the top of the stairs with a slight smirk, and when Stiles turns to look, he realizes that Isaac has been looming silently in the shadows like the shy introvert he is. “Good morning, Isaac,” she greets.

Isaac wrinkles his nose at her (like he smells something unpleasant) and quickly returns to his room.

“Huh,” Stiles says. “He’s usually just a smidge more polite than that.”

“Oh, you know what they say about cats and dogs,” Laura quips, sounding very amused.

Stiles frowns. “What does gender have to do with anything?”

“Oh, I wasn’t talking about gender,” Laura corrects cryptically. Quickly changing the subject before he can ask, she says, “You and I have to correlate all this week. Especially if you’re going to be my date to the spring formal, which means we need to present ourselves as a united front. By the way, I’m running for homecoming queen so be sure to vote and hand out these flyers.” She points to the table where there is a stack of glittery flyers with a tasteful picture of Laura on it.

Stiles can’t say that he’s surprised. “I get the feeling you do this often,” he remarks.

“You would not be wrong. This would be my fourth and final time going after the crown. I’ve plans to pursue prom queen too,” Laura says, like she’s warning him.

Stiles gives her a startled look. “You’re not — if that’s an invitation — I won’t do prom. I’m a freshman and —”

“Relax, I’m not asking you. And I won’t force you to go, even though I’d like to have you there since it’ll probably be our last dance together,” Laura says, cleverly playing on Stiles’s culpability. “But, anyway, I do want you to go to homecoming with me.”

“I’m still thinking about it,” Stiles admits because he honestly is.

“Oh,” Laura says softly, and she doesn’t push. “I’m going to head off. I’ll see you at school.” She starts for the door and opens it. She pauses in the doorway and says, “Oh! Before I forget, your dad told me to tell you that you guys aren’t on punishment anymore. He left the basement unlocked so you guys can grab your stuff.”

Stiles knows it’s rude of him to dart off without saying a proper goodbye to Laura but he’s been waiting for what feels like an eternity for this. He grabs all his electronic devices, and the old newspapers from the past week (his dad likes to archives them by date, thankfully) and carries it all up to his room, but not without informing Isaac of the good news.

He dumps his things on top of his neatly made bed and turns on everything, quickly locating his chargers so he can hook them up. He goes through his phone first, looking at all the missed calls, voicemails, and text messages. He doesn’t find anything significant so he deletes everything.

He takes a moment to throw some underwear on with a tank top before he climbs into the Cookie
Monster onesie Laura got for him, zipping it all the way up to his collarbone and tugging on the googly-eyed hoodie. He runs his fingers through the short blue fur before he carries his laptop over to his work desk, along with his brand new tablet.

He sends a quick text to Peter because he’d forgot to bring this up when he was at the Hale house (that’s just how distracting those Hales are) and it reads: I thought you said you’d look into those old hags next door.

The reply is almost hilariously instantaneous.

Peter texts: Not grounded anymore, I see. :)

And I did. :)

And?

And nothing. :)

Not possible.

I sniffed around and I didn’t pick up anything. :)

You’re probably worrying for nothing. :)

You sound like my dad. You both have no idea how evil those women are. They have pigs.

So? :)

Pigs aren’t a cluing point for malevolence. :)

Have you seen them hack anyone to pieces? :)

Well, no, but still!!! My gut says evil. My gut is always right.

Also, putting a smiley face at the end of that question is disturbing.

How so? :)

Stiles rolls his eyes and doesn’t reply. He’s got an hour before he and Isaac have to leave for school.

He spends it researching.

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Isaac refuses to wear the Garfield onesie that Laura got for him, and he just wears regular clothes. After Stiles crams everything that can fit in his backpack, they mount their bikes and peddle to Isaac’s school.

Scott’s waiting on the curb in front of the bike racks anxiously. He says, “Dude!”

Stiles climbs off his bike and replies, “What?”

Scott looks him over with a questioning look, even though he’s literally in some duck pajamas himself. Then he shakes his head and says, “Dude!”

“Yeah, buddy. I’m here,” Stiles replies in amusement.
“Dude, it's Lydia! And — and her — her family! Didn’t you hear? You’re dad had to have told you,” Scott says frantically. “Everyone’s saying she butchered her parents and ran off. But she wouldn't do that! I know she wouldn't!”

Stiles blanches. “What? What —” He thinks back to the Sunday paper he’d skimmed over this morning and how tired his dad had looked the other day. There had been a report about a possible homicide that bordered on what seemed like an animal attack just because of the gruesomeness of the wounds inflicted on the two bodies found on what was otherwise a quiet and lovely block. There were no mentions of names, or if anyone was missing but Stiles is beginning to realize that his dad may have had something to do with that exclusion of information. “She’s missing?”

“Yeah. Me and the guys were going to help the search parties look after school if you wanted to come. She’s been missing all weekend supposedly and no one can get ahold of her,” Scott explains and he looks conflicted. “I just — I can’t believe that Lydia would do something like that. I mean I know the stuff with her parents separating had to be tough and you know how she is. Well maybe you don't. She's got her quirks but still — it’s not — I’m telling you that she wouldn't do that. I’ve known her for as long as I’ve known anybody else. She wouldn’t. She was actually my first friend before I met anyone else and she's —” He shakes his head with a solid frown as he gasps sharply, turning a little pale. "None of this is right. None of it makes sense!"

“Okay, okay,” Stiles shushes as Scott shakes his inhaler hastily so he can take a deep inhale in order to quell his oncoming asthma attack. “No, I get it. I believe that — well, I don’t know what I believe, but I’ll come with you guys to look. She...well, I think I heard Erica mention that she has autism?”

Scott gasps between sucking on his inhaler but he nods to confirm.

"That's why everyone so frantic to find her," Stiles supposes. He looks around and realizes that Isaac has already vanished into the school. “Listen — I have to go but, text me if you hear anything else. I’ll see you later.”

Scott nods quietly just as Allison rolls up in her parent’s car. She immediately springs out without saying goodbye to her mother or hello to Stiles, completely focused and determined to comfort Scott.

Stiles takes no offense to that. He thinks about how sweet that is as he mounts his bike again and starts pedaling towards his school. During the ride, he gets lost in his thoughts.

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Stiles is on autopilot for most of his first and second period. He still passes out Laura’s flyers like a second thought, but mostly he just goes through the local papers, marking them with highlighters until his fingers are stained with red and green and yellow. He’s desperately trying to connect the dots. There’s a lot he’s missed out on.

For one, there have been a lot of strange grave robberies, and not any kinds where there are material things stolen, but where caskets have been unearthed and the bodies inside have their bones sucked clean. Apparently the forensics on the coroner’s report has identified the animal hair, teeth marks, and saliva left behind on the bones as ones found on *Hylochoerus meinertzhageni*, aka *giant forest hog*, oh god, he knew it.

Those damn Witches.

Not only that, like *not only that*, but there’s been a lot of people under the age of *fourteen* who have gone missing almost periodically around the same time those old hags next door to him moved in.
And now this thing with Lydia — it had to be related. Maybe she saw something that freaked her out or scared her off, but if they did manage to find her he’d have to question her about what happened because if he was going to bring this case to his dad, he would need proof and the only way to do that would to either have an eyewitness or hard evidence —

“Hey, space cadet!”

Stiles blinks and looks up from where he’s sitting under the shade of a tree out on the quad during lunch, teething the other end of a red highlighter in concentration. His lap is covered in old newspapers, marked up and down with Stiles’s messy and hasty handwriting crammed in the margins.

Kate Argent, who is outfitted in a Smaug onesie (unsurprisingly fitting for her personality), is staring at him with this questioning frown. “Christ, I’ve been trying to get your attention for the past minute. You get lost in your head or something?”

Stiles tugs the highlighter out of his mouth, lifts his head to spit the top in the air before catching it and shrugs.

Kate says, “Laura asked me to retrieve you. She wants to talk and you’re not answering any of her texts. So, come on. You know how moody those Hales get when you ignore them.”

Stiles blinks and glances at his phone, which is lit with all sorts of texts, not only from Laura, but from his dad and Scott as well.

Kate doesn’t wait for him. She stalks across the quad, students springing out of her way in fear and awe.

Stiles gathers his things and juggles it all over to the table that Laura and Kate are seated at.

Cora strolls up a second later in a Winnie the Pooh onesie with a tray filled with mostly cheese fries. She sits next to Stiles and eats without acknowledging anyone.

“So,” Laura says after a brief swallow. She’s eating her second chili-dog, and well on her way to the next. “I just wanted to ask you if you wanted to go to the costume shop after school since Wednesday is ‘cosplay as your favorite cartoon character’? Kate wants to do Josie and the Pussycats but I said —”

“I can’t,” Stiles interrupts and politely declines the carton of cheese fries Cora tries to push his way. He can’t eat when his mind is preoccupied like this. “One of my friends have — hang on, doesn’t Peter tell you about — do you know what’s going on?”

“I read the news.” Laura has an odd look on her face that he can’t quite place and she says, “My mom and Peter usually deal with whatever strange happenings are going on in Beacon Hills. I try not to think about it generally or get involved. I can’t consider it my responsibility.”

“Amen,” Kate chimes as she goes to town on a vanilla pudding cup.

Laura rolls her eyes, but she’s still got an odd expression twisting the lovely features of her face.

Stiles frowns and says, “Okay, I get that you read the news, but we know that they always skate around the issue. Aren’t you ever curious?”

“Not really,” Laura says, and her expression goes even funnier. She starts picking at her nails, avoiding his gaze. “Look, I’ll just pick you out something and drop it off at your house. Kate, help
me pass out some more flyers. I haven’t hit up the swim team yet.” And just like that, the two of
them flock off.

Stiles watches them with a new sense of awareness. He has a feeling that he’s hit a sore subject with
Laura, but he doesn’t really understand why that could be.

Cora snorts beside him and says, “You’re doing those faces again.”

“The kind that makes you want to punch me? I have a face, Cora. It’s gonna happen,” Stiles replies,
distracted still. “What was that about?”

Cora shrugs. She says, “Laura doesn’t exactly — she’s not like Peter or mom. She’s always been —
maybe you can call it selfish, but that doesn’t really fit to what it is. You’ll have to ask her if she’ll sit
still to answer. She’s got a good reason, I think, of why she tries not to get too mixed up in the
oddness of Beacon Hills.”

Stiles makes a thoughtful sound at that. He makes a mental note to find out why that is, but for now,
he switches gears when he spots Derek in a frog onesie by the double doors of the gymnasium
talking to a very irate Paige, who is one of the only people not dressed for spirit week. It looks like
they’re arguing and Stiles can pretty much guess about what. He says, before he can help it, “So
Paige confronted me about spending the night.”

"And?"

"And so she was really bothered about it."

“She knows that wasn’t in your control, right? Scratch that. She’d have to know,” Cora replies,
unmoved.

"Yeah, maybe," Stiles sighs. "Can't help but to feel guilty though."

"You're too sympathetic. That's gotta be exhausting." Cora eats her cheese fries, and mouth full, goes
on to say, “Whatever her case is, let Derek worry about it. Not your problem. That's his girlfriend,
not yours.”

“Uh — okay,” Stiles merely says. The corner of his mouth kicks up a bit because the way Cora had
said that had almost been comforting in a way. He sheepishly adds, “Can I borrow your notes? I
didn’t — I wasn’t really all the way there at the time. I missed a few things.”

Cora doesn’t even look at him. She stabs at her cheese fries with a plastic fork that looks ready to
break under the pressure. “Which periods?”

“Um — all of them? Possibly?”

Cora makes an annoyed sound but she nods generously. She dumps the rest of her food as they make
their way to the library.

The last thing Stiles sees before he and Cora disappear inside is Paige storming off and Derek
scrubbing tiredly at his face.

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Stiles meets up with Isaac, Jackson, Danny, Allison, and Scott after school, and they all head to the
police station on their bikes. They walk in and notice how all the deputies are suiting themselves with
guns and preparing a gang of detection dogs.
The state police are talking to his dad, along with Talia and Peter, and they all have severe frowns on their faces like they’re discussing how they’re going to track down a bloodthirsty killer.

It makes Stiles uneasy that they’re drumming up *that* kind of a fuss over a thirteen year old autistic girl, who Stiles is convinced is completely harmless.

His dad spots them lingering by the doorway and he excuses himself with a frown. “Go home. All of you. This is a matter for the police.”

Scott is the first to object. “But Mr. Stilinski! We —”

“I’m sorry, kids,” his dad says, holding up his hands to put off any of their protests. “I can’t in all good consciousness let you participate. The Martin girl is a suspect, and could very well be an unsafe headspace at the moment. I won’t put any of you in harm’s way like that. You leave it all to me, we’ll find her.”

They all complain louder.

His dad sighs and says, “If you really want to help. You can go through town and hand out these flyers.” He gestures to Deputy Tara, who pulls out a stack of ‘MISSING’ signs with a headshot of Lydia’s face plastered on them. “I think it’s about time we put the community on alert anyway.”

Deputy Tara divides the stacks between them but Stiles follows after his father when he makes for his office. “Dad, I really think you should look into the witches next door.”

His dad makes a face and shushes him as he darts an uneasy glance around. He herds Stiles into his office before he walks over to his coffeemaker. “Careful what you say,” he warns sternly.

“Yeah, but your deputies know, don’t they?” Stiles counters.

“They do, but it doesn’t mean *you’re* supposed to. I already told you I don’t want you getting involved. Do you want to be grounded again? Should I have extended your punishment?” his dad questions with a narrow eyed gaze.


His dad doesn’t say anything to that as he pours himself some coffee.

“I just really think that the old hags next door have something to do with what’s been going on with the grave robberies and the missing children.” Stiles quickly adds, when he sees the darkening look on his father’s face, “I read the newspaper, okay? I didn’t — you said it’d be fine if I did it for pure curiosity!”

“*Academic curiosity,*” the sheriff corrects tightly and oh boy, Stiles knows he’s on thin ice now.

“You know what? I don’t want to hear another word about this. You leave the cases to me and you leave those old hags — *women*, alone. Unless you have photographic proof of their involvement —”

“The pigs!” Stiles interjects, flailing his arms wildly.

His dad sighs as he adds sugar and cream to his steaming cup of coffee.

“Those black pigs I keep telling you about! I would have *had* a picture if all my electronic devices hadn’t been confiscated, which was fair, totally fair — please stop looking at me like you’re seriously thinking of taking them again.”
“I am,” his dad merely says before he sits down behind his desk tiredly.

“Yes, I can see it in your face. But dad please. I mean this town,” Stiles hedges carefully. “You know the history better than I do. The things happening aren’t normal.”

“Yes,” his dad admits. “But I promise to do everything I can to keep it from escalating fatally. You also have to understand that I couldn’t drum up a search warrant without probable cause. Me storming our neighbor’s house with my deputies under my permission would look — you know how that would look, don’t you? Especially if they didn’t find anything?”

Stiles does. It wouldn’t be good for his dad’s reputation nor his position. He fidgets and tries to think about his options.

His dad says, “Son, I know you want to help. I appreciate it, but we both agreed you would stay out of this. This isn’t some game or hobby you can play around with just because you can’t sit still for a second. This isn’t like how you and your mom used to play around with cold cases like these for shits and giggles —”

Stiles tenses up completely and he stares at his father, inescapably hurt. He can’t believe his dad is trying to trivialize his genuine concern like this.

His dad realizes his blunder and quickly backtracks, “No, that’s not what I — you know I don’t mean that you — I do understand that this is your friend and —”

“Right. Of course,” Stiles interrupts curtly. “Just another dumb kid with a hobby. So, yeah. I’m just going to go hand out those flyers now since I can’t sit still.” He storms out of his father’s office. He avoids everyone’s eyes and questions when they try to ask him what’s wrong and he just picks up his share of the flyers before marching out of the station.

They split up in twos, and Stiles pairs himself with Isaac because he prefers his company at the moment and he doesn’t have to worry about Isaac questioning his suddenly stormy mood.

He can’t believe his dad would go there. After all this time, when he knows that it still feels like a fresh wound. For both of them.

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Stiles and Isaac finish handing out the last of the flyers sometime around eight and they quietly peddle home. He’s still furious with his dad’s presumptions and dismissiveness. His hurt is burning like something uncomfortable and itchy in the back of his throat — like a hot metal coin he can’t even swallow.

It’s not until they’re inside the house does he feel bits of tension leaking out of him. Home is a familiar place. It is predictable, and because of that, it calms his racing mind in ways he can’t describe. Sometimes he needs that. Sometimes he needs to be confronted with familiar information so he doesn’t drown in the tidal wave of his thoughts when he feels most upset.

He has a problem with internalizing his feelings — his thoughts become a kingdom of disarray that would make even Sherlock Holmes weep — and he finds himself replaying the scenario over and over as if he could go back in time and change everything.

It can be uncomfortable when your ADHD is folded into an anxiety disorder.
Stiles attempts to rid himself of the emotional thundercloud looming over his head by making dinner first before he even considers going back to his research. He makes baked tilapia and brown rice with broccoli as a side. He doesn’t eat because he’s not in the mood but he enjoys watching Isaac clear his plate and indicate to wanting another.

Stiles lets that lift his spirits a bit more as he fixes Isaac another plate and watches him clear that one too. He notices the way that Isaac pays special attention to the fish like it’s the best thing he’s ever eaten. It’s a bit amusing, but he doesn’t question it when Isaac makes another indication of wanting more. At least he’s eating more than he used to. Isaac is a bit on the thin side, and Stiles would love nothing more than to remedy that.

Isaac settles in the living room with all his homework when he’s had his fill and Stiles makes himself think about what he’s doing when he goes through the motions of putting everything away in storage containers before he cleans the kitchen.

He switches off the lights when he’s done and looms over Isaac to try and see just what it is the preteen is up to. There’s a small set of completed reading packets neatly placed on top of a blue folder on the coffee table. Beside that there is some decimals, mixed fractions, along with the order of operations math worksheets on top of a red folder. Next to that is a stack of science articles on top of a purple folder, and lastly some grammar study guides on top of a green folder. He’s got his subjects very well organized.

Stiles, by what he can see so far, notices that Isaac has little to no trouble in his studies. He’s a smart kid, Stiles knows. It does him proud to see him successful in his schoolwork. He still says, because he feels like he should offer, “You know, if you ever need help, I’m here. I’m kinda iffy with math but that other stuff, I’m, uh, pretty pro at.”

Isaac’s pencil doesn’t stop moving as he scribbles across a history worksheet. But before Stiles can feel stupid for offering, he looks up and directly into Stiles eyes, and then he nods.

Stiles is pretty sure the grin on his face is ridiculous.

Isaac turns his attention back to his lap and continues to work quietly.

Stiles leaves him to it and goes down into the basement so he can grab his dad’s old roll-around bulletin and whiteboard combo. He drags it up the stairs (not without difficulty because who are we kidding this is Stiles) and he places it in his room, right by the wall adjacent to his windows. He goes back down in the basement for some tacks, some green, yellow, and red yarn, some whiteboard markers and a box of his mother’s old mythology books.

He purposely does not look at the grand piano still sitting under some tarp covering when he passes it to get to the stairs.

It’s been nine years and him and his dad still can’t look at it — can’t do much of anything with it.

When he reaches his room, he’s only partially surprised to see Isaac already there, sitting in one of his dark blue bean bag chairs with one of his own comics (Superman because that’s his favorite hero it seems).

Stiles doesn’t mind the company. He takes everything in his arms and dumps it in front of the bulletin/whiteboard. And because he has priorities, he starts in on all his homework first before he gives attention to anything else.

When he finishes, he takes some Adderall and starts cutting out news articles before he tacks it to the
bulletin side of the board. He connects all the things he doesn’t understand together with a thread of red yarn (mainly the missing kids under the age of fourteen and the grave robberies). Then he connects the things that seem useful but he doesn’t know what to do with by using yellow yarn (mainly the radius of where all the missing kids lived versus where they were last seen). Lastly, he connects everything he thinks is significant to figuring out what exactly those old hags are or up to with green yarn (things like the DNA of animal hair and saliva identified at every crime scene, and the fact the crime scenes aren’t following any specific orbital lunar patterns).

Stiles flips the board over to the whiteboard side when he finishes and uses a brown marker to write ‘old hags’ in capital letters before he starts listing off their characteristics.

**OLD HAGS**

1. Butt ugly
2. Practices cannibalism???
3. Kidnaps children for occult reasons???
4. Possible shapeshifters that favors pigs
5. Eats the undead???
6. Do all their hunting at between midnight and dawn
7. May or may not be witches
8. It's possible the weird orange alley cat might know something
9. Saturday was a new moon

Stiles puts the cap back on the marker and taps his chin thoughtfully as he gives the list a once over. Then he drops to his butt and starts rummaging through the old musty box containing his mother’s folklore books. He looks up any occult having to do with eating the undead, shapeshifting, and kidnapping children.

The problem is that there is lots of lore that deal with these three characteristics in particular. It puts Stiles in a frustrating stand still because it feels like he’s only one clue away from really solving this thing. He jumps to his feet and starts pacing as Isaac follows him with his eyes over the top of his comic book.

“God, what is it about them?” Stiles wonders as he scrubs his hands through his buzz cut. “What am I missing? What am I missing?”

Isaac hums and just returns to his comic.

“Not you too,” Stiles complains as he snatches the comic out of Isaac’s hands.

Isaac shoots him this startled and annoyed look.

“I’ve talked to Scott and my dad and Peter and you. It’s like no one cares! Why am I the only one taking this seriously? Why am I the only one that thinks that —” He stops suddenly as he’s struck by a thought. He drops the comic onto Isaac’s lap as he walks back to the board. “I’m not the only one,” he whispers faintly. He uncaps his marker and adds:

10. *Lydia knew something*

He stares at that line for the longest before he scrambles for his phone and scrolls through his contacts before he presses the name he’s looking for.

“*Go for Erica.*”
“What did you mean when you said that Lydia was having another one of her episodes?” Stiles asks without taking a breathe in between the words.

“What?”

“Monday when you guys came over. Before you left, you said that Lydia was having another one of her episodes again. What did you mean?” Stiles clarifies as he squeezes his phone anxiously before he returns to the whiteboard and poses his uncapped mark at the ready.

Erica gives a heady sigh. “I don’t get why I have to be bothered with these questions. I’m finally alone in my house and I was going to mastur—”

Stiles makes a strangled sound as he flushes. “Please. Please do not finish that sentence,” he begs.

Isaac makes a face like he heard it too, and he kindly exits the room, leaving Stiles alone to deal with it.

Erica laughs meanly. “Fine, fine. I won’t, but seriously — go ask Lydia about it if you really want to know.”

“That’s not funny,” Stiles says immediately. Something in his mouth sours. “You — you know what happened don’t you?”

“Nope. Been sick since Saturday. I didn’t go to school today, and plus, I don’t watch the news or whatever,” Erica says. “Why, what happened?”

Stiles tells her.

Erica grows somberly quiet on the other end. “Fuck,” she finally says. Her voice sounds off. “That’s — that’s heavy. No one told me. That’s — wow.”

“I’m surprised no one told you,” Stiles says with a frown as he stares at the list on the whiteboard.

“Yeah, well, I have two older brothers and each of them monopolize the house phone before I ever get the chance to. You happened to call on a good day. I don’t have a cellphone, in case that isn’t clear. My dad is the town’s coroner but that doesn’t exactly pay much. So basically I have to wait until I’m old enough to get a job to afford a phone of my own.” Erica sounds annoyed.

Stiles twirls the marker in his hand guiltily. “I — sorry.”

Erica says nothing.

“Do you think you could tell me what you meant? Please? I think I can help with this whole — with everything that’s been going on,” Stiles says.

Erica says nothing at first, but then she sighs. “So you know her folks were getting divorced right? Well, you probably don’t know why — or what really started the problems.” She goes on to say, “After she was diagnosed with autism, her parents threw money at everything they could to make her seem as normal as possible. Like they were embarrassed. I think they thought they were doing her a favor or something. Back when Lydia was like six, she and her old man went camping out in the mountains for some sort of radical outdoor therapy.

“Rumor is that they took a trail that was closed off to hikers and Lydia was attacked by some kind of wild animal. She never talks about how it happened or what it was. She was in the hospital for like weeks recovering. She still has the like claw marks up and down her sides, but anyway, she was
different after that. She was oddly normal when she wasn’t pretending she didn’t have voices in her head. She’s always going on and on about how she hears something and it really fucks with her. She screams when she can’t take it, when the voices get too loud or something, but I thought she was taking medicine for it. Seems like she finally snapped and took her family with her.”

“Don’t say that,” Stiles says immediately. “Lydia is — we’ve all got things that — I don’t think she’s capable of —”

“Whatever. We all have problems. Lydia’s just another one of those rich kids who can’t cope because mommy and daddy didn’t love her enough to look past her faults,” Erica interrupts, sounding annoyed again. “I have to go. Did you need something else?”

Stiles does his best to quell his irritation at Erica’s indifferent attitude. He says, “Did she ever used to run off whenever she was having a — some kind of episode? Do you know where she might have gone? A place she would like to hide?”

“Trust me, Stilinski. I don’t have a clue.” Erica hangs up after that.

Stiles sighs and pockets his phone as he stares at the whiteboard. When he gets tired of just staring at it, he turns off the lights and walks over to the window and waits. No black boar exits the neighbor’s house come midnight and that makes Stiles even more suspicious.

He leaves it be with a sigh and pushes the bulletin/whiteboard into his closet and closes the door. He doesn’t want to risk his father seeing what he’s up to.

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Tuesday is Twin Day.

Laura intercepts him before the first period bell and urges him into a Dr. Seuss ‘Thing 1’ hoodie whereas she sports the ‘Thing 2’, while also presenting him with a crazy blue wig that matches the one already on her head.

Stiles doesn’t really want to wear the wig but Laura just smiles prettily at him and he knows he doesn’t stand a chance.

During lunch he helps her hand out cupcakes that say ‘Vote for Laura’ in purple frosting. It’s not so bad since she makes Derek and Cora, who are dressed as Mario and Luigi (mustaches and all) do it too.

Stiles watches Laura jog off to harass the chess club before he sneaks a cupcake, jumping guiltily when a voice speaks up from behind him.

“Laura will kill you if she catches you eating her favors,” Derek says, appearing out of nowhere, tossing some junior girl and her boyfriend a charming smile. “Vote for Laura,” he says and gives them a cupcake before they walk off.

Stiles licks the frosting off his lips and tries to look innocent as Derek follows the movement closely with a furrowed brow and darkening cheeks (weird). “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I totally didn’t just stuff an entire delicious cupcake in my mouth. Even though I kinda worked for it and earned it,” he mutters. “Seriously, aren’t there some child labor laws about this?”

Derek huffs as the color in his cheeks fade away completely and says, “I doubt that’d stop Laura. She’s determined this year. You haven’t seen anything until you’ve seen how she is before prom.”
Stiles makes a face. “I think I deserve another cupcake.”

“Don’t,” Derek lightly warns. “I helped her make those. Stop pigging out on them. They're not for you.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Stiles says as he waves it off in a disregarding way that has Derek's fake mustache twitching in annoyance. "You bake?"

Derek fidgets but he doesn't look particularly uncomfortable by the question; he does look guilty however. "Anyone with a working brain can use a stove," he mutters.

“Oh my god, you do,” Stiles accuses gleefully. “First the plushies, and the basketball names — now baking? There’s a whole other side of you, isn’t there?”

Derek gives him an odd look at that. “You really have no idea,” he replies cryptically. He seems amused almost.


Derek suddenly looks annoyed and defensive, which is kind of a hilarious sight because he is literally dressed as Mario. “What? It’s not a big deal. Plenty of people do it. Even boys my age.”

"Even boys my age, he says," Stiles repeats sarcastically. "Like I don't totally get it. Like I'm not almost the same age as you.”

Derek looks like he wants to say something about that but instead, he says, "It's not a gender thing. I don't care for gender politics when they dictate certain behaviors in excluding ways. Baking is...it’s just like chemistry and stuff.”

Stiles laughs and Derek looks kind of wounded. “Is that what Laura tells you when she wants your help with something? ‘It’s just chemistry’. Oh man. I’ll have to use that one.”

Derek glares at him and his fake mustache twitches again. “Shut up.”

“Rude,” Stiles retaliates.

Derek rolls his eyes and walks off without another word to go charm some more people with his unfairly attractive smile. He appears to be in a good mood, despite things, so Stiles figures things must have worked out between him and Paige. He’s relieved. He doesn’t have to feel slightly guilty anymore.

Over by the water fountain, Cora hassles the lacrosse captain until he swears he’ll vote for Laura. She smiles venomously and drops a cupcake in his hands before gliding away to repeat this process.

Stiles grins and shakes his head before he gets back to work. “Vote for Laura!” he says as he approaches a group of people playing Frisbee out on the grassier parts of the school’s quad.

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On his way to pick up Isaac from school, Stiles finds a fifty-dollar bill. He kindly pockets it because why wouldn’t he? He rolls up to the school to find Isaac standing awkwardly between a cheery Scott and Allison, who are dressed as Flo and the other dude from the Progressive commercials for their Twin Day. Strangely enough, it appears that Allison and Scott appear to be fighting to gain Isaac’s attention, but he refuses to look at either of them.
“Hey,” Stiles says as he stutters to a stop. “What’s, uh — going on?”

Scott and Allison blush as Isaac fidgets between them and clenches the straps to his backpack very tightly. He seems to be very relieved to see Stiles and he quickly goes to grab his bike.

Scott and Allison watch him with these odd longing looks on their faces and okay this is super weird.

“So,” Stiles says loudly, purposely grabbing their attention. “Any word about Lydia yet?”

Scott grows somber and shakes his head no.

Allison is still watching Isaac unlock his bike.

“I guess that means they’ll be leading another search party to sweep through the preserve,” Stiles supposes.

Scott nods. “My mom and some of the other nurses have been keeping an eye out at the hospital. Plus she said they’ve been watching the patient databases for any of the other hospitals.”

“Good,” Stiles says just as Isaac rolls his bike past Allison and Scott, firmly avoiding their gazes as he starts out of the parking lot. “Uh — I better go.”

Scott and Allison nod distractedly as they watch Isaac.

“Okay,” Stiles drawls and turns to catch up with Isaac. “So, I’m curious — what’s up with you and Allison and Scott? Is there — do they like — are they making you uncomfortable?”

Isaac goes a little pink and shrugs but he doesn’t say anything.

Stiles isn’t sure what to make of that response. He changes the subject. “I found fifty bucks. Wanna hit up the arcade?”

Isaac nods and that’s exactly where they go.

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They don’t make it home until eight, and oddly, there’s a literal gold coin placed strategically on the top porch step. Stiles stares at it, perplexed and intrigued as Isaac takes the house keys from his limp hands like he could care less about this discovery and disappears inside to use the bathroom and start his homework.

There’s an inscription on both sides of the coin that could possibly be a dead language or something else. It’s hard to tell because the coin looks ridiculously old. Like Pirates of the Caribbean old.

Stiles clenches the gold coin in his hand and looks up, only to be trapped in a staring contest with the creepy orange cat from across the street.

The cat’s eyes seem to glimmer, even under the glow of the street lamp it’s perched under. He starts to feel that stare all the way down into his soul and he has to tap out.

Stiles slowly retreats into the house and leaves the alley cat to its weirdness. He goes up to his room and places the gold coin on his desk before he takes a picture of it with his tablet. He uploads the photo to his computer and uses the internet in an attempt to locate it’s origins.

The results hit a dead end and Stiles is forced to look up a local antique dealer instead with the hopes he can get it identified.
He makes plans to go to the address listed after school.

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Wednesday morning, when his dad think he's still sleep, he sets a bag left for him on the edge of his bed.

Things are still pretty tense between him and his father, so he waits until his dad exits his room before he climbs out of bed to take a look. There's a card stapled to it with Laura’s neat scrawl, which basically instructs him to wear the outfit. He starts getting ready for the day once he takes a peek at what the outfit is (though it looks familiar, he still can't tell who he's supposed to be).

He takes a shower and slips into the costume, but it’s not until he’s putting on the white hat does he realize that he’s cosplaying as Finn from *Adventure Time*.

Stiles huffs as he gives himself a once over in the bathroom mirror.

Laura thinks she’s so clever. She kinda is.

Isaac seems amused when he sees him, but true to his quiet nature, he doesn’t comment.

Sometimes Stiles would pay money to know what that kid is thinking.

His dad leaves the house with the morning paper and stiffly tells them to have a good day, and not to wait up for him (they’re still looking for Lydia) before he exits the house.

Stiles tries not to think about how it makes him feel to be at odds with his dad. He throws his attention at making himself a bowl of cereal before he and Isaac make their way out the door to head to school.

He makes sure not to forget that gold coin or the directions to the antique shop.

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At the start of the school day, Stiles takes a moment to appreciate that Laura planned this whole cosplaying thing very well. She’s dressed as Princess Bubblegum while Kate is dressed as Lumpy Space Princess.

Cora is dressed as Marceline, while Derek is dressed as Jake the dog.

Stiles isn’t given time to really contemplate the arrangement of their costumes because Laura is shoving a box of campaign buttons into his arms. Some of them have her face on it, others just says ‘Vote for Laura’.

He really hopes that she wins because he’s not sure what she’ll do if she doesn’t. He roams through the halls with Cora, handing out buttons to student after student until the first bell rings and everyone disperses.

Cora walks with him to their first period class and Stiles watches as Paige frowns at a campaign button she has in her hand before she trashes it.

He tries not to think about the implications as Cora makes an impatient sound and drags him into the classroom.

All through AP Biology, the gold coin feels like it burns in his back pocket, whispering to the curiosity of his mind.
Stiles can’t even make it until lunch.

He uses the fact that he never asks to be excused midway during his fifth period class, Astronomy, (the period before his assigned lunch time) and he sprints to his locker to dump his books. Then he quickly heads to the boys locker room, which is thankfully empty, and he climbs out the window above the showers.

He doesn’t land gracefully, but he doesn’t injure himself either so that’s a win. He limps a bit towards his bike, trying to be as covert as possible so no one catches him, and he stoops low so he can unlock it.

“Hey.”

“Gee — sus!” Stiles yelps and sends his lock flying.

Derek catches it with minimal effort as he stands at the bottom of the curb watching him with a basketball under his arm. With a flat look, he says, “What are you doing?”

“No —” Stiles looks from left to right as he thinks. “— ditching?”

Derek gives him an even flatter look that says ‘yeah right’. Stiles gets edgy for whatever reason and so he does what he does best. Ramble pathetically. “I just — there’s this something that I — or not really something you can classify as a something — but it’s not a concept either, so it is physical — but it’s the reason I have to — because there’s a place — and this place has answers — I need answers, even though I’m sure, universally, all of us, in our own right need answers but — the place is not like that way in that sense though — and I was going — well not so much going because gravity is a — the world could be moving, not me — I mean the world is moving but I’m saying that —”

Derek lifts his eyebrows with that particular face Stiles is starting to feel like is only reserved for him. The face that says he thinks Stiles is a crazy weirdo he has no chance of understanding.

Stiles sighs. “You know what? I don’t have to explain myself to you. Who are you? No one I have to explain myself to, that’s who. Besides, why are you out here?”

Derek huffs as he twirls his basketball on the impossibly long middle finger of his left hand. It’s kind of an entertaining sight since he is currently cosplaying as Jake the dog. “AP Calculus bores me. My teacher has gotten to the point where he doesn’t care if I show up or not since I’m averaging the highest in that class. They think they might have to start enrolling me in college courses.”

Stiles makes a frustrated sound because how dare he be so cool? “See! The fact that you even get to say something like that is — and with such a casual tone too, like it’s not a big — you know what? I don’t care. Nope. Don’t care. I’m not jealous either.”

Derek smirks a little. “I don’t know, Stiles. Kind of sounds like you are.”

“Whatever, I have no more time to waste on you,” Stiles promises and marches up to Derek to snatch his lock back before he puts it in his green backpack and mounts his bike. He points a threatening finger at Derek before he goes, and the effect gets lost because Derek straightens in amusement, like he’s humoring him. “You better not snitch on me. I’m not ditching, okay? This is an educational, uh, trip.”
“Oh?” Derek says. “Then you won’t care if I tag along.”

“Yes I would,” Stiles says quickly. “I so would. Stay here and be the better person.”

“I thought you said you weren’t ditching.”

“I’m not,” Stiles swears even though he so is.

“Look, I’m coming because I’m curious to see the things you get up to,” Derek admits as he goes and fiddles with a lock on a bike that Stiles isn’t even sure belongs to him. “It’s either me or Peter.”

“That’s low,” Stiles mumbles. “Fine. But you can’t tell anyone about this.”

Derek shrugs and mounts the bike after he drops the broken lock.

Stiles stares at it, wondering just how — he shakes the thought off because he really has no time. He peddles with Derek trailing after him, basketball under one arm as uses his other hand to steer.

The ride to Alan’s Old Antiquities takes fifteen minutes, which is pretty good time considering.

Stiles drops his bike down in front of the shop and tries to peer through the dusty windows into the poorly lit store. He walks in and the bell chimes overhead to announce his arrival.

“I’ll be with you in a moment,” a male voice says from all the way in the back.

“Sure,” Stiles yells in return as he holds the door open for Derek.

Derek freezes right in the doorway and cringes taking a quick step back before he attempts it again. He cringes back quickly and just stands right at the doorway.

Stiles says, “What?”

Derek glares at the doorway like it’s offended him.

“What?” Stiles repeats because he really wants to know what the problem is.

Derek grits his teeth and reluctantly admits, “I can’t come in.”

“What? Are you banned?”

“I can’t —” Derek intones slowly, like Stiles is an idiot. “— come in there.”

“Uh, any particular reason why? Are you like a shoplifter or —”

Derek shoots him annoyed look.

“Oh, okay,” Stiles says quickly, lifting his hands to soothe him because that question is apparently off-limits. He just files it down as another one of those odd Hale things he’ll think about later when he has time. “I’ll be — I’ll just be quick about this, okay?”

Derek says nothing but he backs away even further and frowns heavily.

Stiles lets the door close behind him and ignores the way Derek’s eyes are burning holes into his back.

He decides to roam the overcrowded shop while he waits for the owner, taking in the way the floorboards creek under his footsteps, or the general musty smell of something old or unused.
There’s furniture settled across the shop like it’s placed to be an obstacle course for the customers. The walls are covered in framed items like paintings, black and white photos, copper and silver coins, slightly torn or completely torn scrolls, and the like. There’s china dishes, and porcelain vases. There’s statues, and empty bird cages hanging from the ceiling — not to mention old looking weapons (guns, swords, etc.).

There’s a row of bookshelves adjacent to the front counter full of books. This catches Stiles’s attention but before he can wander over, a bald dark-skinned man with a goatee appears from behind a doorway of hanging beads.

“Hello,” he greets and eyes him. “How may I help you?”

Stiles fishes his pocket for the gold coin and he puts it on the glass counter display, which holds an impressive exhibit of jewelry (pocket watches, rubies, etc.). He says, “I — do you think you could possibly tell me what this is?”

The man looks at him before he flicks his gaze down at the coin. He reaches into the right pocket of his slacks and pulls free a silver jeweler loupe magnifying glass and presses it to his right eye as he picks up the gold coin with his left hand and brings it closer. He makes a thoughtful sound as he really studies the precious metal.

He says, “Where did you say you found this?”

“I didn’t,” Stiles says. “It found me, I guess you can say. Why? Is it — is it important?”

“Well,” the man replies noncommittally. “You have to understand that this is practically a relic. Based on the engravings on either side, or what I am able to make of it, this dates back to the eighth century, perhaps even earlier. These are Arabic inscriptions, which correlate to the Islamic Golden Age. Also, deriving from the materiel of the gold, I would definitely say it originated from a Persian empire.”

Stiles takes that in. He says, “Okay. Cool.”

“Very.” The man sounds amused.

“You, um, seem to know a lot about history and — yeah,” Stiles says lamely. He’s not really smooth at all.

“I know a few things,” the man concedes vaguely. "Textually."

“Right,” Stiles agrees. “So, say I had a question about some other things. Like — I’m going to randomly think of something — oh. How about folktales?”

“Folktales?”

“Yeah, uh.” Stiles tries to choose his next words carefully. “Are there any like stories about Witches or some mythology about Shapeshifters or creatures that eat the dead or kidnap children from that era?”

The man lifts an eyebrow and lowers the coin, along with the magnifying glass. “The earliest I can think to say is One Thousand and One Nights. It’s a collection of folktales from South and West Asia. You may recognize in its modern title as Arabian Nights. I’m not completely sure, but what you just described sounds a lot like a person who delights in the macabre. A Ghoul.”

The man nods as if to confirm. “In ancient Arabian folklore, the creature preys on young children, steal precious items, and eats the dead. They take the form of the living person most recently eaten. They’re also known to shapeshift into bottom feeding animals.”

“Like pigs?” Stiles feels more sick than he does triumphant when the man nods. “But what if — if the Ghoul doesn’t eat a living person? What happens when they just eat the dead?”

“If it eats the dead then it will never change its current human form. Normally they would do this in order not to draw suspicion to themselves.”

“What about the kids? Why do they kidnap kids?”

“Ghouls have strong ties to Vampires. It’s believed that they were made from Vampires. Once turned, they would pay ode to their sires by collecting a herd of children for their masters to partake from when the masters themselves were no longer physically able to hunt.”

“Vampires,” Stiles croaks and presses at the corner of his eyes. He can feel a headache build.

“Yes. But its mainly a commodity of the male species of these creatures. They tend to be more loyal.” The man goes on to say, “The females however, are prone to do a type of nesting, or hiving. They turn the children. To do their bidding.”

Stiles is struck by a sense of foreboding. “Okay, so, the precious items. You mentioned they have sticky fingers when it comes to that. Would that be — do you think they would go for something like gold coins?”

The man nods.

“Why?”

“To the Egyptians the yellow blaze of gold was a symbol of the Sun God Ra. To the Inca people gold was the sweat of the Sun (and silver the tears of the Moon). In these early civilizations, gold was also an important provision for the After-Life,” the man explains. “For Ghouls, being creatures of the night, and also undead themselves, those gold coins would be the closest ties they can have to ever possessing something that’s as symbolically close to the Sun or the life they once lived. They are greedy creatures by nature, but in some ancient accounts, the female species were known to grant special partisanship to those who would present them with gold favors.”

“Like a Genie,” Stiles supposes as he grabs the coin and looks it over. “Uh, well.” He shoves the coin in his pocket. “Thanks but, I’m not looking to sell. I was curious. Just, curious. Always good to know what’s something is worth from time to time.”

“Of course,” the man replies but he’s studying Stiles with a thorough amount of concentration. “I’m happy to have sated your curiosity. Feel free to come by anytime. I’m Alan Deaton.”

“Stiles Stilinski.”

“The sheriff’s son,” Deaton says thoughtfully, like this fact means something to him.

Stiles blushes a little and figures now would be the best time to exit. “Okay, well. I better get going since my free period is just about up. Thanks again.” He hurries to the door.

“Mr. Stilinski,” Deaton calls.

Stiles pauses and looks over his shoulder.
“While we’re on the subject, it might be educational for you to know that the only way kill a Ghoul would be by decapitation. Electricity and fire can often render them weak,” Deaton says. “Have a good day.”

Stiles nods faintly and exits the shop.

Derek is leaning against a meter with an annoyed frown.

“Now for what reason could you have to make that face at me? I told you that you didn’t have to come,” Stiles points out as he grabs his bike.

“What are you up to?” Derek asks instead.

Stiles fidgets. “What do you mean? I’m not up to anything. This was nothing but an educational trip.”

Derek doesn’t look like he buys it but he doesn’t push. He grabs his bike and mounts it before peddling towards school.

Luckily, they make it back right at the end of lunch.

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Peter is sitting out on the porch steps when Stiles and Isaac roll up to their house on their mountain bikes after school. Peter glances briefly at Isaac before he focuses a narrow-eyed gaze on Stiles.

Isaac wrinkles his nose at Peter as Stiles hands the house keys over and he heads inside, giving Peter a wide berth when he marches up the steps like he really doesn’t want to make physical contact.

Peter seems amused but unsurprised.

Stiles doesn’t even want to know (except he totally does). He approaches Peter, who makes no move to stand, and says, “Dropping in unannounced yet again. But without a stuffed animal this time. What’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” Peter says slowly with a meaningful look. “You tell me.”

Stiles sighs and crosses his arms. “Derek opened his stupid mouth, didn’t he? What did he tell you?”

Peter flashes him a sharp smile and says, “Enough.”

An incredibly loaded silence falls over them.

Stiles fidgets. “My gut is never wrong, you know,” he points out. “I knew something was up with —” He nods his head to the house next door. “— them, and I was right. I was a little off about my theories but a quick fact check cleared that right up. You know, since I took the time to do a little digging unlike everyone around me.”

Peter stares at him intently for a long moment before he says, “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

Stiles blinks. “Okay, that was something I wasn’t expecting you to say. Actually if you want to go ahead and say that again, I will not stop you.”

Peter ignores the suggestion. He just stands and looks towards the house next door. “Tell me the plan.”
“Plan?”

Peter gives him a look.

“Okay, okay,” Stiles concedes and fishes the gold coin out of his pocket and holds it up for Peter to see. “I was going to try and bargain with them.”

Peter lifts a brow.

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Under the cover of darkness, Stiles sits against the tall wooden fence on the grass with Peter as they wait. The plan is that Stiles is going to distract those horrible old hags while Peter sneaks into the house to either get some hard evidence that would give his dad the cue to take some judicial action, or possibly figure out the location of those missing children.

Hopefully, Stiles thinks, Peter won’t be too late. Or that this plan comes to nothing.

Predictably, the door swings open around midnight and the clopping of hooves and snorts sound off as those two black boars exit the backdoor of the house.

Stiles waits a beat before he moves to follow them.

Peter reaches out and grabs his wrist. “Are you truly certain about this? Mistakes might prove to be fatal in this case.”

“I'm partially sure,” Stiles admits. “Look, all I know is that they won't do anything to me. It’s better that I distract them. They know I’m the sheriff’s son. I'm virtually untouchable.” He shrugs again. “Now go do the whole rescue thing while you still have a chance.”

Peter looks uncertain, like he wants to say something soft and sentimental but he shakes his head instead. He says, “Be careful. I'll kill you if you let them kill you.”

Stiles gives Peter a look. “That was almost nice until you just kept running your stupid mouth, you weirdo.” He shakes of Peter’s hand and cuffs him in the shoulder. “You be careful too.”

"As if I could be anything but.” Peter smirks before he climbs over the fence and sneaks into the old hags’ house.

Stiles meets Isaac out front and they mount their bikes so they can quickly trail the black boars who are predictably fast. He hadn’t wanted to involve Isaac in this endeavor but Isaac had seemed pretty keen about not being left behind.

The black boars lead them to the Beacon Hills Cemetery.

Stiles veers his bike off toward a tree and he hunches down as Isaac sticks close and they both watch the smaller of the black pigs waddle its way into the lowly lit graveyard.

The other noses around one of his dad’s deputies, who is sitting in a parked cruiser by the entrance of the cemetery, cramming some curly-fries in his mouth, none the wiser.

The black pig transforms abruptly, and takes the form of Kalliope. She kindly taps the window and waits for the deputy to lower the window questioningly before she blows softly into his face. A thick cloud of green fog escapes her mouth and curls around his head.

The deputy passes out within a heartbeat and Kalliope glides away in satisfaction.
Stiles waits a beat before he whispers, “Go to the car and make sure he isn’t dead. If he’s not, just wait for like, fifteen minutes, okay? If I’m not back before then, well, you know who to call.”

Isaac grabs his wrist before he has a chance to get away and there is a thorough amount of unease etched in his scarred features.

"Don’t worry," Stiles promises, secretly pleased by the concern he can identify in Isaac’s eyes. "I’ll be just fine."

Isaac looks uncertain but he nods before letting him go.

They part ways and Stiles strides quickly into the cemetery as Isaac climbs into the passenger seat of the squad car.

Stiles spies Acantha and Kalliope huddled around an open coffin, sucking the rotted flesh from the bones of a corpse with greedy wet sounds. He gags a bit as he hunches behind a tombstone and watches as little by little their true form is revealed.

They have grey leathery skin stretched over skeletal frames, black beady eyes, elfish ears, thin grey hair and razor sharp talons on their hands and feet to match their bloody razor sharp teeth.

Stiles steadies his heart despite things, and he fishes in his pocket for the gold coin. He pulls it out and twiddles it between his fingers.

Kalliope stills suddenly and sniffs at the air before her black eyes whip over to the tombstone Stiles is hiding behind.

“What is it?” Acantha hisses wetly. Blood and shards of bones are oozing from the corners of her wrinkled mouth. "Why do you search the darkness so wildly?"

“I hear something precious,” Kalliope snarls. She licks at her upper lip as her head twitches to the side. Then she says, “Seems to me we have a little nosey visitor.”

"Is that so? I do like company,” Acantha cackles, crushing an already brittle skull between her claws. "No need to guess who. This scent is familiar."

Kalliope hisses in agreement and says, "Come out, stupid boy. I smell that gold on you.”

Stiles swallows but he stands and reveals himself. He slowly makes his way over as they track his movements like a hawk would a mouse. He says, “I hear you’re the two to go to for a favor?” He waves around the coin.

Kalliope and Acantha watch the coin greedily before they scowl at him.

"Clever, isn't he?” Acantha murmurs. She cocks her head with a smirk. "Children are never so clever. Special, this one. Different from the rest."

Kalliope merely scowls harder and says, “Hardly clever if he comes seeking us as we are. What do you want, stupid boy?”

“Nothing much. Just, uh — was kind of wondering why you came to Beacon Hills?” Stiles asks instead, stalling for time.

Kalliope mouth twists in displeasure. “That’s not a favor, you ugly child.” She starts prowling around him on all fours. "That’s a question."
Stiles swallows. “Yeah, well, the sooner you answer, the sooner I tell you what I want.” He waves around the coin and they watch it with distracted focus.

Acantha says, like she’s compelled to, “We were called here.”

“By who?” Stiles asks.

“Not by who, stupid boy,” Kalliope corrects as she continues to circle him. “This signal comes from no man. Nor woman.”

“What signal?”

“You know of what we speak,” Acantha counters. “You’ve come to it too. It called you. It calls to all it’s kin.”

Stiles thinks back and it hits him. “The magical tree stump.”

Acantha and Kalliope give an ugly laugh.

Acantha says, “Not it’s given name. Not properly.”

“No,” Kalliope confirms. “Those foolish Druids call it the center of the world, they do.”

“The Nemeton,” Acantha clarifies, almost gleefully.

“The Nemeton,” Stiles repeats as he rolls the word around in his mind, and there's a whisper of curiosity that unfurls in his mind. There's a stirring in his gut that he's never felt before, like the awakening of something he can't name (something that's been lying dormant). “Why does it — is it just you that can hear the signal?”

“No,” Kalliope merely says as she continues to circle him. "It's not a sound, you vile boy."

"So it's like a vibration then?" Stiles asks, confused.

"No, not a feeling either. The signal is something beyond the senses," Kalliope adds. "Humans don't understand there is more to just tasting. More to just seeing or hearing. More to just scenting or feeling. There is an Echelon of Splendor that they will never get until they are in the throes of death. Then, only then, do they know."

Stiles has no idea what any of that means but he definitely does not want to die in order to find out.

“You ask the wrong things, you know,” Acantha remarks. “Come now, give me the pretty coin and I’ll tell you the future of the world. None of us are safe anymore. The Humans have war in their hearts for us all.”


Acantha hums in agreement. “Give me the coin, little darling. I’ll tell you of what’s to come. You’ll want to know. So many snakes in this town. They’re all poised to strike. I can be so sweet to you if you hand it over.”

Stiles is curious. They’re clever to play on his curiosity like this. He’s almost tempted to hand the coin over and get some real answers. But he just shakes his head to clear his mind of their seduction and says, “What did you do to Lydia?”

“This hideous child asks such boring questions,” Kalliope drawls as she slinks back over to the rotted
corpse and begins to suck on another bone. “We’ve done nothing to that atrocious redheaded fairy.”

“It’s the feline therianthropic, not us,” Acantha adds, sounding offended. “Bad luck to kill a woman of the barrows. Why would we?”

“We wouldn’t,” Kalliope confirms.

Stiles feels his thoughts begin to swim with all this new information.

“We should eat him,” Acantha announces suddenly. “He’s not going to give us that coin. We should eat him and then take the coin.” She eyes him. "Yes, that'll do nicely."

“I vote no on that,” Stiles says quickly.

Kalliope huffs meanly. “Shut up, you repulsive boy. We wouldn’t touch you.”

“And why wouldn’t we, Kalliope?” Acantha complains. “He’s seen our true nature. Can’t let that stand. Oh no. Can’t let him run his delicious little mouth about that.”

“Honestly, Acantha. You mean you don’t smell it on him?” Kalliope remarks as she glares at Stiles like he’s the ugly vermin sucking on rotted flesh like chicken off of a bone. “Isn’t it a curious thing that our concealment charms didn’t work on him? He still gave us the side-eye when all the other dull-witted creatures of this town were so delectably dismissive.”

Acantha cocks her head as she takes that in to consideration. She inhales deeply in Stiles’s direction curiously before her eyes flutter and she gives a frightening grin. “Ah, I see. How delightful,” she murmurs. “Too true you are, Kalliope. He’s been paying us far too much attention from the beginning. Not natural for Humans at all. But he's never been one, has he?”

“There’s never a proper concealment charm that works efficiently for Virtues. They’ll always discern the true nature of a person. I’ve always hated them for that reason,” Kalliope complains as she continues to glare at Stiles. “Well don’t look so confused. Don’t you know what you are, you imbecile?”

Stiles rolls the name over in his mind and tries to think desperately about what it could mean. “You think I’m a — Virtue?”


Acantha smiles wickedly. “We should keep the ignorant Changeling then. I’m tired of this place anyway. Come, Kalliope, let’s run away with the little thing. Imagine what we could do.”

“Blood of a Virtue pays very nicely,” Kalliope agrees as they begin to stalk towards him.

“Wait, wait,” Stiles hastily says as he backs away, stumbling. “I thought we were here to bargain. Seriously, you don’t want to kidnap me.”

“Oh but don’t we?” Acantha counters. “Keep your silly little coin. You just gave us something far more valuable.”

Stiles runs and screams with his arms flailing, hoping that Isaac can take this as a sign that things are going wrong and call his dad for help. He doesn’t make it far because these old hags are fast.

Acantha tackles him into the dirt with a squealing growl and Kalliope blows a gust of nasty wind in
his face. The smell of her breath is so toxic (worse than hot, raw sewage) that it makes his vision
swim as his stomach churns with nausea.

In the distance, he makes out that eerie orange alley cat watching them from where it’s perched on
top of a tombstone.

Kalliope blows in his face again.

The world goes dark.
Stiles wakes up with both his wrists tied together and his mouth gagged with white hanging rope soaked in what smells and tastes like vinegar and oil. He’s lying on the center of the Nemeton in the middle of a circle of strategically placed (eerily deformed) black candles, blinking up at a starry sky.

This takes a moment for him to process, of course.

He’s never woken up like this before. He groans and sits up shakily, pleased to see that, although shoeless (and without socks), his feet aren’t tied together. There is, however, red wax melted between all his toes (causing them to stick together). He tries to wiggle them free but to no avail.

"That'll make some nice footprints for us to follow if you try to run, naughty boy," Acantha explains when she notices that he's awake. "Can track you anywhere with that, we can."

Stiles blinks and tries to tongue away the saturated rope from his mouth.

Acantha goes back to lighting the black candles one by one as she uses her free hand to burn some sage into the air (the smoke is thick and an auburn brown).

Meanwhile, Kalliope mutters a prayer over a long archaic looking blade she points from north to south, then east to west. She repeats this process as she circles the Nemeton.

Stiles makes an annoyed sound at Acantha as he stumbles to his feet.

Acantha looks at him sharply with her beady black eyes and warns, “Mustn’t break the circle, little one. You’ll be burned to a cinder. You’ll stay put like a good dear, yes? Wouldn’t want those young bones to poof into ash. No, wouldn't want that. Such a waste for something so valuable. All the candles have been lit and it's tiny flames will keep you in where you belong.”

Stiles makes a distressed sound as he eyes the edges of the Nemeton when he stands to his full height. She was right. All of the black candles were lit but the flames didn’t flicker at all. They were frozen, as if they weren’t real at all. The only sensible thing to do would be to heed her advice since he didn’t understand this kind of magic at all. He then looks around and out into the trees, hoping to see even a glimmer of help (maybe even some light through the trees where the Hale Manor might reside).

It’s dark and quiet, however.

The moon is sitting heavy amongst the stars in First Quarter, and the air feels moderately warm. It’s a perfect night, and it really clashes with Stiles’s current situation. It makes a chill of slight fear roll down his back like a bead of water. It makes something restless in his gut. He wonders if this is the moment he dies.

Stiles shakes his morbid thoughts away and thinks about Isaac and his dad and Peter. They don’t know where he is and he doesn’t know where they are. Oh man, his dad is going to be so pissed if he goes and gets himself killed. Or if he doesn’t and he somehow makes it out of this alive and somewhat unscathed then he’ll be grounded forever. Being grounded sounds like heaven right now.

Isaac had to have heard him scream. He’s smart. He’ll get help or something. It’s a silly hope to cling to but Stiles clings to it desperately.

He winces as he tongues at the rope tied around his mouth again. It tastes bitter with the heavy
saturation of vinegar and oil. He tries to wriggle his mouth free once more as he bounces on his heels and weighs his options. Common sense is telling him to run but he can’t ignore Acantha’s earlier warning. He’s not sure what kind of ritual they’re performing, but he’s in no position to take any risks.

He wonders how far he’s from the Hale Manor. He thinks about how good their hearing is and he wonders if any of them can hear him when he begins to scream through the rope while jumping up and down.

“Quiet your tongue, you pea-brained nuisance,” Kalliope snaps; the blade in her hand winks at him dangerously with the help of the moonlight. “Acantha's burning sage and their as good as raising silencing wards. Can’t afford any interruptions with this.”

“We’ll be as quick as possible,” Acantha promises as she shakes off the last bit of brown smoke, like that’s supposed to be soothing or something. "We've got a Half Moon tonight."

"What luck," Kalliope agrees with a smirk. "First Quarter's good for summoning. Best time to draw things outside of ourselves and bring them to us."

Acantha takes what looks to be the bones of a human infant and the bones of an adult ox, crushing them together between her taloned hands until she’s ground it all into dust. She then begins to spin around with it over her head before she releases it around the visible roots of the tree like a flower girl would with rose petals as she waltzes down the aisle of a wedding ceremony.

Kalliope turns with the ancient looking blade and folds her hands over the hilt, pressing it back against her skeletal sternum as the sharp edge of the blade points up at the sky. She closes her eyes and begins to chant so fast that it barely looks like her lips are moving.

Stiles pants as the air grows sharp and cold, pricking needles of uneasiness into his heart as he watches with widened eyes as Kalliope’s body begins to vibrate like the wings of a hummingbird.

Acantha’s cold laughter echoes menacingly as she begins to vibrate as well and she continues to belly dance her way around the Nemeton without ever ceasing.

Stiles makes another distressed sound as the hairs on his body stands on end with the fluctuating energy buzzing through the air and it's like being in a cave the way their voices seem to echo in his ears. He watches as the flames of the black candles lining the edge of the tree stump and keeping him enclosed begin to blaze brighter and brighter as though they have a life of their own.

There's a sheet of fog rolling in across the dewy grass.

Kalliope slices open her hand and drips dark green blood onto a pile of bones at her feet. She then drips some deep blue candle wax over them as she hisses something in archaic Latin, which makes the bones disappear under a thick puff of red smoke that smells sulfuric (like rotten eggs) when it reaches Stiles.

When the red smoke clears with the sound of a loud sigh, there’s a leggy and very naked dark eyed woman with long, wild and wavy (mud brown) hair, pupil-less eyes the color of red wine, and a blank but neutral expression. She lifts her hands and eyes them with a cocked head before she takes stock of the rest of her naked body. She's covered in streaks of dirt, and she looks like some kind wild woman who hasn't known civilization in years.

Kalliope and Acantha fall to their knees before her, keeping their foreheads pressed to the grass in a total sign of submission.
The woman eyes them with clear indifference and says, “For what reason am I to be sealed in Human flesh? Am I not a Foot Soldier to the King of Principalities? How insulting.” She examines the back of her right hand with a grimace. "By whom was I called? To whom can I blame?"

Acantha’s voice trembles as she speak, “Look kindly on us, O Jezebel. Most beautiful of all the Fallen Ones —”

“Kindly?” Jezebel retorts as she stops Acantha's babbling before it can truly start. Her mouth compresses into a hard line. “Now what use is a low-ranking Demon to a decrepit Ghoul? I would say you’d find yourself in better company with the Vampires.” She clucks her tongue. "Are you all out of wretched parasites to sponsor?” She cocks her head and narrows her pupil-less eyes. "Though now that I do gaze upon you..." She trails off with a thoughtful him. "Yes. You do look familiar to me. Lift your heads so that I may see your faces.”

“We can not,” Acantha swears. Her features seem to shrink in nervousness. “You do know us. But we have wronged you.”

“In return for your graciousness, we offer favors as recompense,” Kalliope promises.

Jezebel hums but the look of cold detachment on her face never changes. She says, “I think I do know you. And you have offerings? Laughable. I’ve yet to forgive you for the thousand gold pieces you stole from me some centuries ago when I still belonged to the World of Man and was seated on high. One could almost get nostalgic thinking on those days. How long has it been since I remember the taste of food or the desire to sleep and dream again?” Her expression grows more disdainful. "Tell me why I shouldn’t rip off your heads and burn you to ash.”

Kalliope rushes to say, “We have a Virtue! A true Paragon of motion and choice. One to provide enlightenment!”

“Ambiguous at that,” Acantha hastily adds. “He’s not chosen a field! He has potential.”

Jezebel inclines her head even further in interest at that. She drags her taciturn gaze up and over to Stiles.

Stiles feels another chill creep through him at her blank stare; there are whispers in the wind with voices he can't even separate or determine the source of. But it feels like it's all coming from her. There's a presence about her — around her. It all feels so very haunted. Like stepping foot in an abandoned hotel that was shut down because of all the uncounted/undetermined death. He bites down on the rope in his mouth. He bites down hard as an unsettling smirk spreads slowly across her mouth.

“Well done, monsters,” Jezebel praises, her voice shrill and strident. “The Benefactor will be pleased to hear of this. It’s just the founding stone we’ve been looking for to begin breaking the soil of the New World.”

“Yes. We’ve heard rumors,” Kalliope admits. “The Humans think they work in secret but we see all that they do. And we know of the Benefactor’s cleverness. You sit at his right hand and take delight in fulfilling the desires of his heart!”

Jezebel smirks. "What asinine assumptions," she accuses, scornfully. "You run your useless mouths, thinking that your words will act as your eyes but still you cannot see.”

"This gift to you will help lift our blindness then," Acantha begs as she finally stands upright on her knees. "For this — can we — will we be pardoned in your New World?”
Kalliope straightens as well and adds, “A Virtue is quite a token of loyalty, a sign of a true Dominion, and we’ve come to you when we could have gone to any other. We need protection. Protection you and your master can offer. A fair exchange, would you not say, O Jezebel?”

Jezebel hums as she taps her chin thoughtfully. Her head cocks back as she looks down the nose at them. “Darling little monsters,” she says breezily as she lifts her hands, using some kind of telekinetic force to pick up Kalliope and Acantha. They levitate in the air with choking gasps, clawing at their own throats as Jezebel looks on in gleeful delight. “When has biblical history ever shown me to be fair?” She whistles sharply.

Stiles watches in horror as a pair of zombie Hellhounds break free from the soil at Jezebel’s feet with monstrous growls. They snarl demonically at the Ghouls suspended over their heads like steaks. Their fur is dirty, matted with guts, and as rotten as their eyes look (which glow like the headlights of a car).

“While I do appreciate this remarkable offering you’ve presented to me, I’m afraid this is where we have to part ways.” Jezebel releases them with a flick of her hands and they fall prey to the savagery of the Hellhounds. “Or perhaps it’s better said that you’ll be parting.”

Kalliope and Acantha scream shrilly as the Hellhounds rip them apart to pieces while they all sink into the ground as though caught in the throes of quicksand.

Stiles is shaking down to his toes by the time the ground completely swallows Acantha and Kalliope along with the Hellhounds. The ground normalizes as though nothing had occurred before at all.

Jezebel strides towards him as she tsks. “Poor thing. You’re shaking.” Her words are as hollow as her blank expression. “I’m sorry I had to expose you to such violence, but that’s the way of things,” she unceremoniously reasons as she circles him and eyes the roots of the Nemeton. She smirks and reaches out before her hand gets zapped away by an invisible barrier. “Clever, clever, little monsters, aren’t they? I can’t get in and you can’t get out. What shall we do about this?”

Stiles swallows as he fidgets and struggles against his wrist bindings. He follows her naked form as she continues to circle him, testing the barrier over and over. His heart and mind are racing. Demons and Hellhounds and Vampires and Ghouls and Virtues. Just… dear god. This is more than he ever thought — more than he ever wanted to know.

This must be what they mean when they say to be careful what you wish for and all Stiles has ever wanted was to see the truth for what it really was. To understand what makes this town so different — so special. He’d wanted answers and all that it’s gotten him is some naked Demon, who he is pretty sure is the same person from biblical scripture circling him as if he were a prized jewel.

His vision is swimming with his panic and he drops to his knees under the pressure of how much he is genuinely freaking out. It probably doesn’t help his sanity to see that eerie orange alley cat spring out of the shadows, even larger than it’s usual size, and it hisses threateningly at Jezebel.

It’s appearance slowly transforms under the cover of the moonlight until it completely resembles an adult-sized beige-white lynx. It hops up onto the edge of the stump with little trouble and hisses warningly again at the naked Demon.

Jezebel laughs cruelly. “What a pretty little kitty. My hounds would enjoy having you in their throes. Split you open good, they would. Am I supposed to be scared?”

“No,” the cat replies and holy god — the goddamn cat can talk. Of course it can talk because what would make this moment anymore bizarre than that added effect? “But an acquaintance of mine
might make you reconsider. How fond are you of the Leshy?”

Jezebel’s smirk disappears within an instant. “You lie. The Leshy are extinct.”

The cat just cocks its head as the ground begins to shake.

Stiles looks around for the source of the sound, as does a steadily paling Jezebel.

Then, like something out of Lord of the Rings, a giant of a man wearing fur skins and boots on the wrong feet bursts through the thrush of the trees, swinging a club made of mighty oak and vines. He has thick, bushy hair and a beard intertwined with flowers and butterflies. His skin is made of bronze and his eyes blaze with the fury of an ocean (blue and deep and forceful). He’s like a walking tree practically and when he roars at Jezebel, it sounds like thunder cracking in the sky.

Jezebel hisses, sidestepping every swing of his club before she spins away into a cloud of red smoke, disappearing completely.

The cat huffs in slight satisfaction before it peers over at a wide-eyed Stiles. “Are you okay?”

Stiles doesn’t answer. He really has none to give.

“I think he’s in shock,” the cat supposes.

The Leshy strides over as it shrinks down to a more normal height of seven feet, resembling more of a human male than a humanoid tree. He says, in a deep Scottish accent, “Aye, laddie. He’s had a nasty surprise. Give him th’ inside of your palm. That should wake him, ey?”

“I’m not going to slap him, Mr. Ravenhill,” the cat says, appalled. It’s wandering along the circle of candles, pushing at it with its paws. "He'll come to himself eventually I'm sure."

Stiles looks at the Leshy as the name clicks in his head. That’s Mr. Ravenhill? The Hales’ groundskeeper? Should he be surprised at this point?

Mr. Ravenhill shrugs as he shoulders his wooden club. He smiles thinly at Stiles, who balks, and says, “Dinnae be frightened, laddie. We sooner protect than harm.”

Stiles nods dumbly. He’s in shock still.

The cat says, “I’m not good with these protective seals, but it should be like disarming a bomb. Got to find the right wire to shut it all down.” The cat jumps to the ground and starts clawing at one of the exposed roots of the tree before it pops up again to the edge. “There. I think that will do something.”

Stiles stares at the cat.

The cat simply shrugs but it’s so weird looking because cats don’t shrug. “Try and step out of the circle. I’m going to go inform your father of your whereabouts. Mr. Ravenhill?”

“Aye?”

“Keep him company in the meantime please.”

“Aye.”

The cat sprints off into the trees.

Stiles hedges the edge of the tree stump, sticking his toe out and then his whole body when he
doesn’t immediately go up in flames. He rubs off the wax between his toes by smearing it into the wet grass. He stands before Mr. Ravenhill awkwardly, still bound and gagged, and he fidgets.

Mr. Ravenhill reaches down and snaps the rope from Stiles’s wrists as if it was weak tape and says, “There then. Might comfy now, I gather.”

Stiles reaches behind his head to undo the knot of the rope gagging his mouth. His jaw flexes in relief when he’s able to rid himself of it. The corners of his mouth are sore and tender, and he wouldn’t be surprised if he has bruises. He bruises so very easily, and judging by the rope burn on his wrists, his mouth is probably not any better off.

“Uh,” Stiles says as he cranes his head and blinks up at Mr. Ravenhill. “Thank — thank you.”

“Tis the decent thing to do when yer in a pinch, boyo. There's nae a thing I wouldn't do for a Virtue. Tis been so long since I been blessed tae see one. I count it up as an honor, young lord,” Mr. Ravenhill intones with jovial pride.

Stiles flushes at the title. “I, um — I'm not a lord or anything. I don't really know what it means to be — uh.” He's not even sure what he's trying to say. He rubs the back of his head sheepishly. "So. Um. You’ve met many Virtues before?"

Mr. Ravenhill nods happily, and his beard is so bushy that it’s hard for Stiles to tell if he’s smiling or not. “Aye, a many years ago when th' world was stowed with the lot o’ ye. Come, let's get yer nice 'n' warmed up then. I'll tell ye what I can about what I know.”

Stiles finds himself being herded off in an unknown direction and he wonders if he should be so trusting. But nothing in his gut tells him that the Leshy will do him any harm, so he obligingly enters a gauntly, thorny cabin covered in weeds and ferns.

The inside of it is more homely, well, in an odd fairy-tale way.

The furniture is largely built and obviously made to fit the dimensions of a rather large man. It’s pretty old century too. There’s not an electronic device in sight. Just a small fire in a large fireplace giving the cabin light, as the birds in the birdcages hanging from the ceiling chirp and flap their wings.

Mr. Ravenhill coos at every single one of them as he passes out some grain for them to eat. “Forgive th' noise. I dinnae entertain much company ootside o' th' Hales. I've a soft heart fur th' Wild Things. I luv th' birds most o' all.” He winks jovially at Stiles. Then he makes an indication to the large rocking chair by the fireplace. “Sit down. Sit down. I'll make us a cuppa while we wait fur yer Pa tae come 'n' collect ye. Then I'll get to them questions ye have aboot ye kind.”

Stiles sits and tries not to feel like a toddler sitting in a highchair. He watches Mr. Ravenhill putter around with a teakettle as the house quakes with each of his movements before he comes back with a steaming cup to present to Stiles. He accepts the cup with a thanks and lets it warm his shaky palms.

Mr. Ravenhill slips out of sight for a moment before he returns with a bucket of warm water colored pink by oils (it smells like roses) and some poorly knit socks. He kneels before him and lightly cleans Stiles’s dirty feet with his large hands and a sponge; and he's so gentle about it too — like he's handling paper thin china dishes.

Stiles wonders if this is a normality for the Leshy, and he figures it’s more than likely. The large man seems to be from a different time period where there's a heavy importance placed on this kind of hospitality.
Mr. Ravenhill dries Stiles’s feet before slipping on the wooly and multicolored socks. He says, “There. That should do it, ey? I apologize fur th’ stockings. I dinnae have anythin’ yer size but I figured this would do. I get th’ frilly things from th’ wee Hale kiddies. They like ta knit clothes fur me so I can brace th’ winter. Told ’em I’m used ta havin’ frozen toes, but they mean well. I dinnae have th’ heart ta shoot them down when they offer.”

“It’s fine,” Stiles quickly assures, not wanting to be rude when the Leshy went through all the trouble. “Thank you. They’re, um, comfortable.” Which they are, but they’re also an eyesore.

Mr. Ravenhill nods, pleased. He takes the seat across from Stiles. “Drink th’ cuppa, laddie. It’ll keep th’ bad dreams away when ye rest yer head tonight.” He gestures to the cup in Stiles’s hands and he waits until Stiles takes some careful sips of it, wincing at the bitter taste. “Ye’ve got some questions. Go on then, wee lord. Ask them,” he advises and gives Stiles his full attention.

Stiles fidgets but he says, “You — what are you?” He cringes a bit at his own wording. It feels ignorant to ask that way.

Mr. Ravenhill seems to take no offense to it though. He replies, “Nae a thing. But I suppose some would say I’m a Woodland Spirit. Others would say Forest Demon. But I’ll tell ye I do mean tae harm no one unless they harm me first. I tak’ care o’ the trees and th’ creatures in ’em only in th’ ways that I can. Mostly I look after th’ Hales and their wee ones. I’ve been a Guardian tae them ’n’ theirs fur more than eighty generations now.”

“Whoa,” Stiles says for the better lack of having anything else to say. “What are — what are they?”

Mr. Ravenhill’s blue eyes twinkle with mirth. “If ye dinnae know then it’s not my place ta say, laddie. Sorry. Ask another question. I promise ta answer it.”

Stiles quells his disappointment. “What is a Virtue? How many are there? How many were there? Am I — are they extinct?”

“Back when th’ world was rich ’n’ peaceful, and when Man ’n’ Beast could commune with one another in respect, th’ Virtues acted as judges ta maintain balance ’n’ fix any troubles between Man ’n’ Beast. They were glorious ’n’ fair. They were keener than most. They could look at a ye ’n’ spot yer innermost truths. That was needed back then. Man could nae take advantage o’ Beasts ’n’ Beast could nae take advantage o’ Men.

"Virtues made sure that all was balanced. This is what ye are. Yer th’ scales needed ta set things right. Ye have a pure knowing that keeps th’ world from falling ta fire ’n’ chaos.” Mr. Ravenhill sighs with forlorn nostalgia. “There’s less o’ ye now. Man stopped believin in th’ Wild Things, and in th’ Magic that made us all. When Man forgot, th’ Beasts had ta hide. When they hid, there was nae need fur Virtues anymore. Then one day, Virtues were nae more.”

Stiles doesn’t quite understand but he feels a sadness suddenly. “What do you mean? They just disappeared or something? Like evolution? I —”

Knock, knock, knock.

Mr. Ravenhill stands. “That would be yer Pa. C’mon, young lord. Let’s get ye goin’.”

Stiles is battling between disappointment and relief. He wants to know more — has to know more. He gets up and follows after the Leshy.

Mr. Ravenhill curls a large fist over the knob of the door but he pauses and listens. Before he opens it, he says, very quietly, “Listen, laddie. I can tell ye wantae tell yer Pa ’n’ yer friends, but they
cannae know until its the right time. Ye cannae tell them what ye are if they do nae already know. Tis nae safe fur ye 'n' tis nae safe fur them. Ye must continue ta be Human in th' eyes of them.”

“But I — I am Human,” Stiles says, but he's uncertain really as to what he is. He has so many questions.

“Aye, ye do have th' make of one, but yer more than that. Yer mind is more than that. Yer blood is more than that. Yer th' Emissary fur th' laws o' nature. If yer on this Earth, tis fur somethin’ serious. We cannae lose ye now. Ye be careful with yerself. I will look after ye when I can if ye stumble in th' forests again. The cat-boy will mind ye too.” Mr. Ravenhill pats him a tad too gently, minding his own strength before he opens the door.

His dad is standing on the other side with red eyes.

It almost kills Stiles and he starts to apologize as he rushes forward but his dad just tugs him into a hug. The words die in his throat and he holds onto his father fiercely, hoping to communicate how much he understands.

His dad is shaking and he says, in a raspy voice, “Keeping me from all that red meat loses its significance if you’re the one to give me a heart attack.”

Stiles laughs wetly and holds his old man tighter.

Mr. Ravenhill lingers in the doorway and says, “I wouldn't mind th' laddie. He's got Fate on his side, 'n' Fate would never see him come ta any harm. Ye be on yer way now, Sheriff. Lightening storm's coming. I can smell it.”

His dad manages to pull himself away and he nods somberly. “Thank you,” he says. “Thank you for — thank you.”

Mr. Ravenhill says, “Tis nae a thing. I had someone I knew long ago, 'n' yer son reminds me o' her. Goodnight 'n' safe travels.” He shuts the door.

The cabin trembles slightly as the Leshy moves around.

His dad presses a hand between Stiles’s shoulder blades and pushes him towards his parked cruiser.

Stiles sits in the passenger seat, buckles in, and tries not to fidget as a heavy quiet falls over them.

His dad keeps his gaze on the road and he doesn’t say much himself.

Most of the ride is spent in a loaded silence. The radar beeps and chirps quietly until that sound is overcome by the sound of heavy thunder, which seems to come out of nowhere.

His dad drives a little faster, and the rumble of the engine adds to the silence.

Stiles fidgets. He can’t take it anymore. He says, “Listen, dad. I’m sorry — I know I put myself in danger. I didn’t think — well I didn’t really think at all that something would — but it did and I can see why you would want me to stay out of it because I almost — and Isaac. Is Isaac okay? I’m sorry, dad. I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t have — but I did because I just — I was only trying to do what I thought was right thing. Please don’t be mad at me, I promise I —”

“Stiles,” his dad says softly as they pull up to the house. “Look.” He points to the commotion going on next door in front the neighbor’s house.
Stiles’s breath hitches as he watches through the windshield as all the families of the missing kids are reunited with them. Those missing kids, who are covered in ash and soot and some kind of black goop, are all account for. And they — they are healthy and whole and — and alive.

The parents and the kids are weeping all over each other as the deputies help herd them together and its obvious to see how important and tremendous this reunion must be.

And Stiles — he is — he’s partially responsible for that. He did that. He puts a hand over his mouth as a relieved sob leaks through. It’s so stupid and crazy but he’s just so happy, despite everything that happened tonight, and the trauma of it all — it’s nothing compared to seeing all those families being reunited with their kids who they probably thought were dead. God, Stiles had doubted it himself, he’d thought they were — there was no way to really know but there they are.

His dad reaches over and cradles him as he shakes. He shushes him and says, “You really think I’m upset with you? While I am sprouting some grey hairs over the fact you took a very risqué chance by confronting those — whatever those women were, I’m glad that you — well I’m not glad because it did put you in danger — what I’m trying to say is that I should be the one to say sorry. I should have listened —”

“No, dad,” Stiles croaks in protest, pulling away. “You didn’t know — they were using magic to conceal themselves. You didn’t know. You couldn’t have known.”

“But still,” his dad insists. “I almost lost — I could have lost you because I didn’t want to believe — that’s not okay, Stiles. You’re my son and I would die before I let anything happen to you.” He uses his thumbs to brush the tears from Stiles’s cheeks and he fingers the rope bruises across Stiles’s mouth with an unhappy sound. He picks up Stiles’s wrists and strokes over the rope burns there.

Stiles chokes another sob at the tenderness his dad is showing him and he hugs his dad close because he can’t take it. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

His dad just pats him on the back. “It’s okay. You’re okay.” He rubs a hand up and down his trembling back. “You’re so much like your mother. She had gut instincts that I couldn’t understand half the time, and it sure as hell made her a better detective than me at times. She’d be proud of you too.”

Stiles chuckles wetly before he pulls away. He sniffs and says, “Did she ever — do you know what a Virtue is?”

His dad furrows his brow but he says, “I — well, I would hear your mother and your grandfather talk about something like that when they talked about you. I’m sure I asked too, but I don’t think she ever told me. She said it’s something that couldn’t be explained, and that it’s better I didn’t know until it was time to. Why?”

Stiles closes his mouth and presses his lips together with a headshake, even though the corners of his mouth are still a little tender.

His dad eyes him keenly but he doesn’t press. He says, “I think you and I have to agree to trust each other. This will make things easier in the future, and I won’t have to worry every second of every day if you’re in danger or not. Just — you’re older now and you’re more willful about what you believe in and what you feel you should do. Just tell me please if you think you might be doing something like this again. We’ll figure it out together.”

Stiles nods silently and receives his dad in another hug. “Peter is — is he — and Isaac —”
“Safe. Both of them,” his dad assures before he pulls back again. “Isaac called me to the cemetery, but you were gone. I started to track you but I got a call from the station saying this man called in an anonymous tip — it was about your whereabouts and that you were safe and sound with the Hales’ groundskeeper out on their property and I didn’t stick around to question it. I just drove straight to you.” He looks towards the huddled families, and the kids being looked over by the EMTs while simultaneously giving their statements to the deputies. His dad points to their front porch where Isaac is.

Isaac is sitting on the top steps, the bottom half of his face covered up by one of his longest scarfs. He’s watching the circus of commotion as he fiddles with the dark scarf around his neck anxiously.

Stiles is struck with an insurmountable amount of relief and he sags back against the seat.

Then his dad points to the end of the driveway of the neighbor’s house where Peter is cleverly commandeering all the media attention. “He and I agreed it would be better if he took partial credit to the discovery of the kids while I take the other half. Keeps you out of the media,” he explains.

Stiles snorts tiredly. “How did you convince him to only take partial credit?”

His dad just smiles briefly in quick humor before he goes serious again. “That basement — it was a horror show down there.”

Stiles can imagine.

“You want to tell me your version of the story?”

Stiles does, but he keeps out a few key components (like the fact he is some kind of judge/scale/equalizer?). He wants to tell his dad about it, but he’s not even sure he could explain since he can’t understand, and plus, it’s a keen possibility that his mother knew what he was too. If so, the fact that she didn’t tell her dad about it — well, maybe it would be a good idea to keep that tad bit of information to himself. Just for the time being. Just until he can figure it all out.

His dad listens to his account of things with an attentive ear, his face going a bit ashen at certain parts, but he refrains from saying anything. He does, however, seem unsurprised to hear about Mr. Ravenhill being a Leshy or that the cat spoke or that the Ghouls called Lydia a Fairy.

Then Stiles says, “Wait, so you really didn’t know that those old hags had nothing to do with what happened with Lydia and her parents?”

His dad nods. “I’ve got my suspicions that the person or thing that left that message on our doorstep is also responsible for the deaths of Mr. and Mrs. Martin. The pattern of claw marks fits both descriptions in a damned near identical way.”

“Claw marks?” Stiles questions.

“Possible,” his dad says with a sigh. “The coroner’s report also puts the wounds at the borderline of some special type of hunting knife, which is why I can’t be sure entirely if it was a person or — something else.”

Stiles rolls that around in his mind. “Since Peter and Talia seem to be your consultant on all things supernatural — what did they say?”

His dad shrugs. “Inconclusive.” He goes on to say, “They haven’t told me much of what they think. It must be significant because they’re keeping this pretty close to the chest. I have a feeling that it has something to do with Mayor Argent. That family gets particularly tight-lipped when it comes to the
“Huh,” Stiles says as he glances over to Peter, who is still charming the media’s attention. He rubs at his eyes and says, “I’m tired.” because honestly, he is.

His dad seems to understand and they climb out of his squad car before heading to the house quickly since it’s still thundering.

Isaac stands to his feet immediately upon Stiles’s approach.

His dad opens his mouth to say something but one of his deputies calls him and he flashes both boys an apologetic smile before he walks away.

Stiles gets dragged into the house by Isaac and as soon as the door closes, the quiet preteen clings to him in a surprising display of affection. He’s not normally so tactile. Stiles hugs back when he notices that Isaac is shaking a bit and he immediately feels bad. “Hey, hey — I’m okay. I just —”

Isaac shakes his head sharply as he presses his face into Stiles’s collarbone. He presses his fingers to Stiles’s mouth in a silent request for Stiles to be quiet before he pulls his hand away and continues to hug the older teen tightly.

Stiles swallows over the lump in his throat. He’s starting to get some idea of how Isaac would feel if anything happened to him, and it makes him feel warm and happy, if not a little guilty.

Isaac eventually lets him go long enough so Stiles can go upstairs and take a shower.

Stiles avoids his reflection while he’s in the bathroom. He really doesn’t want to see the bruises on his face. He climbs into the shower with his toothbrush and scrubs the taste of vinegar and oil and bitter tea out of his mouth before he scrubs himself down until his skin is pink. He cries because he’s only Human (no matter what he's been told so far). The day’s events really crash into him and he cries until he can’t cry anymore, and that’s when he climbs out of the shower, red all over and emotionally drained. He goes to his room, grateful for the quiet, and he puts on some pajamas before he crashes facedown onto his bed.

Surprisingly, he dreams of nothing. It makes him wonder just what was in that tea the Leshy gave him.

He could probably use more of that in the future.

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Thursday comes and despite the fact that Stiles has gotten a peaceful night of sleep, he still doesn’t feel up to going to school.

His dad seems to understand and he doesn’t force Stiles to go. He kisses Stiles on the top of his head after he comes in his room to check up on him and heads off to work when Stiles convinces him to go. He scoots to the other side of his bed and stares out the window and tries to think of nothing, which is a near impossibility for him. He doesn’t even realize that Isaac has elected to stay behind until the preteen comes into his room with quiet footsteps and climbs on the other side of his bed with a comic.

Isaac sits with his back to the headboard and he flips lazily through the comic.

Stiles falls asleep again without meaning to, and when he wakes up, there’s a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a cup of milk sitting on his nightstand.
Isaac is nowhere in sight.

Stiles wipes the sleep from his eyes and sits up with a stretch and a yawn. He grabs the sandwich and the milk before he carries it down into the living room, where Isaac is already watching a marathon of *Dance Moms* as he sits curled up in his favorite armchair with his own plate of food.

Stiles sits down on the big couch and wrinkles his nose at the smell of fish. “What is — are you eating tuna sandwiches?”

Isaac just shrugs, which is his way of confirming, and he keeps his eyes glued on the TV.

"*Dance Moms,*" Stiles mumbles, almost disdainfully. "I do not get your attraction to this show."

Isaac's response is to turn the volume up.

Stiles snorts and eats his sandwich. He doesn’t really like *Dance Moms,* but he bears it for Isaac’s sake. He moves to make himself another sandwich when the doorbell rings. He has a quick debate with himself about whether or not he wants to answer but he moves to the door with a sigh.

There’s a tall, very handsome blond with green eyes, outfitted in a police uniform on his doorstep and he greets Stiles with a disarming smile. “Hello. I’m Kyle Parrish. Your dad sent me by to check up on you and Isaac.”

Stiles nods faintly as they shake hands. He doesn’t ever remember seeing this guy around the station, and he practically knows all his father’s deputies. “I’m Stiles — are you new?”

Parrish blinks at the suddenness of the question but he appears to be amused. “I am new. Just started today,” he replies.

“You’re really young,” Stiles says because his brain to mouth filter is crappy. “I mean —”

Parrish laughs. “No, it’s okay. I get that all the time. I’m twenty-six,” he explains. His green eyes are bright with his smile. “A lot people can look as young as me if they just eat right and take care of themselves.”

Stiles straightens at that. “I like you. You should tell my dad that. He wont be convinced.”

“Will do,” Parrish says and flicks his gaze over Stiles’s shoulder. “Hello, Isaac.”

Stiles turns and sees Isaac looming by the doorway of the living room with a dark look on his face. He’s even more startled and confused when Isaac march over and slams the door on Deputy Parrish before storming off to his room. “Uh —” He lifts his hands and waits to see if Isaac will reappear. "So what was that?" he yells.

Isaac is a no show.

Stiles blinks before he quickly opens the door.

Parrish looks a bit sad but unsurprised by Isaac’s rudeness, which is strange in a way. Maybe his dad told Parrish about how Isaac can be — but even then, he looks like he expected it.

Stiles says, “I’m sorry about that. He’s been — moody lately or something.”

Parrish smiles a little sadly. “Puberty, I think,” is his wistful response as he looks towards the stairs like he’s hoping that Isaac will reappear.
Stiles frowns and says, “Well, as you can see, we’re fine. Thanks for stopping by, Deputy Parrish.”

Parrish whips his gaze back and nods quickly. He then reaches in his back pocket for a pad of tickets before he rips one off and writes his number out across the back of it. “Here’s my number for — just in case of anything. Please give it to Isaac too,” he says.

Stiles takes it, despite the oddity of it, but Parrish seems harmless so he doesn’t worry much.

Parrish stiffens suddenly and steps back just as Laura and Peter start up the walkway towards the house. He frowns and steps further back when they reach the top of the steps and eye him with amused smirks and wrinkled noses.

“Kyle,” Peter greets pleasantly. “Or is it Parrish? It’s hard to keep track of what you go by these days.”

“Parrish is fine.”

Peter gives an amiable nod, like he’s humoring the deputy. “Well, I didn’t know you were back in town.”


“Really?” Laura says with a vague hint of skepticism. “No other particular reason?”

Parrish almost glares but he doesn’t. “I guess something drew me back.”

"Or maybe," Peter lightly suggests. "Someone."  

"Well I really don't think it's any of your concern either way," Parrish replies and squares his shoulders and his jaw.

Peter just hums noncommittally. "Ah, yes. Try as I may to change that. Your affairs hasn't really been my concern for a long time. You were the one to make that clear."

"It's at least nice to see you again, Laura," Parrish says, addressing her instead.

Peter expression folds into something bitter.

Laura grins a little like there’s some inside joke here. "It's nice to see you too. I was always your favorite anyway, right?"

Parrish huffs.

Peter says, almost tauntingly, "Careful how you answer my niece. It'll hurt my feelings to know your affections lie elsewhere now, Parrish."

Parrish looks like he's grinding his teeth to keep himself from saying something rude.

Stiles has no idea what’s going on.

An awkward silence follows.

The air feels fused with tension and Stiles knows he’s missing something. Like always.

Parrish breaks his staring contest with Peter and looks back to Stiles, ignoring Peter completely. He says, with a soft (if not forced) smile, “I’ll see you later, Stiles. Be safe.” He nods politely at Laura.
Then he shoots Peter a less than friendly look before he jogs down the steps and towards his squad car.

Peter says, as he watches the deputy drive off, “You sure attract the most interesting company.”

Stiles gives him a look that gets ignored. “Well you two are here, so yeah, I guess that’s accurate.”

Laura snickers but she gets really quiet when she really takes a look at his face. She moves forward and presses her fingers the bruises around his mouth with an unhappy sound.

Peter’s eyes skirt to Laura at the noise before he looks at where her fingers are touching the marks at the corner of Stiles’s mouth and his own mouth dips into a frown. His hands twitches briefly and his voice is eerily calm when he says, “Invite us in, Stiles. I want to hear about what happened.”

Stiles has no chance to move out of the way because Laura ushers him into the house and towards the living room. She sits to his right on the big couch and presses the inside of his wrist to her abnormally warm lips. His cheeks go a little red at the affection and he fidgets while she slides her nose around the bruise like she’s looking for something.

“Vinegar,” Laura murmurs suddenly and lowers his hand to rest over her thighs as she cradles it in between her warm palms.

Stiles can’t help but to notice how long her fingers are when they cover his right hand completely.

Peter leans against the wall by the windows and peers out of them like he’s keeping look out.

Stiles tells them everything in the same way he told his dad, omitting a few details.

Peter frowns over at him when his account of the events end, like he knows Stiles is hiding something but he says, “What a shame that I didn’t get the privilege of tearing those ugly little bottom feeders to shreds. Imagine how delightful their carcasses would have made as confetti.”

Stiles winces at the imagery and says, “I’m okay, Peter. You don’t need to be — it’s fine.”

“It’s not,” Peter snarls, straightening with his anger and his eyes almost seem to glow with it (but that could just be a trick of lighting). He glares at Stiles’s bruises like it’s a personal offense to him. “I should have been there with you. You were almost —”

Stiles tenses up. He doesn’t like to think about that.

“Peter,” Laura says gently when she notices. She strokes a hand down Stiles's tense spine and the corner of her mouth twitches smugly when Stiles shivers and relaxes into it. “Just don’t, okay. I’m sure he knows. We all get it.”

Her voice seems to quell Peter and he grudgingly eases away the thunderous expression on his handsome face but his lips twist into a scowl. “They had those children locked in a disgusting cavern with a steel door. Covered in filth and starving. They might have eaten me if I gave them a chance.”

He walks back over to the windows and crosses his arms. “Those things deserved whatever they got,” he mutters quietly.

Stiles is a little taken aback by the sincerity in his tone. He’s starting to get what Kate meant way back when she said that Peter is good at playing at being bad when he’s really soft and gooey inside. Okay, maybe she didn’t say that *exactly* but Stiles is playing with the creative license on the interpretations.
Laura says, “You should tell mom about the Demon. She should know in case something needs to be proactively done.”

Peter hums noncommittally before he walks off and into the kitchen with his phone.

Stiles follows him with his eyes and listens as Peter talks to Talia, relaying the events in the same manner he had.

Laura pats him on his wrist with a gentle smile to grab his attention. She says, “You missed out on an eventful day of school.”

Stiles knows she’s trying to distract him, but he still says, “Oh yeah?”

“Kate got into it with Paige. There was a fight.”

Stiles blinks at that. “What? What happened?”

“You let Kate tell it and it was premeditated assault,” Laura explains with an eye roll. “Kate and Paige have always been into it though — they've always been dancing around each other. But this incident proved to be the last straw because the next thing I know is that Derek is pulling Paige off of Kate and yanking the lunch tray from her hands, which she was using to beat Kate’s face in.”

Peter growls abruptly from the kitchen before he turns his back to them and continues to speak quickly into the phone.

Laura just smirks at Peter's back before she shrugs at Stiles. “Uncle Peter has been pissed about the whole thing. But Kate was furious. She’s a bully, yeah, and we all know she’s a bitch. I don’t think any of us expected for Paige to lash out like that though, and even I don’t think Kate deserved how Paige did her. Not even speaking as her best friend. This is a totally unbiased opinion.”

“Oh man,” Stiles marvels. “How was — what did Kate say?”

Laura runs a hand through her hair, pulling her long bangs back from her face as she thinks. “How it happened was that Derek brought Paige over to sit with us at lunch. But she was being all stiff and weird. Cora didn’t say much to her. She just rolled her eyes and wandered off to the ballot stands. Side note, the voting for homecoming started today. Anyway, so then it was just me and Derek and Paige and Kate.” She starts chipping some nail polish off her thumb as her finely arched brows furrow with thought. She stands up and goes to the other side of the coffee table. “So I’m right here with Kate and Derek and Paige are sitting on the other side.”

Stiles nods and watches her act out the scene with slight amusement.

“I’m trying to be nice to the girl because I really didn’t want her to feel any type of way, but she was, you know, giving me the cold shoulder. She seemed like she had a really nasty attitude about something but I just decided to be nice. I said, ‘Hi, how are you?’ and she just kept frowning and mumbling. So again, I said, even louder, ‘Hi, Paige. How are you?’ just in case she didn't think I was talking to her. She looks at me like this.” Laura does a face with an expression that’s faintly disdainful. “Then she says, ‘Fine. Thank you.’ And she goes back to eating her salad — well she wasn’t even eating it, she’s just stabbing it over and over with her fork. But, you know, I can take a hint. In my head I’m thinking, just leave her alone, she obviously doesn’t want to be bothered, so leave her be and let Derek deal with it.

“Which, okay, clearly Derek is beyond the stage where he can make things right with this girl. They’ve been dating for two years and I never really paid attention to her because she’s always kind of standoffish. She’s an introvert, and that’s fine, but I can remember way back when she was just
starting to date Derek, I tried to talk to her and get to know her because she's dating my little brother but she kept brushing me off. I left her alone after that because I don’t bother with people who don’t want to be bothered with me, you know? But Cora told me that you told her that Paige came to you about how she was mad that you had dinner with us and spent the night, and that’s, wow, you know? Like grow up. She wants to be invited, but thing is, she can ask to come over at any time. She doesn’t need to make it seem like we’re the ones being dismissive. We may be really private but we’re not some snooty rich family that thinks everyone is beneath us. We’re just really careful about who we associate with and there’s nothing wrong with that.” Laura shakes her head. She sounds frustrated. “But so, back to the whole lunch fiasco — after I left her alone, that’s when Kate spoke up was like, ‘I don’t know why you bother talking to her when she’s got her cello up her ass’.”

Stiles snorts wryly and shakes his head because that is something that Kate would say.

Laura continues, “Then Paige mutters something so low that even I couldn’t hear, and Kate says, ‘Speak up, Princess Metalhead. You come over here and want to be rude to my best friend and mutter things under your breath like a scared little bitch’. Then Paige stands up and says, and listen, she enunciates every single vowel when she does it too, she says, ‘My name is Paige. You call me that one more time and you’re going to find something out.’ And then Kate’s like, ‘I don’t care what your name is. You keep up that nasty ass attitude and treat my best friend and her brother any kind of way, I’ll call you Asshole. Now how’s that?’ Well, I guess that was the last straw because that’s when Paige springs across the table with her tray and tackles Kate into the ground and Derek had to pull her off and I had to hold Kate back because she seemed just about ready to snap the girl’s neck.”

Stiles shakes his head in disbelief. He says, “Maybe Paige has got something deeper going on. Stress can make people, I don’t know, act out. Maybe there was something building up.”

Laura shrugs as she sits back down next to Stiles. “Honestly I never know what Paige’s deal is, but whatever. I’m willing, I guess, partially to give her the benefit of the doubt but she really needs to get it together. Because here is how I feel — if she has a problem with me or Derek or our family, at any point she can open her mouth and say something. It’s not about what you say but how you say it. I just think there’s always a better way to deal with things, you know?”

Stiles nods. “Did they get in trouble? What happened afterwards?”

“You mean after Kate screamed every swear word she knew?” Laura huffs dryly. “They got taken to the guidance office and from what Kate texted me, colorfully I might add, she and Paige have in-school suspension tomorrow and Monday.”


“Yup,” Laura agrees. “Derek’s been sulking like a wounded puppy that doesn’t know how to fix the problem. And honestly, I love my brother, he’s my heart, and it’s his life, but I can’t say that I’m in agreement with Paige’s behavior. It’s like you never really know a person until you see them when they’ve been pushed to their limits. I just — I don’t even know.” She sighs tiredly and uses her fingers to smooth out the wily hairs of her eyebrow.

Stiles gets that she really cares about Derek and wants him to be happy. That’s completely understandable. His relationship with Paige doesn’t sound very healthy. “I hear teenagers fall in love a whole bunch of times, and that each time feels like the end all, beat all,” he supposes thoughtfully. “Maybe Paige is it for him, who knows? Nobody’s perfect though. We’re teenagers. We’re going to do something stupid eventually, and Kate is no saint. Maybe she needed to learn that you can’t just say anything and everything to anyone without retaliation.”

Laura smiles at him fondly. “Listen to you, goober. Being all sensible and whatnot. Cora was ready
to trash Paige. But then again, Cora doesn’t really like people. She’s a cactus that way.” She shrugs the corners of her mouth. “Maybe I’ll pay Paige a little visit so I can really feel her out. This could be a really bad misunderstanding that’s gotten out of hand.”

Stiles nods with a shrug.

Peter returns just as he’s pocketing his phone. “I wouldn’t even spit on the ground she’s standing on, let alone feel her out,” he scoffs. “You do realize you’re wasting your time.” He gives her a significant look. "My nephew has a better option in front of him, which I have hinted towards countless times —"

Laura rolls her eyes and stands. “That’s for Derek to decide. Not you or anyone.”

"Yes, but you may find that I am a formidable matchmaker.” Peter smiles with a frightening amount of teeth.

Laura argues, "You can't make people fall in and out of love when it suits you.”

“Perhaps. But Derek’s always been a little slow on the uptake when it comes to matters of the heart. He takes things for granted,” Peter drawls as he flicks his gaze over to Stiles.

Stiles frowns. "What?"

"Oh nothing," Peter sighs in that dramatic way of his. “You’ll be attending homecoming, I hope.”


Stiles rolls his eyes.

Peter nods to Laura and indicates for her to follow him. “I plan on taking Kate. I’d like to see you there.”

Stiles snorts. “Tempting.”

Peter shoots him a flat look as he follows Laura out of the living room and towards the front door.

Stiles walks after them so he can lock the door.

Laura says, “Are you coming to school tomorrow?”

“I don’t really think so.” Stiles feels more than self-conscious about the bruises on his face. He doesn’t feel up to having to explain them to anybody or having everyone stare.

“Okay, well, not that I’m assuming that you agreed to come, but — my dress is purple. Something to consider if you wanted to coordinate.” Laura pats him on the cheek before she glides off.

Peter tugs his ear and smirks when Stiles swats at him like he’s a fly. “Stay out of trouble,” he implores before he moves across the porch, down the steps and out to the curb to climb into his car with Laura.

Stiles watches them drive off before he closes the door and locks it.
“Dude, they found Lydia!” Scott tells him later that night over Skype. Then he pauses, and says, “Your face! What happened?”

Stiles tells him everything because it’s Scott and he always tells Scott everything. Only this time, he doesn’t quite tell him everything. He keeps out the stuff about being a Virtue.


“Yeah,” Stiles agrees with a shrug. “Tell me about Lydia.”

“Oh, well.” Scott pauses to think. “They found her in an abandoned subway station covered in her parents’ dried blood. She’s — man, she’s not even okay. They had to take her to Eichen House once they cleared her of the charges. They’re saying that her parents’ death really messed her up.”

“What’s Eichen House?” Stiles asks.

“It’s a mental hospital,” Scott explains sadly. “It’s — dude, the worst people are in that place. Lydia shouldn’t be there.”

“Yeah,” Stiles says for the better lack of not having anything more to offer. “Maybe we could...visit?”

Scott makes a face. “I don’t know. That’s a bit — I mean I love Lydia but that place gives me the creeps. We could call her?”

Stiles says, “She doesn’t have anyone now. Do you — like, you get that, don’t you?”

Scott seems to take that into consideration.

“It doesn’t have to be just you and me, you know. We can go as a group with the others. Really show support. The last thing she needs is to be left alone,” Stiles reasons earnestly.

“Okay,” Scott says quietly with a look of guilt. “Malia and Liam are still in Mexico though, so it’ll be us and everyone else. Well, maybe not Erica. She’s — I don’t know. How’s Isaac? He didn’t come to school today.”

Stiles huffs and says, “I’m glad you brought that up. He’s fine, but, uh — what’s up with you and Allison? Are you — do you guys have crushes on him?”

Scott blushes very deeply and that just answers it all.


Scott’s cheeks get even redder. “We — we’ve been talking about it.”

“And?”

“And we’ve been talking about it,” Scott fusses as he fidgets in embarrassment. “But we both want — uh...”

Stiles makes a face because he can pretty much guess where that sentence is going. “Aw, man. Am I going to have to chaperone Isaac from now on when you guys are around? This is bordering dangerously on polygamy.”

Scott scrubs at his flushed face. “You think I understand it? I’m thirteen, dude! My hormones are super confusing at this point.”
Stiles snickers.

“What about you? Why are you so — you like never seem, I don’t know. Do you have anybody you like?” Scott asks as the color recedes from his cheeks. “You never say much of anything about that.”

Stiles thinks about it before he says, “I think girls are attractive. I think guys are attractive. But I don’t — the gender doesn’t really phase me, I guess. Plus I have a whole bunch going on that I don’t really stop and think about how I haven’t even had my first kiss yet. It just doesn’t seem important right now.”

“Oh,” Scott says. “Well, it’s all cool. Maybe you need to like find that person that makes you want to think about those things.”

Stiles shrugs again.

“So Danny’s put me on to this swimming anime. I thought it was weird at first but then I really started to get into it. Anyway, you should totally check it out.”

Stiles listens to Scott ramble about something called *Free!* until it’s time for bed. They make plans to go to Eichen House on Saturday before they disconnect.

He grabs Derek’s wolves on the way to bed and he curls around them until he drifts off.

He jerks awake some hours later, gasping wetly for air, covered in sweat and shaking as he blinks through his tears.

Isaac is standing at his bedside with a look of concern before he wanders off.

Stiles’s teeth are chattering by the time Isaac returns with a warm cup of milk.

Isaac touches his hand to Stiles’s shoulder, very gently, almost like he’s afraid that Stiles will fall apart under his hand, before he pulls away and steps back. He runs a hand through his curls, looking a little at a lost and like he doesn’t know what to do but he’s trying to help.

Stiles exhales and quietly says, “I’m okay. Thank you.”

Isaac stares at him for a long time. Then he reaches out slowly and pokes the tip of Stiles’s nose with a curious frown as though he’s testing some odd theory.

Stiles huffs and swats his hand away.

The corner of Isaac's mouth kicks up a little before he settles into a concerned frown again.

“T’m okay, Isaac. I didn’t mean to wake you.” Stiles sniffs and scrubs his arm across his face to dry his eyes and cheeks.

Isaac fidgets.

“I — was I screaming?” Stiles asks, and he winces when Isaac nods. “Is my dad home?”

Isaac shakes his head no.

Stiles sighs and leans back against his headboard, suddenly weary. “Go back to bed. I’ll be fine. The milk will help.”

Isaac, for once, looks like he wants to say something. But all he does is look at Stiles like he has
nothing to give but he wishes he did. He clenches his hands before relaxing them. He straightens little by little, drawing attention to the fact that he’s always hunching, and he smiles softly at Stiles. Then he quickly turns and exits the room, closing the door behind him.

Stiles is left alone, sitting unblinkingly in the darkness of his room with the cup of warm milk in his shaking hands.

He’s dreaming about his mother again.

That hasn’t happened in years.

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Friday is much the same as Thursday.

Stiles doesn’t go to school and Isaac stays behind to keep him company. He spends most of the day falling in and out of sleep because he’s emotionally exhausted. He doesn’t dream about his mother anymore, but the damage has already been done. Seeing her, even subconsciously, had been like a punch to the gut.

Isaac doesn’t leave his side much. He’s not like right there but he’s within reaching distance. Mainly he’ll lounge on Stiles’s dark blue beanbag chair by the window and play on Stiles’s tablet or read anything from Stiles’s modest little library. He keeps bringing Stiles food too, which is sweet, but Stiles doesn’t feel much like eating.

He’s sad.

He wouldn’t dare say depressed because that would be harder to navigate. He’s swimming in his thoughts and he doesn’t really have the heart to leave bed for half of the day. He keeps quiet and he broods. He answers his phone when his dad calls to check up on them, but outside of that, he doesn’t do much. He watches the sun paint shadows across his room as Isaac turns pages quietly on the other side of the bed behind him.

He manages to convince himself to take a shower when Isaac leaves him alone to go and make a mid-day snack. It’s three in the afternoon when Stiles steps out of the shower and takes his Adderall. He climbs into some clothes and walks down the steps, pausing when the doorbell rings.

It’s a great surprise when it’s Cora standing on the other side with her usual soft frown. She glances at his mouth and her frown deepens but she picks her gaze up and looks him in the eyes. “I got your homework. Didn’t know how long you would be out for,” she says and brushes past him without waiting to be invited in.

Stiles closes the door and follows her into the living room where she dumps all his homework assignment and books on the small coffee table. “Wait a minute — how did you get — most of these were in my locker.”

"Everyone's locker combination is their birthday."

"Ah," Stiles says weakly because that's true.

Cora flashes him a razor sharp smile before she pulls out her own homework in a neater manner. “Mr. Harris wants everyone to do a paper about something. He says that everyone who earns an ‘A’ gets to take the trip out to Chicago for a walk-through of the Evolving Planet exhibit at the Field Museum. There’s no way I’m talking to any of those other idiots in our class, so you better get a good grade on your paper.”
Stiles grabs his AP English book and his homework as he settles down on the floor beside Cora. “Is that your way of saying that you’d rather go with me or not at all? Because if so, then I want you to know that I’m flattered and —”

Cora glares at the inside of her AP French book and says, “Take it however. You’re less annoying than most people, dumbass.”


Cora rolls her eyes. She says, “What are you going to do your paper about?”

“I don’t know. I can’t think of anything off the top of my head,” Stiles admits. “What are you doing?”


“Geez, that’s not intimidating at all,” Stiles mutters, impressed.

Cora just shrugs and starts in on her homework.

Isaac sets a plate of cookies on the coffee table and two glasses of milk. Despite his polite consideration of their house guest, he still wrinkles his nose at Cora, and Cora responds in kind by ignoring him like he’s not even there. Isaac wanders off to his room, as Cora eats the cookies with a low satisfied sound, and chases it down with the milk.

Stiles is midway through his AP English homework (fingers sticky with cookie grease and chocolate) when the doorbell rings again. “Now who is that?” he wonders as he slides everything onto the floor before he goes to answer the door.

It’s Allison and Scott.

Stiles rolls his eyes. “I’m not even going to pretend that you’re here to see me.” He turns and shouts, “Isaac! You’ve got company!”

Isaac eventually joins them at the door.

“We brought you your homework,” Allison says and lifts the stack eagerly.

“Since you missed,” Scott adds, unnecessarily.

“Since you missed,” Scott adds, unnecessarily.

Stiles rolls his eyes again before he just leaves them to it and returns to the living room.

Cora catches him up on everything he’s missed in all of their shared classes with a patience he didn’t even know she had. She even stays for dinner, even though she eats almost half of the cheesy green bean casserole he makes while also ignoring Allison and Scott (who stay for dinner too). She packs up her things and leaves without so much as a goodbye.

Isaac silently walks Allison and Scott out when they ask him to, and they preen happily when he does, like two kids who are given the keys to a candy store. They hardly noticed the bruises on Stiles’s body (too busy going ga-ga over Isaac).

Stiles cleans up the kitchen before he goes to pack up his homework and put it away. He carries it all up to his room and dumps it on his bedroom floor by his desk.

He pulls out the bulletin/whiteboard combo hiding away in his closet and he sets to work with dismantling everything on it.
By the end of the night, he’s thirty pages deep into a Google search on looking up everything having to do with Virtues.

He finds nothing.

Just as he’s slipping into bed, Laura texts him pictures from the homecoming dance, mostly of her wearing a gleaming plastic crown and a triumphant smile.

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Sometime around midnight, when Stiles is lying facedown on the middle of his bed with his copy of the *Maze Runner*, he gets a random text from Peter that reads:

**What do you know about Mermaids? :))**

*What.*

**Mermaids. :))**

**What do you know about them? :))**

*Do you have a mermaid?*

**Maybe. :))**

*How.*

**How do you have a mermaid?**

*I said maybe. :))**

**Maybe I have a mermaid. :))**

**That depends on you though. :))**

*What does that even mean???

(*‿*✿)

**Peter.**

*Do you have a mermaid?*

(*‿*✿)

**What’s going on?**

(*‿*✿)

**Stop replying with that face.**

(*‿*✿)

!!!!

(*‿*✿)
Oh my god. I’m ignoring you now.

( ⊙ _ ⊙ )

Stiles doesn’t reply, but he grabs his tablet from off of the floor and starts researching Mermaids.

He sends everything he finds useful to Peter before he falls into a restless sleep.

He has nightmares about Hellhounds and naked Demons dancing around a orange tinted fire that reeks of vinegar and oil.

They don’t stop running on a loop in his mind until he cuddles around Derek’s wolves; the smell of vanilla and jasmine soothes the anxious spaces of his mind into a dull roar.

He ignores the implications. He just wants to sleep peacefully. That’s all.

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Eichen House looks like one of those places you’d see in horror movies or read about in mystery/thriller novels.

It’s late in the morning on a Saturday when Stiles rolls up to the foreboding black iron gates with Boyd, Scott, Jackson, Danny, and Allison. They all fidget on their mountain bikes as they stare over at the intimidating structure of the gloomy hospital with apprehension.

The sky is grey, and subdued. It’s really like poetry. Sad, sad poetry.

None of them comment on Stiles’s bruises, which he figures must have something to do with Scott, who can sometimes be very mindful of Stiles in ways that matter the most.

“We should head inside,” Allison says, breaking the angst-ridden silence. “We’re not much use to Lydia hanging outside the gates like scared kids.” She climbs off her bike and pushes the gates open before she walks her bike up the walkway to the steps.

After they all lock their bikes, they enter the building and walk over to the reception area where a blue-haired nurse in pink scrubs is sitting with her feet propped on the desk as she files her nails.

Allison approaches her and says, “Hi, we’re here to see Lydia Martin.”

The woman behind the desk goes on filing her nails for a long moment like she didn’t even hear Allison. Then, she glances up slowly and looks at them all with an assessing stare. “How old are you?”

“Old enough,” Jackson retorts, impatiently.

The woman sighs and cracks open a binder as she indicates to the sign-in book. “Sign in,” she says as she picks up the desk phone and dials an extension.

Stiles is the first to sign-in and he frowns at the name that comes before his. It reads: Ines Reyes. He puts the name in the back of his mind to dwell on later because Jackson is herding him out of the way so he can sign-in next.

At the sound of clicking heels, Stiles turns to see Ms. Morrell approach them with a thin smile. She says, “You’re here to see Ms. Martin. The visit will have to be short. She’s still getting used to being here. Refrain from bringing up anything triggering. It goes without saying that the subject of her parents is off-limits. If you upset her, you’ll have to leave, and I’ll ask that you schedule your next
visit with your parents chaperoning. Understood?" She waits for them to nod before she goes on to say, “Follow me.”

Stiles sticks close to Danny as they make their way down the halls and to the stairwell.

There are patients walking around everywhere, most of them in a daze, while others are hyperactively aware.

Lydia’s room is located on the fourth floor at the end of the hall.

Ms. Morrell opens the door and says, “Lydia. You have company.”

Stiles follows the others into the small room and is just as startled as they are at the sight of all the drawings covering every inch of the walls. They’re sketches of trees, rivers, stones, and mythical creatures darkened and detailed with black charcoal.

Lydia is sitting at the desk facing the wall with the barred window above. She’s wearing a mint green floral dress with white flats and a black birdcage funeral veil hat pinned to her hair, which is fishtailed and lying over her shoulder. She’s got a large sketching pad laid out on the desk and she’s drawing a blackened rabbit hole in large and noisy circles. She’s singing softly in Gaelic.

It tugs at Stiles’s heart, the song, and it makes his chest feel heavy and full of something unnamable.

Ms. Morrell says, “You have an hour.” She leaves.

Danny and Boyd sit on Lydia’s neatly made bed as they glance around at all of Lydia’s sketches.

Scott sticks close to Stiles as they watch Jackson and Allison approach Lydia.

Allison says, “Hey, Lydia. How are you?”

Lydia keeps singing softly as her right hand moves around and around and around, the stick of black charcoal is scraping loudly against the paper almost ominously.

“Lydia,” Jackson says, leaning forward in an attempt to get her attention. “Lydia.”

Lydia doesn’t respond. It’s like none of them are even there.

“Jackson,” Danny says. “Just — talk to her. Not like you want her attention, but try — just talk to her. Like we used to when she was — you know.”

“What about?” Jackson asks with an uncertain frown.

“So anything,” Danny suggests.

Boyd says, “Insects. Random, but a safe subject, I think. We can talk about that.”

Allison touches her hand to Lydia’s right shoulder

Lydia stiffens and stops singing.

Allison yanks her hand away with an apology and says, “Lydia, did you know that night butterflies have ears on their wings so they can avoid bats?”

“Did you know a slug has four noses?” Boyd reports.
Danny says, “The heaviest insect in the world weighs 2.5 ounces.”

Lydia goes back to singing and drawing.

Scott says, “There are worms in Australia that are over four feet long. That’s — kind of gross actually.”

Stiles snorts and says, “Lydia, you should know that the desert locust is the world’s most destructive insect. It can eat its own weight in food every day. Large swarms can gobble up to 20,000 tons of grain and plants in a day.”

Jackson says, “The earliest fossil cockroach is about 280 million years old. 80 million years older than the first dinosaurs.”

Everyone looks at him in surprise.


“You read?” Boyd teases and grins (unrepentant) when Jackson punches him in the arm.

Danny gives a dimpled grin as Allison hides her smile behind her hand.

Scott leans against Stiles as they watch Boyd trap Jackson in a headlock.

For a brief moment, everything feels normal.

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Ms. Morrell, true to her word, comes to collect them at the end of the hour.

Stiles pulls Scott aside as the others file out and says, “Distract her for a moment. I need a little time with Lydia.”

Scott looks unsure. “I don’t know, Stiles. Do you think that’s a good idea? She didn’t even — she’s been singing the whole time we’ve been here. How do you know that she’ll even answer?”

“I don’t. But I have to believe maybe she might,” Stiles admits. “There’s still someone out there hacking people to bits and leaving threatening messages on my doorstep for my dad.”

Scott nods solemnly. He squeezes Stiles’s arm with a reassuring smile before he catches Ms. Morrell by the wrist and says, “If I hear someone calling my name and no one is calling my name, does that make me certifiably insane?” He pulls her away and out of sight as if he wants privacy.

Stiles waits a moment before he walks over to Lydia. She’s still singing and she draws in large circles against her sketching pad. He says, “Lydia. I know you — that this is the last thing you want to think about or talk about, and please don’t think I’m being insensitive, even though I am kind of being insensitive, but — do you remember who killed your parents?”

Lydia’s hand stops abruptly. She goes morbidly silent. She trembles as she lifts her head slowly and looks over at him with watery green eyes and a shaky bottom lip. “Cousin, cousin, you’re so sweet,” she whispers. “Miss you dearly, we should meet.”

“What?” Stiles rolls the words around in his mind in confusion.

“Cousin, cousin, you’re so sweet,” Lydia repeats softly, like a repetition. “Miss you dearly, we should meet.”
“Lydia, what does — what are you —” Stiles watches as she slowly rises out of her seat and walks towards him like she’s has no control over her motor functions.

“Cousin, cousin, you're so sweet,” Lydia says again, louder this time. “Miss you dearly, we should meet.” Her voice gets even louder. “Cousin, cousin, you're so sweet.” She’s panting now, looking at him with horror-stricken eyes. “Miss you dearly, we should meet.”

Stiles feels a sudden charge in the room, and a draft makes the papers lining the walls flutter like a heartbeat. They rustle as if a window has been left open.

“Cousin, cousin, you're so sweet!” Lydia screams as she begins to hit at his chest with her fists. “Miss you dearly, we should meet!”

Stiles falls back on her bed as she continues to hit at him. “Lydia! Lydia! Stop!”

Lydia screams and screams and the papers go flying, swept up in a funnel of wind as though the room is being hit by a hurricane.

Ms. Morrell runs in with two male nurses and they pull Lydia off of Stiles as she screams and screams.

Danny, Jackson, Scott, Boyd, and Allison all watch from the doorway with frightened and confused eyes.

“Sedate her!” Ms. Morrell yells over the howl of Lydia’s shrieks and the roar of the wind.

One of the male nurses jabs her in the neck with a needle.

Lydia stops wailing and slowly goes limp in the man’s arms as tears trail down her red cheeks. She looks at Stiles with dazed eyes and mumbles, “Cousin, cousin, you're so sweet. Miss you dearly, we should meet.” She’s out like a light in the next second.

Stiles stares, baffled, and Ms. Morrell grabs him by the arm and drags him out. She says, “I was very specific about you not upsetting her. You’re done here. None of you come back unless you have an approved appointment and a guardian.” She glares at Stiles first before she even turns her furious gaze on the rest of them and storms off.

They all watch her disappear back into Lydia’s room, closing the door soundly behind her.

Jackson shoves Stiles. “Thanks a lot, Stilinski. Just what the hell were you doing?”

Danny holds him back but he waits for Stiles to answer.

“I’m sorry — I didn’t mean for — I’m sorry,” Stiles stammers.

Jackson shakes his head and storms off.

Boyd and Danny rush after him.

Allison opens her mouth like she wants to say something but then she closes her mouth with a disappointed sigh and walks off.

Stiles scrubs his face tiredly as he curses under his breath.

Scott is staring at him with this odd look on his face.
“What?”

Scott says, “You’re bleeding.”

Stiles frowns and touches his face.

“No,” Scott says. “Your ears, dude. Your ears.”

Stiles reaches up and touches his fingers to his right ear before he pulls his hand away to see his two middle fingers stained with blood.

---

Later that day, after Stiles has cleaned the blood from his ears and from the sides of his jaw, he dives into his books for some answers.

He comes to it by the time his dad and Isaac return home from the batting cages because baseball is a thing that his dad and Isaac both enjoy.

It’s in his mother’s encyclopedia of mythical creatures: the Wailing Woman.

Lydia is a Banshee. A Fairy. A Messenger of Death.

Stiles keeps reading and reading and he’s struck by the fact that Banshees usually sing when someone has died, or wails when someone is about to die.

Lydia had done both today.

She had done both.

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Paige doesn’t show up for their tutoring session on Sunday.
When Paige doesn’t show up for their tutoring session on Sunday, Stiles tries not to think too much about it as he sits by himself in their usual spot at the library. He traces his eyes over the white walls as he tries to think about his next move. She could be sick or wrapped up in a family emergency. It would explain why she’s not returning his calls or his texts. He doesn’t have her address so he can’t just go to her house to check up on her or anything.

But he does have Derek’s number.

Stiles pulls out his phone and scrolls through his contacts before he comes to Derek’s name. He tries calling the other teen a couple of times but it always goes straight to voicemail. So he winds up shooting Derek a few texts before he pockets his phone and starts making his way out of the library. He goes to his bike and unlocks it before he mounts it without giving any particular thought to his next move.

The sun is burning brightly in the sky as puffy clouds sail across the yellow orb like cotton thick ships on a blue sea. He doesn’t want to go home because the house would be empty. His dad is out fishing with some friends and Isaac is at therapy (something to do with mindfulness or yoga) and it’s detrimental to his recovery.

The rest of Stiles’s day is wide open. So he peddles lazily around town before he finds himself outside of the antique shop again. He locks up his bike and pushes through the door with the bell ringing predictably over his head.

This time around, Deaton is sitting on a tall wooden stool at the back of the store behind the glass counter display. He’s got some reading glasses on and he’s got a thick text book in one hand as he uses his other hand to underline passages with a purple highlighter. He says, without even lifting his gaze, “Mr. Stilinski. Back so soon. How may I help you?”

Stiles approaches the glass counter display and leans against it as he drums his fingers on the surface. “I’m actually — I was wondering, since you seem to have a modest collection, if you had books on rare and old subjects.”

“That depends,” Deaton says as he highlights another passage. “What’s the genre you’re looking for?”

“Mythology, mainly,” Stiles hedges. “You know, like — Virtues?”

Deaton pauses at that before he glances at Stiles with an assessing look.

Stiles tries not to fidget.

Deaton snaps his book shut and tugs off his glasses. “That’s a rare subject, indeed.”

“But you know about — I mean, you’ve heard of it, them,” Stiles reasons.

“In some circles,” Deaton confirms vaguely. “Very few of them, however.” He sets his book down and puts his glasses back on before sticking his highlighter behind his ear. “Follow me,” he says as he walks over to the rows of standing bookshelves. He goes down the fourth aisle and stops midway, hunching down to tug a book free from the bottom.

Stiles accepts the book when Deaton hands it to him. It’s not exactly a book, per say — it’s more like
a thick leather-bound journal. There’s a sigil on the cover. He runs his fingers over the grooves.
“What’s this?” he asks.

Deaton says, “It’s a triquetra, I believe. I’ve heard some say that it was a very important symbol to Virtues. That they would use it to remind themselves of what they stood for. Usually it would be three things related to their field.”

“Field?” Stiles frowns and follows Deaton to the glass counter display. “What does — what field?”

“As you’re probably aware, there are what’s called the Seven Heavenly Virtues: Chastity, Temperance, Charity, Diligence, Patience, Kindness, and Humility. In the Hierarchy of what’s to be known as the Upper Heavens, they rank at number five, right between Dominions and Powers.”

Stiles silently echoes those names, a twinge of familiarity twisting in his gut.

"Now, these Virtues were believed to have been personified into physical form when all knowledge was available to both Man and Creature,” Deaton says. “This is during a time when all was known and nothing was hidden. There was a communion between Nature and Man and Creature and the Cosmos. It’s believed that Virtues paved the way so that the world could be in unity. They acted as equalizers, and as wells of knowledge, or envoys. They kept everything in balance in order to maintain the harmony. Now since seven is considered the number of completion, the Virtues split themselves accordingly, and depending on the matter at hand, two rivaling parties with an issue could go to the Virtue of Temperance. Or say a young Human woman who wanted to court a Goblin for whatever reason but knew nothing of the culture or how to do so, would then go to the Virtue of Chastity. And so on and so forth. Understand?”

Stiles nods as he rolls the information around in his mind.

“The story goes,” Deaton goes on to say. “That when a Virtue reached their sixteenth birthday, or for others it would be the nineteenth, depending on the progression of their abilities, they would choose a specific field. Say one would choose the path of both patience and charity — defining themselves as a Two — they would use the triquetra as a sort of guidance. An aid. A reminder. This reminder would be comprised of three things from those fields. So if one were to take on the path of diligence they would recite to themselves —” Deaton points to the top of the triquetra and says, “Persistence.” Then he points to the second corner on the left and says, “Integrity.” Then he brings his fingers over to the last corner and says, “Ethics.”

“Persistence, integrity, ethics,” Stiles repeats as he studies the triquetra. “Sounds like a mantra.”

“It often would be in the face of a great adversity,” Deaton says. “There are some who believe that if a Virtue did not remind themselves of what they stood for, then they would fall prey to demise and become a Vice.”

“Vice? You mean like the opposite of Virtues,” Stiles reasons. “Seven Deadly Sins.”

“Exactly,” Deaton says. He taps the journal. “This isn’t an encyclopedia. You won’t find blueprints or maps. Only detailed accounts recorded by the Virtue who experienced them. Think of it as a nonfiction short-story anthology in prose form.”

Stiles lifts his eyebrows and starts fishing for his wallet. “How much do I owe you?”

“Nothing,” Deaton says, surprisingly. “Think of it as a gift. I don’t get many visitors, and I have a feeling you’ll make more use of this than anyone who would gladly pay a quarter of a million for it.”

Stiles is speechless for a moment but then he says, “Thank you. I — thanks.”
Deaton merely nods. “You have a good day. And again, feel free to stop by anytime.” He disappears into the back with his book.

Stiles tucks the journal under his arm and exits the shop as he firmly places Deaton on his ‘Cryptic and Mysterious’ list. Given the reputation of this town, that list is probably only going to keep growing and growing.

He doesn’t go home still. He peddles out to the park and sits at a picnic table as the screaming laughter of children ring off in the distance from where they’re playing on the swings and the merry-go-round and the jungle gym. He begins to flip through the journal. Some of the entries are in Middle English, but the majority of them are in Biblical Hebrew, Aramaic, Latin, Ancient Egyptian, Old Norse and Ancient Greek.

Stiles mostly sticks to the ones which are in Middle English because it’s kind of like reading Shakespeare. He keeps his phone in view in case Derek or Paige texts or calls him.

They don’t.

He ends up losing track of time, realizing that the streetlights are going to come on when it gets too dark to read. He climbs his bike and peddles home to see his dad deep-frying fish with Isaac. He rolls his eyes and lets it slide because he has no choice. He still makes a salad though. He vetoes any salad dressing since most of their food has been deep-fried.

When they sit down to eat, Stiles asks his dad if there have been any reported deaths and his dad lifts a brow at the morbid question but replies with a no. It should be comforting but it just distracts him all throughout dinner.

They end the night in the living room with Isaac curled up in his favorite armchair, his dad in his recliner and Stiles spread out on the big couch as they all watch What’s Eating Gilbert Grape. His dad falls asleep midway through, snoring softly as his chin dips towards the badge on his chest. Stiles barely notices because he’s too busy swallowing back tears. He didn’t realize this movie would be so triggering to his own personal issues of death and family.

Isaac is — he’s quiet. But it’s not his usual air of silence. It’s a meaningful and weighty.

Stiles scrubs at his face with the end of his shirt as the credits roll onto the screen, and when he drops the hem he notices that Isaac is gone. He sighs and shuts everything off before he guides his sleepy father up the stairs and to his room. He takes his time tucking his old man into bed, huffing in fond amusement when his dad reaches out sleepily to knock a loose fist into Stiles’s chin with affection, murmuring about how Stiles is such a good kid. Stiles smiles and slips out of his dad’s room quietly, closing the door behind him with a quiet click. He stops by Isaac’s room and watches the preteen scribble away in his journal with a severe frown and shaky hands.

Stiles thinks about asking if he’s okay, or saying something really profound. He thinks about turning this second into a Hallmark Moment, or something like a serious scene on Full House or Boy Meets World, but he notices the way Isaac is holding himself so tightly and gnawing on his bottom lip like he wants to bite it off and Stiles thinks better of it. He walks away and hangs out in his room for a while. He doesn’t do anything significant. He stashes the journal of Virtues in his underwear drawer like some kind of nudie magazine before he sits at his computer and surfs the web for shoes, comics, games, and more books with the subjectivity of the supernatural while he listens to some alternative songs from his music library.
Isaac comes to his room around midnight. He stands awkwardly in the doorway looking like he feels misplaced, fidgeting with words unsaid.

Stiles closes his laptop and says, “You want to go outside and jump on the trampoline? I feel like breathing.”

Isaac furrows his brows at that but there’s a hint of a smile on his lips.

They quietly edge out of the house and into the backyard.

Stiles lets Isaac climb into the trampoline before he follows. He builds up his momentum as he stares at the (now empty) house next door.

Isaac does a few lazily flips before he just goes back to jumping.

There are fireflies everywhere and Stiles tries to catch some. He manages to trap one between his hands and he lets it crawl up his palm before pausing, spreading its wings and flying off to join its kind in the air again.

They jump and jump, the springs squeaking with their weight as the cool night air presses against their skin like a damp veil.

Stiles is panting when he says, “I get panic attacks sometimes.” Then he adds, even though Isaac doesn’t ask, “It’s like clamping your fingers over your nose and trying to breathe through a coffee straw.”

Isaac stops jumping.

Stiles stops too.

They look at each other.

Stiles says, “I don’t mind that you never talk to me. Communicating with you feels very valuable that way. Like I would never take for granted anything you said when you do say something.”

Isaac picks at his pajama bottoms as he looks at Stiles’s collarbone. He opens his mouth and exhales before he lifts his gaze to look Stiles in the eyes. He keeps breathing, in and out, in and out. Then he starts jumping again, his shoulders bowed in a relaxed line, his spine straighter.

Stiles smiles softly and starts jumping with him.

The crickets make a crescendo of sound in the trees and in the bushes. The fireflies fly and land and fly again, glowing and glowing like reachable stars.

Stiles pays attention to how clammy Isaac’s hand is when Isaac grabs his in a tight grip like he’s afraid that either of them will jump too high and somehow float up and out into space. He gives Isaac’s hand a comforting squeeze back and they look away from each other and up into the stars.

This is the moment when Stiles begins to think of Isaac like a brother.

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Monday finds Stiles at his locker with Cora, who hassles him about the subjectivity of his paper for the AP Biology class until Stiles begs off the conversation.

Cora rolls her eyes and shoves a pack of blue twizzlers at his chest before she stalks off in a huff.
He doesn’t get a chance to thank her for the random act of kindness, and he sniffs at the candy after he opens it before he decides that it’s safe to eat.

He gnaws on the candy vines all through first period as Mr. Harris lectures over a PowerPoint presentation about the connection between mosquitos, DNA, and the transmission of disease.

A blue twizzler hangs from his lips as he draws triquetras in the margins of his study guide. His fingers are sticky and he’s pretty sure his tongue and lips are stained with blue.

On the other side of the room, Cora looks no better off with her grape vines.

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Cora shadows him in the halls between their next two shared classes and Stiles doesn’t figure out why until he sees some sophomore girl staring at the bruises on his mouth. She walks towards him like she’s going to ask, but she freezes midway with wide-eyes and turns to walk in the opposite direction. When Stiles turns his head to question Cora about it, she’s got a vicious glare on her face still aimed at the girl.

That totally explains why it felt like everyone has been willfully ignoring his bruises for most of the day. Suddenly Cora has become a lot less intimidating — well, no, she’s still intimidating but like a fraction less.

Stiles says, “I appreciate the efforts on your part but you don’t have to do that. It’s sweet, but unnecessary.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking,” Cora denies as she tampers her glare into something more indifferent.

“So you haven’t been shooting everyone your patented ‘stare of doom’ when they look at me or look like they want to ask what happened to me?” Stiles questions.

Cora grits her teeth and says, “Hurry up, we’ll be late for class.”

“See that? That right there is avoidance and I would like to be informed of when our relationship goes through these big changes. So are we best friends now? Should I go to the jewelers and put in a request for a BFF charm bracelet?” Stiles teases as Cora scowls and herds him to their AP History class with warm insistent hands. She’s strong and they reach the classroom in no time. When they get to the doorway, he says, “Are we in the experimental phase yet? Has our bond reached the awkward bad touch stage? Seriously, do you want to make out a little? Just to see how it feels.”

“No, I want to rip your throat out with my teeth, dumbass,” Cora growls.

“Well, sure. I mean, if you’re into it. Whatever turns you on. I'll need to be persuaded though.”

Cora sighs and stalks to her desk.

Stiles grins and does a heart symbol at her all through class whenever she looks across the room at him.

When the teacher turns away to write something across the whiteboard, Cora lobs an eraser at him and it smacks him in the left ear.

He throws it back and ends up hitting the guy that sits behind her instead because his aim sucks.
Cora snorts and quickly ducks her head as Stiles does the same.

The guy glares at them both until the bell rings.

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Lunch goes without incident. Stiles sits across from Laura and Cora as he chows down on turkey club sandwich with some curly fries. He glances around, actively seeking out Paige until he remembers that she’d be in in-school suspension.

He sighs very quietly.

Cora and Laura still pause their conversation to look at him questioningly like that sigh couldn’t be any more loud and clear.

Stiles smiles sheepishly and says, “Where’s Derek? I need to ask him something about Paige.”

“I don’t think that would be a good idea,” Laura says, delicately.


Cora stares at him in alarm. “No one. Calm down.” Then she mutters, “Though with the way Derek’s been acting all weekend you can hardly tell.”

“What happened? Is — where’s Derek?”

“At home,” Laura states as vaguely as possible.

“Sulking,” Cora adds because she’s not as subtle. “He reeks of depression.”

“Why would he — oh. Oh no.” It clicks. “Did they break up?”

Laura just shakes her head sadly. “If only it were that simple,” she says.

“That she-devil ran off to Vegas with some nobody and eloped,” Cora reports abruptly as she stabs at her salad like she wishes it were Paige’s face instead. “Two years and she marries some rando she probably met online. I hope she chokes on his dick while they’re still on their honeymoon.”

Stiles splutters and nearly bites his own tongue in surprise. “She eloped?” he croaks. He looks to Laura for confirmation and when she shrugs her mouth, he knows. “When did you find out?”

“When she sent Derek a text that said she wouldn’t be joining him at homecoming while he was already there and waiting for her.” Laura straightens with her anger and she holds herself very tightly, like she’s got something inside her she’s trying to keep in. She tucks her long bangs behind her ears as her mouth wrinkles unhappily.

Stiles finds himself echoing the frown as he thinks about what Laura says. He thinks about Derek standing in a tricked out gymnasium, his back to the folded bleachers but never really touching. His
handsome face washed with the colors of the disco ball as he watches the other couples press their bodies against each other to a slow song on the dance floor.

It makes Stiles sad.

Laura continues, “Then, like a true kick in the balls, she follows that text with a picture of her sitting in the guy’s lap with the marriage certificate, flashing her ring finger with a smile on her face like she won the lotto,” Laura says as she takes slow sips of her red slushie.

“How did she seem, I — how was she?” Stiles asks, because he’s stupid enough to ask. He’s trying to understand this. It all seems so — it’s beyond him.

“She looked drunk and bitter,” Laura quietly replies. She makes a disgruntled sound and says, “I literally took the girl out for lunch to get to know her a day before she ran off. She sat there and she played me, talking about how she wanted to spend the rest of her life — nope. Nope.” She stands suddenly and walks off.

Stiles watches her disappear into the school with some concern. He fishes his phone out of his pocket and shoots Derek a quick text that reads: I’m sorry about Paige. I didn’t know. Sorry.

Derek doesn’t reply. That’s no surprise. It’s understandable if anything. They’re not even friends. Why would he reply?

Cora stabs at her salad like she never plans on stopping.

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The last thing Stiles expects when he goes to pick Isaac up from school is the black eye and the split lip. He almost twists his ankle in his haste to get to the preteen, who is sitting on the curb between Boyd and Jackson. He says, “What happened?”

Isaac doesn’t look at him. His gaze is locked on the laces of his shoes as his hands lay limply over his thighs. He’s got bloody knuckles.

Stiles is so angry that it feels like he’s going to crawl out of his skin. “What happened?” he snaps, but not at Isaac. He’s looking at Boyd and Jackson.

“Some stupid eighth graders tried to jump him in the locker room because the brother of one of the douchebags died from an overdose from the bad batch of drugs that Isaac’s dad sold to him,” Jackson says without even blinking.

Isaac tenses up even more.

Boyd shoots Jackson a look when he notices.

“What? That’s what the kid kept screaming as he and his stupid dick friends tried to stomp him to death,” Jackson says defensively.

Stiles swallows and swallows but nothing makes the burn of rage go away. He exhales and says, “Did he — was Isaac fighting back? Is he suspended?”

Boyd shakes his head. “It happened a few minutes ago. Scott and Danny jumped in when they found them and pulled them all off while Allison ran to get a teacher. They don’t blame him. The guys are going to be expelled, I heard.”
“He wasn’t even making a sound,” Jackson adds. “Isaac didn’t even fight back. He just — he let them.”

“But —” Stiles makes a silent gesture to Isaac’s bloody knuckles.

Boyd says, “He went off on a few lockers. Ms. Morrell had to calm him down. He wouldn’t stop punching them.”

Stiles presses a hand to his mouth and shakes his head as a sharp image of that makes its way into his head. He’s so — he’s so angry he can’t even think. It’s not even Isaac’s fault. The things that Isaac’s family did — it’s not even his fault.

It’s no surprise at all when his dad pulls up in his cruiser and sprints out the car.

Boyd and Jackson move out of the way as the sheriff drops to a knee and speaks quietly.

Isaac keeps shaking his head at whatever his dad is saying to him.

His dad finally stands and squares his shoulders, looking as furious as Stiles feels when six boys are escorted out of the school by some of his dad’s deputies. “I’m pressing charges. You hear me? This is unacceptable!” he shouts over to them.

Isaac shrinks at the volume of the sheriff’s voice.

His dad glares at the other boys until they’re herded into the back of the police cars. He turns to Isaac and says, “We’re going to the station and we’re taking a statement.”

Isaac shakes a little.

Stiles touches his hand to his dad’s elbow. “Dad,” he urges.

“What?” his dad snaps. “This is — I’m not going to let this stand. They attacked him.”

“I know, just — calm down,” Stiles pleads softly and nods to Isaac.

His dad furrows his brow and looks at the preteen. He takes in the way Isaac is holding himself and he deflates. He scrubs a hand over his face tiredly. “Crap,” he mutters before he sighs. “I’m sorry, Isaac. I should have asked if — do you feel comfortable coming to the station?”

Isaac bows his head and shrugs meekly.

His dad rubs the back of his neck before he walks over and gently urges Isaac to his feet before he guides him to his cruiser.

Stiles says, “I’ll be right behind you. I’m going to take care of Isaac’s bike.”

His dad nods before he climbs into the car and drives off.

Boyd says, “I’ll help you.”

Stiles nods gratefully.

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By the time he’s made it to the station, there’s a herd of angry parents waiting inside, demanding to speak to the sheriff to negate the charges being placed on their children.
His dad boldly approaches them with a sternly unapologetic expression and says, “I’m filing for restraining orders for what they did to my youngest. You’re lucky your kids are underage. I have half a mind to petition to have them tried as adults for the stunt they pulled today.”

There’s an uproar of protest and some other nasty remarks that Stiles doesn’t stick around to hear. He strides all the way to the back where his dad’s office is located and enters to find Deputy Parrish already there with an ice-pack and a disgruntled expression.

Isaac is firmly ignoring him. He looks uncomfortable.

“I can take it from here,” Stiles says, stepping in with a forced smile.

Parrish hesitates, throwing Isaac one last look before he pushes away from the sheriff’s desk. He hands Stiles the ice-pack before he exits, closing the door roughly behind him.

Stiles walks over to Isaac and leans back against the edge of his dad’s desk.

Isaac won’t look at him. It’s more heartbreaking then it is frustrating. He’d been making such progress. Now it’s like it’s back to square one.

Stiles says, “Do you know him? You seem like maybe — was Parrish giving you the bad touch?”

Isaac shoots him a look, it’s quick one, and a weak excuse for a glare but it still a relief for Stiles to see because it means he hasn’t completely withdrawn into himself.

“Okay, geez, I’m just worried,” Stiles jokes halfheartedly before he offers the ice-pack.

Isaac accepts it and when he presses it to the side of his chest with a wince he can’t hide, Stiles feels a white-hot anger zap through him.

“They shouldn’t have done that,” Stiles says lowly. His voice is threatening to crack. “I don’t hate easily but I — I swear I hate them for what they tried to do. I know violence isn’t the answer. It should never be but — Isaac, you should have fought back. You could have and no one would — we wouldn’t have blamed you for it. I know you’re strong enough to —”

“Would it have helped, you think?” Isaac asks and Stiles jerks at the sound of his voice, suddenly aware. He sounds so much older than what he looks. His voice is steady, confident and clear. “If I fought back — and if I broke bones? Would that have made me feel good? To hurt them that way?”

Stiles is at a loss for words.

“No,” Isaac answers for him, and he's very gentle about it. More informative than scolding. He reaches out with the hand not holding the ice-pack to his side and places it on Stiles's knee (as if he needs the comfort). His blue eyes are searching Stiles's face for something and when he finds it, he pulls away and averts his gaze. “It’d be no different from what my dad used to do to me — no different from what his dad must have done to him, and I never want to be like that. Never. No matter what.”

Stiles nods dumbly.

Isaac doesn’t say anything else after that. He stares at the corner of the sheriff’s desk.

His dad comes in with Melissa and a doctor so they can look Isaac over sometime later. He tries to ask Isaac a few gauging questions but Isaac remains mute as ever.
The doctor stands with a concerned sigh and suggests that they take Isaac to the hospital because it’s looking like Isaac has some fractured ribs and a sprained wrist.

Stiles stares at Isaac the whole time but he just sits there quietly. From the way he carries himself, you’d never tell that he’d been in an altercation at all, and something about that makes Stiles sick because it so obviously a practiced habit.

They all exit the office and make their way to the hospital.

Stiles sits in the waiting area with his phone, keeping everyone updated on Isaac’s condition. His dad and Isaac come out a little while later.

Isaac has on a medical brace for his wrist and for his ribs, but he looks more comfortable than he had before.

His dad mouths something about pain medicine and they all leave the hospital to go home. He stops at a burger joint on the way and he buys them all burgers and some milkshakes.

They settle in the living room when they get home and they put Dance Moms on just for Isaac, but he’s so looped on pain medication that he practically falls asleep in his food and his dad has to carry him upstairs to tuck him into the bed.

Stiles stays downstairs, staring at the muted TV without really watching it.

He can’t stop thinking about Isaac’s words or the sound of his voice while he had said them.

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Tuesday should have been spent with Stiles at home with Isaac but his dad makes him go to school while he stays behind from work, which is unfair. His dad then he points out the fact that Stiles has been missing more days of school than he should. So Stiles showers, gets dressed, and goes to school, only to find himself staring at his locker like it’s a foreign concept.

Cora whacks him in the face with a pack of blue sour gummy worms and says, “Bioluminescence.”

“What?” Stiles says as he fumbles to catch the pack of candy before it hits the ground. “What?”

“The topic.”

“Topic?”

“For your paper.”

“Paper?”

“For Biology, dumbass.” Cora rolls her eyes. “Bioluminescence. You know? Pretty lights.”

Stiles snorts and tears the pack of gummy worms open before he shoves some in his mouth, wincing at the sourness. “So like fireflies and stuff.”

Cora shrugs and watches him eat her gummy worms with a quietly pleased look.

Stiles shakes the bag at her in offering but she shakes her head. “Sounds cool. I might go to the library after school. Want to come?”

Cora nods and drags him off to first period.
During Astronomy, when the teacher puts on an episode of *Cosmos: A Space-time Odyssey*, Stiles sends a text to Peter that reads: *What’s the status on the Mermaids?*

**Difficult to say at this point. :))**

**Mr. Ravenhill and I believe there may be a nest. :))**

*What???*

Peter doesn’t respond, no matter how many times Stiles texts him.

It’s slightly frustrating, but if Peter’s involved then it’s bound to be.

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At lunch, Stiles calls his dad to check up on things at home and his dad assures him that Isaac is fine.

“Mostly sleeping. Those pain meds really keep him down,” his dad explains.

Stiles informs his dad that he’ll be going to the library after school and that’s the end of that conversation. He grabs a tray of food and brings it over to the table with Laura and Kate. He sits across from them before he glances around. “Where’s Cora?” he asks.

“She had to go to some kind of marching band meeting,” Laura explains as she snags the green apple off of his tray and takes a juicy bite.

Stiles is hit with a wave of nostalgia from the first time they first started talking and somehow he asks, “Derek is — he’s still depressed?”

“Yes,” Laura says with a heady sigh. “He hasn’t left his room once. Mom won’t let me bug him. He needs to be snapped out of it.”

“He dodged a fucking bullet,” Kate grumbles, and Stiles is just now noticing that she has a fading black eye and that her hair is freshly cut into a pixie style. She looks like a hardcore Tinker Bell.

Laura snorts and knocks her shoulders into Kate’s. “You’re just bitter.”

“Damn right I am,” Kate confirms as she steals Stiles’s jello (again).

“You guys haven’t seen Paige yet?” Stiles asks as he twists his fork in his serving of spaghetti.

Laura and Kate shake their head no.

Stiles idly wonders if she’s ever coming back.

It’s probably selfish for him to want her too on account of how good she was at being his math tutor.

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In the Beacon Hills Library, on the second floor, Stiles sits at a rounded table across from Cora as banners with books and words that encourage the patrons to read flutters over their heads while the ceiling fans cut the wind audibly.

Cora pushes a pen and notebook at him and tells him to write down a list of books he needs.
Stiles does what she says because it's faster and easier than questioning her motives. When he finishes, he hands it back over and she takes it with a thoughtfully furrowed brow. Then she leans over and unzips her backpack before she tosses a shiny, royal blue bag of white cheddar popcorn at him. It hits his chest and lands on the table with a sound he can’t classify.

Cora says, “I’ll be back. Don’t move.”

Stiles watches her go, notebook in hand, as he tries to press the wrinkles out of the bag of popcorn with his fingers. He doesn’t open it. He’s pretty sure they’re not allowed to eat in the library.

Someone coughs between the bookshelves on the other end of the room.

A baby cries briefly before being hushed by a mother.

There’s a row of people sitting at a line of study cubicles pressed to the wall of windows. One of them is a tired looking college student who looks to be falling asleep into the cup of coffee in his hand while his other hand traces lines of red under the passages of a Xeroxed journal article.

Stiles looks away and finds someone else to watch. His thoughts jump all over the place with his assumptions of the people he watches — what they do, how old they are, what kind of life they lead.

Cora returns to the table with a black cart full of books. She divides the stacks between them before she settles back down on her end of the table. She shoots him a look when she notices he hasn’t touched the popcorn.

Stiles shrugs, but after a minute he opens the bag with a wince because the crinkle echoes loudly in the quiet space, but whatever, it gets Cora to stop glaring at him from across the table. He jams a handful in his mouth and Cora looks away with this peculiar expression of approval that he knows he has no chance of understanding.

He opens five books and places them in half circle so that his eyes can jump back and forth when his mind gets restless with the information of one book. He finds a lot of useful things about fireflies and fish. It’s just that every time he gets up to go copy certain passages of the book, Cora will get this look on her face and he’ll plop right back down.

Cora uses her long fingers to pull her hair up into messy bun before she makes her way around the table to him. She says, “What do you need?”

Stiles is confused. “I’m not — I can do it.”

“What do you need?” Cora repeats and stares at him with this forceful gaze.

Stiles makes a noncommittal sound of confusion and frustration before he tears out a piece of paper from his notebook so he can scribble out the page numbers and section.

Cora takes it and the books he’s written down before she strides off in search of a copier.

Cora grabs his phone and sends a text to Laura that reads: Cora is holding me hostage, I think. Or being very, I don’t know. She won’t let me do anything. She’s hovering.

Cora handles things differently.

I don’t understand what that means.

Not sure I can explain. Our family has this thing we do when one of us gets injured. She’s just
acting on instinct. She likes you. She wants to take care of you.

But I thought you said Cora doesn’t like people.

Yeah. People. You're not people.

What am I then?

Laura doesn’t reply and Stiles is forced to both wonder and worry. Do they know what he is? Is that why they’ve been so — do the Hales know what he is? God what are they? He’s been holding this question in his mind for the longest, but it’s taken so long to come back to it with everything else going on. He can’t seem to get a straight answer from anyone about that.

Cora returns with his photocopied packets and his books. She puts it in front of him and asks, “Did you need something else?”

Stiles shakes his head wordlessly and watches as she returns to her side of the table. It takes a long while before he can concentrate back on the text before him.

Cora doesn’t walk him home when they part ways when it gets late in the evening, but she does brush the knuckles of her right hand against the knuckles of his before she just walks in the direction of the preserve.

Stiles peddles his bike home only to find his dad and Isaac crashing in the living room with the TV flickering and basically watching them instead of vice versa. He goes to the linen closet and grabs some pillows and some thin fleece blankets. He tucks them both in before he goes into the kitchen to grab a bag of celery and a jar of peanut butter.

He carries it up the stairs with him and into his room, where he dumps everything in his backpack on his bed. He starts his homework, and once he’s completed it, he starts AP Biology paper. He finishes it sometime around midnight and gives it a once over before he sends it to his printer.

As it prints, he stumbles out of his clothes and over to his bed before he crashes, his mind swimming with bioluminescent facts and the odd behavior of the Hales.

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On Wednesday, Stiles wakes to the smell of turkey bacon and burnt toast. He rolls out of bed and hits the floor with a wounded sound before he hops to his feet. He kicks his way through his clothes and throws on something that smells like it could be clean before he jams all his schoolwork in their designated folders. Then he jogs down the steps to find Lydia sitting at the kitchen table dressed in all black, her hair pinned up all neatly with a funeral veil on.

Stiles pauses in confusion. “Lydia? What are you doing here?”

Lydia slowly lifts a porcelain teacup to her lips and takes sips through her veil as she stares straightforward.

Stiles approaches the other side of the table and says, “Lydia?”

Lydia lifts her watery green eyes and says, “Cousin, cousin, you're so sweet. Miss you dearly, we should meet. What did I tell you?”

Stiles frowns in confusion and shakes his head. “I don’t —”
“What did I tell you? What did I tell you? What did I tell you?” Lydia repeats over and over and over. Her lips moving all the more faster each time before it becomes unnatural, like a thousand voices suddenly sounding off as one.

Stiles shakes his head and backs up when he realizes that something is wrong. He lifts his right hand and counts seven fingers. “This isn’t real. This is — this is a dream.” He backs up until he trips and falls on his back.

Stiles suddenly blinks up at a starry sky as he exhales, his breath rises like steam from his mouth. He sits up and notices he’s in an entirely different neighborhood, the rich suburbs (Prairie Hills), and he’s resting on his elbows at the end of an empty driveway. It’s the middle of the night but the block is unnaturally quiet. He stands to gaze over at a largely lit house planted on the side of a long driveway.

Lydia steps up beside him and says, “They only come out during the New Moon. They call it a Dark Moon. A potent time for their most powerful, destructive transformation.”

The night seems to get colder and the stars above their heads goes out one by one like the flame of a candle being snubbed.

The bushes and trees shiver but there’s no breeze.

Stiles’s lips part in shock and his eyes widens as he watches a bulky, large shadow-like creature with glowing yellow eyes scale the side of the house and hop onto the roof with its long claws. “What the hell was that? What the hell was that?”

Lydia starts singing very slowly, the lyrics pouring out of her mouth like syrup, like she’s stuck in slow motion.

Stiles watches as the lit windows go out one by one. “Lydia,” he croaks. “Who’s house is this?”

Lydia says, “They only come out during the New Moon.” She walks up the drive backwards like she’s stuck in the reverse loop of a video player. She continues to move this way until she's to the walkway that leads to the front door. She opens it and disappears inside.

The door closes behind her with a soft but ominous click and that’s when the screaming starts.

Stiles winces, stumbling back as it hits his ears in piercing shock waves. He cups his hands over his ears and says, “Wake up, wake up, wake up.”

The screams get louder and threaten to consume him like a shrieking tidal wave of horror. His whole body gets cold and he jams his eyes shut as he begins to scream back.

— Stiles! Stiles! It’s okay! It’s okay!”

Stiles is still screaming when he comes out of the nightmare and he’s struggling against his father’s grip with wet eyes and restless feet. He blinks away another set of tears and notices that Isaac is standing in his doorway with this haunted look of concern on his face. Stiles shudders and clings onto his father’s arm as his body sags with bone deep exhaustion. His throat feels hot and raw.
It’s still dark out, but the sun is creeping over the horizon, painting veils of orange across a dark blue sky.

Stiles shudders again, cold in his bones but not in his skin.

His dad shushes him and pushes him back down gently, palming his damp forehead before he tucks the covers around his shaking body. He sits on the edge of the bed and rests a hand on Stiles’s shoulder. “You want to talk about it?” he asks.

Stiles shakes his head and at the movement, something warm and sticky slides out of his ears. He sits up and presses both of his fingers into the dips of his ears before he pulls his hands away to see blood staining his fingers.

“Jesus,” his dad whispers in alarm. “I’m taking you to the hospital.”

Stiles doesn’t protest, still shaken and in shock.

It had all felt so real.

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Stiles is herded through a series of tests when they get to the hospital. All of them come up negative and the doctor evaluating him seems stumped that he can’t diagnosis the reason for Stiles’s ear trauma.

Stiles doesn’t offer any answers. He’s not so sure himself what it means.

The doctor gives him the okay to go home, sending him on his way with a prescription for some headache medicine and tells him to just take it easy for the rest of the day.

His dad seems unsatisfied by the lack of answers but he’s relieved that there’s nothing seriously wrong.

The ride home is silent and heavy.

Stiles shivers, forehead pressed to the glass of the window from where he’s sitting behind the passenger seat.

His dad keeps shooting him these concerned looks through the rearview mirror as he cranks up the heat for him.

Isaac is silent and watchful from where he’s sitting on the other side of the car.

Stiles lets the car rock him to sleep, but he jerks awake a second later in slight panic and he straightens.

His dad flashes him another look of concern as they stop at a red light and he cranks the heat up further when Stiles shivers again.

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Needless to say, Stiles doesn’t go to school. His dad wont let him, not that Stiles would have argued the point anyway. He can’t go back to sleep. He doesn’t bother going back to sleep when they return home. He stares up at the ceiling for a long time before he peels his body from his bed and goes to take a shower just for something to do.
Isaac is sleeping on his side with his back to the door when Stiles walks by his room on his way back to his own room. He tucks into his room and slips on some clothes before he settles in the seat in front of his desk and he boots up his laptop.

His dad stops by his door on the way out. He’s dressed in uniform so Stiles can guess where he’s headed. He says, “I got a call. It’s looking like there was another attack.”

Stiles straightens at that.

His dad quickly adds, “I’ll tell you what I can when I get back.”

“Or you could take me with you?” Stiles proposes.

His dad gives him a look that says what he thinks about that suggestion. “I’m still getting used to the idea of involving you. I don’t think we’ve jumped to me taking you to crime scenes stage.”

Stiles doesn’t argue that. “Is it weird if I ask you to bring pictures back with you?”

His dad walks away at that.

Stiles sighs and pulls up a couple of websites that chronicle the happenings of the community. He peruses through any and all articles stamped with the same date as Saturday when he went to visit Lydia.

What he finds is an article about two other patients at Eichen House, who were involved in a murder-suicide that very day (two women). Apparently the women were rooming together, and one woman strangled the other with a knotted bed sheet before hanging herself with it.

Stiles wonders if Lydia knew. If she had felt it while it was happening. It sends a chill through him, and he prints out the article before he goes to his closet to pull out the bulletin/whiteboard combo. He tacks the article onto the bulletin board side before he returns to his computer to print out any articles having to do with the death of Lydia’s parents and her brief disappearance. Then he tries to track down any articles about the animal attack she suffered when she was little.

He prints all those articles out too and tacks them to the board. He’s staring at a black and white photo of Lydia’s house, the same house he had dreamed about the night before, when the doorbell rings. He blinks and looks at the clock on his nightstand. He’s been at it for most of the morning — it’s mid afternoon now.

Isaac is still curled up and asleep in his bed when Stiles passes his room to go down the stairs and answer the door.

It’s Jackson, Boyd, Scott, and Allison.

Stiles can’t help but to notice that their eyes are rimmed with red. He’s struck with an uneasy feeling. “What? What happened?”

“I told them,” Scott says. “I’m sorry, I know I shouldn’t have but I had to. Danny — he’s been — he’s in the hospital.”

“His whole family,” Boyd says, lost. “His little sisters, his moms. They’re all dead.”

“He didn’t show up to school,” Allison sniffs and hastily uses her fingers to catch the tears spilling down her pink cheeks. “So we thought we’d check up on him. Bring him his homework. God — there were body parts all on the lawn and on the porch.” She chokes on a sob and hides her face in
You know what it is,” Jackson says, looking at him intently. “You know what’s doing it. You and you’re dad know.”

“I wouldn’t exactly say — we don’t exactly know but we’re trying to figure it out,” Stiles explains. “How is Danny?”

“We don’t know. They wouldn’t let us — we’re not family and — he doesn’t even have family anymore.” Scott exhales shakily as he scrubs at his face. “Sorry. I’m sorry. I had to tell them because — it’s — it’s Danny.”

Stiles ushers them into the house and they all file into his living room. He watches them all settle down on his furniture with somber faces as he stands across from them with his back to the TV. He says to Scott, “So when you say you told them —”

“It’s not that much of a surprise,” Boyd interjects. “This town has always been, you know, strange. The last sheriff was — and the way he died had been — it’s not a surprise.”

“The Hales have always been odd,” Jackson adds, but he doesn’t seem to care. “When Lydia was attacked a long time ago, I kind of knew something wasn’t right. But I ignored it because who the hell wants to believe that the fairy-tales you think are fairy-tales are real things that go bump in the night?”

Scott takes a sharp puff of his inhaler. He looks a little green.

“Lydia saw something,” Allison says as she looks at Stiles with glossy eyes. “She saw something and it made her crazy and whatever it is that attacked Danny is the same thing.”

“I don’t know that for sure. It’s a strong possibility,” Stiles admits. “Why are you guys here though? Not to sound, you know, but why did you come to me?”

“If you’re trying to figure out what’s going on then we want in,” Jackson merely says.

“This thing is hurting our friends. We can’t just do nothing. We could be next for all we know,” Allison adds in a nasally voice. She sniffs. “I’m tired of pretending that there’s not something deeper going on.”

Stiles takes that into consideration but he says, “It’s dangerous. I’m not going to pretend that this is sensible. A part of me wants to say that we’re just a bunch of dumb teenagers. What can we do?”

“Scott told us about how you were able to help those missing kids. That you figured out what those old women were next door,” Boyd points out. “We’re saying we want to help too.”

They all stare at him and wait for a response.

Stiles sighs, and he suddenly understands how his dad must feel. He’s worried. This could get really ugly, really fast. “The first time was a bit of luck. I — almost didn’t walk away untouched.” He then says, “But if you’re as willful as me, you’ll do what you want anyway. So, fine. Follow me.”

They all file into his room and he shows them all the information he’s compiled together on the bulletin board, while filling them in on what he’s learned about Lydia and her being a Banshee.

Isaac enters the room midway through Stiles’s ramblings and sits on the floor between Jackson and Boyd at the edge of Stiles’s bed.
Allison and Scott shoot him quick glances, which Isaac valiantly ignores.

“Whatever attacked Lydia’s parents and Danny and his family is probably the same someone or something that left the threatening message on my doorstep,” Stiles says as he wraps it all up. “My dad said that the claw marks found on Lydia’s parents resembled the ones found on El Chupacabra, but it’s also could be from some kind of hunting knife.”

“Boyd and I can double back to Lydia’s place and see if we find anything there,” Allison suggests.

Scott frowns. “What about me?”

Allison gives him a small dimpled smile. “Scott, you remember when we watched Night of Living Dead, and we had to stop it ten minutes into the movie because you couldn’t stomach it? I think it would be better if Boyd and I went.”

Scott’s frown deepens.

“Stop pouting, McCall,” Jackson says. “You need to come with me. Your mom could probably sneak us into Danny’s room. If he’s awake, we can ask him about what happened. Your mom can be the lookout.”

“Why would she do that?” Scott asks.

“Because you’re going to tell her everything you told us,” Jackson scoffs, looking at the other teen like he’s an idiot.

“Great,” Stiles mutters with a sigh. “Let’s tell more people. Fantastic.”

“She wouldn’t believe it!” Scott protests.

“We’ll make her,” Jackson insists as he stands and drags Scott to his feet.

Stiles says, “I’m going to go see Deaton. He always seems to know a lot.”

“He’s definitely more than an antique dealer,” is the last thing Jackson says as he herds Scott out of the room.

Boyd and Allison climb to their feet and follow after them.

Isaac and Stiles are left alone. He says, “Did you want to come or —”

Isaac shrugs but he stands. He’s already dressed and ready to go, like he knew or something.

“You probably shouldn’t,” Stiles supposes as he gives the preteen a once over. Most of the swelling and bruises have gone down but hasn’t completely vanished. “How are your ribs?”

Isaac shrugs again and waits for him by the door patiently.

Stiles sighs and sends his dad and Peter a quick text that reads: Going out to do some investigating. Don’t be mad but Scott kind of told some of his friends what’s going on and they’re helping now. I’m pretty sure they won’t say anything to anyone else. Other than Melissa McCall. Don’t be mad.

The responses he gets in return ranges from exasperation, annoyance, and finally acceptance with something that reads as an urging for all of them to be careful.
By the time Isaac and Stiles roll up to the antique shop on their bikes, Mayor Argent is already strolling out with a silver cane, his grey suit sitting on his tall form in a stiff way. He aims a politician’s smile at Stiles and Isaac, and Isaac tenses, stepping behind Stiles like he wants to shrink from view.

“Good afternoon,” Mayor Argent says, his eyes as sharp as his presence is intimidating. “You must be the sheriff’s sons. I don’t believe we ever had the pleasure of meeting. Gerard Argent.” He offers a wrinkly hand.

Stiles accepts it reluctantly and when they touch palms, a chill rides down the length of his spine. He snatches his hand back and flexes his fingers as he tries to place the feeling. His gut is going haywire right now.

Mayor Argent just smiles, white teeth gleaming with a predatory edge. He says, “You boys have a nice day. Stay out of trouble.”

One of his bodyguards ushers him off to the black limo parked by the curb. The limo pulls off and turns the corner, disappearing from sight.

“Okay,” Stiles says, almost shakily. “That was so — that felt so —” He doesn’t even have words because he’s never experienced anything like that before.

Isaac drops his forehead to Stiles’s shoulder and exhales a trembling breath. This goes on for a few moments.

Stiles turns and looks at him with a concerned frown. “Hey, what’s wrong?” He searches Isaac’s blue eyes for an answer. “Did you know him? Is he someone you knew —”

“No. Not really. Not directly but my dad used to...” Isaac trails off with a faraway look that seems pained. He shakes his head quickly before he can really get caught up in whatever memories are swirling in his mind. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

Stiles snaps his mouth shut, once again taken back when the preteen uses actual words. He swallows down his questions and nods. “Are you coming?” he asks instead as he moves to enter the shop.

Isaac takes a deep breath and straightens. He glances to the shop briefly before he looks away and crosses his arms. He shakes his head no.

Stiles figures he just needs a little time to collect himself so he doesn’t push and he goes into the shop by himself. The bell chimes over his head and he strides to the back where Deaton is sweeping up a mess of broken glass. The glass counter looks like its been smashed open.

“Mr. Stilinski,” Deaton says before Stiles can ask about the glass. “What can I help you with?”

“I can come back,” Stiles says as he watches the other man continue to sweep up the mess. “Is this a bad time?”

“There is no good or bad time. Just time,” Deaton replies cryptically before he sets the broom aside and gives Stiles his full attention. “What can I do for you?”

“Uh, well.” Stiles tries to find the right words. “I’ve been reading a lot about Banshees and I was wondering if there has ever been any stories of Virtues and Banshees encountering one another.”

Deaton takes a moment to think before he says, “Some legends place Virtues and Banshees together in certain events or crises. They are two sides of the same coin. Banshees hear death while Virtues
“Blood connection?” Stiles repeats questioningly. “Like family?”

Deaton nods. “If ever a Virtue and a Banshee were found together, it’s only because they were born into a similar lineage, therefore this creates a supernatural tethering between them. Often how it happens is that they share a relation through a set of grandparents. Ultimately, what this means is that they’re cousins.”

Stiles finds himself jumping back to that moment in Eichen House when Lydia kept repeating that eerie rhyme at him over and over again. It dazes him — the thought that he and Lydia could possibly share a familial relation. He swallows and asks, “Have you ever heard any stories about twins who share a psychic connection where they can sometimes feel each other’s pain or share dreams? Do you think it’s possible for a Banshee and a Virtue to have a similar telepathic connection?”

“That calls for a complicated answer,” Deaton supposes. “If you give me a little time, I can do some research and see what I come up with.”

Stiles nods and says, “Also, on a completely different note — do you know of any creatures that like to rip its victims apart with claws or something of a knife that could do the same kind of damage? But it never like — takes anything or eats what it’s ripping apart — it just, you know.”

Deaton lifts both brows and says, “Sounds like either an incredibly intelligent animal or a sadistic sociopath. I’m going to need a little more than that to be completely sure.”

“Sorry that’s as much as I got,” Stiles admits.

Deaton nods and says, “Come back in three days, Mr. Stilinski. I should have something for you on both accounts.”

“Thanks,” Stiles says. “And if I suddenly have some other fact about the thing then I’ll let you know.”

Deaton reaches in his pocket and pulls out his business card, offering it. “Call me,” he advises.

Stiles takes it before he gives an awkward wave goodbye and moves to exit the shop. He and Isaac mount their bikes and start peddling with no clear direction.

He sends a mass text to the others to tell them what Deaton said about needing time to do some research.

When he and Isaac swing by the park, Allison calls him and informs him that she and Boyd hadn’t found anything important. He calls Scott to relay the message and Scott says that he and Jackson weren’t able to find anything out because Danny’s wounds were so severe that they had to put him in a medically induced coma.

It’s all dead ends.

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Cora is sitting out on the porch steps with cup holder full of ice cream blizzards when Stiles and Isaac roll up to their house on their mountain bikes. She hands Isaac a coconut and chocolate one as he passes her on his way up the stairs and he pauses to take it, giving her a five-dollar bill in exchange.
Cora pockets the money and Isaac disappears inside the house with his frozen treat.

Stiles lifts a brow and says, “What was that?”

“An understanding,” Cora merely says and hands him a banana cream pie blizzard. “Eat that and tell me why you missed school.”

Stiles takes the cup of ice cream and relays the story between bites.

Cora eats her way to the bottom of two strawberry cheesecake blizzards and says, “Sucks.”

Stiles gives her an amused frown. “Yeah, sure. That’s one way to look at it.”

Cora shrugs. She says, “I have your homework for you. Did you finish your paper?”

Stiles nods and they make their way up the steps and into the house. When they settle in the living room, he asks, “Did Derek come to school? Paige?”

“No and no,” Cora replies as she unloads her backpack before she hands him all his assignments.

Stiles takes it with audible gratitude.

They work in silence until his dad comes home looking tired and wound tight.

Cora stands right away (like a soldier acknowledging their senior) and says, “Hello, Sheriff.”

His dad smiles tiredly and says, “Nice to see you, Cora. Will you be staying for dinner?”

Cora glances at Stiles and then away as she says, “I have to get home. But thank you for the invitation, sir.”

“Next time then,” the sheriff supposes.

Cora hums noncommittally and packs up her things before she slings her backpack over her shoulder.

Stiles follows her to the door to see her out.

Cora pauses in the doorway and asks, “Are you coming to school tomorrow?”

“Most likely,” Stiles supposes.

Cora nods stiffly as she looks him over. There’s a moment when her gaze turns searching as she look him over from head to toe. She averts her gaze, and quietly says, “Your bruises are looking better.” Then she just walks away and leaves.

Stiles watches her disappear up the block as he rubs the back of his head in wonder.

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On Thursday, Stiles and Isaac both head out together in the morning to go to school. Like always, Stiles will peddle to Isaac’s school first.

Scott and Allison are already out front with Malia.

“So, you’re back?” Stiles says as he comes to a halt at the curb they’re standing on.
Isaac rolls his bike over to the racks, locking it, and then meets up with Boyd before they head inside together.

Malia nods and says, “Cancun sucked, but my step-dad was like trying to enforce the whole family bonding experience. Mom was drunk off her ass the whole time.” She shrugs. “So. What did I miss?”

Stiles exchanges a look with Scott and Allison.

Allison grabs Malia’s hand and says, “I’ll break it to her.” before she drags the confused blonde away so they can chat in private.

Scott says, “Did your dad say anything when he came home?”

“Not much of much,” Stiles admits. “He told me what you guys said. Danny’s family was ripped apart and there were limbs everywhere in the house and out on the lawn and even floating in the pool in the backyard. Though —” He pauses.

“What?” Scott says with a frown.

“He says there was no sign of forced entry,” Stiles explains. “Which means whatever or whoever did it, well, Danny knew them.”

Scott marvels at that. “Oh man. Oh man — that means Lydia might have too.”

“No might about it. She did. Same deal at her house. No forced entry,” Stiles confirms.

Scott opens his mouth to say something but the sound of heavy metal overtakes the parking lot and when they turn to see the commotion, this big black monster truck looking thing comes flying through the parking lot, swerving to a stop dangerously close to where Stiles is standing.

Erica stumbles out of the truck with a scowl and slams the door shut over and over again.

A big bulky looking dude with a shaved head and a red paw-print tattooed just under his ear in the car screams, “Fucking bitch! Careful!”

“Fuck you, Carter!” Erica screams back as she stumbles back as the truck whips in reverse and flies out of the parking lot. She huffs and dusts herself off before she reaches down and starts collecting her books and homework, which fell out of her backpack during all the commotion.

Scott and Stiles share a look before they move to help the blonde.

“You must be feeling better,” Scott comments as he looks her over.

Erica is wearing a tight leather skirt with ripped stockings, a sheer top and a leather jacket with cheetah pumps. She blows a neatly curled hair out of her face and says, “Puberty hit me like a brick to the face.”

Stiles snorts and hands her a ripped up novel he vaguely recognizes (The Count of Monte Cristo) before they all stand. “How long were you sick for?” he asks.

Erica shrugs as she dusts herself off. “Hard to say. So what’s been going on in this shithole of a town since I’ve been confined to my bed?”

“Danny’s in the hospital. So is Lydia. Well, in a mental hospital,” Scott clarifies.
Erica huffs and says, “About time. That ginger haired Barbie has been on her way to the nut house. I spotted that coming a mile away.”

“Hey, come on, Erica. Be cool. That’s not something to make fun of,” Stiles rebukes.


Scott makes an alarmed sound.

Stiles rubs the bridge of his nose as he swallows down some choice words.

“What? I saw a PBS special. Or was it HBO? I don’t know, but Mark Ruffalo was in it and he was floating around. But whatever it was, there wasn’t enough sex in it to be honest,” Erica says as she looks at her watch. “Fuck. I gotta go. I’m supposed to meet up with the school’s guidance counselor. I’ll see you two dildos later.” She clicks off in her heels, turning heads as she marches into school.

Stiles stares after her and shakes his head. “Is it just me or is she more — you know — more — you know — more.”

“No. Erica is — she’s always been like that,” Scott admits. “You just haven’t hung out with her as long as I have. It takes some getting used to. No surprise, really. You should meet her family. That was one of her older brothers who dropped her off.”

“Seriously?” Stiles says, startled. “That’s twisted.”

Scott nods before he gives Stiles a bro hug. “I’ll see you later. You coming to the lacrosse game tonight?”

Stiles shrugs. “I’ll text you.”

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Beacon Hills High School gets two new transfers — sophomore students (Violet and Garrett) — and it’s the talk of the school. Rumor has it that they’re the new adopted children of Mayor Argent.

“Can’t tell what the old bastard is thinking,” Kate admits when they meet up for lunch. She likes them enough to confirm the rumor but she ignores everyone else who tries to ask. “He comes home with these two and tells me to make nice. What the fuck.”

Laura says, “What are they like?”

“Creepy as fuck, and sneaky as fuck.” Kate pauses as she considers that. “I guess they’re a perfect fit for my broken family.”

Laura bumps her shoulders with Kate and they share this look of significance.

Kate is the first to look away with a sigh. “I think they’re fucking each other. They’re always in each other’s room or sneaking out of the house.” She eyes Stiles’s tray.

Stiles hands her his jello because she’s going to steal it anyway.

Kate winks at him and smirks. “You know, on a different subject,” she drawls as she pops a jello cube in her mouth. “A little birdy told me that Paige is back in town with her new hubby.”

Cora looks up from her nachos and scowls. “Really? Maybe we should pay her a visit with a gift.” She straightens and pops her knuckles ominously. “I wonder if they’re registered at the gun store.”
Laura sends her little sister a look. “Don’t joke about that.”

Cora deflates and crosses her arms. “Whatever,” she says and stabs at her nachos.

Stiles scoots away a little. He says, “I actually ran into your dad the other day.”

Kate looks at him sharply, as does Laura. She says, “What happened?”

“Not much of anything. He shook my hand and smiled at me,” Stiles says. “When’s the re-election? I’m not going to vote for him.”

Kate snorts. “Like he’s ever depended on the votes. He’s got something up his sleeve,” she says. “You just wait.”

“That’s not foreboding in the least,” Laura remarks sarcastically. She looks at Stiles. “You should steer clear of him though. He’s — you can’t prove anything he is. Do you get what I’m saying?”

Stiles does.

The bell rings and they disperse.

Stiles goes to his locker and is disappointed to find that the latch is jammed. He has to put the books already in his arms down so he can use both hands to try and pry the latch back.

The bell for next period rings and the halls empty out.

Stiles grumbles out mangled swears under his breath as he pulls and pulls and pulls. He’s literally on the verge of breaking a sweat over this.

“Here, let me.”

Stiles steps back as a dark-skinned female with long, curly raven hair removes a bobby pin from her hair and begins to pick with the latch. “Uh, thanks.”

“No problem.” She smiles at him and wow, she’s really pretty. “I’m Violet.”

Stiles jolts a little at that. “Nice to meet you,” he mumbles.

Violet gets the locker to pop open. “There. It just needed a little something extra,” she supposes.

Stiles presses his lips together and nods. He steps up to his locker when she steps back and he quickly exchanges his books under her heavy stare. He straightens and closes the door, fixing the lock into place before he says, “Thanks. For that.”

“No problem,” Violet says. “Maybe I’ll catch you around, Stiles.” She gives him a once over before she glides off with a shrewd smirk.

Stiles’s gut twists and he’s got no time to think about it because the late bell rings and he has to sprint to class.

It’s not until he’s halfway into his class does he realize that he never told Violet his name, and yet she just knew.

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There’s a moving truck parked just next door and there are movers shuffling back and forth between
the truck and the house when Isaac and Stiles roll up to their own house on their mountain bikes after school. The movers carry furniture that looks like it came straight from Tokyo and it makes Stiles wonder what kind of person or persons are moving in.

“I hope they’re nothing like our last neighbors,” Stiles says as he drops his bike to the lawn.

Isaac does the same as he tracks the movements of the movers very closely. He wrinkles his nose suddenly and says, “Huh.”

Stiles whips his gaze over to the preteen. “What?” he questions. “What?”

Isaac shakes his head and shrugs before he starts towards the house.

“Isaac!” Stiles complains. “You can’t just say something like that and walk away!”

Isaac slams the door behind him in reply.

“Rude,” Stiles grumbles before he edges over to the neighbors lawn.

Suddenly, the movers carrying a couch in have to stumble out of the way because a family comes marching out. There’s an Asian woman fussing at what looks like her daughter in Japanese while the daughter fusses back as the father tries to placate them both.

The teenaged girl huffs and flails her hands at her mother before she stomps down the steps.

The mother shouts, “Kira! Kira! You step one foot off the lawn and you’re grounded for the next month!”

The girl named Kira freezes before her foot touches the sidewalk. She steps back and glares at her mother. “This is so unfair!”

Her mother shouts something in Japanese at her before she storms back into the house.

The father says, “We love you, Kira. Please. Try not to upset your mother. This move was difficult for all of us.” Then he disappears inside too, probably to go and appease his wife.

Kira mutters something under her breath and crosses her arms before her gaze lands on Stiles. She blushes hotly. “Great. You saw all that and you must think we’re insane.”

“Nope,” Stiles denies. “Just hoping you’re not a Ghoul or anything like my last neighbors,” he weakly jokes.

Kira lifts her brow. “I wouldn’t be out in the sunlight if I were,” she points out as she tucks her long hair behind her ears and approaches him. “So you probably already know this, but I’m Kira. Kira Yukimura. Not a Ghoul. Just very, very frustrated.” She offers a hand.

“I’m Stiles. Stiles Stilinski. Also not a Ghoul,” Stiles says and touches his palm to hers, only to yank his hand back because he’s hit with some static shock.


Kira shrugs as she hugs herself.

“Well, welcome to Beacon Hills. I moved here not too long ago myself,” Stiles admits. “It’s an — interesting town to say the least.”

“I’ll need to see more of it to confirm. Mom’s taking me to register for school tomorrow,” Kira says. “You go to Beacon Hills High, right? I’ll be starting as a freshman, even though there’s like two months left of school.”

“I’m a freshman too,” Stiles says. “Maybe we’ll have some classes together.”

Kira smiles a little at that. “Yeah. That would be cool.” She glances over to his house and waves. “Who’s that?”

Stiles turns and he sees Isaac looming in the doorway. He sends the preteen a thumbs-up to assure him that everything is checking out so far. “That’s my favorite little brother Isaac. He’s handsomely shy.”

“Oh,” Kira merely says. She squints her eyes. “He does seem cute.”

Stiles snorts. “Yeah, when he’s polite enough.” He then says, “Actually, I was going to go to a lacrosse game at his school if you wanted to come? It might be a good way to meet some people and make friends. That’s only if you want.”

“Uh, sure. I have to okay it with my parents but I’m totally up for it,” Kira quickly assures.

“Cool. I’ll see you in three hours,” Stiles says and waves as he makes his way to his house.

Kira gives him a bubbly smile as she watches him go before she runs into her own house.

Stiles opens the front door, startled when Isaac drags him into the house and into a tight hug. He awkwardly pats the preteen on the back. “Uh, Isaac — not that your hugs aren’t awesome because they are made of pure awesome, but if you could maybe tell me what I did to —”

“You called me your brother,” Isaac mumbles into his shoulder.

Stiles blinks and says, “How did you even — your hearing is crazy if you could —”


“Oh, uh,” is Stiles’s eloquent reply. “I didn’t say anything that wasn’t true.”

Isaac nods before he pulls away and moves to hide away in his room.

Stiles huffs with a little grin and turns to close the front door, pausing when he catches sight of something.

The eerie orange alley cat is back, and it’s staring at the Yukimura house.

---

Stiles introduces Isaac to Kira more formally when they meet up on the sidewalk in front of her house and mount their mountain bikes.

Isaac just wrinkles his nose at Kira and starts peddling off.
Kira frowns questioningly at Stiles and he sheepishly says, “Sorry. It’s, uh — progress?”

Kira nods and they move to catch up with him.

The bleachers are pretty packed when they reach the lacrosse fields of Beacon Hills Junior High.

Boyd lifts his hand and waves them over from the fourth row.

Stiles quickly introduces Kira to them before they sit down. He ends up sitting between Kira and Boyd while Isaac somehow finds himself between Scott and Allison.

The game starts up and Kira asks him questions through most of it since she isn’t familiar with the sport.

Stiles tries to explain to the best of his abilities over the commotion of the crowd.

Scott and Allison hold up a glittery sign for Jackson as they chant his name in encouragement.

Kira jumps and clings to Stiles’s arm during the more violent altercations of the game but she blushes and pulls away as she mumbles an apology.

Stiles shrugs but he assures her that he doesn’t mind. “It’s what I’m here for, I guess. It was my idea to bring you so if you have to cut off the circulation to my arm it’s fine. I know how to suffer in silence for the good of mankind, or womankind in this case.”

Kira smiles shyly and her blush doesn’t recede until they’re both distracted by the game again.

During halftime, Boyd, Scott, and Allison go down to check on Jackson.

Isaac disappears to either get some popcorn or use the bathroom.

“Do you play?” Kira asks once it’s just them.

“Oh yeah,” Stiles says. “I’m a certified benchwarmer. Though I missed the last few games. I don’t think my coach even noticed.” He sighs and says, “What about you? Do you play anything?”

“Meh, some kenjutsu and a little archery,” Kira says with a meek shrug.

“Oh? I think you might have something in common with Allison,” Stiles supposes. “Scott’s mentioned that she does some archery. I think she competes at a national level over the summer every year.”

“Cool,” Kira says with a grin. “I’ll definitely ask her about it.”

Stiles nods. He says, “So where did you move from?”

“New York. You?”

“Los Angeles.”

“Wow,” Kira says and she doesn’t say much else because the bleachers are starting to fill up, signaling the start of the game again.

Isaac returns with a bucket of popcorn and glares at Scott when he tries to eat some. He shares with Stiles though and Stiles can’t help but to send a teasing grin at Scott, who just sulks.
Stiles grabs a handful of popcorn and offers it to Kira, who accepts it gratefully as she looks at him from under her lashes with a soft grin.

The rest of the game goes without a hitch and Jackson scores most of the points. They win by a landslide.

It’s not until Stiles is stepping down the bleachers, following after Kira and Isaac, that he notices Violet and Garrett sitting on the top row and watching him with identical smirks. He shudders and quickly moves to catch up with the others as they cast a vote to hit up *Ramona's Pizzeria*.

Kira gets along with the others swimmingly and they exchange phone numbers over huge calzones. She smiles gratefully at him the whole time but Stiles returns it with only half the enthusiasm.

Violet and Garrett are sitting at a booth on the other side of the restaurant, and they don’t stop staring.

---

That night, while Isaac and his dad are safely tucked away in their beds, sound asleep, Stiles tears through a ton of articles in connection to Mayor Argent (the guy even has his own Wikipedia page). He’s been mayor of Beacon Hills for a very long time, and before him his father was mayor, and so on and so on. Though he doesn’t find anything incriminating, he still doesn’t rule anything out either. He prints out every single article and tacks them to his bulletin board.

There’s something off about the guy.

Stiles is determined to figure out what it is.

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On the morning of Friday, Kira rides with Stiles and Isaac as they peddle to his school. After they drop him off, they peddle to their school and Stiles gives her the grand tour before they part ways so she can meet her mother in the main office to start registration.

They don’t meet up again until Astronomy, and from there, he walks with her to lunch. It doesn’t surprise him that Kira turns heads wherever she goes, and everyone watches her with open interest because she’s very pretty and bubbly but she keeps grinning at Stiles like it’s just the two of them.

Stiles introduces Kira to Laura and Kate, who are outfitted in their cheerleading uniform. “Where’s Cora?” he asks when he notices she’s not around.

“Who’s Cora?” Kira asks, looking worried for some reason. “Is she your...girlfriend?”

Stiles snorts. “Nope. Not at all.”

Kira nods as her mouth fidgets thoughtfully.

“Cora’s practicing for tonight’s basketball game,” Laura says.

“Is Derek gonna show, you think?” Stiles asks because he’s curious to know.

Derek hasn’t shown up for school this entire week.

Laura shrugs. “It’s touch and go. I can’t say for sure.” She turns her gaze to Kira. “So, Kira. Where are you from?”
Kira pulls her gaze from Stiles and says, “New York.”

“Oh? I have some family there. What part?” Laura asks with an amused grin.

Kira rambles on and on about how her dad used to be a professor at Columbia University and how her mom was the Curator of Exhibitions for the Museum of Natural History while she, herself, had attended a private school. She looks at Stiles the whole time she talks, using her hands to animate her words as she smiles widely.

Stiles figures she’s probably making sure he’s paying attention, so he smiles back and nods politely while he eats.

Laura won’t stop grinning at him from across the table like she knows something he doesn’t.

Kate steals his jello (again) and rolls her eyes, bored with Kira and the whole conversation. She eventually picks up her pom-poms and skips off to make some idle threats to the members of the basketball team about winning tonight’s game.

Kira stops talking suddenly and curses, “I forgot I was supposed to go to the guidance counselor’s office to check in about my schedule.” She starts packing up her things before she looks at Stiles and says, “We’ll meet up after school, yeah?”

Stiles nods and she beams before she scuttles off.

Laura snickers.

Stiles frowns and looks at her. “What?”

“You really have no clue do you?” Laura says. “You’re so adorable.”

Stiles flushes and sticks his tongue out at her. “I’m hot. Not adorable.”

“I’m sure Kira would agree,” Laura mutters, snickering to herself.

“What?” Stiles says.

“Nothing,” she says but she won’t stop laughing. She pulls out her phone. “God, Peter is going to have a field day.”

Stiles frowns and wonders what he’s missing.

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Kira rides in circles around Stiles and Isaac on her bike as they all peddle home together. She babbles happily about her first day of school and all the people she’s met and how she’s considering either joining the baseball team or the swim team.

Mrs. Yukimura is standing on her porch with crossed arms. “Kira,” she calls in a firm tone.

Kira’s mouth dips and she peddles over to her house. She waves at Stiles and Isaac before her mother drags her into the house, fussing in Japanese.

Stiles says, “I’m going to go and visit Mr. Ravenhill. Do you want to come?”

Isaac nods.
Fifteen minutes later, Stiles is using the wooden knocker shaped like a bird to knock on the door.

The cabin shakes as Mr. Ravenhill walks to the door and opens it. He brightens at the sight of them. He says, “Good ta see ye, wee laddie. I wasn't expecting ta see ye so soon. Who've ye got there?”

“This is my brother Isaac,” Stiles introduces and doesn’t miss the way Isaac shoots him a pleased look as he goes a little pink.

“Aye. Nice ta make yer acquaintance, Isaac. Come in, come in.” Mr. Ravenhill moves out of the way so they can enter. “I'll put on a cuppa.”

Stiles moves to sit in the rocking chair by the fireplace as Isaac stares up at the birds in the birdcages with this sort of transfixed look on his face. It’s a little amusing.

Mr. Ravenhill must think so too because he huffs out a short laugh. “He's fond o' them birds. Nae surprise there considerin' his kind.” He carries over two steaming cups of tea and hands one to Stiles before he sets one down on the other rocking chair. He grabs a small bottle of cream and gives it to Isaac with a wink before he shuffles back over to the seat across from Stiles. “What brings ye by then, young lord?”

Isaac makes these please little mewl sounds as he drinks away at the thick cream he was given.

Stiles looks on at him in fond amusement while he blows on his tea before he says, “I was just wondering if you could tell me about Mayor Argent. You've been in this town as long as he has right?”

“Aye,” Mr. Ravenhill confirms as he furrows his bushy brow in thought. “I dinnae know what I can say aboot th' man. He's nae any good. Ne'er met a man who didnae get th' chill when he's around. He dabbles wi' th' dark things.”

“Have you ever caught him doing anything bad?” Stiles asks.

“Aye. But ye'll be wanting ta ask Lady Talia about that. Tis more ta do wi' her kinfolk then wi' th' good folk o' Beacon Hills,” Mr. Ravenhill advises. “Ye met th' man, I take it?”

“Yeah, and I got this really ugly feeling about him,” Stiles admits as he glances over at Isaac, who’s cooing at some of the birds with a milk mustache. Stiles smiles a little before he looks back to Mr. Ravenhill. “Are gut feelings natural for — um, me?”

Mr. Ravenhill’s blue eyes twinkle with mirth. He says, “Aye. That's yer instinct afoot. Ne'er dismiss it, boyo.”

Stiles nods in solidarity. “Do you think you can tell me more about the — you know.”

“Aye, but another time,” Mr. Ravenhill says.

Stiles is disappointed but he doesn’t push. “How old are you?”

“Old enough. Older than these trees, I gather,” Mr. Ravenhill supposes.

“Where did you come from?” Stiles asks as he takes another careful sip of tea.

“Th' trees. But that's where most things come from,” Mr. Ravenhill reasons.

“What things?”
“Th’ magic that made us, laddie.”

Stiles wrinkles his nose in confusion. “It came from the trees?”

“Aye, it cam from th’ trees,” Mr. Ravenhill confirms.

“But where did the trees come from then?” Stiles asks, skeptical.

“Would ye lik’ ta hear th’ stories? Come have a seat, Isaac. Ye’ll be wanting ta hear th’ tales too,” Mr. Ravenhill says, motioning Isaac closer.

Isaac wanders over and sits between Stiles’s knees, devoting his attention to the Leshy.

Mr. Ravenhill says, “When I was no more than a bit of bark, my gran told me colorful stories about th’ start o’ creation. She said that th’ Faceless were responsible fur how all things came ta be. Th’ Faceless were four sentient beings o’ nae specific form or gender or identifying qualities, what had decided, amongst themselves, ta construct a plane where they could coexist ‘n’ cohabitate peacefully. My gran said that it all started wi’ th’ best o’ intentions ’n’ th’ darkest o’ loneliness…”

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Stiles and Isaac have to leave when it starts to get really dark outside. There’s a curfew now because of the recent attacks, so they depart from Mr. Ravenhill’s cabin with a promise to the Lesly of a future visit. They paddle down a winding trail and out onto the road, lost in their own thoughts.

They make it back to the house by the time the streetlamps come on and they drop their bikes to the grass as they march up the steps and into the house.

His dad is waiting for them with some pizzas.

“Any new developments?” Stiles asks as he takes a slice.

His dad shakes his head and says, “Still waiting on the coroner’s report and a debriefing with forensics.”

Stiles hums and reaches for another slice of pizza.

Isaac stacks a few slices on a plate before he carries it into the living room.

The sheriff follows.

Stiles sits in the kitchen a little longer and eats his food there. He thinks on the things that Mr. Ravenhill said, about the Faceless and how they made the trees so that they could cry on them and see what grew from the branches. He didn’t get far in the tale since they had to go, but Stiles is definitely interested in hearing more about this theory of creation.

He tugs free a can of soda from the six pack his dad bought and hops over the back of the couch, landing with a soft bounce as he realizes that Isaac and his dad are watching *Frozen*.

It’s a pretty decent movie, but Isaac and his dad are like *super* into it — so much so that they watch it one more time, and then once more. They don’t make it through the third time, though. They start falling asleep and Stiles, still wide-awake, rolls his eyes and ushers them off to bed.

He shuts down the entertainment system and turns off all the lights downstairs before he sprints up to his room and closes the door behind him with a soft click. He settles down at his desk and boots up his computer before pulling up anything he can about the Faceless.
He finds one or two things, but nothing substantial.

He shuts it and grabs his phone to put it on the nightstand before he grabs the journal of Virtues from where he has it stashed in his underwear drawer and begins to read.

At midnight, he gets a surprising text from Derek that reads: **I’m outside.**

Stiles blinks at his phone for a long moment before he sits up and slides off his bed. He slips on some socks and quietly makes his way down the steps to the front door. He unlocks it and shivers against the cold as he closes the door behind him while he steps out into the night air.

Derek is sitting on the top step on the porch. He’s wearing a letterman jacket and his shoulders are hunched, like he wants to shrink inside of himself.

Stiles walks over and plops down to his right. “Hey.”

Derek doesn’t look at him. He peers out into the street, tracing his eyes over the wet pavement, up to the glow of the streetlamps and from darkened house to darkened house. He shifts his feet and says, “What should I do?”

Stiles lifts his brows at that and blinks. He turns his gaze to the thin fog veiling the neighborhood. He shivers and says, “I don’t know.”

Derek snorts wryly. “I don’t know either,” he admits. “She felt like everything. She was everything. I don’t understand.”

Stiles is smart enough not to point out that this is something Paige has said to him also. Instead, he says, “Are you angry?”

Derek hunches his shoulders again and marries his eyes to his shoelaces. “I’m everything,” he whispers, and he sounds so lost and broken. He snorts bitterly. "At Least that's what it feels like here," he explains, patting a hand over his heart.

Stiles feels a twinge of compassion pluck at his own heart. “Have you thought about maybe — what do you want to do?”

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” Derek growls and he hits his forehead against his knees over and over. “I just — I don’t know. I came to the game tonight and I tried to play to see if things could be the same and to see if I could move on but my palms were too sweaty and it felt so loud and I couldn’t stop thinking about her. I missed every shot I made. It was horrible.”

Stiles brushes his fingers over the stubble of his hair as he eyes the gleaming trashcans at the end of everyone’s drive. He says, “You’re allowed to make mistakes. We’re only Human, or so I’m told.”

Stiles doesn’t really mean it as a joke but Derek still laughs and it sounds painful, like he hasn’t let himself laugh in years. “You’re odd,” he mumbles. "I can honestly say I've never met anyone like you.” He picks up his head and looks at Stiles with wet hazel-green eyes.

Stiles sucks in a wounded breath at the sight and looks away as his thoughts scatter. Derek’s eyes are burning holes into the side of his face.

Stiles says, “You probably don’t want to hear this, but...it could be worse.”

“Worse?” Derek repeats, the question in his voice obvious.
“She’s alive. I know everything else sucks, and I know what she did was — I know. And it was. You should be sad and angry and everything else you want to be. Two years is a long time to center your life around someone else for it to just end like that.” Stiles stares at the wet grass on the front lawn. It needs to be cut. “But, despite it all — she’s alive. She could be, you know — but she’s not.” He swallows and tries not to think of his mother as he says, “There’s a lesser evil we have to be grateful for sometimes.”

Derek says nothing to that but he doesn’t stop staring at the side of Stiles’s face.

Stiles shivers again and rubs his arms. He’s only wearing a thin t-shirt and some pajama bottoms.

Derek takes off his letterman jacket and drapes it over Stiles’s shoulders, ignoring the other teen’s protest. “You’re cold. I’m not,” he says as if it’s just that simple. “It’s the least I can do for talking your ear off like this.” He pulls away and stares out into the night.

Stiles clamps his mouth shut because his shivers die in the wake of the warmth that Derek’s jacket offers. The inside of it feels like how his clothes feel when he pulls them out of the dryer before it even comes to a complete stop. It smells heavily of vanilla and jasmine. “Thank you,” he says because it would be impolite not to. "I'm not expecting — you didn't have to give — just, thank you."

Derek says, “You’re the only person who hasn’t tried to bad-mouth Paige.”

Stiles shrugs. He doesn’t see the significance of it.

"After the handful of 'I told you so's' I've been receiving left and right, it's refreshing." Derek sighs and scrubs at his face before he keeps his large hands cupped over his eyes. His bottom lip trembles as he says, “I’m sad and scared that it'll never stop. I...still love her.” He chokes on a sob and it’s obvious it hurts him deeply to even admit this out loud.

Stiles feels tears well up in his own eyes and the gut-wrenching compassion and empathy he has for Derek is as overwhelming as it is sudden. He presses his trembling lips together as the first set of tears slide down his cheeks.

Derek jolts and drops his hands as he looks at Stiles through wet lashes. His brow furrows in confusion. “Are you...” He leans closer to Stiles as his nose twitches and he inhales sharply. "You are," he says in awe. "Why are you crying?" he asks.

“Because I’m sad for you,” Stiles says quietly.

"Why?"

"I honestly don't know, but you have to stop crying,” Stiles says as he sniffs. "I'd take you being your normal rude self over this."

Derek laughs wetly and he looks at Stiles like he can’t believe he’s real. “You’re so damn odd,” he claims but there’s something almost soft and sentimental in the way he says it.

Stiles gives him a watery smile and shrugs with a great amount of self-deprecation.

"And I'm not rude."

"You are. Especially to me. I'm talking day one with that."

Derek huffs. "The locker room incident," he says, almost nostalgically. "That was a
misunderstanding."

"Misunderstanding, he says," Stiles mumbles, mockingly. He rubs at his eyes tiredly. "Like it's too much to ask for you to be nicer to me."

Derek sniffs and wipes his cheeks dry before he exhales shakily. “Okay,” he says, and Stiles doesn’t know what that’s supposed to mean, but it feels important. “Okay,” he says again. He sniffs and stands, descending the steps and walking away without a proper goodbye.

Stiles watches as Derek travels up the walkway, over the sidewalk, off the curb and further up the street adjacent to his house. The streetlamps are lighting the way for him, and the fog swallows him in.

Stiles sits out on the porch for a long while after Derek disappears from sight, clutching the jacket Derek hadn’t bothered to take back and he laughs a little wryly at how strange his life has become.

He picks himself up and goes back into the house, locking the door behind him.

He puts Derek’s jacket on the top of his dresser by his wolves, and as soon as his body hits the bed, he falls asleep.

He dreams of trees.
Sometime around eight in the morning on Saturday, Laura sends him a picture of Derek smiling and playing with his baby sister Olive and their cousins and their dogs with a text that reads:

**I DON’T KNOW WHAT YOU DID**

**BUT THANK YOU**

Stiles huffs and rolls onto his back, rubbing sleep from his eyes. He responds:

*I didn’t do anything.*

*He came by and we talked.*

**EXACTLY**

**APPARENTLY YOU’RE ALL IT TAKES**

**WE’VE TRIED EVERYTHING WITH HIM**

**AND NOW HE SMELLS SO DISGUSTINGLY HAPPY**

*Stop yelling at me through text. How do you guys know what emotions smell like? I didn’t do anything.*

**YOU DID SOMETHING**

**HE’S ACTING LIKE HIS OLD GOOBER SELF**

**HE STILL GETS SAD RANDOMLY**

**BUT IT’S BETTER THAN BEFORE**

*That’s got nothing to do with me. Swear.*

*Derek is his own person.*

**WHATEVER**

**I KNOW WHAT I’M TALKING ABOUT**

<3 <3 <3 <3 <3

Stiles rolls his eyes but he smiles indulgently for maybe like half of a minute. Then he shakes it off and sits up with a stretch and a yawn. He shifts and tugs free the journal of Virtues when he realizes that he’s sitting on it. He slides out of bed and tucks it away in his underwear drawer. Then he snags his phone from his nightstand and scrolls through his contacts before he dials out.

“Hello?”

“So I don’t mean to pry or bring this up randomly but my brain doesn’t follow the general rules of order and this just came to me but — how is your relationship with your grandfather and your — is
Allison pauses on the other end and there’s some shuffling before she says, “Yeah. She’s my aunt, but we barely talk. Same deal with my grand — with Gerard. It’s — my mom and my dad don’t talk to him either. Something happened — you know the fire with Peter and his family? Well my dad was pretty sure that Gerard had something to do with it and he just didn’t — that was the last straw for him. He kind of packed up and took off. Left my mom and I behind. He was going to take Kate with him but she didn’t want to go.

Imagine that, right? Choosing your little sister over your wife and daughter. I...maybe I don’t understand it. Why it was so easy to leave us all behind but beg to take her. Good use that did anyway. She wanted to stay and — well, Peter and Laura are here and I don’t think she wanted to be anywhere else. I don’t think there is anyone in this world Kate loves more than them. My mom...she wasn’t like me. I was jealous of Kate and hated her for a long time because of my dad.

“My mom understands my dad better than I do, always have, which is why, even after he left, she offered to let Kate stay with us but Kate’s always been, you know, she prefers the finer things and with Gerard she can do what she likes. She’s not much for rules and my mom definitely would have brought the hammer down, or however that saying is. But yeah, I don’t really even — we don’t really even speak to each other. Not that I hate her still or anything. We just...we’ve never tried to have a relationship with each other. And my dad just washed his hands of this town and everyone in — hang on, does this have anything to do with what’s happening? You think Gerard is involved?”

“Could be,” Stiles admits and tries to place the guilt he feels for bringing up such a delicate subject. “I’m — sorry, I didn’t realize that — I shouldn’t have —”

“No it’s okay. I don’t treat it like a dirty secret. I’m not ashamed,” Allison says and she sounds so certain that Stiles is almost envious. “My dad bailed on us and I’m not going to protect him from that. It is what it is. My mom and I are fine. She’s dating again, which is stressful for me because I — I’m real protective of her and I think she’s trying to forget — but even still, I don’t think she’ll ever stop loving — whatever. It’s whatever.”

Stiles understands now why he keeps seeing Victoria with different men whenever she picks up or drops off Allison. He hadn’t really thought to pay that much attention or take notice, but he’d filed it in the back of his mind, as he does most things for later assessment. He says, “Allison?”

“Yes?”

Stiles, because his gut tells him to, says, “You’re probably the strongest girl I know in how you’re facing a situation like that. It’s just — if you ever worry about — I don’t want to assume this or anything but, um. You definitely can hold your own, and, yeah. Sorry, that sounded a lot more coherent in my head which, ha, makes sense because everything in my head isn’t all that coherent sometimes but I still somehow make sense of it.”

Allison goes silent on the other end.

Stiles wonders if he’s said the wrong thing.

Allison quietly replies, and she sounds a little hoarse when she does, “That — thank you. I can’t — you don’t even know how much I needed to hear — thank you. I’ve been trying hard.”

“It’s okay, I think,” Stiles says, and winces at his wording. “I just mean that if you want to talk to me about — we’re friends, right? So you know that you can call me?”
“Yes.” Allison takes a moment to breathe and gather her thoughts. Then she says, “Um, today Malia and Scott and me were going to go and visit Danny. Just for moral support and to check on his progress. I think Boyd and Jackson were supposed to come too. I’m not sure if Erica will — she’s never been fond of hospitals so I don’t think she will.”

“Speaking of Erica — did anyone tell her what’s going on?”

“No I don’t think — well I mean, she’s been distant, you know?” Allison explains. “I think at this point she’s even less interested than she usually is. It’s — yeah. I think something happened while she was out. Her family is, as you can imagine, very interesting, to put it very mildly. Whatever it was, she’s a lot meaner for it.”

Stiles hums and takes that into consideration. He makes a mental note to call Erica as a friend and see about her.

Allison says, “Will you come? To the hospital, I mean.”

“No, uh — I have that thing with Deaton. Then I was probably going to go see about Lydia,” Stiles says.

“You made an appointment? I thought you weren’t allowed back after what happened last time?” Allison asks, confused.

“No, you’re right, I’m — I didn’t make an appointment. I’m still trying to work around that somehow but I have to — I have to tell her, you know. She should know what’s going on if she doesn’t already,” Stiles reasons as he starts rooting around his messy floor for some clean clothes.

Allison huffs in amusement. “Don’t get in trouble. You can call us too if you need anything,” she points out. “You don’t have to do it all by yourself.”

Stiles smiles at that. It is comforting to know. He says, “I’ll keep you guys updated on my progress, and we’ll go from there I guess. You keep me updated on Danny.”

“Sure thing. You be safe.” Allison ends the call.

Stiles rubs at his right eyebrow before he yawns and shakes off any remaining exhaustion. He tosses some clothes he thinks are clean onto the bed and makes his way to the bathroom to take some Adderall and a hot shower.

An hour later, he’s stepping into a pair of jeans, slipping on a white t-shirt and into his sneakers, tying the laces before he slips on the blue Captain America hoodie Laura bought for his birthday. He makes his way towards the stairs and then down them to go into the kitchen where he starts making breakfast. He makes some wheat pancakes and a fruit salad because they have been really slacking in the eating healthy department. He eats his share of food in the living room while he watches *Teen Titans* on the TV and waits for Isaac and his dad to wake up.

His dad is the first to come down. He goes for the morning paper first before he even makes a plate for himself. The paper rustles when he shakes it out and he says, “Good morning.”

“Morning, dad,” Stiles replies distractedly and laughs at something Beast Boy and Cyborg do.

His dad walks over and pats him affectionately on the head. He says, “What are your plans for today?”

Stiles waits for the commercials before he leans his head back against the back of the couch so he
can look up at his dad and he tells him his plans for the day.

His dad gets this complicated and difficult look on his face that says he’s still not comfortable with Stiles involving himself in the more serious matters of the community but he’s slowly swallowing his protests and sighing in resignation. He pats Stiles on the cheek before he turns away and goes to make himself a plate. He says, “Please be careful. My blood pressure is a mess when it comes to you.”

Stiles smiles up at the ceiling before he picks his head up. “I know who to call if things start to blow up in my face,” he says, just to hear his dad sigh again. “You love me.”

“God help me, I do,” his dad confirms, sounding both grudgingly amused and fond. “If your mom were here, she’d have a better handle on you, I gather.”

Stiles feels his mouth slowly lose its upward curve and he swallows. He says, “Yeah.” But he says it so softly he’s not sure his dad even hears him.

His dad shakes out the paper again behind him as his fork clinks against the plate.

Stiles goes back to watching TV, but it takes a full hour before he’s actually watching it and not just blinking at its general direction.

Isaac comes down sometime around noon, still rubbing sleep and gunk from his eyes before he walks over to the stove and piles his plate higher than Stiles has ever seen him do.

His dad also raises a brow in question but he doesn’t seem as surprised. “Welcome to the land of the living. I was starting to wonder about you,” he jokes.

Isaac shrugs and sits down across from him. He looks over to Stiles and nods.

Stiles smiles back and waves before he turns and goes back to channel surfing.

His dad says, “Isaac’s got a doctor’s appointment I’m taking him to shortly. I’ll drop him off at the library when I’m done because I have to go to work right after. You’ll pick him up?”

Stiles nods distractedly but his dad chuck a strawberry at the back of his head. “Hey! I totally heard you,” he swears.

His dad chuckles and says, “Just making sure.”

Stiles just grumbles before he turns the TV off and stands with a stretch. It's time for him to get going anyway. He makes his way around the couch, picking up the strawberry to blow it off and eat it on his way to the stairs (because five second rule) before he pauses to say, “What time will you be home?”

His dad shrugs. “Hard to say. I’ll aim for an early time but I’ll be pouring over some case files. There are some inconsistencies with the pathologist’s report which state the murders were done by a wild and possibly rabid animal, but the coroner has discrepancies with the wounds found stating that it should be ruled as a serial murder. Don’t get me started on what forensics is saying. It’s a real mess since no one can agree on anything.”

Stiles rolls that around in his mind before he says, “I’ll tell you what Deaton says. The guy really knows his stuff. He could shed some light on it.”

“Hopefully,” his dad says with a sigh before he folds the newspaper up. “Come on, Isaac. It’s about
time we get going.”

Isaac nods and eats a little faster.

Stiles jogs up to his room to grab and pocket his phone. As he passes Isaac on the stairs, they high-five each other like it’s instinct and then he’s out the front door. When he gets midway down the porch steps, he jumps the rest of the way, sticking a wobbly landing before he’s righting his bike and mounting it.

“Stiles!”

Stiles pauses and glances over to where Kira is sitting on her porch steps with an acoustic guitar in her lap and a notebook in her hands. He shifts his bike around and peddles over, halting to a stop at the bottom step. “Hey, Kira. What’s up?”

“Just doing a little lyrical writing, I guess,” Kira says with a smile as she sets the notebook aside and places the pen on top.

“So you’re a singer,” Stiles reasons as he indicates to the guitar.

Kira nods happily. “I don’t know if I’m any good though. I’m decent. When I was little I had to beg my parents to pay for the singing lessons. My dad was all for it but my mom, predictably enough, thought it was a waste of time.” She shrugs as she strums a few strings before clapping a hand over it to silence the sound. “I learned how to play the guitar on my own, however — well, with the aid of some YouTube tutorials.”

Stiles snorts at that. “You can learn how to do anything from YouTube. One time I really wanted to know how they get toothpaste inside the container, but then it went from that to how they make ice cream sandwiches, and somehow from there I ended up on the other side of the spectrum, spending three hours watching Nova’s *Becoming Human* series.”

Kira laughs. “Yeah, I know how that goes. This one time I just wanted to know how you can like take some scotch tape and put it over your eyelid for a perfect winged eye, you know, and before I know it I’m like knee deep in conspiracies videos learning about how everything has subliminal messages and it just went so deep that I had to pull out of there.” She shakes her head with a smile. “But back to what we were originally talking about, um — if you wanted, I could sing a song for you?”

“Yeah, no, yeah, uh — that’d be cool,” Stiles says but he holds out his hands to stall her when it looks like she’s about to play something on the spot. “But rain check, because I have to — and I want to devote my full attention to and at you and whatever you sing — but it’s just that I really have to go. I don’t want it to seem like I’m — like those people who are being nice about wanting to hear their friends perform but secretly they don’t want to but you can’t just not say you don’t want to and — because I’m not. Saying that. I totally do. I’m ready to be wowed, which I’m sure you will do when you do your thing. You just seem like you have — like you — your voice is — heavenly, and okay I’m going to go because I’m — right. This is getting away from me. Sorry. I have to go.”

Kira’s cheeks are red and she appears to be flattered by his nonsensical rambling. “It’s totally cool — fine. I — yeah, another time,” she agrees.

Stiles shoots her a thumbs-up and she laughs as he shifts his bike backwards, almost stumbling as he tries to pedal off. He winces at his own faulty coordination and tosses Kira an embarrassed wave.

Kira stands and returns it enthusiastically as she watches him until he’s out of sight.
Stiles rolls up to *Alan’s Antiquities* and locks his bike before he enters the shop. The bell rings predictably over his head and he makes his way to the back. He notes that the glass counter display has been replaced.

Deaton appears from behind a doorway of hanging beads. He says, “Mr. Stilinski. You’ll be happy to know that I came to some rather interesting conclusions,” he says as he lays a musty old book on the surface glass counter display. Before he opens it, he says, “At first I considered how you made a mention of a creature with claws with the capability of ripping its prey apart, but you also stated that there was the possibility that a knife might have been able to do the same damage as well. On average, if the wounds of a victim who had encountered something fairly large or as aggressive, it would prelude to a more...how can I put this? A mixture of something both human and creature in nature.”

“Like with Therianthropy,” Stiles says, already having some idea of where he’s going with this.

“Exactly. But more so than that,” Deaton says. “You see, there are all types of sublevels to consider. You have Cynanthropy, where dogs can become men and men can become dogs. Or Ailuranthropy, where a person can have the ability to turn into domestic cats, sometimes of enlarged size, or any feline form of their choosing. Then there's Theriocephaly, where an individual manifests into a certain creature by halves like Centaurs or Mermaids. Then we would also have to consider Lycanthropy and Nagualism. Now you can see where the dilemma really comes into play because any of these could be responsible for what you’ve described.”

Stiles finds himself thinking on the eerie orange alley cat. He has a hunch, but he says, “Tell me more about the Ailuranthropy.”

Deaton opens the book to an illustration of a crowd of people holding lit torches as they look onto the hanging of a woman who is midway into transforming into a large beast-like creature that highly resembled a cat. “In Europe, the folklore labels them as Witches, whether they were male or female, and even though they had no other magic ability other than being able to transform. There are some accounts from official church doctrine that bands them together in the age of Witch Trials.” He turns the page and shows another illustration of a tribe bowing down to a humanoid looking lion and a leopard. “In Africa, they were treated as deities. Some legends place them as royalty, or even as protectors from all the evils of the World and the Cosmos.”

Stiles is fascinated.

Deaton turns to a Chinese illustration that has a man using some kind of sword to strike down a child in the middle of transforming into a Bengal Tiger. “In India, and in Persia, and also China, there is folklore which would state that the ability of self-transformation is actually a hereditary curse, but the true nature of good and evil comes from the personality of the individual who inherits it.” He turns the page and this illustration is of a beastly tiger (practically the size of Godzilla) that is devouring a village of people. “In Indonesia and Malaysia, the belief is that the inheritance of transformation does not come unless there is cause for revenge. It’s may be interesting to also note that they make a claim that a Shapeshifter’s weakness is its own name.”

Stiles frowns, filing away all of this information to the best of his abilities before he asks, “Why would saying their name matter?”

Deaton considers the question before he says, “I suppose it’s a way to bring awareness to them. When they shift, they fall prey to instinct, and most of the time those instincts do not often involve moral consciousness or the ability to distinguish right from wrong.”
“Because there are no rules in the Wild Kingdom,” Stiles reasons.

Deaton smiles a little. “Exactly. That’s very insightful.”

Stiles rubs the back of his head and says, “I heard it somewhere.” He shrugs and indicates to the book. “Is there anything else?”

Deaton turns to the last illustration which is of an Aztec Shaman pointing its staff at an enlarged jaguar. “In pre-Columbian Mesoamerican civilizations, the Priests and the Shamans wore the pelt of the animal they wished to shift into in order to become as such. The motifs often depict jaguars as the animal of choice because it’s representation was closely tied to the god of the night sky, Tezcatlipoca. But mainly their system of transformation was linked to the Mesoamerican calendrical system, which was used for divination rituals.”

Stiles jolts a bit at that. “That’s — you wouldn’t happen to have one of those, you know, lying around?”

Deaton appears just a smidge amused as he says, “Unfortunately no. It wouldn’t be of any use to you, as is. It’s a rather outdated system, and the astrology would have changed greatly from the time it was first created to now. Is there a reason you’re asking?”

“I have this — theory about, um, something. Do you know any mythology about the New Moon? Or Dark Moon?” Stiles asks. “Just to clarify a bit, here’s a scenario — if a Shapeshifter, namely of the Ailuranthropy variety, were to only do its hunting on a New Moon, is there — would there be some significance to that?”

Deaton says, “Yes.” He goes on to explain, “You are aware that mysticism places an importance on the Full Moon? All of these ancient myths and old legends will agree that the gravitational pull is what affects the chemistry of nature. Greek mythology emphasizes on the folklore of Lycanthropy, which is subject to manifest on a Full Moon. This would come into play of what you’re asking because there are legends that place Werewolves and Werecats at odds in the Animal Kingdom. A Full Moon finds a Werecat at its weakest, whereas a Full Moon would find a Werewolf at its strongest peak. Vice versa — a New Moon would find a Werewolf at its weakest, and the Werecat would be at its strongest peak. It is to balance the power between these creatures so they may keep each other in check.”

Stiles rolls that over in his mind with a thoughtful frown. “So a Werecat would do its hunting on a New Moon because it’s most likely to...survive or endure confrontation if it ever crossed paths with a Werewolf?”

“Indeed,” Deaton confirms. “There would have to be a heavy population of either for this pattern to occur, otherwise either creature would hunt and thrive at any moment of its choosing. But if they are within proximity, they mainly try to give each other a wide berth, should there be an understanding from either Pack or Pride.”

“Right, because a horde of wolves is called a pack and a group of cats is called a pride and oh my god, I am an idiot,” Stiles says as he sinks his face into his hands. It hits him out of nowhere, like fireworks in his mind. “Oh my god.”

“Is everything okay, Mr. Stilinski?”

“This explains so much, like — you don’t even know. With the hearing and the smelling and the weird like — weird behavior. How did I not notice — how didn’t I see — and there are like dozens of them in one house. Who even — who even does that? In California no less!”
“Mr. Stilinski —”

“And the stuffed animals, well that — okay I still don’t get what that was about but — they kept touching my right hand and — Isaac! Oh my god, Isaac. He looks at them like he can’t be in the same room and oh my god, that cats and dogs comment Laura made. I am an idiot.” Stiles starts pacing. “And Cora, she — because wolves bring food to injured pack members when they can’t — if only to — I’ve read about this stuff! Oh my god, and the — the Leshies, they — they only associate with wolves and Mr. Ravenhill has been a friend to that family for eighty generations, oh my god. I’m freaking out. I’m freaking out. My brother is a possible Werecat and I am freaking out!”

“Mr. Stilinski —”

“God, my dad probably knew — he knew this whole time and he should have told me, oh my god, it’s like a brick in the face how obvious — and I didn’t even — Virtues and Banshees and Leshies and Ghouls and Werecats and Werewolves like what the hell — is everyone in this goddamn town something? There should be a formal warning on the town sign. Like ‘Welcome to Beacon Hills! Population 30,000, but haha, not including all the mythological creatures!’ Like oh my god!”

“Mr. Stilinski,” Deaton intones calmly.

Stiles laughs a little deliriously but he stops pacing. “Werewolves,” he says weakly as he flails his hands. “Werewolves.”

Deaton is looking at him in concern.

“Oh. My. God.” Stiles is suddenly furious. “I’m going to kill Peter. I mean it this time. I swear. This is the last straw. I might not be able to get my hands on some silver bullets but just wait and see what I can do with a silver spoon. He'll wish I —”

“Mr. Stilinski,” Deaton says, louder this time. “If you’re quite finished, I may be able to clear up a few things for you.”

Stiles snaps his mouth shut and gives him his full attention.

“While I understand that this might come as a shock to you, and you seem to already be adapting well, there are others in this town who would not,” Deaton calmly points out. “Because while it may be heavy on the supernatural beings, the quantity of Humans residing in our community still outnumbers them in a threatening way. Do you understand? We can’t afford a panic. Not now while there is still peace.”

Stiles nods dumbly and swallows down his almost-nervous breakdown.

“Good, then I suppose we can end this charade of you coming to me out of general curiosity, and I can stop aiding you with my coincidental knowledge of the supernatural.” Deaton rolls up the left sleeve of his shirt, all the way to his shoulder, and shows Stiles the same kind of symbol of three-conjoined spirals that he recognizes seeing all over the Hale house.

“What’s — what is it?” Stiles asks as he steps closer to study it. “What are you?”

“It’s called a triskelion,” Deaton explains. “Sometimes it represents the three branches of life: Spirit, Mind, and Body. For the Hales, being as they are, it can be a grounding aid, a means to find control when they have no anchor to do so: Alpha, Beta, and Omega. For me, it’s a Druid symbol. It’s what I stand for: Construction, Preservation, and Intellect.”

Stiles inhales carefully before the wind rushes out of him. He says, “You’re a Druid.”
Deaton nods and rolls his sleeve back down.

“And you knew this whole time what I was,” Stiles says without a speck of doubt. He glances up to see Deaton confirm with a nod. “And you also know what’s going on in this town.”

“I have some theories, but I’m merely a helpmeet. I don’t share my insight unless called upon to do so, and I don’t interfere because that is no longer the way of my people. Perhaps, one day, when there is time, I’ll tell you why that is.”

Stiles scrubs his face tiredly as he tries to gather his thoughts into something less chaotic and sporadic.

“I can help you,” Deaton says suddenly. “Your abilities as a Virtue are beginning to come to fruition. You’ve noticed it as much as I have. I can teach you how to properly yield and engender them.”

Stiles drops his hands before he lifts them to scrub them through the stubble of his hair. “I don’t know. I don’t know if that’s what I want. It’s — I don’t know. This is a lot to take in,” he admits. He drops his hands again and says, “What about the — Lydia. You said you would see — or did you already know?”

“You and Ms. Martin share a genetic link, therefore you both have the ability to spark each other’s abilities in a number of ways,” Deaton merely says. “If she’s visiting you in your dreams, she may be trying to trigger yours without subconsciously being aware of her intentions to do so.”

“She’s so turned around,” Stiles says. “I want to help her and I don’t know how to. Can I?”

“With patience and understanding,” Deaton confirms. “Let her know that you understand what she is and what this is. Touch is also essential.”

Stiles frowns because that twinges something in his thoughts. “Why? She's...she doesn't like touch.”

“Because of the autism,” Deaton says with a knowing. "That will provide some challenges. Again, patience is key. Touch is a...vital part of a Virtue’s abilities. You see truth through physical actions. Have you noticed?” he asks. “Never mind the fact that you can nearly discern the true nature or intentions of an individual, but with touch, you sense something more.”

Stiles exhales shakily because what Deaton is saying hits home hard. He’s always had what he’s called gut instincts about people. It’s only lately that touching people has become — he’s been trying to ignore it and right it off as something else but — that thing with Mayor Argent just confirms it.

Deaton says, “You might start to see bright threads of gold. Like the lines of Fate. I wont tell you what I mean because each Virtue identifies them differently. If you do, you must tell me because I’ll know for sure what your destined field is, and also because by then the choice of learning how to control and use your abilities or pick a field of your choice will be out of your hands.”

Stiles nods faintly.

Deaton says, “I’ll need pictures.”

Stiles blinks. “What?”

“Of the wounds left on the victims. If you want help identifying what kind of Were was responsible, I’ll need pictures. Do you think you can obtain some?”

“I can — no, my dad is — he could come by with them or you could meet him at the station,” Stiles
suggests.

Deaton shakes his head. “I’m afraid that wouldn’t be safe for either your father nor I. You’re not the only one who knows of what I am.”

Stiles thinks of Mayor Argent. “Okay, I’ll — I’ll get them.”

“Carefully,” Deaton advises. “I’m not the only one being watched.”

Stiles feels something cold and foreboding twist in his gut at that, and he can’t help but to think of Violet and Garret. “Mayor Argent adopted those kids to — spy on me, didn’t he?”

“More like to keep track of a potential investment,” Deaton clarifies. “As such, again I would remind you to be careful. We wouldn’t want you to fall into the wrong hands.”

“Right,” Stiles says and he feels a headache start to build between his eyes. “I should — I’m gonna go and see about Lydia.”

“You’ll run into my sister. Just make her aware that you know,” Deaton suggests. “You’ll have met her already. She’s the one who saw to Isaac’s adoption.”

“Ms. Morrell?” Stiles says and he tries not to be surprised when Deaton nods. “Right. Why wouldn’t she be involved?” he mutters, a little annoyed. He says, “Does Isaac know what he is?”

“That should be a conversation between the two of you, don’t you think?” Deaton counters before he picks up his book and disappears into the back.

Stiles exhales tiredly before he scrubs at the stubble of his hair and makes his way out of the shop.

There’s a black unmarked Chevrolet Tahoe with tinted windows parked across the street where it wasn’t before.

Stiles unlocks his bike with shaky hands as eyes burn into his back and he quickly mounts his bike to pedal in the opposite direction.

Thankfully, the truck doesn’t follow after him, but it still doesn’t stop him from looking over his shoulder every ten minutes just to be sure.

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Eichen House is just as gloomy and menacing as the last time Stiles pulled up to its black iron gates. He pushes them open and they give with a metallic groan that only adds to the whole creep factor. He rolls his bike up the cracked concrete of the walkway and to the steps. When he reaches the top, he locks his bike and pulls out his phone. He sends a mass text to Laura, Peter, Cora, and Derek that reads: **SO FYI I KNOW ABOUT YOUR FURRY ALTER EGO YOU ANNOYING CABBAGES.**

And just to spite them, Stiles turns his phone off and pockets it. He enters the building and walks up to the front desk to sign-in.

There’s a woman in marigold scrubs with a white hijab on playing scrabble with a dark-skinned man in grey scrubs with a lip, nose, and eyebrow piercing. They look to be in their mid-twenties.

Stiles clears his throat after he signs in and says, “I’m here to see Lydia Martin.”

The woman in the hijab nods and scoots her wheeled chair over to the phone.
A few moments later, Ms. Morrell appears, looking competent and cool as always. “Mr. Stilinski. I thought I made myself clear about the stipulations of your visits. I don’t respond well to people who drop by unannounced.”

“I know. Sorry. But, um — I know,” Stiles says and gives her this sort twitchy look of knowing, which he hopes she can translate into something feasible.

Ms. Morrell just blinks at him before she says, “Follow me.” She clicks her way down the hall leading to the stairwell.

Stiles stumbles after her and when he catches up, he says, “So I met your brother — Alan?”

Ms. Morrell doesn’t look at him as she mutters, “Brother.” A cold smirk passes over her face before completely vanishing. ”Yes, Mr. Stilinski. I can tell.” Then she adds, “I’m guessing you’ve become aware of Beacon Hills’ rather preternatural situation.”

“Yup, yes, yeah — I totally — I’m all caught up. Kind of?” Stiles follows her up to the fourth floor and to the end of the hall.

Ms. Morrell pauses outside of Lydia’s door and says, “Fifteen minutes. No more than that. It may not seem like it but she’s actually safe here while she’s under my watch and I won’t have you jeopardizing that. I consider her my ward. Are we clear?”

“Crystal,” Stiles says quickly because she’s kinda very intimidating.

“Good.” Ms. Morrell unlocks the door and steps back so Stiles can enter. “Lydia, your cousin is here to see you.” She closes and locks the door after Stiles enters. “Fifteen minutes. Clock starts now.”

Stiles waits until he hears the sound of her heels clicking away before he really observes the room. It’s much the same as before, but the sketches on the wall look newly drawn. There are charcoal pictures of a large tree with a face carved into it. Pictures of the different phases of the moon. Pictures of fireflies. Pictures of Dragons immersed in fire. Pictures of graveyards. Pictures of eyes staring angrily into nothing and everything at the same time.

Lydia is sitting at the desk facing the wall with the barred window above. She’s wearing a bright red lace silk dress with nude stockings, no shoes, and that same black birdcage funeral veil pinned to her hair (which is pinned into a low sailor’s knot bun).

There’s a dark mahogany old time radio at the right corner of the desk with it’s back to the wall and the sound of it’s static floats through the room almost like an endless ghostly song.

Stiles approaches Lydia and sees that she’s knitting dead flowers into fuchsia-colored yarn patterned into a hang rope. He probably would have been worried if it weren’t so small and clearly not made to fit her neck. “Lydia,” he says as he sits on the end of her neatly made bed.

Lydia doesn’t even acknowledge him.

“Lydia, it’s — it’s Stiles.”

Lydia doesn’t pause her needlework.

"Yeah. Pretty stupid thing to say. You know who I am as much as you know who you are.”

Lydia grabs another dead flower to add to another part of the knitted yarn.
The radio continues to hiss with white noise in the background.

Stiles takes a moment to think. He says, “I know what you are. I have a feeling you do too. You’re smart, I know you are. I just — I think maybe you tried to ignore it all because it was scary. I’ve read about Banshees and what they can do and the territory that comes with it. I can see how — I probably would have done the same thing, you know, ignoring it. I’m a fan of ignoring the problem until it goes away, but it never really goes away does it?”

Lydia says nothing; just keeps patterning the dead flowers into the miniature hang rope made of bright fuchsia yarn.

“I’m a Virtue. Whatever that means, I still don’t know. But I think you do,” Stiles supposes. He keeps watching her work. “So I’m sorry it took me so long to realize that we’re cousins. I — look, I figured that our grandmothers must have been sisters on our mother’s side. It’s just too bad we can’t ask to confirm since your mom’s parents are dead and my mom’s parents are dead. And...they’re dead. My mom. Your parents. The only people who could have given us the answers we need about our lineage.”

Lydia pauses her needlework so she can reach across the desk and turn the dial on the radio to switch over to another station, which only turns out to be more white noise. She still hums in satisfaction like she’s found what she’s looking for and goes back to sewing.

Stiles rubs at his temples as the veins in his forehead began to pound painfully. He says, “But maybe we don’t need them to know that we share blood.” He exhales shakily. "I want to help you, Lydia. And by the way you visited me in my dreams, well, I get the feeling you want to help me too. We can — we can help each other. Not just because we’re family. We can — I don’t know. I just want to understand what it is I’m supposed to do.” He drops his hands to his lap with a sigh. “Danny’s in the hospital.”

Lydia goes completely still.

Stiles knows an opportunity when he sees one and he scrambles to say, “His family — all of them — they were ripped apart. They were killed just like —” Yours. He doesn’t say it but the word is still implied.

Lydia’s hands begin to shake and that ethereal wind begins to circulate through the room, making the charcoal sketches flutter with animation.

“Lydia, please. If you know what — if you know who — just, anything that you can tell me. Anything.”

Lydia’s bottom lip begins to tremble as she slowly turns her watery gaze in his direction. Softly, she chants, “Lizzie Borden took an axe. Gave her mother forty whacks. When she saw what she had done, she gave her father forty-one.”

Stiles tries to process the words. “Lydia, I can’t — just tell me what you’re trying to tell me. I can’t with the nursery rhymes. Someone could die and I’d really like to avoid that. So —”

Lydia interjects and repeats, “Lizzie Borden took an axe. Gave her mother forty whacks. When she saw what she had done, she gave her father forty-one.”

Stiles would tear out his hair if it were long enough. “Lydia,” he implores, almost desperately.

Lydia throws down her needlework and grabs his hands with her cold and clammy ones. “Lizzie Borden took an axe. Gave her mother forty whacks. When she saw what she had done, she gave her
father forty-one.”

Stiles’s breath hitches as a flow of energy passes from Lydia to him, and suddenly, in his mind, he can see the face of a man he doesn’t recognize. He’s got silver hair, a slightly aged and wrinkled face with thin lips, a big nose and dark eyes settled under thick eyebrows. It’s something about his eyes that really stands out to Stiles. He’s seen those eyes before.

Ms. Morrell unlocks the door and steps in. She says, “That’s enough. Lydia, let him go. It’s time for him to go.”

Lydia stares at him with desperate and sad eyes. She hesitates before she lets him go and she settles back in her chair, picking up her needlework so she can begin again.

Stiles stares at her. “Who was that?”

Lydia doesn’t respond but her hands keep trembling as she does her stitching.

Stiles opens his mouth to ask again but Ms. Morrell grabs his arm and ushers him out of the room before she locks the door behind them. She then turns a stern eye onto him and says, “Don’t push her like that again.”

“I’m sorry but I’m just trying to avoid more death,” Stiles snaps. He’s frustrated and he doesn’t mean to. "She reached out to me. I didn't make her do anything!"

Ms. Morrell levels him with a look that makes him feel guiltily for losing his temper. “Go home, Mr. Stilinski. You’re no good to anyone like this.” She walks off, heels clicking soundly against the linoleum floors.

Stiles tries to avoid feeling the sting that follows her words but it’s of no use. He swallows and shakes off the deep shiver that’s settling into the marrow of his bones.

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Isaac is sitting at a study cubicle with a manga on the second floor of the Beacon Hills Library when Stiles gets there after he has a quick cry on the side of the road on his way back (the sky rumbling above his head with the threat of rain he knows will not come). It’s not — he’d rather cry than have a panic attack. It’s the lesser of two evils and he does feel better afterwards so there’s something.

Stiles taps Isaac on the shoulder and the preteen stands, but pauses and cocks his head with a thoughtful frown as he really looks at Stiles.

Isaac says, very quietly, “You’ve been crying.”

Stiles shrugs but remains stubbornly silent about it.

"I don't like it when you cry. Who did it?"

Stiles sighs and says, "It doesn't matter." He scrubs a hand over the stubble of his hair before he drags Isaac into the closest study room. He closes the door for privacy and says, “I know.”

Isaac lifts an eyebrow.

“About — you know,” Stiles says, flailing his hands a bit with his words.

Isaac lifts another eyebrow.
“You’re a Werecat,” Stiles says bluntly as he sags against the rounded table behind him.

Isaac doesn’t blush. He doesn’t stiffen. He doesn’t look uncomfortable. He doesn’t react at all like how Stiles figured he might. He just says, “Not entirely.”

Stiles blinks at that.

“I haven’t reached maturity yet,” Isaac explains as he rubs the back of his neck and shifts his feet before adjusting his scarf. “I can still — there’s things I can do. My sense of smell and sound is better than most, and my strength is steadily getting — I kind of broke my doorknob this morning.”

“Oh yeah,” Stiles says as he thinks back. “I was wondering about that.”

Isaac shrugs sheepishly. “I wont be — it won’t fully develop until I turn thirteen. I’m still...normal.”

Stiles processes that. The word makes him feels as uncomfortable as Isaac looks saying it. He says, “I don’t think there’s a such thing as normal anymore. It’s just — being. Does dad know?”

Isaac nods as his gaze gets shifty. “You’re not freaked?” he hedges carefully.

“No. I’m not exactly — just, you don’t have to worry about me looking at you any differently if that’s what worries you. It’s not an issue for me. It’ll take some getting used to, but, you’re still my painfully shy brother,” Stiles assures. "Everything else places as second in importance to that. Always."

Isaac rewards him with a slight grin before his expression goes somber and says, “What happened today? You smell a little — everything. Emotionally, that is.”

Stiles sighs and shrugs. “I’ve come to some rather monumental realizations. And I’ll even own up to doing a little stress crying on the way here.”

Isaac nods with a look of concern.

“I’m fine now. Well. I’m adapting still,” Stiles admits. “You know about the Hales, don’t you?”

Isaac wrinkles his nose like he can’t help it.

Stiles laughs a little. “That’s enough of an answer right there. What’s the deal with that anyway? Do you really not like each other?”

Isaac frowns but he shrugs. “It’s more complicated than that. They smell — not good to me,” he delicately states. “It puts me and my instincts on edge.”

Stiles does his best not to compare this explanation to the stuff he’s read from the Twilight series that one summer he will not mention. He says, “You know, you could’ve told me. Not just about you, but them too. That would have saved me a lot of head scratching.”

Isaac shrugs again, choosing a nonverbal response.

Stiles huffs. He’s so stupidly fond of this kid. “So,” he says. “The fish thing is suddenly really making sense now. Am I allowed to make fun of that or make any general cat jokes? Mostly puns though. I promise they’ll all be in good taste.”

Isaac rolls his eyes at that but there’s a vague hint of something happy and fond working its way onto his scarred facial features. He turns and exits the room.
Stiles follows after him as they make their way out of the library and to their bikes. After they unlock them and mount them, he says, “Do you think you’ll ever tell me what happened when — with your family? To you? The fire? I don’t mean to be — I just wonder sometimes. I want to know everything about you. But it’s fine if you don’t trust — if you don’t want to tell me.”

Isaac tenses and he grips his handlebars tightly. He takes a deep breath and releases it before he says, “I trust you, Stiles. You’re important to me too. Just give me time.”

Stiles nods quietly and that’s the end of that. He says, “I’ve got ten bucks I found because I’m awesomely lucky like that. Race you to the ice cream parlor?” and he takes off without waiting for a response.

Isaac only wins because he’s a cheater.

Stiles makes sure to inform him of this as they sit down in a booth by the window with their creamy blizzard treats.

Isaac just smiles down at his ice cream the whole time that Stiles complains and he doesn’t bother defending himself.

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Talia and his dad are standing out on the porch steps with their cups of coffee when Stiles and Isaac roll up to their house on their mountain bikes.

Stiles feels nothing but curiosity as he drops his bike to the grass and approaches them. He says, “Hey, dad. Mrs. — Talia.”

Talia looks marginally amused at the correction. “Stiles. It’s nice to see you again.” She turns her gaze over to Isaac, who fidgets restlessly from where he’s hiding behind Stiles. “Isaac. You too.”

Isaac doesn’t say anything. He edges towards the front door before he wanders into the house.

His dad looks after him with slight concern before he looks to Stiles. He says, “How did you find out?”

“Find what out?” Stiles says, acting oblivious on purpose.

His dad gives him a look. “Don’t be cute,” he warns.

“I just worked it out while I was with Deaton,” Stiles explains. “He’s a Druid, dad. Did you know?”

His dad simply nods.

Talia is staring at him intently, however. She’s stripping away at him with her hazel eyes and she’s looking beyond him.

It’s a powerful stare and Stiles feels his heart flutter anxiously because of it. She’s got a presence about her that makes Stiles want to — well, he’s not really sure but the urge is strong.

Talia makes a thoughtful sound as she straightens and Stiles can breathe a little easier as she shifts her gaze away and towards his father. “I know Deaton well,” she says and gives his dad her empty coffee cup, which he accepts with no complaint. “If he trusts your son enough to tell him of his status then it must be for a good reason.” She looks to Stiles again. “You know about my family and I?”

Stiles nods slowly.
“What do you think?” Talia asks, and her stare goes intense again and Stiles has to wonder if this is some kind of test. “No need to be nervous. I’m simply asking out of curiosity,” she assures.

Stiles flushes and rubs the back of his head, realizing she can scent his emotions. That’s going to take some getting used to. He says, “I don’t think it’s up to me to think anything. Should I — am I supposed to think something?”

Talia smiles with indulgent patience. “Most people have their opinions, and by all accounts, they have their right to them. It’s the impracticality or the idealization behind the opinion that concerns me. Humans either hate or fear the things they do not understand. Those two emotions can be devastating motivators.”

Stiles considers her words with a deep amount of thought and consideration. He knows she’s talking about history and how it’s shown when discrimination over dissimilarities have driven mankind to act in the most gruesome and horrific ways. The Hales have a good reason to be as private and as careful as they have been. He thinks about the way that Hollywood and the rest of the world’s media have portrayed mythical creatures. It’s never been completely positive. There’s always been doubt — always an assertion of Human superiority — the idea that being Human overcomes all the evils of differences in species instead of the concept of acceptance and understanding.

It’s disconcerting.

“I want to ask you again,” Talia says, interrupting the flow of his thoughts. “Knowing what little you do about what I can do and nothing else. What do you think?”

Stiles feels like his answer should matter. She wants to know if he can be trusted with their most sacred secrets. He says, “I think I’ll have to ask questions that I’ve never had to ask before, but not because I’m afraid or anything like that, but because I want to understand. I want to be — sensitive, I guess, to the cultural differences. It’s all — it’s more about culture than it is about species, right? I mean, because learning about a species is just learning about the barriers that separates everyone and everything, but understanding culture is about making sure we recognize and appreciate those distinctions. Am I making sense?”

Talia and his dad both look pleased with his answer. She says, “You speak with age old wisdom, Stiles. Has anyone ever told you that? I can see why my brother Peter continues to seek out your counsel.”

Stiles flushes and fidgets.

Talia leans towards his dad, touching a hand to his elbow as she whispers something in his ear. His father goes from looking surprised, to intrigued, and finally amused before he nods.

Talia is smiling when she pulls away, and she carries that smile as she looks to Stiles. “I imagine my family and I would very much enjoy a bit of your company for a night or two. I believe it’ll be an educational bonding experience.”


“We should be on our way then. You needn’t worry about a change of clothes, I’m sure we’ll find something for you,” Talia says as she herds him towards her BMW X1, which is parked behind his dad’s squad car.

“Behave,” his dad says as Isaac reappears with an unhappy frown and his dad pats him comfortingly on the crown of his head when it looks like Isaac is about to climb in the car after Stiles. “Call me
before you settle down.”

Stiles nods and waves at them both as he slides into the passenger seat, sighing at how comfortable the leather feels against this body. The car smells heavily of jasmine and he wonders if it’s a smell that’s unique to the Hales as a whole or to Talia in general.

Talia pulls out of the driveway and starts for the preserve. She turns on her digital radio but turns the volume really low.

Stiles figures it’s because her hearing is so sensitive.

Talia says, “You have some questions.”

Stiles looks over at her but her gaze is married to the road ahead of them. He says, “I — maybe a few.”

“Ask them.”

Stiles straightens in his seat and asks, “You follow pack dynamics?”

Talia nods.

“Does that mean — are you the Alpha?”


“Okay, cool.” Stiles shifts in his seat. “What does that make everyone else?”

“In my pack, they would be my Betas.” Talia puts on her blinker as she makes a right at red light. “Outside of that, just family.”

“So they can choose to be in your pack if they wanted to?” Stiles asks.

Talia nods. “Being pack is — it’s a choice, sometimes. Other times, well, that’s a little more complex. Depending on the situation, often when it’s life-threatening, the choice will have to be made on a whim.”

“How did you become Alpha?”

Talia smiles softly at his curiosity and says, “I inherited the power on my eighteenth birthday, as is the circumstance for born wolves.”

“So that means it can be taken or given? Is it mostly females that inherit the power?”

“The eldest daughter of an Alpha in each coupling often will inherit the power. In more rare circumstances, our sons will, but that’s not always the case since they would have to take the power forcefully or by misfortune. In saying that, the power can also be achieved if one kills an Alpha.”

Talia stops at the last red light that comes before the long stretch of road that divides both sides of the preserve.

Stiles asks, “So Laura...does that mean she’ll become an Alpha when she turns eighteen? Is she eighteen already? How do you know the difference between types?”

“Laura will become an Alpha when she turns eighteen, much to her bereavement. She’s a work in progress,” Talia says with a worrying sigh. “We know the difference between each other by smell and also by eye color.”
Stiles breath hitches in awe when she looks over at him with red eyes. “Cool,” is his lame reaction because he’s too stumped to think of anything else to say.

Talia blinks and her eyes resume color. “Very,” she agrees with vague amusement. She says, “Alpha eyes are red. Betas and Omegas are gold. Sometimes blue, but there is a special case for that.”

Stiles nods eagerly as they pull onto a private trail. “You said wolves are born. Is everyone a Werewolf?”

“No. Not everyone. We have Humans in the pack. In the family.”

Stiles takes that into consideration. “Can they be turned if they wanted?”

“Yes. The Bite is a gift,” Talia says instantly, almost like it's second nature.

“Could anyone ask for it?” Stiles asks because he just wants to know.

Talia shoots him a curious look before she pays attention to the trail ahead of them. “Outside of family, we try to avoid doing so. It — there can be some complications. The Bite does not always take for Humans.”

Stiles goes quiet at that and his mind races to compare what Talia has told him and what he’s read mainly from gothic horror and fantasy literature. He says, “Do you — do you know what I am?”

Talia says, “Yes. But only because my first husband was a Virtue.”

Stiles blinks at that. He never would have guessed. He wants to ask, but he doesn’t because it doesn’t seem appropriate. He instead says, “Does everyone know?”

Talia waits a moment before she says, “Outside of Laura and myself, no. Rest assured, you’re identity is safe with us.”

Stiles says nothing to that. He’s not sure how to place how he feels. He’ll have to think about it later. For now, he says, “Is Peter trying to make me Pack? I feel like I’m being scented or — I’m not sure what you call it and I don’t want to assume. It’s just that he’s been —”

“I’m aware of what Peter’s been doing,” Talia gently interjects as they turn down the drive that leads to the house. “It’s instinctual. Oftentimes we identify potential pack members by a way of — there are no human words to fully explain this. You do share a connection with our family that goes beyond the rationalization of Human relationships. Perhaps the more time you spend with us, the more it will become clear. We consider you to be as close to Pack as one can be without the legitimization. The decision to solidify the link will always be left to you.” She pulls around the house and into a garage full of nicely new cars.

Stiles climbs out when she comes to a full stop.

Talia makes her way around the car and stands before him. “You should know that they are aware you know of what we are. They’ll treat you accordingly, with your permission. We are very tactile, and I don’t want you to be uncomfortable. We communicate a lot through touch and through scenting. If it bothers you, I’ll talk to them.”

Stiles shakes his head no. He doesn’t want to mess this up because this feels pretty important. He’s curious enough to want to understand their culture. It’s a rarity he’s not looking to take for granted. He says, “If I — if there are some limits I have that I don’t already know, I’ll say something.”
Talia nods solemnly before she rests a warm palm against the back of his neck and squeezes comforting. “Come then,” she says and guides him to the side door that opens to a crowded kitchen full of kids.

Stiles recognizes some of them by face and then by name but Talia still reintroduces him.

All of them hedge closer, looking at Talia with wide eyes and when she nods, they ambush Stiles and tackle him onto the floor.

“Easy, easy,” Talia instructs the horde of Hale kids with firm and guiding hands. “Be gentle. You need only — ah, there, like that. No licking or biting.”

Stiles can only lie there in amusement as the little ones squirm against him, hugging each of his limbs to their unnaturally warm bodies as they growl in satisfaction. Some of them stick their nose in odd places like by his ankles or his armpits or his ears. This silent exchange lasts no more than three minutes and Talia monitors the activity very closely, often with a tickled tone and a tender grin. One by one they clamor off of him when they’re satisfied with the scenting and they go back to whatever it is they were doing before (homework, baking, wrestling, etc).

Talia offers him her right palm and he takes it with his own because he feels like that’s what he’s supposed to do. She says, “Right hand is for greeting family and friends. Contact with the left hand is to signify a more profound intimacy, as one would have with their significant other, or their intended. So unless you plan on proposing, I would advise you to avoid making that kind of contact.” She cups a hand over the back of his neck. “I prefer to leave my scent-mark here to distinguish myself from the others as Alpha,” she goes on to explain as she gives the back of his neck a light squeeze with her right hand. "Most of our scent glands are in our hands. We are able to secrete different types of pheromones and other semiochemical compounds at will, whether it's something light or something loud. It's how we are able to leave long-lasting scents. Our right hands have odor-messengers which indicate information such as status, affection, and territorial marking. Our left hands, which is why it's important not to make contact unless it is on purpose, have odor-messengers indicate information such as mood and levels of sexual interest."

Stiles nods to let her know that he understands.

Talia guides him to the living room where some of the elder family members are. They greet Stiles warmly and much the same way as last time with each of them looming in his space before they dart a glance towards Talia, who gives a subtle nod before they touch his right hand with their own right hand in a firm grip. Unlike last time though, they touch their nose to the back of his hand briefly before they let go. On and on this pattern continues through a line of cousins, uncles, aunts, sisters, brothers — one after the other.

Nana Hale is the last person he comes to and she smiles at him kindly as she says, “You’re very handsome. I’m sorry I didn’t make mention of that the last time you were here.”

Stiles feels his cheeks grow a little red. “Thank you. I — you’re really pretty. Your hair is — it’s like threads of lightning.”

Nana Hale barks out a laugh as the rest of them follow. “Oh, I like this one, Talia. We must keep him close.”

“We’ll do what we can, Nana,” Talia replies, amused.

Nana Hale kisses the back of Stiles’s right hand before patting it sweetly. “Go on then. You’ll find Peter, Laura, Cora, and Derek out by the river with the dogs. They’ve been yammering on about you
all day. I’m sure they’ll be happy to see you.”

The color in Stiles’s cheeks deepen as they all shoot each other amused glances that he knows he has no chance of understanding.

Talia walks him to the front door and then out before she releases him and says, “Remind them that dinner is in an hour.”

Stiles nods before he goes stumbling down the steps with a garbled curse.

Talia looks on with amused concern. “Stiles, please be careful. Should I worry?”

Stiles’s blush brightens and he rights himself before turning to walk backwards so he can shoot her a sheepish smile. “Uh, no. I — I’ll be fine.” He trips over a rock and falls on his butt. “I’m fine!” he insists as he scrambles to his feet.

Talia says nothing but she watches him disappear into the thrush of the forest with quiet but fond mirth.

Stiles replicates the trail he and Derek walked the last time he was out here, and in no time he hears laughter and the sounds of joyful barking. He picks up the pace and stumbles his way through some bushes.

Peter is standing on the bank with Derek as they toss rocks across the expanse of the gentle stream where some of the more full-grown Tibetan Mastiffs are splashing around.

Cora is running around with a small group of dogs, playfully chasing them and being chased.

Laura is lying on her back with her hands behind her head as though she were sunbathing, feigning complete obliviousness to the fact that some of the puppies are whining softly as they clamor all over her, butting her cheek with their wet nose or wrestling each other on her chest, stomach, and legs.

“Your mom says dinner is in an hour,” Stiles announces as he draws closer to them. “And also — you guys suck by the way.”

None of them seem surprised to see him. He was probably stumbling around really loudly on the way to them.

“You suck for taking so long to figure it out,” Laura retorts, sitting up and causing a couple puppies to slide off of her and roll onto the grass with an annoyed yip. “What’s the word I’m looking for? Help me out here guys?”

“Willful ignorance?” Cora offers as she tosses a stick and watches some of the dogs run after it.

“Conscious obliviousness,” Peter says as he tosses another rock skillfully.

Laura says, “Determined unawareness.”

“Yeah, that sounds accurate,” Derek agrees as he skips a rock across the river. It jumps across the stream six times before it sinks.

Stiles looks at all of them meanly. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize I was supposed to realize you were Werewolves. Is that something you try to make obvious to everyone?”

“Only the ones we really like,” Peter promises and Derek snorts, as does Cora and Laura.
Stiles rolls his eyes and gives up on the argument as Jordan jogs up to him and presses his wet nose against his right hand curiously before he gives him a happy lick. It’s not long before the rest of them come over to do the same and he makes it a point to pet every single of them while feeling like some kind of canine king with the way they surround him dotingly.

They eventually disperse and continue their jovial activities but Jordan sticks close to Stiles, looking as if he has no intention of leaving Stiles’s side.

Stiles doesn’t mind. He likes Jordan, even if the dog does remind him a bit of Derek (he’s a lot nicer and affectionate though). He says, “So can you guys do the full Wolfman or — how does it work?”

Laura stands and brushes herself off. She stalks toward him with a mischievous grin. “Would you like to see?”

“Well, sure, if you’re not going to eat me or anything,” Stiles says, feeling the need to make that very clear.

“Don’t be stupid,” Cora says, sounding a little offended.

Stiles says, “Sorry.”

Laura circles him as she slowly shifts in different degrees (her facial features taking on more canine characteristics) and Stiles watches the process with widened eyes. When she’s fully transformed, she stands before him with golden eyes, elongated fangs, claws, pointed ears and no eyebrows.

“Why don’t you have eyebrows?” is what Stiles says because this is Stiles and why wouldn’t he say that?

Laura growls but it sounds suspiciously like a laugh.

Cora falls to the ground because she’s cackling so hard. Some of the dogs bark curiously at the sound and begin to jump all over her.

Derek’s got that look on his face again. The look that says he’s amused but he also thinks that Stiles is the craziest weirdo.

“Isn’t it interesting that out of the millions of questions he could be asking, he goes with the real winner and asks, ‘Where are your eyebrows?’ Wow.” Peter eases his way over with his hands in his pockets and a pompous smirk. “What a time to be alive.”

“Shut up,” Stiles says and watches as Laura shift back. “That was — whoa.”

“Pretty much sums it up,” Laura agrees with an amused grin. She plucks at the graphic of Captain America’s shield resting at the middle of his chest and says, “Nice hoodie.”

“Yeah? The person that got it for me has amazing taste,” Stiles replies with a half-grin.

Laura winks before she pulls him into a one-shouldered hug. Seeing as she has a few inches on him, she ducks her head down and presses her nose against the stubble of his hair with a thoughtful sound.

Peter walks over, hugs Stiles’s right arm, and then noses over Stiles’s collarbone through the fabric of his hoodie as Cora wanders over and presses against Stiles’s back before she hides her face against his left shoulder blade.
Stiles doesn’t say anything because he can pretty much tell what’s going on.

Derek turns away and continues to skip rocks, ignoring them completely.

The scenting with Cora, Laura, and Peter lasts approximately five minutes, maybe more, maybe less. He’s not good with time. Eventually they all pull away at the exact same moment with satisfied sounds before they disperse.

Laura loops her arm with Cora's before she says, “Oh yeah. Peter?”

Peter whistles sharply and all the dogs line up behind him. He moves his eyes over them like he’s silently counting and when he’s satisfied that they’re all there, he looks at Laura with a raised brow.

Laura says, “Kira.” and wiggles her eyebrows meaningfully.

Peter suddenly smirks, “Ah, thanks for reminding me.” He looks at Stiles. “So I hear you’ve made a new friend.”

“Sure.”

“She’s a pretty young lady?” Peter questions. "Easy on the eyes?"

Stiles narrows his eyes. “Sure.”

Peter hums noncommittally. “Well, I won’t spell it out for him. This’ll be much more interesting to watch if we just let things progress naturally.”

Laura snorts and Cora looks as confused as Stiles does. Cora says, “What the hell are you guys talking about?”

Laura pulls Cora along and says, “You know how Stiles can be adorably oblivious?”

Stiles says, “Hey! Stop calling me adorable!”

Laura ignores him as she and Cora disappear into the throng of trees to continue this line of conversation.

Peter huffs and as he follows after him with all the dogs.

Stiles is left alone with Derek, who is still skipping rocks. He walks over and says, “So. Um. How are you?”

Derek shrugs and tosses another rock. “Getting there,” he admits. "Or trying to."

“Right,” Stiles says for the better lack of having anything else to say.

Derek glances at him and says, “You don’t have to do that.”

“Do what? What am I doing? What's being done?”

Derek rolls his eyes and skips another rock as he says, “Act like you have to walk on eggshells around me. I get enough of that from my family. I’m not damaged or anything.”

“Never thought you were,” Stiles admits. “I’m just — I can be awkward sometimes. Didn't want to say the wrong thing. I’m bad with social cues.”
Derek frowns and looks at him. “You don’t seem like it.”

“Don’t I, though? You’re always calling me odd.” Stiles points out as he watches the other teen huff.

Derek grabs his left hand and drops some rocks onto his palm. “That’s because you are odd. That’s got nothing to do with your awkwardness or whatever. You’re not like — you’re just different. I meant it when I said I never met anyone like you. But I never meant it in a bad way.”

“Oh,” Stiles says weakly as he clenches the smooth stones in his hand.

"Yeah," Derek replies as he eyes him.

Stiles fidgets and says, “I don’t know how to skip rocks.”

“Not that hard,” Derek merely says as he releases Stiles’s wrist. “You just kind of cock your hip and flick your wrist. Like this.” He gives a demonstration.

Stiles tries to imitate it and fails. “Look at that. I suck. Who knew?”

"Don't be so negative."

"Fine, I'll be just medium negative then," Stiles snarks.

Derek rolls his eyes. "Just try again."

Stiles sighs and does. He fails. Again. "I don’t want to do this. Why do I have to do this?"

Derek shrugs but he keeps tossing rocks with an amused and slightly mean grin.

Stiles sticks his tongue out at him and steps back as he gives it another try. Nothing. “I don’t like this,” he repeats.

“You make a habit of not liking things you don’t know how to do?” Derek asks as he keeps tossing rocks like a pro.

Stiles makes a face at the back of his head. “Well, it would describe my relationship with math very accurately.”

Derek goes quiet and Stiles wonders if he’s said the wrong thing. Derek drops the remaining rocks in his hand and says, with a blank face, “Have you heard from Paige?”

“Uh, no,” Stiles says, startled by the question. “Why —”

“If you still need a tutor for math, I’ll do it,” Derek interjects before Stiles can even get the question out. “If you want.”

Stiles blinks at the offer, surprised. He says, “Do I want to be tutored by the Werewolf who could possibly be taking college level math by the time he becomes a junior? Is that what you’re seriously asking me?”

Derek rubs his nose with his left hand in a gesture that would normally be considered a sign of awkwardness, but is clearly only a way of hiding his smug grin and he says nothing.

Stiles rolls his eyes and says, “I have ADHD.”

“I know. Paige mentioned it.” Derek drops his hand from his face and something that looks
complicated and painful flutters across his expression. He straightens and continues, “Sometimes you have this smell and it’s — you take medicine for it, right?”

Stiles nods.

Derek goes thoughtfully silent for a moment. Then he opens his mouth to say something but his head whips towards the trees with a furrowed brow. His head cocks before he flushes suddenly with a scowl. “Shut up,” he growls.

Stiles lifts his eyebrows and says, “I didn’t even —”

“All you,” Derek says as his flush dies down. He rolls his eyes before he looks back to Stiles. He still seems a little embarrassed and annoyed. “Laura’s being a — never mind. She says dinner is ready.” He begins to head toward the house.

Stiles stumbles after Derek as he keeps up a quick pace. When he manages to catch up, even after falling flat on his face when his foot gets caught by a tree root, he says, “So, this tutoring thing. Can we circle back to that for a moment?”

Derek slows down a little and glances over at him with a brow lifted in question.

“We’ll need to get it like some permission to — I just mean, Mrs. Argent is the one who set me up with Paige. I think it’s — she should know I want to swap and — that general stuff.” Stiles fumbles over a rock but manages to right himself before he falls flat on his face again. He glares at the ground and then at his own feet.

Derek huffs in amusement.

Stiles says, “Also, if you’re going to be tutoring me, please don’t give me any basketball related scenarios. Seriously. That’s a deal breaker.”

Derek frowns like he totally was going to do just that and Stiles just ruined all his future plans.

Stiles laughs and says, “Oh my god, you totally were, weren’t you? You’re such a goober.”

“You sound like Laura. Please stop,” Derek complains as they reach the house.

“I like Laura. I don’t mind it,” Stiles counters and smiles when Laura appears out of nowhere when they enter the house and high-fives him with a wink.

Derek glares at both of them before he sulks off into the dining room like the moody teenager he is.

Laura just throws an arm over Stiles’s shoulders and says, “He’s just jealous of our bond.”

Stiles scoffs. “Yeah. Totally.”

Laura pauses as she looks towards the dining room. Her lips spread into a sly smile. “That’s not very nice, little brother,” she says.

Stiles frowns. “What? What did he say?”

Laura shakes her head and ushers him into the dining room so they can take a seat at the crowded table. She puts him between Nana Hale and Cora, who is holding her sleeping infant sister (Olive). Then Laura drops a kiss onto Nana Hale’s cheek before she wanders around the table to sit down at the middle of the table between Peter and Derek.
Nana Hale smiles at him briefly before she addresses her grandson-in law (Derek Sr.), who is sitting next to his wife, Talia, at the head of the table.

Everyone starts fixing their plates but Stiles glances to his right where Cora is and looks down at Olive, tracing his eyes over her little button nose, frowning lips and thick twitching eyelashes. She looks so much like a mixture between Cora and Derek that it’s unreal.

Cora catches him looking and says, “Want to hold her?”

Stiles starts to say no because he’s never ever held a baby before and he’s not even sure if he’s qualified to do so anytime soon but Cora is already sliding the little warm bundle in his arms. He freezes and tries not to panic when Olive starts to squirm.

Cora rolls her eyes and says, “Relax, dumbass. She’s just a baby.”

“Right,” Stiles says weakly and quietly starts to panic.

Derek looks over at him suddenly and Stiles vaguely realizes that his heart must be going haywire in his chest.

Cora strokes a hand down between his shoulder blades, making him straighten his posture and says, “Relax or you’ll freak her out too.”

Stiles shifts his arms in a more comfortable position as he exhales out the side of his mouth and focuses on calming his heartbeat before he hugs Olive close. She’s wrapped in a thin cotton white swaddle with an illustration of cherries patterned all over. Her tiny fists are covered with matching mittens and licks of dark and curly hair are peeking out from under the edge of the white cap she’s wearing. She stops squirming when his heartbeat resumes its normal pace, mostly because he’s too busy staring at how absolutely gorgeous she is, or how tiny and warm she feels in his arms, or how she smells so much of jasmine like her mother.

Stiles just really hopes he doesn’t cry because he may or may not be having a moment here and this isn’t even his kid. He blinks quickly as Olive turns her nose more towards his chest, namely the direction of his heartbeat with the cutest yawn he’s ever seen, and oh god, he might cry. He’s going a bit misty-eyed.

Cora looks over at him sharply, obviously because she can smell the salt lining his eyes and says, “Are you okay?”

Stiles colors a bit, totally caught.

Derek is staring at him intently from where he’s sitting and it’s not helping his blush at all.

“I’m fine,” Stiles croaks and quickly clears his throat. “Just — I never held a baby before.”

Nana Hale pats his thigh and says, “Don’t worry, dear. It happens to the best of us the first time. Peter wouldn’t stop crying the first time he held Laura in his arms.”

Something absolutely amazing happens. Peter makes this choked sound as he flushes and he hisses, “Nana. You promised not to ever bring that — oh, don’t you dare get smug, you smell insufferable, Laura.”

Laura puts a hand over her heart, feigning a look of flattery. “Awe, but Uncle Peter. That’s so very sweet —”
“Shut up,” Peter snarls but it loses its edge because he’s still flushing. He adds, when everyone starts to snicker, "You all are absolutely intolerable."

Stiles laughs as softly as he can since he’s holding Olive and he marks this moment as one to remember forever.

Peter glares at him with a look of betrayal and everyone at the table starts really chuckling.

Stiles rocks Olive a little as he holds her a little while longer before Derek takes her away so that Stiles can eat. Does he eat quickly and very little just so he can steal Olive back? Yes, and he’s not ashamed to admit it. He even dismisses dessert in order to beg Derek to let him hold her again.

Derek rolls his eyes but he hands Olive over with an amused grin before he reaches across the table to cut himself a ridiculously large slice of strawberry cheesecake.

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Stiles ends up in Derek’s room by the end of the night with Olive still in his arms because he’d asked Talia if he could hold her a little while longer and she’d agreed with this soft smile before Derek dragged him away.

Stiles moves to sit on the floor at the edge of the bed but Derek looks at him sharply and says, “Don’t sit on the floor with her. You can sit on my bed.”

“I didn’t want to intrude,” Stiles explains and moves very carefully with Olive as he settles on the middle of the bed.

Derek says, “You’re in my room. You’re already intruding.”

Stiles open his mouths to reply.

“That was a joke,” Derek adds before he can even get the chance to say anything.

Stiles huffs and watches as Derek hooks a pull-up bar onto the top of the doorway of his shared bathroom and removes his shirt before he begins to do a set of pull-ups. Stiles looks away quickly and down at Olive, who is still resting peacefully in his arms.

Derek does what sounds like a million pull-ups before he drops down to his feet to lower himself to the floor to do some push-ups.

Stiles arms are getting a bit tired at this point so he twists to the side of the bed and drops his socked feet to the carpeted floor before he leans back carefully until his back is touching the mattress. He shifts Olive onto her stomach as gently as possible and shifts her closer to his heartbeat because she seems to be soothed by the sound. He rests his palm over her back and stares up at the ceiling.

Jordan squeezes through the crack of the open door and hops up onto the bed with Stiles, sniffing at him before sniffing at Olive. He exhales abruptly and falls onto his side, pressing back against Stiles’s side as his tail wags lazily, whacking Stiles’s knee as he watches Derek grunt with his continuous up and down motion on the floor.

Stiles doesn’t remember falling asleep but he does and wakes when Derek’s dad is carefully extracting Olive from his chest. He says, “Sorry. Her mother’s ready to feed her and put her down for the night.”

Stiles sits up and rubs tiredly at his eyes with a nod.
Derek is sitting on the space before his TV with Jordan curled up beside him as he plays some kind of war game that Stiles immediately identifies as the zombies feature of *Call of Duty* with a headset.

Derek Sr. tucks Olive in the groove of his left arm and he uses his right hand to pat Stiles’s on the shoulder with a kind grin before he wanders over to cuff Derek over the head.

“Dad,” Derek complains distractedly as he removes his headset and pauses the video game. “You almost killed me.”

“Tough,” Derek Sr. merely says. “Say goodnight to your sister. We’re going upstairs.”

Derek stands and brushes his nose against Olive’s before he brushes a hand over her head with tender consideration. He pulls back and touches his forehead to his dad’s.

Derek Sr. starts to exit the room. “Night boys,” he says before he shuts the door softly behind him.

Stiles waits until Derek is settled on the floor in front of his TV before he asks, “Is your dad a Werewolf? He doesn’t carry himself like — he doesn’t seem — um, I don’t know.” He doesn’t mention that his touch felt different from the others, and much more like the touch of Hale members who Talia had pointed out as Human to him.

“Dad’s a Human,” Derek clarifies before he puts his headset back on. He doesn’t take the game off of pause yet. “Why?”

“Just curious,” Stiles admits. “Is he — is he Laura’s dad too?”

“No,” Derek says and he takes the game off of pause, making it very clear that the conversation is over. “Braeden, where are you? We gonna do this campaign or what?”

Stiles labels the subject of Laura’s dad as off-limits before he watches Derek play *Call of Duty* while he fusses and complains into the mic of his headset at someone named Braeden.

After a while, Stiles tucks away into the bathroom and fishes for his phone, turning it on. He sees a few notifications from missed calls and texts. Some from Scott and others from Allison that tell him that Danny is in stable condition but they still have him under to progress his recovery. The other texts are from when he sent that mass text to Laura, Cora, Peter, and Derek. He deletes it all before he sends a mass text to Boyd, Jackson, Allison, and Scott to inform him all that he’s learned from Deaton and his visit with Lydia. Lastly, he calls his dad.

“I was wondering if you’d forgotten about me,” his dad lightly jokes.

“Never,” Stiles promises. “How are things at home? You guys better not be loading up on junk food.”

“I wish. Isaac made us a Cobb salad. He said something about how you wouldn’t forgive him if he let me order a pizza,” his dad says, sounding both amused and annoyed. “I don’t think I like how you’re both conspiring against me.”

Stiles rolls his eyes. “Dad, please.” Then he says, “Listen, I need a favor.”

“What kind of favor?”

“Deaton wants pictures of some of the victims. He says if he could see the wounds, he’d be able to tell us what did it,” Stiles explains.
His dad goes quiet on the other end before he sighs and says, “Give me a few days, I'll see what I can string together.”

Stiles nods and remembers that his dad can’t see. He says, “Okay. Thanks.”

“Goodnight,” his dad says.

“Goodnight.” Stiles sends Isaac a quick text that says ‘goodnight’ after his dad hangs up and he pockets his phone before he walks over to Cora’s door on the other side of the bathroom. He knocks and waits.

A medium-sized Tibetan Mastiff with red fur hops up excitedly at Stiles, trying to lick his face when Cora opens the door. She says, “Ginger, chill.”

Ginger whines at Cora like she’s making a complaint before she wanders back over to Cora’s bed and squeezes under it to hide from view.

Cora rolls her eyes and mutters, “Drama queen.” Then she drags Stiles into her room before slamming the door shut behind him. “We’re watching Ghostbusters,” she says and indicates to the totally cool looking indoor balcony above her bed that has a sea of pillows on the floor of it and an entertainment system mounted to the wall.

Stiles follows her up the white ladder that leads to the balcony and he has to carefully step over and around Cora’s younger cousins to find a space of his own. He grabs a silk throw pillow and hugs it to his chest as he lies on his stomach while Cora cuts the lights before turning the movie back on.

Bowls of popcorn and candy get passed around as Cora settles down beside him, close enough that their shoulders touch. She fusses at her cousins and shushes them when they get too loud, talking through important points in the movie.

Stiles finds it amusing and he snickers at how into the movie Cora is and how easily annoyed she gets when someone starts talking.

Cora kicks him lightly a few times every time he chuckles but she mostly divides her time between glaring at her cousins and her flat screen TV.

Midway through Ghostbusters II, Ginger worms her way between him and Cora.

Cora complains, “Tyson! I told you not to bring her up.”

“You little dweeb. Of course she was. She smells the food, you butthole!” Cora snaps as she pulls the bowl of popcorn out of Ginger’s reach.

"Hey! You're the butthole, Cora!"

"Oh shut up."

"You!"

Stiles smiles, watching them wrestle playfully before he shifts away and falls asleep. He wakes up boiling a couple hours later (around midnight) when the house is dead and quiet and he’s crammed between and under some uncomfortably warm bodies. He has to squirm free so he can pull his hoodie off for some relief. It doesn’t help much and he figures he might as well extract himself
completely from this puppy pile. He does with some trouble and quietly crawls over to the ladder and down it before he tiptoes out of the room, through Cora’s shared bathroom and over to Derek’s room.

Derek is still up, leaning back against a pile of his pillows at the head of his bed in the dark of his room with nothing but the glow of his muted TV flashing shadows across the walls and the posters on them. He’s playing NBA 2K14 and Stiles is not even surprised.

“Don’t you sleep?” Stiles asks quietly as he closes the bathroom door behind him.

Derek shrugs distractedly. “Not really a pressing need when it’s the weekend,” he points out softly.

“You couldn’t sleep?”

“I woke up under an avalanche of your family. Too hot,” Stiles whispers as he wanders over to the bed and sits on the floor at the edge of it. He frowns when Derek throws a pillow at his head. “Okay, rude.”

“You don’t have to sit on the floor,” Derek says and there is a definite eye roll in his tone that Stiles does not appreciate. “You can come up here with me. My bed’s big enough.”

Stiles leaves his hoodie on the floor as he crawls over to the other side of Jordan, who is sound asleep with his back pressed to the side of Derek’s right leg.

“Wanna play?” Derek asks after he finishes a game (which he wins).

“So I can get creamed? No thanks,” Stiles says as he makes himself comfortable over Derek’s covers and his pillows.

“You too chicken?” Derek teases with a distractingly smug grin.

“No, me Stiles.”

Derek rolls his eyes but huffs out a laugh. “Come on. Just one game. I’ll go easy on you.”

“Why?” Stiles complains as he starts to drift. It’s the smell of vanilla. He’s too used to falling asleep to that smell and Derek’s bed is so unfairly comfortable. “I’m sleeping now.”

“Not until you play me.”

Stiles frowns. “What’s with you trying to get me into basketball?”

“I pity you,” Derek says, jostling the bed as he slides off and goes to grab another controller. He climbs back onto the bed and hands it over.

Stiles takes it and grumbles unintelligibly. He sits up a little with a yawn, and while they’re picking teams, he says, “What’s the team you hate the most?”

“Spurs,” Derek says, almost like it’s second nature, but then he shoots Stiles a look of suspicion.

“Why?”

“Cause that’s the team I’m picking,” Stiles merely says and he does just that.

Derek scoffs and selects the Lakers as his team of choice which is no surprise at all because he’s not subtle at all when it comes to basketball and of course he’d choose that team out of some misguided sense of loyalty.
Stiles grins midway through the first game while Derek curses with transparent confusion. He takes pity on the other teen and says, “I forgot to mention that I’m unnaturally good at video games. It’s a superpower really.”

“You swindled me,” Derek accuses with a low growl.

Stiles laughs and slaps a hand over his mouth to quiet himself. When he’s calm enough, he says, “Dude, you’re losing against the team you hate. That’s just — I’m being super mean right now, but I feel a little sleep deprived so I kinda don’t care. You should have let me sleep — ha, I totally just winged a line from the Trek Reboot. Vindication.”

Derek sighs in annoyance but his lip twitches slightly and Stiles figures he isn’t too irritated.

They keep playing with Stiles winning each round by a landslide and Derek looks at him with a mixture of exasperation and grudging respect as he demands a rematch over and over.

Stiles fall asleep during their sixth rematch and Derek wins that round by default.

He doesn’t even care.

He just rolls over, hugs a pillow close and sinks deeper into sleep with the smell of vanilla cloying to the inside of his nose and curling in his lungs.
bonds

It’s Sunday and the first thing that Stiles thinks about before he even opens his eyes is cinnamon.

And thing about it is that not only does it colonize in his mind but it also settles in his gut and the pads of his fingers as if there were some kind of direct connection between these three.

The word unfurls, and then, it becomes all he can smell, all he can taste on the back of his tongue. It’s overwhelming. The word expands even more and begins to fizzle loudly in his mind like a newly lit road flare with a red flame, signaling his attention aggressively.

Cinnamon.

It’s like it’s all over him, in him — like a tidal wave. He sees darkness and he hears nothing. Every breath he takes fills his lungs with the heady sharpness of it, and it floods his mouth — it’s on his tongue, between his teeth, on the roof of his mouth like a lingering spice he’s had way too much of. It’s everywhere, trying to consume him.

And then, just like a wink, all of it vanishes just as quickly as it came.

There’s nothing now.

Stiles doesn’t understand it.

His wet lashes flutter against his cheeks with his confusion as he slowly wakes to the noise of laughter, unnamable thumps and thuds, running feet, and streaks of sunlight pouring through the closed blinds to land on his face. Jordan’s resting heavily on his back, pressing his wet nose behind Stiles’s left ear with soft, quick breaths. He shifts and Jordan sniffles, sits upright, head cocked and tail wagging happily as he watches Stiles stand to his feet.

Stiles shoots the dog a small smile as he stretches contently with a yawn before looking over to where Derek is lying on his stomach, shirtless with head resting against a pillow cradled between his arms and the side of his face. Stiles can only see the back of Derek’s head but the slow rise and fall of his shoulder blades kind of clues him in on the fact that Derek is still sleep.

The Hale house is alive with noise and yet Derek still manages to be unconscious. It’s a wonder.

The digital clock on the nightstand to his left reads: 11:00 am.

Stiles yawns again and makes his way to the bathroom so he can relieve his bladder. When he’s finished, he washes his hands and splashes some cold water on his face so he can wake up a little more. There’s a (still packaged) Captain America themed toothbrush sitting on the sink with a sticky note from Talia that reads: For Stiles, Laura says you’d prefer this kind. He rolls his eyes with a humored smile but he still uses it before exiting the bathroom and enters Derek’s room again to see that the other teen is still sleep. He doesn’t know how Derek does it. He’s the one with superior hearing and apparently he can tune out everything at will. But as Stiles grabs his hoodie from off the floor at the edge of the bed and slips it on, he notices something dark green in Derek’s ear. He makes his way around the bed to take a look because his curiosity gets the best of him at times and he realizes that Derek is wearing some heavy duty construction silicon ear plugs.

Well that explains it. Smart.
Stiles hums in amusement before heading for the door, Jordan jogging after him, and together they both exit Derek’s room.

“Watch out!”

Stiles blinks and steps back as Madeline, a seven year old with thick, curly hair the color of a starless night sky, brown eyes, and a dimpled smile, runs by him with a group of her cousins on her trail. They’re all holding buckets of water balloons and they don’t fumble once as they make their way down the stairs and out the front door with excited shouts — barefeet echoing in the distance. He waits a second before he makes his way down the stairs too but he makes a hard left to stride through the dining room and into the kitchen.

Peter and Tyson are sitting at the wide island counter planted in the middle of the kitchen on the side that faces the stove, sink, cabinets, and refrigerator.

They’re playing chess.

Laura is sitting at the end of the counter on a stool with a small white book and a calculator. Without looking up, she makes an indication for Stiles to take the seat adjacent to hers.

Stiles does.

Laura puts her book down and fiddles with the calculator as she smiles at him. “Good morning, Blue. Well —” She takes a moment to look pointedly at the time on the microwave and stove. “Whatever is left of it, that is.”

Stills huffs. “Your brother kept me up with his sore-loser-ness.” Then, in the very same moment he thinks it, he says, “Was anyone making something with cinnamon this morning?”

“Cinnamon?” Laura repeats slowly and blinks at him. “No. Everything we ate was either strawberry or banana flavored. Or both. We don’t have — cinnamon isn’t something you’ll find in a Werewolf’s house.”

Stiles blinks at that. “Why?”

“To put it simply, cinnamon for us is like pepper spray for Humans. It’s overbearing,” Peter explains without taking his blue eyes off the chessboard. He moves a pawn and Tyson makes a garbled sound. “The smell, the taste. Utterly repulsive. Tear gas would be more endurable.”

Stiles rolls that around in his head with some intrigue. He never would have guessed anything like that.

Laura is looking at him intently, her gaze searching, but he can’t tell what she’s thinking. She just says, “Why ask about it? The cinnamon, I mean. Why ask?”

“I don’t know. I just thought —” But the thing is that Stiles doesn’t know what he thought, which is why he doesn’t finish the sentence. It’s just so bizarre.

Laura is still staring at him.

Stiles decides to shrug because it’s easier than having to explain himself. It might not be the best thing to do but he decides to just cut the peculiarity of it out of his mind. Maybe he’d been dreaming vividly again. Hard to say after all. There are more pressing things he should be thinking about anyway instead of the anomalous out of body experience he’d had this morning with a spice. He shrugs again because Laura is still watching him.
Laura’s manicured fingernails drum against the marble counter top of the kitchen island and she looks like she wants to say something contrary but she just stands with a frown instead and fishes something out of the back pockets of her white ripped shorts. She places his bottle of Adderall on the counter.

Stiles fiddles with it before he looks at her with a raised eyebrow.

Laura says, “Your dad swung by earlier to pick up my mom for some consultation over something. He dropped those off for you before they headed off.”

Stiles makes a grateful sound because he had forgotten to grab them himself.

Laura gets him a cup of water to wash the medicine down. Then she retrieves a spoon, ceramic bowl, and box of cereal. “Eat. You missed breakfast,” she says. As she rifles through the fridge for some milk, Stiles notices that (like the kids and himself) she’s barefoot.

Stiles takes his Adderall first because he always takes it first, and then makes himself a bowl of (what looks to be Reese’s Peanut Butter) cereal. He eats three bowls as he watches Tyson and Peter’s long chess session as Jordan sits at his feet like he’s guarding him. His wet nose presses against his barefoot when Stiles isn’t paying attention to him and he always perks up (tail wagging happily) when Stiles looks down to shoot him a slight grin (even petting Jordan between bites).

Laura explains, even though he hadn’t asked, “This is a thing between them. Peter and Tyson. Every Sunday. Never fails. Chess, chess, chess.”

"Cool," Stiles mutters. Between bites, he says, "What are you working on?"

Laura looks up from whatever she's scribbling in her white book to press a few buttons on the calculator she has. She says, "It's a study in responsibility, or so my mom calls it. She sometimes hands over the finances of the house to me so I can learn how to manage things like budgeting for food or making sure everyone's needs are provided for. Things a good Alpha does."

Stiles notices she sounds very unhappy with this task. It makes him wonder.

Jordan suddenly straightens with a low sound, ears pulling back and forward as he whines before he darts off.

Stiles just assumes that Derek must be awake.

“My nephew is determined to win,” Peter clarifies as he captures another of Tyson’s pawns. “I admire his tenacity at least.”

“Shut up,” Tyson grumbles as he sinks his chin onto the palms of his hands and glares at the chessboard.

Stiles, because he likes to be helpful, says, “His rook is wide open and his left flank looks pretty shaky too.”

Tyson perks up at that and goes right after it with a triumphant grin.

Peter sends Stiles a dry look. “You’re a menace.”

“I do aim to please,” Stiles replies cheerfully.

“Thanks,” Tyson says. “And sorry about almost breaking your nose last time. What should I do
“Apology accepted as long as we both agree on not having a repeat performance. Pawn on your left.” Stiles takes his empty bowl to the sink and washes it before he places it all in the drainer nearby.

Tyson makes an excited sound when he takes the piece. He urges Stiles to come over and looks at him with widely eager and expectant eyes.

Stiles observes the chessboard and guides Tyson skillfully until the preteen is destroying all of Peter’s strategically placed defenses one by one.

Peter looks extremely disgruntled but greedily impressed (if there were ever such a thing). “Perhaps I should be playing you,” he supposes lightly as he gazes at Stiles fixedly, ignoring the fact that Tyson has now managed to capture his queen.

Stiles salutes him with an impish grin and replies, “I’ve always been good at games. Except for poker. I am terrible at poker.”

Peter gives him a disarming grin that he's forced to blink dumbly at. “I'll keep that in mind.” He looks to his nephew with a put upon sigh that does not conceal his obvious affection for the boy. “There then. Are we all done now? You might as well run along. I know you want to go gloat to the others about this. I can tell. You smell insufferable with your arrogance anyway.”

Tyson sticks his tongue out and gives his uncle the two-fingered salute, running off with a giggle when Peter playfully snaps his jaws at the preteen (eyes flashing gold).

Laura stands with a content stretch and says, “You ready to go?”

Peter nods and looks to Stiles. “Would you like to come?”

“Where to?” Stiles says curiously. He scratches his right elbow.

“Peter and I run the animal clinic on the edge of town. It was — well, it belonged to our dads. They ran it together,” Laura explains and she says nothing else about it.

Stiles is intrigued. He says, “Yeah. I'll go.” Then he adds, “Let me grab my shoes.” He makes his way through the dining room and up the stairs where he passes Cora.

Cora curls her long fingers carefully over his right shoulder (like she's minding her own strength) and says, “Derek and I are going into town for some laser tag, pizza, and ice cream with Aunt Rosemary. We’re taking some of the munchkins. You wanna come?”

“I would. I so would. That definitely sounds like my kind of fun. But I’m already going with Peter and Laura to the animal clinic,” Stiles says as he walks backwards up the steps.

Cora snorts as her hand hangs suspended in the air and she looks mildly disappointed. “Well. Your loss, I guess,” she merely says and continues down the steps and out the front door.

Stiles watches her go with a small frown before he continues his journey up the steps. When he reaches Derek’s room, he sees the other teen slipping on a green plaid shirt over his grey tank top as Jordan sniffs at his feet, wagging his tail jubilantly.

Derek ruffles his own hair with a little grin before he drops to a knee and spends a good minute rubbing his dog down while he coos praises with puckered lips that would look ridiculous on anyone
else but of course Derek can manage to make it look so dignified and attractive.

Stiles does his best to rub away the amused grin forming on his lips as Derek pats Jordan’s side one final time before he straightens.

Derek takes a moment to look around and palms his pockets like he’s doing a mental check before he glances at Stiles with a greeting nod and raised brows. He stands and looks at Stiles like he’s waiting for something.

Stiles merely shrugs.

Derek seems satisfied with this response and he nods to himself as he turns and grabs his phone and wallet from off his bed before he pockets them. He brushes past Stiles on his way out the door and softly says, “Later.”

Jordan sprints after him.

“Later,” Stiles returns maybe a second too late, skin feeling a little warm with the sensation of having Derek so close for only that split second. He decides not to think too much of it as he goes hunting for his shoes. He finds them on the other side of the bed (under it), caught between an elephant and giraffe plushie. This only reminds him that Derek has a literal kingdom of stuffed animals residing under his bed.

Peter and Laura are waiting in the garage for him, both of them settled in Peter’s hotrod red Lamborghini.

Stiles slides in the backseat and barely has time to put his seatbelt on before Peter is whipping his car in reverse and righting it. He lowers the windows and he catches Stiles’s gaze through the mirror as his eyes flash gold like whoa.

Laura says, “Prepare yourself, goober. Uncle Peter is a total speed demon.”

Peter revs the engine twice before takes off like some kind of racecar driver.

Stiles clutches the door, the seats, the roof, himself, and says, “Oh my god. Oh my god. My heart. My heart is in my throat! This is way too fast — too, too, too fast — I’m gonna pee myself — I am peeing myself!”

Laura just cackles and sticks half her body out the open window as they go flying through the trail and out onto the main road. She spreads her arms wide and whoops loudly.

Peter echoes the sound with breathless laughter as he drums his hands against his steering wheel.

Stiles thinks they’re crazy, but he also can’t admire how carefree they sound with the wind roaring through the open windows, touching his skin with a cool caress as the leather cushion under him trembles.

Peter’s neatly combed hair begins to float as the car shakes with the speed and Laura’s long raven hair flies everywhere in a stunning way.

Stiles forgets himself for a moment as he watches them. There’s an itch in the back of his mind and a quiet whispering in his heart that tells him that they need this sometimes. From what he knows about Peter losing some of his immediate family to a fire and Laura’s absent father (whether by choice or not), he can see why they’re doing this. They have a shared sadness that Stiles finds himself understanding.
He thinks about his mother, and the distance that will always be between them. It makes his whole body ache with misery and before he can let himself get lost in it, he squeezes his eyes shut and shouts along with them until his voice gets hoarse.

Laura claps when she hears him, and she cheers even louder in encouragement.

Peter drums his hands against his steering wheel even harder and howls in a completely human way.

Laura echoes it as the trees whizz by them on both sides.

Stiles finally opens his eyes and takes a deep breath.

Turns out he needed that too.

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The Beacon Hills Animal Clinic is a modest looking place. It’s a small brick building with its own parking lot, marble sign, and glass double doors with lots and lots of shaded windows. In front of the glass double doors, there’s a preteen girl, who has waist length hair the color of charcoal and looks to be of some sort of mixed Indian descent, standing there with wet cheeks and her long arms full of a puppy Alaskan malamute.

Stiles notices right away that she’s a Werewolf because her eyes are glowing with gold, teeth slightly fanged and clawed fingers tangled into the short black and white fur of her puppy. She isn’t fully shifted but she looks well on her way to being.

Laura moves to unlock the doors quickly while Peter drops to a knee in front of the distressed girl and says, “Kali. What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know, Mr. Peter!” Kali sobs with glowing eyes, her voice pitched with a deep tenor that sounds like it’s coming right from the middle of her chest. “I don’t know. Simba-Bhupal won’t stop shaking. He threw up something black and had a seizure. I’ve never seen him do that!” She starts crying with thick and shaky desperation. “I wanted to call you. I wanted to call but I didn’t have your number. I only had the number for the clinic and no one was here, and my parents are both out of town, and it’s just me and my grandpa, but he can’t drive cause he’s sick with fever since he’s Human and so I ran all the way here by myself and I waited. I waited and waited and waited. Please, please help him.”

Peter shushes Kali as he straightens. “We’ll see what’s wrong and then I’ll be sure to give you my personal number and Laura’s too.”

Kali gives a hiccupping sob and nods hastily.

Peter holds open the door for her and after she steps through, he swiftly follows.

Stiles catches the door before it closes, and doesn’t hold it against Peter that he forgot about him in all his distraction. He observes the inside of the clinic in glances. There’s a high counter that makes up the length of the reception area, and at one end there is a small swinging door. There’s maroon cushioned chairs lined up against the walls by the front door, and planted around strategically placed coffee tables with kid-friendly animal magazines.

There are framed pictures (old and new) on the wall and they're of clients with their pets, smiling happily as if to say they made the right choice by coming here. There are also local newspaper review articles, some of them dated and others pretty recent singing the clinic’s praises. In the corners of the reception area are tall potted plants, some with flowers and some without.
Behind the front desk, mounted high on the wall, is a largely framed photo of two handsome men with their arms around each other's shoulder as they stand in front of the clinic. They look happy and bright. One has dark hair with soft brown eyes (the youngest of the two), and the other has blond hair with grey streaks (he's the older of the two), but the both of them stand fairly tall, shoulder to shoulder. The dark haired male is smiling wide while the blond male smirks as he looks down and not directly at the camera.

Stiles wonders if they may be Peter and Laura's fathers in the clinic's younger days. They certainly echo Peter and Laura's facial features very strongly. He stashes the question away in his mind and traces his eyes over the floor, picking up on the triangular pattern of the linoleum tiles. When he’s done eyeing everything, he makes his way to the back to a singular examination room with a waist high metal table where Kali’s puppy is lying limply on his side with his back to her. He seems to be struggling to inhale and exhale.

Peter’s long fingers trace gently along the puppy’s ribcage while Laura stands near the doorway, observing like she's waiting for instruction.

Stiles stands near Laura and watches as well.

Peter’s brow furrows and his nostrils flare as he hunches down with narrowed eyes. He buries his nose behind the puppy’s ear, down to its throat and he lingers there with a thoughtful, yet animalistic sound. He straightens and says, “Tell me everything you did with him today.”

Kali quickly says, “Nothing I haven’t done before. I woke up, fed him, and then I went on my morning run. I take him with me sometimes, even more now that he’s getting older because he’s starting to be able to keep up. I’ve just been trying to get in shape so I can get a podium finish for gymnastics since the summer competitions are coming up. So to reward him for keeping me company, we went to the dog park and I met up with Ethan and Aiden so our dogs could have a play date since their dogs and mine are around the same age and I swear I only looked away for a second. Simba-Bhupal wandered off and I don’t know. There was this blind guy sitting on the bench by himself and he gave Simba-Bhupal a treat or maybe what he thought was a treat. I don’t know. I — we weren’t even halfway home before Simba-Bhupal fell over. He’s been in pain and I can’t take his pain for some reason. He smells like he’s dying. Don’t let him die, please. Mr. Peter, please.” She starts sobbing again.

Peter reaches over and curls the fingers of his right hand around the small wrist of hers. He gives a comforting squeeze as his eyes flash gold and he says, “He’s not going to die, Kali. I’m going to make him better.”

Kali gives another hiccupping sob but she nods gratefully, like she doesn’t doubt it for a second.

“Laura, go get the ginger root, some smelling salts, and a dish with water,” Peter says as he straightens, growing tall, taller than Stiles has ever seen him be. There’s something shifting in his presence and it’s forcing an awareness onto Stiles. “Kali, listen to me,” he says in a calm tone. “You can’t take his pain because he’s been poisoned with something.”

Kali’s shoulders start to shake.

“Don’t,” Peter warns softly. “Don’t shift, just pay attention. I need you here right now. You’re bonded to him, yes?”

A tremor goes through Kali as she shifts back, but not without some trouble. She seems to swallow it down with some effort as she exhales shakily and flexes her human fingers. Then she says, “Yes. We are bonded. He is mine and I am his.”
“I was afraid of that,” Peter says lowly. His brow furrows with thought. Louder he says, “I haven’t quite seen this kind of poison before. Though, if I had to guess, I would say that its intended effects are for bonded pairs. If Simba-Bhupal should die, you’ll become ill immediately and two things will happen. You’ll either die because he does or become so weak that you’ll lose your lycanthropy altogether.”

Kali inhales sharply. "I would sooner die if either," she says passionately.

“I’m not going to let that happen,” Peter swears as he meets her gaze head on and it looks so intensely certain that it makes Stiles fidget even though Peter’s not even looking at him.

Kali hunches her shoulders before flattening them into a relaxed line. It almost looks like some kind of nonverbal exchange of trust. She says, “Do what you have to do. In this...I trust you.”

Peter nods and eases his eyes over to Stiles. “Kali, this is Stiles. It’s his first time at the clinic. You should show him the koi pond. I think he might enjoy that and it’ll give you a chance to get some fresh air. We still need you to have your wits about you for this delicate procedure. Laura and I will take special care of Simba-Bhupal.”

Stiles lifts his eyebrows, wondering silently at what exactly Peter is playing at.

Kali twitches and looks very much like she can’t stand the thought to be parted from her animal companion. She reaches out with shaky fingers and caresses Simba-Bhupal’s spine tenderly before she balls that hand into a fist, turning sharply and starting for the swinging doors that lead to the back door of the clinic before she succumbs to the urge to stay.

Stiles takes one look at Peter, who gestures with a nod for him to catch up, and he stumbles after Kali, wondering how he manages to let Peter loop him into these things. He passes Laura on his way navigating through a maze of cages full of a variety of domesticated animals and she gives him an encouraging thumbs-up with a slightly concerned smile not really aimed at him but most likely the situation in general.

He reaches the heavy metal door and uses what little upper body strength he has to push it open, quickly springing to the side as it slams shut with a resounding thud.

Kali is already at the other end of the alley that leads away from the parking lot in the front and towards a man-made trail that cuts through the trees.

Stiles jogs after her and only catches up when she stops in the middle of a silver metal bridge that curves over a large yet modest koi pond with floating lily pads and water so clear he has no problem making out the brightly colored fish or the murky bottom.

Kali folds her hands together and rests her arms over the railing of the bridge as though she were getting ready to recite a prayer. She doesn’t though. She just stands tensely as she glares down at the water below and the fish swimming around in it as if she blames them for her current troubles.

Stiles steps up beside her, but not too close because he doesn’t want to put her on edge or make her uncomfortable. So he keeps four steps between them and he leans forward as well, far enough that the metal railing is digging into his stomach. He white knuckles the railing because it would be just his luck that he’d somehow tip all the way over and fall into the pond.

Kali just goes on glaring at the water and the floating lily pads and the trees and the sun and at just about everything as her shoulders tense more and more.

Stiles wonders what she can hear, or if she’s listening in on things back at the clinic. He doesn’t ask
though. He has no right to.

It would’ve been a pleasant day otherwise. The peaceful silence shifting between them is broken when the crickets chirp or the birds flutter about, squawking in the trees or giving a call to their kin to signal their position. Butterflies skim the wind.

A military plane passes overhead in the sky, flying low and towards some nearby base camp with a name that Stiles can’t quite think of or even really care to figure out.

The sun is smiling down on them with warm rays that are hot enough to remind Stiles that spring will be coming to an end quickly. With only a week left of April, and the month of May soon to follow, summer is just around the corner.

For some reason, Stiles blurts something like, “There’s gonna be five Fridays, five Saturdays, and five Sundays this year in August.”

Kali slowly turns a speculative stare in his direction.

Stiles ignores it, follows an orange fish with his eyes, and continues, “I think about that a lot.”

Kali cocks her head and gazes at him like she’s seeing him for the first time.

Stiles has actually gotten used to that since he’s been in Beacon Hills — only lately, not so much. His association with the Hales has kind of put him on the radar around town, but not significantly so. At least not yet, maybe. He’s not sure.

Kali says, “Pocketful of money.”

It’s Stiles's turn to frown and he looks to Kali, who’s still staring at him with this sort of intensely searching gaze. “I’m sorry, what?”

“The five weekends thing,” Kali clarifies. “Chinese call it a ‘pocketful of money’. I read about that a couple of days ago and I thought it was really cool. We actually had a whole discussion about it in my Astrology class.”

“Oh. Huh. What a coincidence,” Stiles says. He rubs the back of his head. “Yeah.” He clears his throat and says, “Your dog has an...interesting name.”

Kali smiles sharply and Stiles mentally congratulates himself when he doesn’t gulp. She says, “My dad’s from Kenya. Mom’s from Bangladesh. I borrowed from both their languages just to name him ‘Lion King’.”

Stiles smirks, unable to help it. “That’s — really clever.”

Kali shrugs. “It’s my — was my favorite movie. But, whatever. Details. I was young. I think we're all a little stupid at that age.”

“Stupidity is ageless actually,” Stiles supposes. "Being young, well, you see the world in a different way. I don't think that's necessarily stupid, you know, to wake up every day with the universe wide open to you, full of unexplored promise.”

Kali continues to study him.

"I can never just pick one,” Stiles admits after a while, when the silence becomes too much. “A movie, I mean. There’s so many that I enjoy — though my particular choices tend to lean towards
the ones with Robin Williams. He’s really — I like watching him. Always did. Kind of reminds me of parts of myself.”

Kali says nothing to that, though she does finally look away and out into the trees.

“Do you go to Beacon Hills Junior High?” Stiles asks because she seems young enough to.

Kali furrows her brow and she looks at him again. “No,” she says slowly. “I go to — don’t you already know?”

Stiles says, “What would I know?”

“You’re Pack, aren’t you? You smell like Hale Pack. You —” Kali stops abruptly as she cocks her head before straightening suddenly. Then she goes dashing off towards the clinic.

Stiles follows in confusion, which goes away when he returns to the examination room to see Laura leaning against Peter with a smile as they both watch Kali weep joyfully, arms full of a lively and healthy looking Simba-Bhupal, who’s licking the tears away from Kali’s cheeks with cute little yips.

“Thank you, thank you,” Kali sobs with such bone deep relief, hugging her companion close.

Peter just shakes his head as he peels off the blue latex gloves on his hands and says, “Just be mindful, Kali. That could’ve been a close call. Teach him not to be so trusting of strangers.” He trashes the gloves and turns to Laura. “I’m going to take her to the dog park so she can show me where this blind man was. Then I’ll take her home. You’re okay to take over in the meantime?”

Laura nods and brushes the fingers of their right hands together. “Be careful.”

Peter rewards her with a sharp smile and returns the touch of affection as he says, “When am I never, dear niece?” He turns to a still tearful Kali and makes an indication for her to follow him. On his way out the door, he makes sure to gently tweak Stiles’s nose with a mean grin.

Stiles makes an annoyed sound, ducking his head back and swatting Peter’s hand away.

Peter’s grin just widens fondly as he glides through the doorway, out to the front and through the glass double doors with Kali.

Stiles waits until he hears the familiar rumble of Peter’s car starting and the grind of it peeling out of the parking lot before he says, “How did he do it? What did he do?”

“What he had to,” Laura supposes as she begins cleaning up. "Call it luck if you will."

Stiles walks over and picks up a piece of ginger root as he says, “He didn’t use medicine like regular veterinarian though.”

“No, we don’t usually — our methods have always been a little unorthodox. We find the balance between science and magic, but that’s what makes us the best,” Laura explains and goes to the sink to fill up a bucket with soapy water before she carries it over to the metal table. She dunks a large sponge into it and begins wiping the metal examination table clean of a black sludgy-looking goop.

Stiles wrinkles his nose in disgust. It smells rancid. Like spoiled meat. “What’s that?”

“The poison Peter extracted,” Laura says and continues wiping it up. She doesn’t seem phased by it, which is kinda telling that this isn't outside of the realm of what they usually handle.

“I’d offer to help but, you know,” Stiles says with a repulsed expression.
Laura just smiles with a shrug. "I've got it pretty covered. You can stand there and look pretty."

"As if," Stiles huffs, cheeks warming.

Laura laughs and continues to clean with a cheery attitude.

“So between you two, who has the license to practice?” Stiles asks curiously. "Because I thought Peter was still in college and you’re still a month shy from graduation."

Laura says, “Peter’s certified. He is still going to college online, but that’s just to earn his Master’s degree in Psychology and Education.”

Stiles lifts his eyebrows at that. “I’m guessing he graduated high school early. Man, is everyone in your family geniuses?”

Laura shrugs modestly. "We do pretty well for ourselves, I suppose."

Stiles suddenly remembers something Kali said. “So I was talking to Kali and she seemed confused that I didn’t know what school she went to. Should I have known?”

“You wouldn’t have. She goes to the private school on the other side of town. And when I say private, I mean the admittance rate of Werewolves are pretty much at a ninety-nine percent range.”

“Whoa, you guys have your own private schools — wait, why don’t you and Derek and Cora go then if that’s the case?” Stiles asks.

Laura’s got that closed off look about her. “After my dad died — when the fire that took our family was —” She doesn’t finish the sentence. It seems too hard for her to talk about. Too painful. “I just didn’t want to, Stiles. Mom didn’t fight me on it. She let me decide. Cora and Derek — well, that’s because of me too, I guess. They’ve always looked up to me and when I went to public school, they wanted to too. So they did. Following on my heels as always.”

Stiles rolls that around in his mind. “But the rest of your cousins attend those private schools, right? The rest of your family? Because I never see them anywhere else.”

“Yeah, they go to private school. It’s a preference most Weres have for their kids. You grow up being different and it’s just — there’s a community we have that’s all our own, so growing up, you know, our parents try to teach us how to survive in both our world and the Human world. But they want us to feel settled among our own kind first.”

“How many private schools are there?”

Laura says, “In this county? Four. One for preschool through junior high, and then if they wanted to continue on, there’s a high school. College really isn’t an option because you’ve got to leave the nest at some point, right?”

Stiles frowns. “You said four but you mentioned only two. Why?”

“Because two are exclusively for Werewolves and the other two are for Werecats,” Laura clarifies. “Across the country, I think there’s about two hundred. A hundred being for Werewolves and the other for Werecats. Outside of that, for other types of shifters, I’m not sure. Peter or my mom would be the one to ask. They really keep track of all that. They say keeping a peaceful understanding fluent through all the communities is important for survival. Oh, while I’m mentioning my mom, you should know that Kali thought you’d know since my mom is pretty much the superintendent for the two schools we have here, the two in New York, the two in Florida, the two in Texas, and the two in
“Wow,” Stiles says because he has nothing better say. That would partly explain why it seemed like the Hales came from good money. He’s starting to get that there are more Weres in the entire country or even in the world than what he initially thought. It’s an intriguing concept. Then he gets hit with another thought. “Earlier, Kali said something about trying to take her puppy’s pain. What’s — can you guys really do that?”

Laura doesn’t answer right away. She cleans up the last of the sludge, drops the sponge in the dirty black water of the bucket, and then she empties it out in the deep metal sink under the x-ray illuminators. She washes her hands quickly, dries them and walks over to Stiles before punching him in the arm.

Before Stiles can even cry out from the pain, her fingers are coiling around the skin of his wrist on his right hand. His eyes widened as the pain leaves him in black lines swimming from under his skin and into Laura’s. He watches her face cringe slightly for a moment before she sighs. He says, “That was — whoa.”

Laura lets him go with a thin smile. “Pretty much,” she agrees.

“But I could have done without that demonstration though,” Stiles points out. “You could’ve just said yes.”

“I prefer to demonstrate. Better you see than hear,” Laura supposes lightly.

“But it looked like it hurt you,” Stiles says with a frown.

“Rather me than you,” Laura says with a complicated expression he can’t work out. She brushes the fingers of her right hand against his. Then she brushes her nose against his flushed cheek and makes a thoughtful sound like she scents something on his skin. “Don’t worry about me, goober. I can take a little pain. Some evils are necessary.”

Stiles says nothing to that. He knows what she’s saying is true but he doesn’t quite agree. Plus he's a little distracted by her proximity and the way she wraps her heated palms against the sides of his neck, swooping her thumbs down towards his collarbone as though she's searching for the pulse resting just under his skin. “S-so, uh, what’s Peter planning to do with his degrees? Outside of working here, I mean. Is this a full time thing?” he says, changing the subject as she continues to slide her nose along the side of his face with a rumbling sound.

“Peter wants to be like my mom,” Laura murmurs as she slides her lips against the tip of his nose before skating her own nose along his left ear. "He’s looking to principal the two schools we have here. I think the long-term goal is to take over looking after all the schools under my mom's jurisdiction when she retires. He’s doing this in the meantime, until he can find someone else certified to take over,” she continues softly.

“What about you?” Stiles asks in a whisper and notices how withdrawn Laura’s expression suddenly gets. She pulls away and Stiles feels instantly colder. He takes an instinctive step towards her before he can even stop himself. Then he flushes and steps back. Whatever kind of scenting she'd been doing felt good — relaxing. “What are you going to do after graduation?”

Laura doesn’t answer right away. She glides out of the room and over to the counter of the reception area, leaning forward with a heady sigh. She’s holding herself up by her forearms on the edge of the counter and staring listlessly at the glass double doors.
Stiles saddles up beside her and presses their shoulders together because now that she’s leaning forward they’re approximately the same height.

Laura says, “What my mother wants is for me to be a good strong Alpha. Find some territory to call home. Contribute to the Werewolf community in the most productive manner befitting my skills as a leader. Raise a pack of my own. Start a family. Do the Hale name proudly. Fulfill my obligations as a Daughter of our Great Mother, the Moon.” Then, as she continues, she speaks so softly that it forces Stiles to pay attention to her every word because there is now a weight in the air. “But what I want is to move to New York. Walk out to Times Square and spin around like a mystified idiot. Just like they do in the movies, you know. And I want to rent out a crappy yet affordable apartment that’s close to the corner of some diner I’ll be working at part-time as a waitress. Sure the tips will be bad at first but I’ll use my devilish looks and charms to really earn something. I’ll be rude back to those customers who are rude to me and I’ll have a boss who won’t even care because he likes me so much. He’ll say I’m like the daughter he never wanted.

"I'll make the finest pots of cheap coffee that customers will ask after because I know just how to add a little something extra. But I'll be terrible at soup and hot cocoa, no matter how simple it is. And when I’m not working my ass off to keep the hot water on so I can take long showers in my shitty bathroom, I’ll be out and about, auditioning for every single play there is. Certainly, at first, it’ll be all horrible scripts and I’ll be a background character in most but somehow I’ll work my way up to the top of the thespian food chain. And before long, I’ll have directors asking after me from left to right. I’ll make a name for myself on Broadway, and I’ll snag my dream job, which is to play Elphaba in Wicked, and I’ll keep playing her until they run me off the stage with pitchforks and lit torches. That’s what I want, Stiles.” She exhales shakily as tears slide down her cheeks. “And I don’t want anything else.”

Stiles is surprised to see this side of Laura: open and vulnerable. She usually just keeps everything close to the chest like she’s impervious to this kind of pain. He doesn’t even let himself think about it; he just pulls her close and hugs her. He says, “You should cry, Laura. You sound like you need to. I swear I won’t judge. I myself enjoy a good cry from time to time. Best muscle relaxer I know.”

Laura laughs around a hiccupping sob as she buries her face in his shoulder and does just that. She mumbles things into the material of his hoodie; things he can’t hear or understand, and things he’s sure aren’t really meant for him. She cries with trembling shoulders, and shaky knees. She clutches onto the sides of his hoodie like she’s desperate and afraid, and like she doesn’t get to do this often. Her tears leak into his clothes but he could care less about the dampness he feels on his shoulder.

Stiles strokes her hair and the space between her shoulder blades. His heart knocks steadily in his chest but his eyes get a little warm and his throat locks up hotly. It’s the empathy he has for Laura. It’s the sudden swell of affection that takes him over and makes him says, “I know it doesn’t seem like it now, but...it gets better.”

Laura jolts suddenly like she’s been zapped and pulls away from him. She looks at him with ruddy cheeks, redened lips, and watery gold eyes burning brightly with shock. “What did — what did you say?”

Stiles fidgets, uncertain. His cheeks begin to grow red and he feels hot over all. “I — I said that it gets better.”

Laura stares at him for a really long time before she presses her left hand to her mouth, shaking her head as she laughs and cries at the same time, if you can believe it.

Stiles isn’t sure whether to take this as a good or bad sign.
Back in Los Angeles, he didn't have any female friends (outside of his mom when she was alive) and he really wants nothing more than to do this right. He knows how complicated it all is with Laura being a Werewolf and a potential Alpha at that, but sometimes he feels like he has a connection to her that helps him understand what she needs, however she needs it. And then when Laura starts to laugh breathlessly and reaches out to yank him to her, he lets out a sigh of relief as he pats her back with a shaky hand. She laughs and laughs and clutches him closer, and closer, and closer, burying her nose behind his right ear as warm puffs of air hits the side of his jaw with each exalted laugh she gives.

“God,” Laura says shakily after a quick cough. “You don’t — you don’t understand how much I needed to hear that.”

Stiles flushes down to his toes, pleased. He watches anxiously as she pulls away and goes about trying to dry her face with her trembling hands.

Laura laughs wretchedly, and it sounds a little snotty. “God, I’m a gross mess,” she says and sniffs.

"You're beautiful," Stiles says, almost on instinct, and flushes harder for his trouble.

Laura gives him a crooked grin and a wink. Then she rubs her reddened nose against the back of her hand before she sighs. “Hold on.”

Stiles watches as she rounds the counter and walks to one of the restrooms. She returns a moment later looking a little less puffy around the eyes and a lot brighter in her face. There is effortlessness in her movements that wasn’t there before and her posture has straightened tenfold. She looks like a queen practically, glowing so blatantly with her contentment. He tries really hard not to feel like he’s responsible for it (best to stay humble in these moments).

Laura stops right in front of him and cups her hands over his shoulders, tilting her head down slightly so they can meet eye to eye, and she says, “The last thing my dad ever said to me was, ‘I know it doesn’t seem like it now, but it does get better.’”

Stiles inhales sharply, winded, as shock floods his senses, making him hot and prickly all over while it puts him in a daze. ‘I — I don’t know why I — that wasn’t what — I hadn’t even heard that anywhere before. Laura. Laura. How did I know to say that to you? Why would I —”

Laura shushes him and rubs her hands up and down his arms. She chuckles but it’s filled with sincere sympathy. She says, “It’s okay, Stiles. My dad used to — he would say things like that too. It’d come out of nowhere, the things he’d say. Like the universe itself was speaking through him. Mom told you he was a Virtue too, right?”

Stiles nods dumbly.

“It’s just — it’s a part of the territory, I think. Virtues have good discernment and they’re sensitive when it comes to certain situations and people and places and so on,” Laura goes on to say. “When I was little, my dad bought this bouquet of yellow roses and he gave it to me. He told me to give it to the pretty librarian with a shaved head and tell her something like what you told me. He said, ‘Tell her that you know it doesn’t seem like it now, but it does get better.’ And that’s exactly what I did, even though I didn’t understand it. The librarian, Mrs. Diamond, she looked at me with this face I’ll never forget and she starts bursting into tears.

"She asked me who told me to say that to her and I told her my dad did. Later on, when she attended his funeral, she came up to mom and I and she said that she’ll always be grateful for my dad’s kind words. Stiles, she’d been diagnosed with cancer, and when the chemotherapy started taking it’s toll
on her, her husband left with their two children, and she got so depressed that she’d been thinking of committing suicide that very same night I gave her the flowers and told her what my dad said to say. Those words saved her life, and she’s still living to this day. She fought and won custody of her kids and my dad is responsible for that because he knew that all she had to do was hold on long enough for it to happen. He just had a gut feeling and he followed it. And I think that's what you're going to find yourself doing a lot.”

Stiles exhales quietly as he rolls that around in his mind. “I — I don’t know what’s going on with me — I don't understand.”

“It's nothing you should be afraid of,” Laura says and rewards him with a disarming smile. “It just means you’ll do some good for a lot of people. And we could use your kind of good in this wide wicked world of ours.”

Stiles scrubs the stubble of his hair and says nothing.

“No pressure,” Laura says impishly with a wink before she turns and leans forward against the counter, looking at the glass double doors expectantly.

Not even a moment later, a chubby woman with her chubby son walks in with two cages that have hamsters in them.

“Hi, how can I help you?” Laura says, straightening.

Stiles vaguely watches the exchange, but he’s just so lost in his thoughts.

His mind is a maze of queries.

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Peter eventually returns and frowns for a second as he glances between Laura and Stiles as though he can detect their little heart-to-heart session earlier. If he does, he says nothing about it and takes over for Laura as the clinic begins to fill with a steady flow of clients and their animals.

Stiles stands off to the side, texting Scott, fetching things when Laura and Peter trust him enough to, or generally being useless as he watches Laura and Peter work. They’re really good at what they do. Especially Peter. He’s alert, polite, and very tolerant during these exchanges, no matter the age of the pet owners or what kind of questions they ask. And please believe that some of those questions they ask are either extremely stupid or so bizarre that Stiles has to roll his eyes and shake his head as Laura turns away with her silent laughter because Peter answers them with the straightest face and most neutral tone of voice.

It’s amazing really. A gift.

Around five or so, Peter decides it’s time to close for the day. He makes Stiles help Laura feed the sheltered animals in the back while he sets to work cleaning up his stations and the entirety of the examination room.

Stiles doesn’t mind helping Laura at all, mainly because all the animals they have (and there is a variety of them) are so well-behaved and affectionate. Even though no one asks him too, he gives each and every one of them gender neutral names aloud.

Laura finds it amusing and she doesn’t say anything to try and stop him. They meet Peter at the glass double doors out front and he locks the clinic up behind them as they make their way to his car.
Peter whips out of the parking lot and down the road. He and Laura don’t shout out the windows this time when he lets them down.

Stiles still clutches the belt across his chest tightly because Peter is a jerk who decides it’ll be a funny idea to speed in reverse when they hit the trail of the preserve that leads to the private drive of the Hale Manor. And although he doesn’t crash the car, Stiles still stumbles out of it with shaky knees after they’ve parked in the garage and he shoots Peter the strongest glare he’s got in his arsenal.

Peter just smirks and whistles his way over to the side door that opens to the kitchen, keys twirling around his long pointer finger.

Laura throws an arm over his shoulders and nuzzles her nose against his ear affectionately. “Cheer up, Blue,” she says, not without irony. “Sunday night is Wing Night!” She pulls away swiftly before she swats him on his bottom and jogs off.

Stiles flushes brightly in shock, quickly clutching his butt with a choked sound like he’s afraid that if he doesn’t protect himself she might do it again but she doesn’t look like she’s coming back. So he runs after her. “You can’t just do that, Laura!” he complains.

“Oh can’t I?” Laura cheerfully counters with a singsong voice and settles at the head of the table between Cora and Nana Hale.

This leaves only one other space open (the seat between Derek and Peter).

Stiles grumbles as he sits down and watches baskets of different flavors of wings and fries being passed around.

“What did she do?” Derek asks as he leans over the table to accept a basket of hot wings from his Uncle Jonah.

“Huh?” Stiles asks as he distractedly watches a basket of honey barbecue wings float from Cora to her Aunt Emilia. “Who did what now?”

Derek notices where his attention is and he urges his older cousin Delilah to pass him the other basket of barbecue wings but he doesn’t give it to Stiles right away. He actually keeps it out of Stiles’s reach.

Stiles makes an impatient sound. “What? What is it? What is this?”

“I don’t like to be ignored,” Derek merely says with a grin.

“So does most of the world’s population,” Stiles snidely replies and maybe he’s being a dick but he’s hungry and Derek started it first anyway so, completely allowed.

Derek doesn’t seem bothered either way though. His grin widens into a smirk and maybe if Stiles blinks hard enough he won’t find it as attractive as he does right now.

Stiles is totally experiencing hunger delusions like those people wandering in the desert or the wilderness or wherever — anyway, this is vexing.

Derek says, “Answer my question.”

Stiles makes a grab for the wings but Derek skillfully holds it out of his reach. He sighs. “Great, this is great,” he complains quietly. “I just want to eat like everyone else and you’re being rude. Okay, what? What? What question? I’m actively listening now. Not that I have a choice.”
Derek raises both eyebrows with a mean grin and says, “You were saying something to Laura about her not doing something. I just wanted to know what you meant.”

Stiles blushes and clamps his mouth shut. He’s so not explaining this in a dining room full of Werewolves. He’s just not.

Derek cocks his head questioningly at the spike Stiles's heartbeat makes in embarrassment and his brow furrows thoughtfully. He glances over at Laura, who is chatting animatedly with Cora before he looks back to Stiles. Then he looks back to Laura. He says, “What’d you do, Laura?”

Laura pauses her conversation to toss Derek an amused look. “Hm? What’s that Der-Bear?”

Derek scowls in disgust and says, “Don’t call me that. What’d you do to Stiles?”

Stiles sinks down in his seat as Cora glances between them curiously.

“Oh I didn’t do much,” Laura states airily as she shoves a few fries in her mouth. “I just gave him a gentle love tap on his cute little keister.”

Stiles feels the heat return to his cheeks with a vengeance as Derek shoves the basket of wings at him without another word, looking for all the world like he wished he hadn’t asked at all. Stiles is right there with him on that. He shoves the boneless wings into his mouth with as much dignity as he has left and tries to put the whole thing out of his mind.

Laura just blows kisses at them both before she continues her conversation with Cora.

It’s not until Stiles feels like he’s going to pass out from eating so many wings does he notice that neither Talia nor Derek Sr. are sitting at the head of the table like they usually are. He nudges Derek with his elbow and says, “Where are your parents?”

Derek straightens and darts a glance at Stiles’s mouth before he quickly glances away and towards the stack of empty baskets before him. “Mom’s out with your — with the Sheriff. Dad’s taken Olive to his parents ranch in Texas since they haven’t gotten a chance to meet her yet.”

Stiles is kind of disappointed that Olive’s gone. He had wanted to hold her some more. He’s probably too ridiculously attached to the baby Were. He then thinks over what Derek said. “Why did you say it like that?”

“What?” Derek says with a deepening frown. He’s starting to glare at the baskets ahead of him.

Stiles is hesitant to ask, but he pushes on, “You said, ‘his parents’ like they aren’t your grandparents. Usually people stuff like ‘grandma’ or ‘gramps’ when they refer to them.”

Derek’s mouth twists grimly before he replies, “They don’t actually approve of what we — they’ve made how they feel about us and what we are pretty clear. It’s not exactly —” He stops abruptly with a frustrated sound before he starts again. “The only reason they want to see Olive is because they think there’s a chance she may be Human. Like them. They haven’t bothered with Cora and I after we presented.”

“Oh,” Stiles says, and feels sorry for even bringing it up. He frowns a little bit as a small bubble of anger fizzes in his gut on Derek and Cora's behalf. They shouldn't have to suffer such narrow-mindedness from their own dad’s family.

Across the table, Cora says, “Hey, dumbass. You’ve got sauce all over your mouth.”
Stiles shoots her a look, and just to spite her he says, “Where? Here?” He stabs his tongue into the left corner of his mouth. “Maybe you mean here.” He licks at the right corner.

Cora snorts and rolls her eyes, giving up on him.

Derek gives a heady sigh but he seems marginally amused. “Can you not, Stiles?”

“What? What’d I do, Derek?” Stiles asks, widening his eyes at the other teen innocently as he wags his tongue across his bottom lip.

Derek wrinkles his nose and huffs. “You’re a dweeb,” he says with grudging amusement as he snags a napkin off the table and high-fives Stiles’s mouth with it.

Stiles makes a disgruntled sound because the napkin sticks to his tongue and he has to spit it out. “Rude,” he complains and catches the napkin before it can drop to the floor. He licks it again and uses his own saliva to scrub the area around his mouth clean.

Derek tracks the movements with a raised eyebrow. “Are you six?”

“Are you?” Stiles retorts because he’s just that clever and he tosses the napkin.

“Nice comeback.”

“Thanks. Peter helped me with it.”

Peter pauses mid-sentence in his conversation with Nana Hale with a quiet snort and shoots Stiles an amused look before he goes back to speaking with his grandmother.

“Figures,” Derek simply mutters.

"What's that supposed?"

“Oh nothing. It's just that he’s as much as a dweeb as you are. Like minds, as they say.”

Stiles bristles at the audacity and says, “Stop calling me a dweeb. You’re a dweeb.”

Derek snorts like he can't help it with a slow grin and says absolutely nothing at all.

It flutters and confuses Stiles more than he'd like to admit. He feels like he just completely missed the point of something. “Right, well. Glad we got that established.”

Derek doesn’t stop staring at him with that unnerving grin but he nods like he's humoring Stiles.

Stiles clears his throat, pushes away from the table, and totally flees into the kitchen and out the side door. He breathes a little easier as he navigates his way through a maze of cars and out of the opened garage into the cool night air. It feels like a relief for his heated skin.

The wind feels good. He pulls his hoodie over his head and walks towards the back of the house where he’s pleased to find a modest playground. He goes to the swing set and sits down, swinging idly as he looks up at the cloudy night sky. He curls his fingers in the hem of his hoodie before he fishes his phone out of his pocket. He calls his dad and leaves him a brief message when his old man doesn’t pick up. Then he calls Isaac.

Isaac, predictably, doesn’t say a greeting when he picks up.

“Hey,” Stiles says softly. “How are you?”
Isaac says nothing. It sounds really quiet in his background.

Stiles smiles and says, “You know I can’t see you shrugging. You’re kinda gonna have to be verbal.”

Isaac shuffles on the other end and sighs. He says, “I’m fine, Stiles.”

Stiles feels his smile widen. “Good, Isaac. That’s all — really good.” He pauses to think. Then he says, “How’s life going? Broke any doorknobs lately?”

Isaac sighs again.

Stiles gives a short laugh. “I’m only teasing. Sorry. I’m just — don’t mind me.” He kicks at the ground to build his momentum on the swing. “Hey, Isaac. Do you miss me yet?”

“No.”

“Lies. Total lies. You adore me. I am your world. You miss my mindless chatter. It’s probably super endearing — hey, are you at home right now?” Stiles grips one of the chains of the swing with one hand while his other keeps his phone pressed to his ear.

“No.” Isaac waits a few seconds before he adds, “Dad doesn’t like me at the house by myself. You know that.

Stiles falls off the swing with a choked sound.

Isaac continues like he doesn’t notice. “He was going to drop me off across the street at Mrs. Doyle’s house until he got off work, but I didn’t want to stay there because it smells like — you really don’t want to know. So I’m spending the night at Boyd’s because I asked.”

Stiles sits up and rubs the back of his head until he stops seeing stars. “Dude — dude,” he says breathlessly. “You — that’s more words than I ever heard you say in one breath. And — and — you called my dad your dad — our dad. That’s so — you’re so —”

Isaac shuffles again, and he sounds a little flustered as he says, “Stiles, please settle down.”

“Okay, okay,” Stiles says and he can tell Isaac is uncomfortable. “I just think — it’s kind of — I like hearing you say — that we — you are family. You should, um, you know. Know that you’re family. I’m sure dad feels the same. I sure do. I always have.”

Isaac says nothing. He shuffles on the other end again like he's fidgeting shyly.

“So are you and Boyd bros now? I feel like you guys are totally bros,” Stiles goes on to say, changing the subject. “But remember who your main bro is.” He points to himself. “You can’t see, but I’m totally pointing at myself.”

Isaac huffs in amusement.

Stiles grins happily. “What are you up two up to tonight anyway?” he asks.

Isaac says nothing.

"Can't see the shrugging, buddy," Stiles teases.

Isaac sighs like he thinks Stiles is being a handful and says, "Movies, games, food."

Stiles nods to himself because he approves. "Okay, I’ll let you go and do those bro things you were
doing with Boyd. Goodnight."

Isaac just hums.

“I’ll see you tomorrow because of course I’ll see you guys tomorrow. And I can honestly say without shame that I miss you guys, which is like — it’s only been two days. How crazy is that? I’m growing too attached,” Stiles says as he rolls his eyes at himself.

Isaac gives a noticeable pause on the other end. Then quietly he says, “It’s...not just you.”

"I'm sorry, come again." Stiles blinks. "It almost sounded like you were implying —"

"You're not the only one," Isaac states clearly and firmly. "Missing us all being together, I mean."

Stiles splutters with wide eyes. “You did! Oh my god, you did mean —”

“Goodnight,” Isaac says like he's had enough and hangs up.

Stiles pulls his phone away and stares at the screen in annoyance, even though a swell of warm affection spreads through his chest, down to his toes. He stands and brushes himself off before he pockets his phone.

“BOO!”

Stiles yelps in fear, trips over his own feet, and falls to the ground with a mangled swear.

Laura cackles like the evil woman she is. It's easy to see where Cora gets it from.

“I hate you,” Stiles whines as he rolls onto his back and glares up at her.

Laura cups a hand over her ear and says, “What’s that I hear? Your heart beating slightly faster on the words ‘hate’ and ‘you’. Awe, you don’t have to lie, Stiles. We both know the truth. You adore me. I am your world.”

Stiles’s cheeks grow red because he's not ignorant to the fact that she may have been ear hustling his conversation with Isaac. He stares woefully up at the sky. “If I lay here...if I just lay here...will you go away?”

Laura snorts and drops down to the ground beside him and curls into his right side, throwing a leg over his thighs as she wraps his arm around her neck so she can lie comfortably on his shoulder. "You'll never be rid of me, goober."

Stiles combs his fingers through her long hair and hums at how soft it is. "Ah, yes. What a burden."

Laura growls playfully as her eyes flash gold for a moment.

Stiles huffs as she snuggles into his side and he says, “You’re totally scenting me, aren’t you?”

Laura turns her head and bites him in reply.

“Hey, hey! No biting!” Stiles reprimands as he tweaks her ear.

Laura snorts and keeps her nose buried in the spot where she bit him, rumbling contently.

Stiles goes back to combing his fingers through her hair.
It’s not long before Cora finds them. She doesn’t do much besides frown softly before she drops down and curls around Stiles’s other side until he’s properly sandwiched between them.

Stiles gingerly wraps his arm around Cora’s shoulders and relaxes when she doesn't try to gut punch him for it. She actually wiggles closer, tangles the fingers of her right hand in the hem of his hoodie as she buries her nose into the side of his neck, rumbling just as softly as Laura is. He can very nearly feel the vibrations in his own chest.

It's like being sandwiched between two soft vibrating furnaces.

Laura starts singing *Firework* by Katy Perry and she sounds so freakin’ good — even better than Katy Perry herself. She’s got a soulful voice that’s both breathy and smokey. She’s talented and Stiles has no doubts that she’d be able to go far if she actually pursued her dreams. He wants that for her.

Cora joins in, and she’s not really as good as her older sister, but she’s decent and can hold a tune at the right parts of the song.

Stiles squirms when they poke at his sides in a silent request for him to join in and they don’t stop until he does.

Somehow he ends up spending the next fifteen minutes with them, singing hit pop songs before they switch over into some Disney songs as they lie all over each other under a starry night sky.

Peter and Derek join them while they’re midway through singing *Hakuna Matata* from the Lion King.

Derek scoffs at their theatrics and goes to sit on the swings while Laura says, “Sing a song of beauty, Uncle Pete.”

Peter looks marginally amused. “Sure, anything for you, Laurie.”

Stiles sits up on his elbows and says, “There’s no way you’re as good as Laura.”

Laura snorts, flattered.

Peter smiles with a frightening amount of teeth and says, “You’d be surprised, little Stilinski.”

“Prove him wrong, Uncle Pete,” Cora says as she tucks her hands behind her head but makes sure her hips are still touching Stiles’s.

“I plan on it, Corral,” Peter retorts. He clears his throat for five minutes.

Derek boos and says, “Quit stalling, Uncle Pete.”

“Patience, Darren.”

Stiles is starting to think this saying each other’s name wrong is some kind of inside joke between them. Before he can even help himself, he asks, "What's up with you all calling each other the wrong names?"

"Oh it's a thing," Laura replies. "We have this Great Uncle who lives in Canada. His name is Demetrius and he comes down with his horde at the end of every summer for the Assembly."

"Assembly?" Stiles repeats with a frown.
"Our version of a family reunion. Every one in our family flocks over to our land in upper California and we show each other what we're made of," Cora elaborates. "Hale Family Reunion at it's finest."

"It's more like a Werewolf Olympics," Derek complains with a sour look. "Like we're supposed to prove to each other who's the best in our brood. Who's got the best Pack."

"Derek's just sore that our cousin Amelia beat him in the Run," Cora swears with a cackle. "The one year he loses and he swears the Assembly is nothing but garbage."

Derek growls at her as his eyes flash gold.

Cora snickers as her own eyes flare, unafraid to meet his challenge.

"Anyway," Laura drawls. "Great Uncle Dee has always been bitter that his mother, our great grandmother, Nana, decided to stay with us instead of with him and his pack up in Quebec. So he purposefully goes out of his way to say all our names wrong since we belong to my mom's Pack."

"Ah, yes. Uncle Demetrius has always been jealous of my sister since our grandmother showed her favor above the others despite the fact that she's not the oldest. Our mother was also no stranger to having many lovers, so you can imagine why the age difference between us all is so peculiar. But it wasn't until she met my father did she really decide to settle down. You also must understand that Nana had some very traditional values when it came to daughters fulfilling their roles as Alpha, and when my mother, as the oldest daughter, finally married and had children from that marriage beginning with Talia, she finally had a legitimate heir to whom she could pass the power on to.

"And during that marriage, my mother continued to have more legitimate children such as myself. So on and so forth, and well, there was some favoritism I admit. All the other children my mother had, most here and some not, well in the traditional sense are what one would consider...bastards, to put it lightly. Not that I care for such things, nor does Nana particularly anymore, as we all grow and learn from our mistakes, don't we? But it's still something our Uncle makes sure to never let my older brothers and sisters forget. You know, what and who they are — where they came from. Honestly, if my mother hadn't settled down with my father, then Uncle Demetrius would've had legitimate claim in challenging her for the Alpha position. But that, perhaps, is a story for another time," Peter supposes as he studies his claws like he's bored by it all. "Childish, really."

"You say that but it was your idea to run with the incorrect names whenever Uncle Dee is around," Derek points out. "Just to get under his skin."

Peter hums and squints his eyes thoughtfully. "No, I don't believe so. Doesn't really sound like something I would do."

"That's exactly something you would do, and you know it," Laura remarks knowingly.

"This is boring," Cora complains like she's over this line of conversation (Stiles is interested in hearing more though). "Sing, Peter."

Peter taps his chest and clears his throat six more times before he actually starts singing.

And you know what?

He sucks.

Dear god, does he suck.

Stiles gawks as Peter does a rendition of Ursula’s solo of Poor, Unfortunate Soul from the Little
Mermaid. He sounds epically horrible, and he can’t carry a note to save his life, but he makes up for it in enthusiasm.

Stiles has to hold onto his sides, which are aching because he’s laughing so hard.

Laura is wiping tears of glee from her eyes and Cora is literally wheezing.

Derek is fighting back a smile, trying to look as annoyed as possible since Peter is circling him as he sings, shaking Derek on certain parts as if to get him into the song or to treat Derek as if he’s pretending that Derek is Ariel.

Either way it’s hilarious.

It’s hilarious.

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When everyone is settling down for bed, Peter pulls Stiles aside and into the family study before he says, “Cinnamon.”

Stiles sits down in the armchair near the fireplace and frowns in confusion.

“It’s been bothering me all day ever since you brought it up,” Peter goes on to explain. “I didn’t realize until now why that was. It’s because now I recognize that every crime scene me and Talia have been to concerning the victims who were possibly clawed to death, it smelled like cinnamon. Not just on them but all through their houses — the Martins, the Mahealanis. Even your porch when El Chupacabra was left there with that message.”

Stiles minds starts cranking. “You should tell my dad or —”

“Already did,” Peter interjects, waving his phone. “Talia says that the forensics report shows abnormally high levels of Coumarin, which means they’d been force fed cinnamon. Not just any cinnamon, but Saigon. There’s only one place you can buy that in this entire state, and that’s at a Vietnamese spice shop right at start of the hiking trail on the Temescal Mountains.”

“Peter,” Stiles says, dazed with realization. “Peter, that’s where Lydia was attacked.”

“Lydia? Who is — ah, the Martin girl. The one immune to the Bite,” Peter murmurs thoughtfully and his eyelids droop in serious thought. “Talia kept an eye on her after news of the animal attack hit the local papers. When she didn’t turn, well, I got curious.”

Stiles stares at Peter, gauging his expression. “You know don’t you? About — what she is?”

“Yes,” Peter confirms, staring at him intently with eyes that say that’s not all he knows. “But that’s a subject for later. Right now, I want you to tell me what you’re thinking. You look like you were on to something.”

“Huh — oh. Yeah,” Stiles says as his mind tinkers away with a sudden thought. “So you said that the reports identified high amounts of Coumarin, right? But that kind of thing can cause liver damage, it doesn’t make sense. Why would someone force feed this kind of cinnamon to their victims before slashing them open?”

Peter lifts both brows in question.

“What’s the one thing that Werewolves can’t scent past because it’s a natural odor neutralizer?”
Stiles says, flailing his hands as if trying to get Peter to see the conclusion he’s come to already. “Cinnamon!” he says. “You know what I’ve learned about cinnamon in my AP Biology class? It has the effect of thinning the blood thereby increasing blood circulation. So not only did they make sure no one like you or your sister could trace their scent, but they also wanted their victims to bleed out as quickly as possible. Which also means they were probably killed in short order. This person knows exactly what they’re doing and how not to get caught. They're perceptive."

Peter’s mouth dips dourly. “What if we could trace the purchase of this particular brand of cinnamon?”

“Useless. Dude, all they’d have to do is pay with cash. That’s as untraceable as it gets,” Stiles says as he clutches the armrests of the chair he’s sitting in. “The closest bets we have are Danny, Lydia, and Deaton. Danny’s in a coma. Lydia is unhinged and won't give any straight answers that aren't grim nursery rhymes, and Deaton needs the photos from the crime scenes to be able to tell us anything useful. We’re pretty much at a standstill until we can figure something else out.”

Peter mutters under his breath quickly. He seems inordinately perturbed. “Fine, I’ll — research. See if something stands out.” He strides out of the study without waiting for Stiles’s response, already distracted with his thoughts.

Stiles doesn’t blame him for it. He’s pretty perplexed by the whole thing himself. All he really has to go off of is a face Lydia put in his head and a nursery rhyme that doesn’t make any sense. He sighs and stands, making his way out of the study too. He finds himself on the third level of the house, standing outside of Laura’s door, and before he can even knock, she’s opening it with a look of concern.

"I was just —"

"I know. I heard you coming." Laura drags him into her purple-themed room and shuts the door behind him. Her room is bigger than Derek’s and Cora’s. Her bed looks like it goes on for miles. She’s got posters of what he can assume is all her favorite Broadway musicals, and a few pop singers like Beyoncé and Lorde.

Against the wall by the open doorway of Laura’s private bathroom, there’s a huge sparkly dog bed with a big heap of Tibetan Mastiff lying in it, blinking slowly. There are letterheads against the wall above the grey-furred dog and it reads ‘Gumdrop’.

Stiles looks at Laura and says, “Gumdrop?”

Laura grins and says, “Don’t look at me. She used to be my mom’s dog but I kinda stole her. She’s super sweet. She used to be a surrogate mom to me whenever my own had to go away on business trips when I was little. She’s not as active as she used to be because she’s getting up there in age. She mostly lazes around in here with me or in Olive’s room. She loves babies.”

Stiles snorts. “Something we have in common.”

Laura flashes him an amused smile.

Stiles continues to look around her room.

Another thing that’s noteworthy is the fact that she doesn’t have a TV. She’s just got a computer station with two large computer screens, some speakers and a sleek looking keyboard with a wireless mouse. On the other side of the room, between her dressers and under a line of windows, she has an impressive stereo system, which she has her iPod hooked up to at the very top.
It sounds like some kind of a chorus line droning through the speakers.

“I Hope I Get It” by Marvin Hamslich,” Laura says, answering a question he didn’t even ask. She flops facedown on her huge bed and continues flipping through one of those celebrity magazines. “It’s one of my favorites.”

Stiles kicks off his shoes and crawls up on the bed beside her until their shoulders are touching.

Laura scoots her magazine over so they can both see it properly. She props her chin in her left hand and spends the next ten minutes pointing out her favorite celebrities. She gets real stars in her eyes when she comes to full body photo of Kim Kardashian. “Ugh, her body is phenomenal.”

“I guess.”

Laura sends him an incredulous look. “There’s no guessing about it. It is.” She sighs as she drags her brown eyes back to the photo. “What I wouldn’t give…”

“Nothing. You should give nothing because you don’t need to be anymore hotter than you already are,” Stiles grumbles as he drags over one of Laura’s pillows and hugs it to his chest. "Us normal people have to fall back on our personalities."

Laura throws back her head and laughs. When she’s calmed down, she says, “Thank you. I know I’m long and lean, but sometimes a girl wants curves — and not for reasons you think. But back to you though. You’re the first boy I’ve ever seen just shrug over Ms. Kim K.”

“She’s pretty,” Stiles acknowledges. “I just — her physique is intimidating. Any fantasy I’d have about us would only be of her crushing me or suffocating me somehow with her phenomenal body.”

Laura snickers. “Okay, what kind of girl do you like?”

Stiles shrugs.

“What kind of guy?”

Stiles shrugs again.

“Do you even — does it matter either way to you?”

Stiles shakes his head no.

Laura slaps the magazine shut and gives him her undivided attention. “I’m interested now. Have you ever dated anyone?”

“I’m fifteen.” Stiles groans and rolls onto his back so he can stare up at Laura’s ceiling, which is covered with glow in the dark stars and music notes. “I’ve never even really held anyone’s hand in a romantic way.”

Laura hums thoughtfully at that as she gazes down at him.

“It doesn’t bother me, you know. I — it’s not something I think about. I mean, I do think about how attractive people are, but I get — I’m easily distracted. There’s never been anyone that could hold my attention long enough for me to consider what it would be like to do — those kind of romantic things,” Stiles explains carefully and he really hopes she gets it because that’s as good as he can do with explaining it.

Laura says, “It’s all cool. I’m sure you’ll find someone special who does make you want to think
about those romantic things.”

Stiles’s cheeks go a little red and he wrinkles his nose. “Don’t tease me, please.”

“I’m not,” Laura swears. “It’s just, for a second there, I thought you were like me and Isaac.”

Stiles feels his eyebrows shoot up at that. He turns to look at her and says, “What do you mean? What does that mean?”

“I’m asexual,” Laura merely clarifies.

“Oh,” Stiles says. Then blinks and wonders if he ever took the time to notice that. “How do you know Isaac is too?”

“We talk sometimes,” Laura admits. “I got his number from Cora —”

"Hang on, how does she have his number?"

"I don't know, Stiles. You'll have to ask them, but that's besides the point," Laura says. "I got his number after that day we ran into each other at the market. I could just tell. Sometimes you can, well, when you’re a Were you can tell. You can pick up on a person’s sexual orientation because it’s somewhat a chemical thing at the very least. He didn’t smell like any other hormone-ridden prepubescent teen I’d ever ran into by far. When you have a nose like mine and a face like mine, you kind of become aware of who’s attracted to you and by what degree. Isaac’s scent stayed neutral when he looked at me, never spiking up or down. He could’ve been looking at a firefly for all I could tell. I’m kind of the same way when I look at people. I mean sure, I recognize the aesthetics in others but there’s no real sexual appeal. Does this make sense?"

Stiles nods because it does. He’d never considered that maybe Isaac might have been different in other ways, outside of the preternatural things that is. He thinks back to the times he’s seen him with Scott and Allison, how uncomfortable he’d look or embarrassed. If Stiles has to make a good guess of it, he’d say it’s probably because Isaac can smell their attraction towards him, and he doesn’t know how to handle it. He’s really shy and quiet so Stiles can see the struggle of it.

Laura shifts beside him and says, “He’s a good kid. Handsomely smart.”

“You get him to talk to you?” Stiles says as he looks at her, a little envious. “Sometimes I can’t get more than six words out of him, and that’s on a good day.”

Laura shrugs. “That’s more than I get. We mostly text. I just figured he should be able to have someone to talk to if he gets confused or concerned about something.”

“Yeah,” Stiles says quietly and he feels guilty for even feeling jealous.

Laura pokes his cheek with a grin and says, “Don’t worry, Blue. He does adore you. It’s obvious to anyone with half a brain. You’re his favorite goober.”

Stiles blushes and bats her finger away. “Well, I should be. I should be everyone’s favorite,” he jokes. “I am a delight.”

“Totally,” Laura agrees with an affectionate smile. She sits up and says, “Time for bed.”

“It’s pretty early,” Stiles lightly points out because it is only eleven, and usually he doesn’t feel the urge to drift off until sometimes around midnight on the weekends, unless he’s just really tired or stressed out. “We don’t even have school tomorrow because of the Parent-Teacher conferences,” he
“I know,” Laura chirps and takes off her shirt, making Stiles squawk in surprise and slam a pillow over his face so he can preserve Laura’s modesty. “But everyone else still has school, which means breakfast will be at six like it always is and Nana’s making crêpes and I will not miss it because she makes the best crêpes.”

“Never had a crêpe before,” Stiles admits, voice muffled by the pillow.

“All the more reason to settle down for the night. Okay, you can look now.” Laura sounds amused.

Stiles cautiously removes the pillow to see that, yes, Laura is indeed properly attired with sleepwear. He says, “I want to take a shower.”

“Go for it,” Laura encourages. “I’ll get you some pajamas. Towels and stuff are in the bathroom.” She slides out of the room with bare feet.

Stiles nods and makes his way over to the bathroom, pausing briefly to pet Gumdrop, who sniffs his right hand curiously before licking the back of it and settling down to rest again.

By the time Stiles has climbed out of Laura’s shower, most likely smelling like green tea (he had to shy away from the products that had coconut in them because of his allergies) since Laura has nothing but that type of body wash and shampoo. He notices his other clothes have been removed and there’s a pair of green pajama bottoms and a grey tank top folded neatly on the sink. He doesn’t have to guess too hard about who Laura might have borrowed the clothes from.

And wow, okay, there’s even underwear.

Stiles is more of a boxers type of guy, but apparently Derek’s more of a briefs kind. God, he doesn’t stop blushing awkwardly as he slips the clothes on. He expects it to feel stiff against his skin, but it’s just as soft and comfortable as though it were his own clothes. He’s not going to think about it. He cuts the peculiarity out of his mind before using his toothbrush, which Laura has kindly left for him. He rinses out his mouth, flicks off the light and makes his way over to Laura’s bed when she pats the space beside her with a wide smile while wiggling her eyebrows. He huffs in amusement but makes towards the bed.

Laura grabs him as soon as he sets a knee on the edge and drags him over, hugging him close to her chest so that he’s the little spoon. “Ah, this is nice. I’ve got a nice little cuddly soft Human. I’m gonna call you Squishy,” she coos, pressing her forehead against the back of his neck.

Stiles snickers and says, “You’re ridiculous. That’s totally from Finding Nemo.”

“Shh,” Laura hushes and hugs him closer. “Sleepy time now, Squishy.”

Stiles kicks her softly in retaliation but he eventually settles. He falls asleep just as Laura tangles their legs together and rumbles contently like a little motor engine.

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Monday morning, Laura jumps up and down on the bed while singing the Never Gonna Give You Up by Rick Astley because she’s kind of evil like that. They get dressed separately, and Stiles is pleased to find that the clothes he came in are clean but smell like they’ve been soaked in jasmine, though not heavily so. He figures it must be a Were thing (a scenting/claiming thing). Most of the Hales here smell like they have hints of jasmine on them (Talia being the direct source as Alpha) and it mingles with their own unique scent easily. It kind of makes Stiles feels like he belongs when they
treat him just as if he were another member of their pack. He slips his clothes on with a content sigh and shoots Gumdrop a thumbs-up with a happy grin.

Laura exits the bathroom and sends him an amused look before she grabs Gumdrop’s empty dual food/water bowl, taking a moment to refill it properly before setting it beside the older canine. “Come on, we can still beat the rush if we move hastily.”

Stiles laces his sneakers quickly and follows her down two flights of steps until they’re in the dining room, which is swarmed with young Hale children of all ages and sizes. Most of them are outfitted in the uniform of their academy: the boys are wearing red polo shirts under a dark blue blazer, with the insignia of the triskelion on the left breast pocket, and khaki shorts, which are belted at the waist with a leather belt; and the girls have the same, only they’re wearing plaid skirts with no belts and knee high socks with mary jane shoes.

It doesn’t look like any of their parents are around, and Stiles wonders maybe if they’ve already left for work since it seems plausible, what with it being Monday and all. He’s never seen any of the kids eat at the big table and he figures this must be a thing they’re only allowed to do when most of the adults aren’t about.

Stiles soon finds himself settling between Sabrina and Tyson at the middle of the table. Like everyone else, they’re plucking at the edible fruit bouquets strategically placed within reach. He grabs a pineapple daisy dipped in milk chocolate with a cherry center for himself, and a couple of honeydew melon and cantaloupe wedges because those are his particular favorites.

The table fills up quickly and the dining room is abuzz with excited chatter, mostly over the events they’re expecting to do at their schools today. They swap homework sheets, and copy from each other, or fight over dipped strawberries with white swirls, or star-shaped pineapple slices dipped and decorated with a smiley face.

Stiles actually gets hit in the eye with a grape that was actually originally aimed at Tyson, who snickers at him.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Stiles!” Gracie (Tyson’s younger sister) shouts from the south end of the table and lowers the spoon she used to hurl the grape. “Tyson, it’s not funny, you stupid dipstick!”

“Yes it is,” Tyson cackles, holding his sides. “Your aim sucks, and you’re a Werewolf.”

Gracie growls in annoyance, eyes flashing gold briefly before she sniffs spitefully and turns her nose up at him. She starts talking to her older cousin, Clover (Stiles thinks he’s about fourteen or so), and she ignores Tyson completely, even when he starts flinging grapes at her.

Tyson makes an unhappy sound but he stops bugging his little sister to mutter a spiteful apology that Gracie shoots him a forgiving smile for.

Sabrina pops a strawberry in her mouth and says, “It’s no fair you don’t get to go to school, Stiles.”

Stiles blinks and looks at her. He says, “Sorry? If I could — I would?”

Sabrina just rolls her eyes. “Well don’t apologize. I’m just saying. I wanna sleep in.”

“Tough,” Laura says from where she’s sitting across the table next to Derek, who has his head cradled in his arms, most likely sleeping.

Stiles is entertained by the thought that Nana Hale must make one hell of a crêpe if Derek is willing to wake up this early when he could be sleeping in.
Laura chews on some orange wedges as some of her little cousins play around in her long hair, braiding it or putting some of their school bows in. To Sabrina, she says, “Well, maybe if someone wouldn’t stay up so late texting their little dreamy boyfriend, a Mr. Travis Justice...” She continues, “You’d probably get all the sleep you need then. You should go to bed when Aunt Rosemary tells you too.”

Sabrina blushes with a groan like she’s dying and cups her hands over her ears. “Don’t say such evil things.”

“She’s your mother. You’re supposed to do what she says,” Laura points out sweetly.

“But you don’t always listen to yours,” Sabrina retorts (just as sweetly) and crosses her arms moodily.

Laura merely shrugs and the conversation is left at that.

Stiles watches in amusement as everyone straightens in their seats suddenly, as though they’ve been zapped, but the reaction makes sense soon enough because Cora and Nana Hale are exiting kitchen with silver trays filled with every flavor of crêpes there is. Together they pass them out and Laura has to elbow Derek awake.

Cora makes her way down the right side of the table as Nana Hale takes over the left. Cora serves Tyson, and then she skips over Stiles, and serves Sabrina.

Stiles frowns. “Um, Cora?”

Cora says, “You can’t eat these, dumbass.”

Stiles frowns even deeper. “Why not?”

“Oh my goodness, that’s right,” Nana Hale chimes from across the table where she’s serving Laura and Derek. “You know, it’s the funniest thing. I’ve always made these using coconut milk and I never would’ve thought twice about it until Cora mentioned that you had an allergy to coconut while she helped me make these this morning. So I made you a special batch. Derek, be a dear and go grab them. They should still be on the island counter.”

Derek, who’s cheeks are puffed out with nothing but strawberries and cream crêpes, grumbles in complaint.

Nana Hale cuffs him on the back of the head. “You be nice and treat our guest respectfully.”

Stiles can’t help but to tease and says, “Yeah, Derek. Where’s that famous Hale hospitality?”

Derek swallows the food in his mouth, pushes away from the table and shoots Stiles a withering look before he goes marching off towards the kitchen. He returns with a plate of peanut butter banana crêpes topped off with whipped cream and bacon shavings.

Stiles doesn’t hesitate to dig in and it is literally the best thing he’s ever tasted in ever, like wow. He repeats the feeling aloud.

Nana Hale sits at the head of the table with a smile and says, “I’ll take that as a compliment due.” Then she turns to Cora, who’s sitting beside her, and says, “Now where is that boy? Where’s Peter?”

“Nana, he said something about going to the mountains with his girlfriend Kate,” Tyson chimes between bites. “But that was late last night.”
"You're such an eavesdropper," Gracie accuses.

"Am not!"

"Are too!"

Gracie and Tyson go back and forth like this for the next few minutes.

Stiles, on the other hand, thinks about what was said. He shoves another forkful of crêpes in his mouth as he pats himself down for his phone. When he finds it he shoots Peter a text that reads: *When you said you were researching, I didn’t realize that what you actually meant was you were going to circle back to those mountains!!! You better keep me updated on anything you find.*

Peter's natural response is: :))

Stiles rolls his eyes at the predictability and pockets the phone again before he concentrates on clearing his plate.

Talia strides into the dining room from the kitchen, greeting her family affectionately when all the kids hop up from the table with an excited commotion. They surround her on all sides, kissing her hands or rubbing against her. She smiles at them warmly and drops kisses on their foreheads, or their cheeks, or squeezes the back of their necks affectionately. Then she says, “Alright, you guys, finish up. The bus will be here soon to pick you up. It won’t wait.”

They scramble back to their seats and begin shoveling their food into their mouths with great haste.

Talia saddles up behind Nana Hale before she leans down and accepts a kiss on the cheek from the elderly woman before she strokes a lock of Cora’s hair with tender consideration. She walks over to Laura and does the same before she drops a quick kiss to the crown of Derek’s head before ruffling the spot with her fingers. She smiles at Stiles from across the table and says, “Ready to go home?”

Stiles swallows the food in his mouth and shrugs with a nod.

“If you want, we can head out now,” Talia suggests. "Not that I'm pushing you out the door. You're welcome to stay for as long as you like."

There's a murmur of agreement around the table.

Stiles is completely warmed by their acceptance and he smiles. "Thanks, but I'm sure my dad and brother are anxious to see me. Another time. Thank you for having me."

Talia merely nods in understanding.

Stiles wipes his mouth clean and pushes away from the table.

Derek suddenly announces, “I’m coming too.” and he stands to follow his mother out of the dining room and through the kitchen to reach the garage.

Stiles takes a moment to give Laura a hug (which she milks like they'll never see each other again), and then he hugs Nana Hale, thanking her for the amazing meal.

Nana Hale just kisses the back of his right hand (as she is prone to do) when she grabs it and pats the spot sweetly, saying, “Don’t be a stranger. Come back soon. We enjoy you so very much.”

Stiles nods with a pleased flush before he gives Cora a quick hug that she doesn’t return because she’s too busy making a third plate for herself, but she does knock her head softly against his in
acknowledgement. He waves goodbye at the rest of them (they return it just as enthusiastically) before he strides into and through the kitchen to head out the side door. He does pause for a moment to pet all the dogs goodbye since they’re huddled by the doorway with their bowls of food and water. He navigates his way to Talia’s car and climbs into the back seat because Derek is already sitting in the front.

Talia reverses out of the garage and starts down the driveway, out onto the private trail. She says, “Derek mentioned he’s going to be tutoring you.”

Stiles blinks as he fumbles with his seatbelt. “Uh, yes.”

Talia merely nods and leaves it at that.

Fifteen minutes later, they’re pulling into the driveway and parking behind his dad’s cruiser before they all climb out.

Stiles strides quickly so he can be the first to reach the door and he throws himself at his dad after he opens it.

His dad makes a soft sound as he keeps them upright with a chuckle, though he's not surprised by this kind of greeting. “Well, hello to you too, son.”

Stiles mumbles something similar and hugs him tighter before letting go while he can still convince himself to. “Where’s Isaac?”

“Still at his friend’s house. He’ll be home tomorrow,” his dad reassures, patting him on the crown of his head before he urges him through the door and behind him so he can greet Talia and Derek. “I hope he didn’t give you too much trouble.”

Talia looks marginally amused. “Oh I don’t imagine so. Everyone’s quite taken with him in their own way,” she admits as she clasps a hand over the back of Derek’s neck. “This is my baby. Derek.”

Derek makes a face at the introduction but he straightens to his full height to offer his right hand to the sheriff and politely says, “It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Stilinski.”

“Same here,” his dad replies, accepting the hand. “And please, just call me Sheriff. We’re all friends here.”

Stiles rolls his eyes and says, “Dad, will you stop making that joke? It’s losing value.”

“Never,” his dad vows with feigned seriousness.

Talia chuckles before she says, “Derek has kindly volunteered to tutor Stiles in Paige’s stead.”

Derek tenses notably at the mention of his ex-girlfriend and he drops his gaze to the ground with a grim frown.

“That’s very brave of him,” his dad jokes. “He does know how Stiles can be, right?”

“Hey!” Stiles says from behind him. “You don’t have to make it sound like I’m a terror and he already knows about my concentration issues, dad.”

“Just checking,” his dad quips as he lifts his hands to show he only means well. “Well, come in, come in.”
Derek steps through the door when the sheriff makes way for him and he brushes past Stiles to head towards the stairs.

“I can’t stay, though I would. I have to make some rounds to some of our schools,” Talia says. “Thank you for having my son. I’m sure he’ll be on his best behavior.” She shoots Derek a look from over their shoulders.

Stiles turns to see Derek roll his eyes with a silent nod as he jams his hands in the pockets of his jeans like the moody teen he can be sometimes. He turns back to look at Talia and she seems satisfied if not amused.

Talia reaches out and squeezes the back of Stiles’s neck as a final parting goodbye with a nod to the sheriff before she glides across the porch, down the steps and to her car.

His dad steps out the door and says, “I have to be heading to work too. You call me if you guys need something.”

“Okay,” Stiles says, a little disappointed. “You’ll be home early though, right?”

“I’ll be back in time for dinner. I still have those conferences to go to with yours and Isaac’s teachers. I’m expecting good reports,” his dad says with a look.

Stiles smiles innocently. “As far as I know, that’s what you’ll get.”

His dad rolls his eyes as he walks away and says, ‘I’ll pick up something on the way home tonight. Maybe from that taco place you like so much.”

Stiles perks up at that (he loves Ramona’s Taco Treasure). “Don’t forget the horchata!”

“I know what to get!”

Stiles snickers as he watches his dad climb into his squad car, back out of the drive, and roll off with one last wave. He closes the door and locks it before turning to say something to Derek, but the other teen is nowhere to be seen. He throws up his hands with an incredulous huff before he goes off in search of him.

Derek is in his room, walking around and picking up everything like he’s studying it or checking for some faults. He skims his hands over the furniture, and over the walls. He steps over to the dresser that has his stuffed wolves on top with an amused hum and pokes his letterman jacket before he moves on to fiddle with something else.

"You want your jacket back?” Stiles asks, even though he doesn't know why he would ask like that.

But Derek just shrugs, like there's no rush to retrieve his things from the sanctuary of Stiles's room. He merely says, “You’re not very organized.”

“I'm going to ignore the judgment I can hear in your tone,” Stiles retorts as he sits down at his desk, picking up his tablet so he can check his email for any local news notifications he’s subscribed to using the words ‘mauled/clawed’ or ‘animal attack’ or ‘Mayor Argent’. There’s nothing for the first two, but there is a few articles that outlines Mayor Argent’s plans to turn an abandoned car-making factory into something more useful that will be contributing to the community. There’s talks of him brokerking some type of contract or deal with the company that makes Kind bars to turn the old factory into a distribution warehouse.

Stiles makes a thoughtful sound and wirelessly sends the articles to his printer to print. He sets his
tablet aside, idly wondering why Derek’s been so quiet, and he pauses mid-movement when he realizes why.

Derek.

Hale.

Is.

Cleaning.

His.

Room.

“Uh — what are you — I don’t remember asking for room service — hey, put that down,” Stiles fusses as he leaps up and snatches his snow globe from the other teen, clutching it to his chest possessively. “Stop cleaning my room.”

“I can’t work in this kind of clutter. How can you?” Derek says and bypasses him to continue to clean his room.

“I work just fine. I enjoy the chaos I have created,” Stiles says mildly.

“I don’t,” Derek replies, picking up Stiles’s clothes from the floor and folding them neatly. “You can either help or keep complaining. Either way, I’m not stopping.”

Stiles grumbles fitfully for a long moment but he helps, only because he doesn’t want to run into any awkward situations where Derek finds his underwear or something equally mortifying. Between the two of them they get his room all cleared up with everything put in its proper place.

Derek skims the room with this look of satisfaction before he walks over to Stiles’s bulletin/whiteboard. He studies the articles with a furrowed brow.

Stiles leaps over, and flips it to the whiteboard side. “Don’t mind that. It’s um — yeah, a side project. So here you go.” He slaps a blue dry erase marker in Derek’s left hand before he sits down on his computer chair, folding his hands over his stomach as he gives the other teen his undivided attention.

Derek twirls the marker between his fingers skillfully like it’s a drumstick or something. He says, “What the last thing Pai — that you were taught?”

Stiles doesn’t miss the way Derek purposefully ducks around saying Paige’s name. He carefully replies, “Something about ‘if and only if’? Implications? Square roots, maybe? I think?”

Derek lifts a brow. “Okay,” he drawls before he taps his chin thoughtfully with the marker. He does this for a good minute. Then he says, “Here’s what I’m thinking.”

Stiles nods encouragingly.

“We should focus on the most common algebraic symbols,” Derek says and uncaps the marker as he starts making a list of them. He has really nice handwriting.

“You have really nice handwriting,” Stiles repeats aloud because apparently his brain wants Derek to know what it’s thinking.

Derek doesn’t stop writing but he says, “Sure. Thanks. I do what I can.” Then he writes the last
symbol before he snaps the cap back on. He takes a step back to look at his handiwork before he
looks to Stiles and says, “Give me the names of these.”

“That’s square root,” Stiles points out and his eyes bounce around in no particular order. “That one is
the ‘if and only if’. I think that thingy right there is a radical? Um — add, subtract, divide — yeah,
that’s all I got.”

“That’s not good,” Derek bluntly remarks. “You should know all of these. What was she teaching
you?”

“Just how to solve for x and stuff. Oh, and I’m really good with squaring numbers, and somewhat
cubes. I think because I enjoy doing those parts the most,” Stiles supposes with a shrug.

Derek furrows his brow. “Switch places with me,” he instructs, handing Stiles the marker so he can
sit down. When they do, he says, “What’s your least favorite thing about Algebra?”

“All of it.”

Derek gives him a look. “I mean what seems to be the hardest for you to understand?”

“Equations and formulas. I get it turned around in my head,” Stiles admits. “I never end up with the
right answer.”

Derek hums thoughtfully as he considers it. He glances at the board and stares at it for a long
moment before he says, “You like puzzles, right?”

Stiles blinks. “Uh, sure. I mean. Yeah, I like the challenge of figuring something out.”

“Well think of math like a puzzle. In fact, solving an equation is just like solving a puzzle. And like
puzzles, there are things you can and cannot do,” Derek explains as he lazily twists the chair from
side to side. “Write this on the board. This a list of things you can do...”

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If Stiles thought that working with Derek would be anything like what he had with Paige, he was
wrong, very, very wrong.

For one thing, he encourages Stiles to make mistakes because he believes that the mistakes will help
him to remember how not to do something in a certain way. He treats everything they do like some
kind of mystery or a puzzle, and he asks Stiles more questions than Stiles asks him, which is
surprisingly helpful too. It gets Stiles to really think things through carefully and try to work it out
himself instead of winging it until he’s being told what he should be doing, which is how it worked
with Paige.

Derek’s also really good with keeping Stiles’s attention by appealing to that ambitious part of his
brain that’s constantly chiming ‘what’s that, pay attention to it, that’s something interesting, do
better’ and it makes Stiles file away anything he deems useful like he does whenever he’s trying to
work out one of his dad’s cases. Stiles finds that he has no trouble absorbing the information after a
while, even if it is still in a sporadic manner, especially since Derek treats it like jeopardy, giving him
the answers with the expectation that Stiles replies in the form of a question.

Before either of them know it, the sheriff’s home with dinner.

Stiles and Derek dart down to the kitchen because they’re both equally hungry. Well, maybe Derek
more so than Stiles, but that’s probably because of his Werewolf metabolism or whatever.
His dad is prepared though. He says, “I wasn’t sure what you’d like, Derek, so I got three of everything on the menu.”

Derek nods and says, “Thank you, sir. I’ll eat anything.” But then he wrinkles his nose and shoots the cup holder filled with Styrofoam cups of horchata a look and adds, “Except for that.”

Stiles shoves a taco in his mouth and snorts. “It’s the cinnamon, isn’t it?” he asks knowingly.

Derek just wiggles his eyebrows and it’s weird how expressive he is with them because Stiles totally gets that he’s says ‘yes’ without him actually saying it. He steals one of Stiles’s steak tacos.

“Yo! Whoa — that’s not allowed. Dude,” Stiles complains and hunches over his food protectively.

“I’m just keeping your math skills sharp. How many tacos do you have now?” Derek says with a mean grin as he swallows his food.

His dad chuckles and Stiles shoots him a look of betrayal as Derek steals another one of his delicious tacos.

Stiles makes an outraged sound and says, “If anyone else touches my tacos, they’re going to be counting how many fingers they have left,” Stiles warns, giving Derek a narrow-eyed look in particular.

“Lighten up, son,” his dad huffs as he powers through some chicken nachos. “There’s plenty to go around. You should be more courteous. He’s our guest.”

“Yeah,” Derek agrees, the taco-stealing traitor. “Where’s that famous Stilinski hospitality?”

“Oh, ha. Haha. Ha,” Stiles gripes, tone dripping with sarcasm. “Real clever. Didn’t realize you were such a stand-up comedian.”

Derek shrugs his mouth at the same time he shrugs his shoulders and takes another one of Stiles’s steak tacos. He takes a generous bite while looking Stiles dead in his eyes and smirks.

“You’re the worst,” Stiles swears lowly, cheeks burning for a reason he can’t even name. He’s probably just really irritated. Yeah, that’s it. Derek is super annoying. He grumbles this over and over to himself like a mantra as he eats what little remains of his precious tacos.

His dad and Derek start up a debate over basketball that turns into something like waxing poetry until his dad and Derek are looking at each other like long lost friends reunited.

Stiles rolls his eyes and laughs quietly as he shakes his head. He wipes his mouth clean, pushes away from the table as he grabs two cups of horchata and says, “I’ll just give you two a minute alone.”

His dad and Derek shoot him a flat look that’s almost eerily identical and that’s when Stiles knows he’s absolutely done.

Stiles tucks away in the living room and tries to watch TV but that doesn’t work out because Derek and his dad totally takeover and turn on a stupid basketball game. It’s something like the Chicago Bulls versus the Boston Celtics. He doesn’t stick around to watch it because he’s honestly not into the sport. Lacrosse is more of his thing.

He goes up to his room and logs on to Skype to catch up with Scott for a bit since sometimes when they don’t talk for more than a few hours it ends up feeling like forever. They talk about Danny’s condition (which is gradually but surely improving), and Stiles feels an itch in the back of his mind
that says he’s forgetting something but he can’t figure out what it is. He doesn’t get around to figuring out what it is because Scott lures him into a discussion about the direction of *Naruto’s* plotline and what it could potentially mean for how Kishimoto plans on ending the popular manga series.

Somehow they end up in a heated debate over who would win in a fight. Scott says Sasuke but Stiles is adamant Naruto would, ignoring Scott’s argument about how if Naruto wasn’t the vessel for the Nine Tails then he would be no more skilled than any other ninja in the Leaf Village and Stiles just goes off.

This lasts for a good hour before they decide to just agree to disagree because it’s not worth losing their friendship over the fictional lives imaginary characters. They trade a few cheat codes for a few video/online games they’re trying together before they part ways amicably.

Stiles calls Isaac and immediately complains when the preteen picks up. “You said you’d be home today,” he whines.

“Sorry,” Isaac says quietly, but he doesn’t really sound sorry at all. He mostly just sounds tired and worn out. “Boyd’s mom wanted to take us to Six Flags and so she did. We’re still driving back. It’ll be late before we reach Beacon Hills.”

Stiles frowns and scrubs at the stubble of his hair with his free hand. “Fine. Text me when you get to Boyd’s house or whatever. I’ll just worry if you don’t.”

Isaac just hums.

“Goodnight,” Stiles says and smiles when Isaac returns it softly before he hangs up. He’s about to put his phone on the charger when Laura calls him. He picks up on the third ring. “Hello?”

“Chutzpah!” Laura says, sounding really annoyed.

Stiles blinks and spins in his chair. “What? Am I supposed to know what that means? Is that a new greeting?”

Laura scoffs and says, “No, but Cora is trying to make that pass as a word. We’re playing Scrabble.”

Stiles makes a sound of understanding as he plants his feet on the floor so he can stop his chair from spinning.

Derek chooses this moment to stroll into his room like he owns the place, and he wanders over to Stiles’s bookshelf to sift through his modest collection of comics. He chooses a *Batman* one and makes himself comfortable on Stiles’s bed.

Stiles makes a face at him. “Shouldn’t you be on your way home?”

"I am home," Laura replies, confused.

"No, not you," Stiles corrects, distracted. "Seriously. You should head home, right?"

“Nope. Your dad I said I could stay the night,” Derek replies, flipping through the comic lazily.

“Is that Derek?” Laura says in his ear, already knowing the answer. “Hey, Der-Bear! Miss you already. Cora’s trying to cheat in Scrabble.”
“Am not. Don’t be such a wimp,” Cora gripes.

Derek snorts.

Laura continues, addressing Stiles this time, “Cora told me to call you because you’d confirm that it’s legit.”

“What?”

“Chutzpah.”

“Oh,” Stiles says. “Um.” He takes a moment to think. Then he says, “Yeah, sorry. It’s legit. We learned about it in our AP English class. It’s Yiddish. It can mean either extreme self-confidence or shameless impudence.”

“Damn,” Laura swears lowly.


Laura starts fussing at Cora and Stiles doesn’t get to hear the whole argument because she hangs up on him midsentence.

Derek snorts again.

Stiles hooks up his phone to his charger, which is plugged into the USB port of his laptop, and he calls Kira. She picks up on the second ring.

“Stiles? Hey.”

Stiles snickers and says, “Yup. That’s me. What are you doing?”

“Nothing, why?”

“So you remember when you said you were going to sing for me? You should do that now.” Stiles glances at the timestamp on his laptop. It reads 9:27 pm. It’s still a reasonable hour. “Come on. You can perform while we jump on my trampoline. Or is that too gravitationally challenging for you?”

Kira laughs happily. “Nope, I am totally ace at singing and trampolines.”

“Well let’s do it,” Stiles decides. “Meet you in five,” he says and hangs up when she agrees. He pauses when he sees a notification pop up on the screen of his phone with an invitation from both Laura and Cora to play Ruzzle. He accepts before he puts his phone to sleep and kicks off his shoes. He doesn’t usually like to jump on the trampoline with them on. He yanks his hoodie off and throws it at Derek.

Derek pulls it off his head with an annoyed face.

“You coming?” Stiles asks.

Derek furrows his brow and looks at him like he’s an idiot. “No. Why would I?”

Stiles shrugs and exits the room, making his way down the stairs, cutting off all the lights when he sees his dad isn’t around (probably already in bed or something), and he wanders out the back door. He jogs down the steps and climbs onto his trampoline.

Two minutes later, Kira joins him with her guitar.
Stiles hops around and says, “Alright. I’m all ears. Hit me with your best shot.”

Kira totally does. She sings the *Skinny Love* cover by Birdy and nails every note, not only with her voice but on her guitar as well. She’s got a very tempered voice. When she’s done, Stiles makes sure to cheer extra loud. She blushes, pleased.

“You ever consider doing YouTube videos? I bet you’d get a major following,” Stiles says with certainty.

Kira shrugs as she bounces around. “My mom wouldn’t approve. She’d think it was a distraction from my *true destiny*. Whatever that means.”

“Parents are weird,” Stiles offers.

Kira rewards him with another smile. “How was your weekend? I noticed you were away. I mean — not like in a stalking kind of way but — I just hadn’t seen you. Not that I was looking or waiting for you or anything. Oh god, am I creeping you out?”

Stiles just barks out a laugh as he jumps higher. “Nah. I know what you’re trying to say.”

The color in Kira’s cheeks slowly fades away and she looks at him from under her eyelashes with a shy smile.

“My weekend was eventful. I was at my friend’s house. One of them even followed me home like an annoying puppy,” Stiles says, glancing up at his window with a mischievous grin. He laughs fully when Derek sticks his head out the window a second later and glares at him. “Oh look. There he is. We call him Derek.”

Kira waves up at him. “Hi, Derek. I’m Kira.”

Derek just salutes her before he glares at Stiles one more time and disappears.

“He seems nice,” Kira supposes as she goes to the opening of the trampoline and sets her guitar on the ground before bouncing back over to Stiles. “My weekend was spent mostly unpacking.”

“Oh yeah?” Stiles says and grabs her hands, trying to get her to bounce higher with him. “My dad and I still haven’t really unpacked everything too. Mainly pictures but that’s because —” of mom. He doesn’t say it. He can’t. “— just because,” he finishes lamely.

Kira nods but she’s blushing again for some reason. She squeezes his hands and says, “I didn’t shock you this time.”

“Huh,” Stiles says as he realizes. “Do you think its because I’m made of rubber, and you’re made glue?”

“And whatever I say bounces off of you and sticks to me?” Kira finishes with a humored smile. “You’re a dork.”

“Oh, that’s fine. But we’re holding hands and the laws of biology states that now you’ve contracted my dorkiness too,” Stiles says with a mock serious tone.

“Oh really?” Kira laughs. “Now how will I find a husband?”

“We can marry each other,” Stiles supposes, feigning a put-upon sigh. “Think about it. We’ll be Mr. and Mrs. Lame-Dork.”
Kira tosses her head back and belts out an impressive laugh.

Stiles grins as he watches her, pleased with himself. “Your laugh is really colorful. I like it.”

Kira colors and stumbles suddenly, flailing her arms and grabbing on to Stiles until they both go crashing into the protective net and onto the grass with a painful thud.

Stiles groans and tries to worm free as Kira does the same. Somehow in all the commotion, they end up smacking their foreheads together, and hissing with a pained sound as they clutch the sore spots.

Stiles says, “God, we are such a hot mess right now.”

“The hottest,” Kira agrees as she manages to find her way out of the net. She helps Stiles out and they stumble a bit when he springs to his feet because when she pulls him, she tugs him harder than either of them expect. She blushes and says, “Sorry, I — I’m sorry. This is horrible. I’m such a klutz.”

“It’s okay,” Stiles soothes. “So am I. It was bound to happen sooner or later. What’s that one saying?”

“Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong?” Kira supplies with a fading blush.

“Yup. That’s the one,” Stiles says, snapping his fingers. “Murphy’s Law.” He chuckles. “That’s totally what I was thinking. You and I?” He points back and forth between them. “Total like minds.”

Kira ducks her gaze with another pleased grin as she tucks her hair behind her ears. “I’m sorry about your net.”

Stiles scratches the back of his head as he looks down at the mangled and twisted net. “Well, that’s what it’s for. We probably would’ve broke some bones if it hadn’t been there,” he supposes.

Kira opens her mouth to say something but her mom appears on their back porch with a sharp, “Kira.” Then she says something in Japanese that sounds suspiciously like a reprimand.

Kira’s mouth twists unhappily and she looks to Stiles. “I have to go. Thanks for the jam session and cushioning my fall.”

“I’m a good husband,” Stiles jokes and he smiles when Kira cheers up with a grin. “Go. Your mom’s glaring at me. I think she knows we got married without her permission,” he stage-whispers.

Kira blushes with an explosive laugh, smacking a hand over her mouth to stifle it before she grabs her guitar off the ground quickly, and stumbles towards her house when her mother shouts at her in Japanese again.

Stiles waves sheepishly at the Mrs. Yukimura when she gives him a narrow-eyed look that could potentially thaw ice. He turns away and kicks the mangled net under the trampoline, figuring he can swindle Isaac into helping him fix it later, before he strides up the steps and into his house. He locks the door behind him and makes his way up the stairs.

Derek is exiting the bathroom, using the back of his hand to dry his mouth. He says, “I couldn’t find an extra toothbrush so I used yours.”

Stiles jaw drops, appalled. “You’re lying!”

Derek grins wolfishly before he swaggers into Stiles’s room.
Stiles rushes into the bathroom only to find that his toothbrush is bone-dry, but one of the spares his dad keeps around for guests and family is lying off to the side. He pretends he can’t hear Derek snickering in the other room as he grumbles under his breath about unwanted, rude houseguests that think they’re so funny but they aren’t.

Stiles brushes his teeth quickly and enters his room to find Derek wearing a pair of his pajama bottoms and no shirt as he does some sets of push-ups. He flushes and complains, “You’re acting a little too at home. I didn’t do this at your house. I kept my polite little hands to my polite little self.”

Derek shrugs and rolls onto his back to do some stomach curls.

Stiles can’t even fathom the audacity of this guy and he grumbles while he goes about finding some sleepwear for himself. He changes quickly and climbs into his bed to settle down.

Derek follows not long after, settling on the other side, and lays on his stomach, facing his head away from Stiles as he tucks his arms below the pillow under his head.

Stiles sighs and says, “You could’ve turned off the light.”

“I could’ve,” Derek agrees tiredly.

Stiles rolls his eyes and slides out of bed to do it himself. He stumbles and falls twice on his way to the bed with a mangled swear. He glares at Derek in the dark when the other teen laughs quietly. He grabs Derek’s wolves off of his dresser and hurls them at him, missing horribly because it’s so dark and his eyes haven’t even adjusted yet.

Derek still makes a displeased sound, like they actually hit him or something. He gathers all three of them since they’re in reaching distance and he cuddles them close, nosing at their fur like he’s looking for something.

Stiles slides back into bed and watches him in amusement before he turns on his side (facing away from Derek) before squirming until he feels comfortable enough to just lie there and wait for sleep.

It goes quiet.

Then Derek says, "Here."

Stiles has no time to prepare before Derek is shoving two of his stuffed wolves in his direction. "Ow — hey, easy with Sly and Truth. They’re soft, but they’re not that soft. And neither am I for that matter."

Derek gives a noticeable pause in the dark.

Stiles flushes when he realizes what he let slip and he quickly turns away so he can hide his blushing face between the grey and white wolves taking up residence in his arms.

"You — you named them," Derek marvels.

Stiles just mumbles incoherently as his face continues to burn. He’s going to melt right through the bed.

Derek doesn't say anything for a long time (which is worrying enough).

Stiles can still feel his gaze burning up his back and he fidgets.

Derek clears his throat a couple of times before he asks, "So, uh...which one is Sly, and which one is
"God," Stiles whines, mortified. "Can't you let me die in peace?"

Derek laughs gently and nudges him. "I'm really not making fun."

Stiles scoffs but refuses to remove his pink face from the sanctuary of the stuffed wolves's bodies.

"Seriously. I just — I think it's cool," Derek admits, tone gentle. "Which is which?"

Stiles has to fight every instinct in his body that tells him to pretend to fall asleep so he can be done with this embarrassing situation. Instead, he takes a deep breath, lifts his head a little so he can blink lazily at his nightstand, and says, "Sly is the white one. Truth is the grey one."

Derek makes a thoughtful noise that almost sounds like he's impressed. "And the black one?" he presses.

"Chaos," Stiles reluctantly replies.

"I'm guessing you named them after the situations you earned them in," Derek supposes because he can be annoyingly perceptive when he wants to be.

Stiles doesn't bother confirming it. He just shrugs as the color finally recedes from his cheeks and his ears.

Derek shifts on his side of the bed and Stiles feels like he can breath a little easier without Derek's gaze burning holes into his back.

It goes quiet again.

Stiles is drifting off to sleep to the sound of the crickets chirping outside his open window as the scent of jasmine and vanilla consumes his senses.

Derek decides this is the perfect time to say, "Wanna hear the best basketball joke in the world?"

"What? No."

"Shh, I'm talking to Chaos, not you."

"I hate you."

"What's that Sly?"

"You are the Devil."

"Truth wants to hear it too?"

"I'm in bed with Satan right now."

"Well...if you three insist..." Derek goes on, like he can't hear Stiles at all. "Gotta give my wolves what they want."

"I vote no because I don't want to hear it."

"Tough luck. That's four against one, so I'm telling the joke anyway," Derek decides. "Why can't you play sports in the jungle?"
Stiles refuses to ask.

Derek just waits patiently.

Stiles purses his lips and sighs (his own accursed curiosity getting the best of him). “Why?”

“Because of the cheetahs.”

Stiles starts laughing even though it’s so not funny but he can’t help it.

"Get it? Cheetahs."

“Oh my god,” Stiles gasps, laughing harder. “I hate you so much for that.”

Derek hums but he sounds so unbelievably smug.


“You still laughed.”

“Nope. I had a mental breakdown.”

Derek snorts.

“Okay, I’m going to sleep now,” Stiles announces, snuggles closer to two of Derek's wolves, and closes his eyes to do just that.

---

The next day, while Stiles is in his Algebra II class (totally acing his quiz), Derek, like the dark-hearted person he is, sends him a text that’s basically just a picture of cheetahs.

Stiles gives an ugly snort that signals the attention of his classmates and he blushes, sinking down in his seat when Mrs. Cassidy gives him a reprimanding glare. He shoots Derek a reply that reads:

That’s not funny.

You still laughed, didn’t you?

You’re the worst. I’m taking a quiz. I don’t need this in my life.

Just admit that’s the best joke you ever heard and I'll leave you alone.

Fine. It was funny. In a totally lame, freakish way.

See. That wasn’t so bad, was it?

Now say I’m the king of jokes.

What? No way, you loser. I’m ignoring you now.

Stiles turns off his phone and forces himself to concentrate on quiz.

It takes a few tries, but he manages it.

Stupid Derek and his stupid jokes.
doubt

During Astronomy, his teacher begins an exuberant lecture about the possibility of life on other planets, or even the odds of being able to inhibit those planets that can sustain life, should Earth fail to provide it’s natural resources. This is something his teacher does every week on Tuesday, and Stiles enjoys the laidback lecturing because he can just focus on some of his other homework and have a good portion of it done by the time he gets home.

In between doing some worksheets from both his AP Biology and Algebra II class, or doodling some triskelions and triquetras in the margins of his notebook, he texts Derek, who is still being ridiculously smug about the fact that he can send Stiles the picture of a cheetah a million times per second and still get him to laugh. Stiles is just about to threaten to block Derek’s number if he doesn’t quit it when Peter sends him a text that reads:

You know how you can be looking for one thing? :))

And you find something else? :))

But it’s still another thing you were looking for? :))

Please explain.

Well. :))

Concerning our little cinnamon-monster thing. :))

I’ve hit a dead end, even with doing some tracking throughout the trail that loops around the mountains and around the shop too. :))

But good news still. :))

I found the mermaid’s nest. :))

I’ve found them. :))

They’ve been staying in the Santa Ana River. :))

But a few of their more rebellious teens have wandered off. :))

Is this why you asked me about them in the first place? Did you encounter the “rebellious teens” or something?

Not in physical form. :))

But they haven’t been as careful as they’d like to think. :))

I think a few of them have been camping out in my family’s river. You remember the one. :))

Uh, sure?

Well the point I’m trying to get to is that this nest of mermaids have dwelled here for a long time, and they’re famous for being clairvoyants. :))
They might be able to help us with our problem. :))

Let me guess, we have to help them with their problem first.

You’ve always been more clever than most. :))

They could be of great help to us. :))

You just have to help me track down some of their kids, though, keep in mind that by this
time they’ll have probably incited the spell they need in order to be able to walk amongst the
land folk. :))

Oh great. So basically what would have been easy at first just got twenty times as hard.

I believe in you. :))

Don’t. I never agreed to help.

But you will. :))

Negotiable. Seriously negotiable.

If you say so. :))

I’ll be back on Thursday. :))

Kate and I have decided to stick around for a little longer. :) 

Keep me updated on any new developments, either with the missing mermaids or the 
cinnamon-monster. :))

And be safe. If you let anyone harm you while I’m too far to do anything about it, I'll shake 
you until go to sleep. :))

Dude! What the hell? That’s not something you say if you’re trying to show you have a heart!

Who says I have one? :))

Stiles rolls his eyes and shakes his head before he pockets his phone. He tries to catch up on the 
lecture, but his mind is already away from him.

God, this is his life now.

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Laura’s at it again. She’s passing out campaign flyers for Prom at lunch.

Stiles can only watch her in amusement as he and Kira carry their food trays over to the usual spot. 
Derek and Cora are already sitting across from each other, fighting over some slushies.

Laura is wearing a purple tribal print romper with her raven hair falling big and beautifully around 
her shoulders. She’s totally wearing make-up too, not that she needs it, but Stiles has seen her use 
this ploy before back during Spirit Week when she was politicking for Homecoming Queen.

Cora reaches out and grabs Stiles when he makes it to their table, dragging him onto the bench in the
space besides hers, which forces Kira to sit on the other side with Derek.

Stiles gently pries Cora's fingers away and says, “Kira, you've met Derek already since he stuck his
big head out my window last night, and walked with us to school this morning. This is Cora. Our
favorite prickly cactus.”

Cora, surprisingly, doesn’t glare at him for the introduction. She eases closer to Stiles until their sides
are flushed together while she gazes at Kira intently like she’s trying to make some sort of weird
point.

Kira blushes and shoots glances between them. “I — it’s nice to meet you, Cora. Stiles has told me
such —” She seems to be looking for an appropriate word. “— things about you,” she finishes
lamely and squirms for it.

Cora cocks her head with a light smirk as she throws her right arm over Stiles’s shoulder. “Oh really?
How fascinating. He’s told me practically nothing about you,” she lightly replies.

Derek snorts around a mouthful of chili-nachos like he totally gets what Cora’s trying to do and he
says nothing as he watches this whole thing unfold.

Stiles glares at him a little for it because he had expected Cora to be hostile but he never expected
anything like this. She’s got her left hand on his thigh as she hangs all over him like she can’t hold
herself up. He says, “Uh, yeah, I really haven’t got around to telling you guys how awesome Kira
is.”

Kira beams at that.

Cora scowls and the hand she has on Stiles’s thigh twitches like she’s trying to keep her claws in.

Stiles squirms and carefully pushes her hand away, which helps nothing because her hand ends up
right where it was again. “Um, Cora — is there something you want to tell me?” he asks.

Cora looks at him with a blankly innocent face as she lifts her arm off his shoulders to stroke the
edge of his left ear. “I just, you know, missed you I guess,” she says.

Kira’s smile shrinks a little. She looks down and pokes at her salad.

Stiles rolls his eyes. “I literally saw you over an hour ago,” he points out.

Cora shrugs and finally moves to start eating, giving Stiles room to breathe and really process her
weird behavior. She’s looking smugly satisfied for some reason, and he doesn’t miss the way she
shoots Kira these little glances.

Stiles looks at Derek for some clarification but he just smirks with a meager shrug. Stiles sighs and
gives up. He’s too hungry anyway.

Two military jets pass overhead with a loud sound.

Stiles dips a chicken-strip in his small cup of ketchup and says, “They must be doing drills or
something. I’ve seen those planes at least six times today.”

Derek shrugs again and Cora glances up like she’s waiting to see it for herself.

Kira just continues to poke at her salad like she doesn’t plan on eating it at all.

Stiles frowns with concern and he nudges her foot with his own until she looks up. “You want my
slushie? You didn’t get one,” he says, because he’d noticed.

Kira smiles a little with a nod and accepts it. She glances over at Cora from under her eyelashes and she doesn’t stop grinning.

Cora looks ready to snap her plastic fork in half.

Stiles doesn’t get where all this tension is coming from. There’s no reason why Cora shouldn’t like Kira.

Derek steals a couple of Stiles’s fries since he’d finished his own. He says, “That quiz you had in math. How do you think you did?”

Stiles pulls his tray out of the other teen’s reach. “I need you to stop taking my food or we can’t be on speaking terms,” he warns. Then he says, “For once, I think I did really good, and I don’t usually feel confident like that.”

Derek smiles in an approving manner and Stiles gets a little distracted by how nice it is for like a split second. He says, “When did you want to go to the guidance counselor’s office so we can make it official?”

Stiles shrugs and goes back to eating his chicken-strips when he’s certain that Derek won’t take anymore of his fries. “We can go after lunch is over,” he supposes.

Derek nods and goes back to sipping on his slushie. By the color of his lips, it’s obvious he’s drinking the sour apple one.

Those two military jets pass overhead with a loud sound and Stiles watches them circle above before disappearing from sight again. His brow furrows as the back of his mind itches with something that’s almost like a keen awareness. It kind of feels like déjà vu almost.

Kira flags his attention away from the matter when she says, “So there’s this movie.”

Stiles looks at her and nods to show her he’s paying attention.

Kira looks a little nervous. “I just — it’s got Christina Ricci and it’s like a historical movie or whatever. She’s like this axe-murderer or something and — the reviews online looked positive — though I can’t really say for sure. You know with these kinds of movies it can be hit or miss and she’s been out of the game for what feels like a long time. Or maybe I just haven’t really been hearing about her other projects or whatever, but I think if they were any good they would have been worth mentioning —”

“Can you get to the point already?” Cora rudely interrupts and Stiles nudges her with his elbow warningly.

Kira flushes and clears her throat. “Right, well — I thought maybe, you know, if you wanted, Stiles — we could, um, go? Together?”

Stiles doesn’t answer right way. He’s thinking of everything he has to do this week. First, there’s the thing with the Mermaids. And then his father has to still give him those photos so he can take it to Deaton and get his input on the situation. Then there’s the class trip he and Cora are supposed to be taking this Saturday for their AP Biology class out to Chicago. He hasn’t even told his dad about that yet. Plus he wanted to pay Lydia another visit before he went out of town, just to check up on her and see how she’s doing. He worries sometimes.
Kira fidgets at his silence and says, “It’s okay if you didn’t want to—”

“No, no,” Stiles quickly reassures. “Sorry, I was just thinking. Checking my mental calendar. I don't know if — there’s just a lot of things I have to do this week.”

Kira looks like she’s trying to mask her disappointment.

Stiles makes it a point to add, “But next week I’m pretty wide open if you, uh, still wanted to go?”

Kira perks up at that and nods.

Cora says, “It’s been a while since I’ve been to the movies too. Why don’t I tag along?”

Kira presses her lips together and she looks like she’s trying to keep her expression neutral.

Derek snorts and says, “I don’t think that invitation was for you.”

Cora glares at him. “She doesn’t mind if I come.” She turns her glare to Kira. “Right, Kira? I mean, it’s not like it’s a date or anything.”

Kira chokes, face burning hotly, and says, “Nope. Nope. Yup, you should totally come. I’d — three’s a company, as they say. Okay, I have to go now.” She picks her tray and flees.

Stiles watches her stumble away with a frown. A gob of defensive anger strings around the teeth of his ribs and gets tangled up in a web of irritation. He looks at Cora who tries to look at him as impassively as possible. “Don’t,” he says. “Don’t treat her like that, okay? I get that you’re — that you don’t really like people much or anything, or you’re a certain way with people outside of your wolfy circle, but she’s really nice and funny and sweet and I like her. She doesn’t deserve to be pricked by your thorny personality.”

Cora purses her lips and she looks angry too. “I’m doing you a favor, dumbass. You really think she’s just wants to be —”

"Yeah, well, don’t bother doing me any favors like that," Stiles snaps.

"Ugh. You know what? Forget it. I’ll let it blow up in your face while I’ll play the nice little Human.” Cora bats her hair over her shoulder and it hits Stiles in the face. “Don’t expect me to like her though because that’s not me. I don’t kiss people’s ass.”

“I don’t expect anything from you,” Stiles merely replies with thinly veiled frustration because that isn’t what he meant at all.

"Then what, huh? What would make you happy?" Cora snidely replies. "How should I be?"

“I’m not asking you to be anything you're not. Don’t you get it?" Stiles exclaims. "I'm not asking — I would never ask you to change. I’m just asking you not treat my friends like garbage and really I shouldn’t have to ask for that courtesy, Cora,” he says as he gathers all his things and walks away because he doesn’t want to say anything else he might regret later. His hands are shaking by the time he dumps his tray and he has to jam them in his pockets.

Derek runs to catch up with him. He doesn’t say anything, which Stiles really appreciates because he’s not up for conversation.

Together they go to the main office and sit on the bench outside of the guidance counselor’s office. It takes a little while for them to see Victoria because she has quite a line of people already waiting for
her. That might have something to do with the fact that the school year is coming to a close. But when they do see her, it’s a quick process. She doesn’t ask many questions about what happened with Paige, partly because she seems to be in a rush and extremely busy as is.

Stiles and Derek sign their new tutoring contract and that’s the end of that. They exit the main office together and start a lazy pace through the (now empty) halls. They end by the stairwell, and Derek grabs his elbow so they can pause there.

Stiles raises both eyebrows and looks at him expectantly.

Derek says, “Cora’s not too complicated.”

“Well, I know that,” Stiles says with a questioning frown. He’s a lot calmer now than he was before, and he just feels more anxious than he does irate about their little falling out. “I just...yeah, I get it. I get how she is.”

“Look, I’m not just saying this because I’m her older brother,” Derek clarifies, tugging Stiles closer like he wants this conversation to remain private, even though they are literally the only two people in the hall. “She likes you. She doesn’t really bother with people outside of our family. She’s selective like that. She’s always been rough around the edges and she’s selfish in the most unapologetic way. That being said, don’t expect her to apologize for how possessive she acts with you.”

Stiles fidgets with a heady sigh, and Derek’s words do nothing but leave him feeling weary, kind of like he’s been stretched too thin. “Yeah, I never thought she would,” he says quietly.

“She won’t,” Derek confirms. “But you were right to say what you said to her.”

Stiles just makes a thoughtful sound. He’s becoming emotionally tired over this.

"Cora thinks she can..." Derek pauses to find the right words. "Sometimes she needs to be reminded that it’s not okay to treat everyone with that kind of attitude. Mom does what she can at times, and Laura and I try to get on her case too. Sometimes Uncle Peter will say something to reel her in. She’s a tough girl, but she’s not a bad person.”

Stiles shakes his head. “I don’t think that she’s a bad person. I like how abrasive Cora can be. But Kira is — she’s a lot like me. When I first moved here it was — it’s just always hard to make friends. Or not feeling like you’re annoying everyone you meet because you stick out like a sore thumb.”

Derek cocks his head at that. “You think you stick out like a sore thumb?”

“Kinda? Yes? I don’t know, it’s just — I have a thing about that,” Stiles admits and tries not to fidget under Derek’s searching gaze. “I’m only — look, can we not talk about me? We’re talking about your sister and how she possibly scared off one of the best next door neighbors I’ve had in a long time?”

Derek looks amused. “Oh yeah. Peter told me about the Ghoul thing.”

“He shouldn’t have,” Stiles complains. “You’ve got better things to do than to hear about my crazy luck.”

“I thought it was funny,” Derek admits and smiles widely when Stiles glares at him. “I’m kidding.”

“And we’ve discussed that. You’re not funny,” Stiles grumbles and brushes Derek’s hand away because he’s still gripping his elbow. “Now, are we going to go to class or are we going to —”
“Bilinski! There you are!”

Derek and Stiles turn to see Coach Finstock striding down the hall towards them.

Coach Finstock says, “Listen, I need you here for the game tonight. I’m going to have to play you since three of our players came down with some weird freaky flu called dilutional hyponatremia or something, I don’t know. I kind of drifted in and out when their parents were talking to me.” He glances at Derek with narrowed eyes and sizes him up. “You’re not on my team are you? Jesus, I should really be keeping track of this.”

Derek shakes his head and says, “Lacrosse is not my thing. I’m on the basketball team.”

“That’s right,” Coach Finstock with a look of dawning and he shakes Derek’s hand with a zealous smile. “I was there at the game before spring break and I have to say you have one hell of a wrist.”

Derek smirks. “Well thank you for saying as much. I do what I can.”

Stiles rolls his eyes.

“You know, if you ever get sick of that court, you can come out to the fields and give it a try. We’d be happy to have you,” Coach Finstock says and he lets go of Derek so he can clap a hand over Stiles’s shoulder in a jilting way. “I can’t pretend I don’t need it.”

“That’s flattering, but like I said, I’m not much for lacrosse,” Derek reiterates with an apologetic shrug that’s not sincere in the least. “And since you were so nice enough to come to one of my games, why don’t I come to yours?”

“Or you could not,” Stiles suggests because he has a feeling that Derek isn’t offering to be nice. He’s offering to be rudely funny and probably to watch Stiles fumble around.

Derek ignores him but his smirk does widen which only confirms Stiles’s theory. “I’ve never been to a lacrosse game, but I think it’s about time I see what all the fuss is about.”

“Please do. It’s a rousing sport. Doesn’t get much credit,” Coach Finstock says before he looks to Stiles. “For the love of all things mighty, Bilinski. Please don’t be late.” And with that he’s off.

Stiles shoots Derek a look and says, “You’re not really going to come are you?”

Derek straightens, and he has just an inch over Stiles but he manages to use that to his advantage as he gives a wolfish grin. “It almost sounds like you don’t want me to come, Bilinski.”

“Don’t try and be my Yoda about this,” Stiles mutters as he crosses his arms. “Confidence will mean nothing if the other players run me over.”

“That’s because I don’t. I really don’t. I am not trying to be subtle about that at all,” Stiles replies honestly. “I’m going to eat so much grass tonight. I haven’t been to practice in forever. Maybe I should just phone it in to the hospital right now. Tell them to get that stretcher ready.”

Derek snorts. “You know, the main thing is that confidence is key.”

“Don’t try and be my Yoda about this,” Stiles mutters as he crosses his arms. “Confidence will mean nothing if the other players run me over.”

“Why’d you even join the team if you were worried about that?” Derek asks with a hint of exasperation.

“It’s — never mind, don’t pay attention to me. It’s just the nerves talking,” Stiles reasons with a sigh. “But seriously, are you going to be there tonight?”
“Yeah, but only because you don’t want me to,” Derek admits with a mean grin. “Laura and I will even make you a sign and everything. You know, really show our support.”

“Unbelievable,” Stiles mumbles, giving Derek a flat look. “You just get a kick out of messing with me, don’t you?”

Derek just shrugs the corners of his mouth at the same time he shrugs his shoulders. Then he says, “Later.”

“Later,” Stiles returns as he watches the other teen stride down the hall and disappear around the corner. His mouth twists thoughtfully as he wanders in search of his locker. He’s entering the combination when a chill zips up his spine, causing him to straighten and he turns in time to see Mayor Argent striding down the hall with Garret and Violet on either side of him.

They all look at Stiles as they pass him, and it feels like he’s watching it happen in some kind of eerie slow motion the way they all smirk slowly in unison as they eye him like they know something he doesn’t. The moment their eyes connect with his feels like it happens for an age because everything goes deathly quiet as they slowly glide past him with darkly ambitious eyes.

They eventually look away as they continue on in the direction of the main office, smirks still firmly planted on their faces as their pace never stutters and the sound of the world comes rushing through again, breaking through the momentary moment of mute stillness.

Stiles watches them disappear into the main office as something cold seeps into his bones and his gut twinges in alarm.

He can’t figure out what it is about them.

But he knows it’s nothing good.

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When school ends, Stiles looks for Kira but she’s nowhere to be found. He has a sinking feeling that she might be avoiding him because of the whole lunch incident. He sends her a few texts to apologize and makes his way to his brother’s school on his bike.

Isaac is waiting out front with Boyd. And the thing is that they’re not even talking or looking at each other. They’re sitting on the curb, side by side with shoulders touching and with their hands folded together between their knees. They seem content to just sit there quietly and let the world continue to move around them.

Stiles finds it curious, but he doesn’t find it strange. He’s glad Isaac has found a friend in Boyd — someone who he can relate to in some way or another. He rolls to a stop before them and says, “Hey, Boyd. Is it fair for me to assume that you’re trying to steal my brother?”

“Yes, I think that’s very fair and accurate to assume because that is what I’m trying to do,” Boyd says with a sarcastic smile.

“Oh,” Stiles laughs. “Well at least you’re honest about it.”

Boyd stands and claps their hands together. “Hey, man. I’m just keeping it real,” he says with mock sincerity as they release each other’s hands. “What’s going on with you, though? Got any plans tonight?”

“Lacrosse game,” Stiles admits and shrugs. “Other than that. No.”
Boyd hums thoughtfully just as Erica strolls up to them in a scandalously tight nylon dress. She says, “What’s going on, clits?”

Isaac fidgets and looks in the opposite direction with a frown.

Stiles makes a face and says, “Hey, Erica. Charming as always.”

Erica gives a curtsy while holding up two middle fingers before she digs into her cleavage for a cigarette and a lighter. “Seriously, though. Tell me you guys have some plans because I cannot hang with Jackson and the rest of them. Total downers. All they ever want to do is go to hospitals.”

“Yeah but the thing about that is that people who have friends in those hospitals want to visit out of concern,” Boyd explains and gives Erica this disgruntled look. “I don’t know why you’re acting shady, but you need to remember that you grew up with Lydia and Danny too.”

Erica flicks her thumb over her metal lighter and takes a deep drag as she lights the tip of her cigarette. She exhales a long stream of grey smoke in Boyd’s face. “Grew up, Vernon,” she replies. “That’s all we did. Grow up together. I wasn’t swapping tampons with Lydia, and I sure as hell wasn’t trading makeup tips with Danny.” She smiles sweetly as her cigarette hangs limply between her cherry red lips as she pats Boyd on the cheek. “Trust me, sweetheart. If it was you lying in a hospital bed, all bandaged up and bruised,” she says as she slides her hand down the side of his neck and to his wide chest. “I’d play nursemaid for you in a heartbeat,” she finishes with a wink and plucks her cigarette from her mouth to flick some ash off the tip.

“You know you could get expelled for that right?” Stiles points out.

Erica shrugs like she doesn’t care and she probably doesn’t. “Let’s go to the arcade. I got some clowns over there that owe my brothers some money for *product* and I’m about to cash out. Plus my dad’s being weird so I’m not ready to go home.” She sniffs and takes another drag from her cigarette. She seems bothered and anxious, if the way her feet always shift restlessly as her fingers twitch around her cigarette is any indication. She looks like she’s coming down hard from a caffeine high.

“I’m good on that,” Boyd says as he walks over to Isaac. They exchange a brief conversation before they do a little handshake that seems all their own and Boyd uses that grip to pull Isaac to his feet as they exchange grins. Then he turns away and continues, “I’m going to the hospital with Jackson. He’s been to see Danny every day, just as much as Lydia and you know, I don’t want him to be by himself since Scott’s gone to have dinner with Allison and her mom.”

Erica just sniffs again and flicks her cigarette as she scans the parking lot anxiously.

Stiles watches her and feels compelled to say, “I think I’ll hang back. Some gaming might do some good for my nerves.”

Boyd nods. “I’m sure you’ll do fine tonight. Jackson says you’re not half bad when you try. Maybe we’ll swing by later,” he supposes. He nudges Erica as he walks to his bike. “Don’t let her get you into trouble,” he warns.

Erica scoffs and smiles prettily, but there’s a razor sharp edge to it. “Me? Trouble? I don’t think that’s possible,” she quips.

“Yeah, yeah. You just better not get arrested for something dumb. Stop mixing yourself in your family’s mess. It’s not worth it,” Boyd urges as he mounts his bike and peddles off in the direction of the hospital.

Erica throws down her cigarette and stomps it into the cement with her heel before she looks to
Stiles. “So. Just you and me.” Then she looks at Isaac, who is still looking off in the direction of where Boyd disappeared to. “And Mr. Mute too, I guess.”

“His name is Isaac,” Stiles says and reigns in his annoyance. He’s trying to be a good friend here and see what’s up with her. She looks like she needs someone to talk to because to Stiles, well, she feels kind of off and he’d like to know why. “If we’re going to the arcade we should go now. I’ve got a game later so that only gives me about two hours.”

Erica shrugs but she eases over to grab her bike before she mounts it and starts peddling lazily.

Stiles rolls over to Isaac and says, “Hey. You good to go?”

Isaac looks at him before he looks at Erica’s shrinking back with an unreadable expression. He says, quietly (like he thinks she’d hear), “I don’t like her.”

Stiles snorts. “I don’t think anyone does. But she can’t be all bad,” he supposes.

Isaac shakes his head. "She's — she feels off."

Stiles considers that and says, "Yeah, I kind of noticed that too."

Isaac's frown just deepens as he continues to gaze after her.

Stiles nudges him gently. “Get your bike.”

Isaac exhales quietly before he grabs his bike and mounts it.

Five minutes later finds the three of them in the heart of the business area (Uptown). The sidewalks are as busy as the streets are with all sorts of people walking around, either by themselves or with friends or family. The sun is gleaming down on them with winks of light that hit store windows and car windshields and any shiny metal thing.

Outside of the arcade stands a homeless man, his feet planted on the edge of the curb that marks the empty spot reserved for the handicapped, his dirty fingers curled around a scraggly piece of cardboard with the words ‘GOD IS DEAD! MONSTERS ARE ALIVE!’ scribbled across it. He doesn’t look to be too old, but he does have a deep tan and prominent wrinkles around his eyes. His skin is caked with smudges and dirt, like he’s been cleaning out a chimney. His hair is a wild bird’s nest of salt and pepper, but his clothes are immaculately clean.

What sticks out the most to Stiles is his red satin jacket. It looks shiny and new, and it twinkles with glossy streaks when he moves his body every which way with the passionate sermon he shouts at pedestrians as they pass him by in haste.

“The wicked is coming!” the man swears, mouth foaming slightly despite his split and dryly cracked lips. “Pray for your kids but they’re already dead! To darkness they’ll be dragged down. Guard your houses! They’ll take you alive and make you what they are! Pray! God is dead but pray!”

Erica comes to a screeching halt and this forces Stiles and Isaac to stop as well. She’s got a devious smile on her face as she says, “Ah, there. See? Just the man I was looking for.”

Stiles has no time to ask her what she means because she tosses her bike to the side and marches towards the homeless man like a girl with a purpose.

Erica shouts, “Yo, Frank! You damn bastard! Where have you been hiding?”
The sharp sound of those two military jets passing overhead rings loudly as if they’ve edged even closer.

The man called Frank looks at Erica with widely terrified eyes and he stumbles in his haste to get away, which is a mistake because he ends up falling flat on his face in the handicapped parking space.

“No, no, Frank,” Erica calmly reprimands as she strides over so she can press her heel to his throat to keep him down. “None of that.”

Frank chokes as he twists and jerks his body under her heel like he can’t get free.

“Where’s the money you owe Ricky and Carter? You’re lucky it’s me trying to peel your ass about this. Ricky and Carter?” Erica shakes her head. “Wouldn’t be so considerate. You’d be spitting out teeth by now, Frank. Or whatever left you have. But to be honest, that’s fair right? We drop two pounds of our best product on you without the cash advance and this is how you repay us? Come on, Frank. You know that shit doesn’t fly.”

“Please! Please!” Frank gasps and he looks around frantically at the gathering crowd who watch in interest with seemingly no intent to intervene. Some people have even pulled out their phones to record. “For the love of — don’t just stand there! Stop vining and do something! She’ll kill me — ahh!”

Erica grinds her heel down on his Adam’s apple as she retrieves her lighter from her pocket. She flicks it on and off with a smirk. “That’s a nice jacket you got there, Frank. It’d be a shame if something happened to it while you were still inside it.”

Frank gives a high-pitched whine and empties his pockets of all the money he has.

Erica lets up on him then, huffing as she watches him scramble to his feet before he sprints off. She gathers the money and pockets it as the crowd disperses now that the show is over. She takes a moment to unscrew the top to the cross she’s been wearing as a necklace and dabs something suspiciously white onto her pinky before she holds it under one nostril and takes a sharp inhale before blinking rapidly with a shiver. She wiggles her nose as she puts the cap back onto her cross.

Stiles strides over to her and says, “Seriously, Erica. What the hell was that?”

“Business,” Erica merely says with another sniff and wiggles her nose. What had seemed like a caffeine crash has now become startlingly clear for what it really is: a drug problem. “What? You don’t like the way I handled that? Should I have been more polite? Want to give me pointers on customer service?” She scoffs. “You need to relax. No one’s going to call the cops over some thirteen-year-old girl kicking down a homeless man. I just provided these small town fuckers with some dinner conversation.”

“They might call the cops if they think you and your family are dealing,” Stiles hisses lowly.

Erica blinks slowly at him before she gives him a smile that doesn’t even reach her brown eyes. “So what? You’re judging me now? Is that a threat I hear from the sheriff’s son? Trust me, asshole. You don’t want to try it. What my brothers and I do is our business, okay? Not all of us have nice homes and loving parents, so fuck you. I don’t need another fake friend hanging around me out of some moral sense of obligation. And yeah, I know that’s the only reason you came with me because you feel sorry for me, just like Scott and Allison and the rest of them do. Fuck you and fuck them.”

“Erica,” Stiles reaches out to touch her but she flinches away.
“Don’t,” Erica warns. “Don’t fucking touch me. Don’t ever touch me.” There’s water building up behind her eyes quickly. “You have no idea what I have to do to survive. You have no idea because while you’re sitting all warm and cozy with your poster family, I have to constantly fight off my dad every night he comes home drunk and covered in blood. So go ahead and tell your dad that my family’s dealing or whatever the fuck you think you have to do, but know that if I didn’t do it I’d be starving right now. I’d be living on the streets just like a bum. We do what we have to do.”

Stiles stares at her in shock.

“Yeah, that’s right. That’s what you want hear, isn’t it? You wanna hear the whole fucking sob story so you can be a good Samaritan and offer your shoulder for me to cry some pretty little tears on so you can go on and feel good about your life. Well guess what? I don’t need that and I don’t need you. I don’t need any of you doing me any fucking favors,” Erica says as her mascara begins to run and she looks so very broken. “Fuck you,” she whispers and storms past him to grab her bike and peddle off.

Stiles watches her go without a mind to stop her. He’s still dumbfounded. He had wanted to help Erica — wanted to be a friend. He was trying to be a willing ear but now he’s pretty sure that would have never been enough. Her barbed words had been like a bucket of ice, and suddenly, standing out in the middle of that parking spot with the rest of the world just passing him by, undisturbed, he feels so raw and foolish.

He’s never felt so unsure of himself.

Isaac grabs him and leads him to his bike, and together they ride home quietly.

Stiles is on autopilot. There’s something ugly like uncertainty expanding between the teeth of his ribcage like thick, heavy foam.

It stays with him for the rest of the ride home, and even longer then.

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The game against the rivaling school is not going well at all. They’re dying out there, not only from the lack of skilled players, but because Coach Finstock is foolish enough to put Stiles in the goal post as goalie.

Stiles hasn’t caught a single pass, and that’s only gratifying his already bitter mood. His uniform is wrapped around him all wrong, and he’s sweating under his helmet because the field lights seem blindingly hot and bright.

Don’t get him started on the eyes of the crowd.

It feels like they’re watching him as if they know he has no idea what he’s doing. The grass under his cleats feels too soft and slippery, like he’s going to sink down into it like quicksand. His chest feels tight, too tight, like his heart doesn’t have enough space to thump. His palms are a damp mess under his gloves and his eyes are stinging from the salt of his own sweat. He shifts restlessly as he watches the other players run around, chasing after the ball and each other, never quite making it to either side to score a goal.

The horn signaling halftime comes like a relief.

Stiles clenches his hands around his lacrosse stick, twisting and turning as he stalks over to Coach Finstock who waves them all closer with a frustrated frown wrapped around his black whistle. He’s indicating heavily to his clipboard, which now has a new play scribbled across it. Stiles is barely
paying attention to the words. He feels itchy and unsettled. He just wants to take a long hot shower and crawl into bed.

“— god sakes, Bilinski,” Coach Finstock bellows as he glares at them all. "Please keep your eyes open and catch the goddamn ball. We’re behind by a point but let’s not give them that opening.”

Stiles just nods with the rest of them before they all disperse to grab a towel or a bottle of water or Gatorade. He pulls off his helmet and dabs at his forehead with a towel and looks towards the bleachers.

Jackson, Isaac, and Boyd are in the third row and they give him a nod and a wave that Stiles returns with less enthusiasm.

Laura and Derek are sitting on the far right at the top, and as promised, they’re holding up a large banner that reads ‘Stilinski is Our King!’. They wave at him and Laura shoots him a huge encouraging smile as Derek juts his chin with a small grin.

Stiles just waves at them too, and it’s as forced as it feels.

His dad, who is sitting on the first row, waves him over with a concerned frown.

Stiles goes, not even bothering to pretend that he’s even remotely happy.

“How you holding up, kiddo?” his dad asks, clapping him on the shoulder when Stiles gets close enough.

Stiles just shrugs. He’s given up on words.

His dad looks even more concerned. “Stiles — what’s wrong?”

Stiles shakes his head and shrugs again. He really doesn’t want to talk. He just wants to go home.

His dad must read it on his face and he opens his mouth to no doubt offer to take him home but the horn signaling the start of the game interrupts him.

Coach Finstock urges him onto the field and so Stiles puts his helmet back on and moves to go back out there.

His dad grabs his wrist, stops him, and looks him in the eyes as he says, “You are allowed to leave whenever you feel uncomfortable.”

Stiles freezes at that. That’s — that’s something his mom always used to say. She knew how uncomfortable public spaces made him feel sometimes (playgrounds, play dates, parties, etc.) and she always made it clear that they could leave at the drop of a hat if that’s what he wanted.

“Son,” his dad intones. He’s treading carefully. “You don’t owe them anything. Nothing at all. We’ve discussed this before — there’s no guilt in putting yourself first.”

Stiles feels warmth gather at the corner of his eyes. He nods very quickly to show his dad that he understands.

“If you wanted to leave, I’d take you away. No questions ask. To hell with it all,” his dad says and presses his forehead against Stiles’s helmet. “Okay, Stiles? You don’t have to stay.”

Stiles presses his lips together and he hugs his dad fiercely.
“I’m proud of you,” his dad continues. “If you don’t want to go out there then don’t go out there unless you want to. It’s your choice, Stiles. It’s always your choice, and they’re your feelings. Yours alone. Don’t let anyone else make you feel guilty for how you decide to deal with them.”

Stiles smiles and inhales deeply before exhaling. He finally feels comfortable enough to breathe. He pulls away and says, “Thanks, dad. I think — I know I needed to hear that.”

His dad pats the side of his helmet affectionately with a nod. “You’re doing great,” he promises.

Stiles nods and straightens, shaking off all the negativity before he jogs back onto the field to the goal post. The warmth of his dad’s words kind of shelters him and he can’t feel anything but loved, the guilt of earlier marginalizing into something manageable. He feels slightly less small when he stands in that goal post again and he tracks all of the players’ movements with his eyes, ready and willing to really try this time.

Stiles will never be able to explain how his hands somehow know what to do when one of the rival team’s powerhouse players come rushing down the field at him with determination written in hard lines across his massive body. He stands there gaping, kind of frozen, completely sure he’s about to mess this up, but he finds himself ducking left to scoop the ball out of midair when its hurled at the corner of the goal post. But, holy god, he does it.

Stiles catches what would have been the winning goal for the other team, and the crescendo of clapping praises jolts him out of his shock in time for him to brace himself as his teammates barrel into him with their enthusiasm, lifting him up with roaring cheers. But Stiles is looking at his dad, who is cheering for him with such glowing pride and it floods Stiles with such a sense of accomplishment and joy.

When he’s settled on his feet, he staggers out of from the cluster of his teammates, who won’t stop patting him on the back and shoulders. He stumbles all the way over to his dad who receives him with open arms. He says, “Dad, dad! I — dad, did you see that? Oh my god, dad.”

“I know, I know,” his dad replies as he squeezes him close, his tone interlaced with mirth and pride. “That was amazing. Stunned the hell out of me.”

Stiles pulls away and bounces on his heels anxiously. He’s got all this energy now that he has absolutely no idea what to do with but he doesn’t care. This is his moment. This is a moment he gets to keep forever because he did something he never thought he’d be able to do at least until he was a junior or senior but he did it and it felt so good.

Jackson, Isaac, and Boyd descend from the bleachers to offer congratulations.

His dad excuses himself with a promise he’ll be waiting in the car when he’s ready to go, and walks off with Isaac, who offers Stiles a quick grin meant only for him to see.

Jackson actually looks genuinely impressed, but of course, he makes it about him by saying, “Looks like all that time I put in with you paid off.”

Boyd nudges him and shakes his head.

“What?” Jackson says, looking as unapologetic as ever. But then he gets solemn. “Danny would’ve said something sappy about how you’ve always had it in you. But, you know. I’m sure you’ll tell him all about it when he’s — you know.”

Stiles nods. He understands perfectly well what Jackson is trying to say, but the other teen deals with emotions about as well as a toddler who’s being forced to swallow syrup medicine does. He says,
“Thanks.”

Jackson nods before he makes an indication for Boyd to follow. “Let’s catch a practice together some time, Stilinski. Can’t have you slacking,” he says with a cocky smirk before he wanders off with Boyd.

Boyd says, "Congrats, man. Good one."

Stiles watches them go before he turns to see Derek and Laura approach. He offers them a modest smile. He says, “What did you think?”

“It was interesting to say the least,” Derek supposes with grin and he shrugs. “Still not into it. But your performance at the end was inspiring.”

Stiles rolls his eyes. “Didn’t think you’d be into it, but I guess that’s as much as a compliment as I’m going to get from a basketball fanatic.”

Laura snorts and pinches Stiles’s cheek. “Don’t mind, Derek. He can’t be bothered when it’s not about him. I thought you were awesome! And that last move with the goal? Flawless,” she compliments.

Stiles smiles widely and swats her hand away. “Yeah. It was so — thanks.” He looks down and says, “Nice...banner?”

“You like?” Laura says as she holds it up higher at eye level. “Derek helped me make it. Wouldn’t stop complaining the whole time about how the glitter was getting in his hair and on his shoes, but you know, he’s a drama queen so I just tuned him out.”

Derek makes a wounded and offended sound.

Stiles snickers. “Well I appreciate the efforts.” He pokes at the sign and some glitter pops off and he adds, “I’m really digging the irony, though.”

“I’m a total Potterhead. I won’t even deny,” Laura confesses with mock seriousness. “Next time I’ll make shirts though. Really show my support.”

“Uh, you don’t have to do that,” Stiles says with an amused frown. “Seriously. Please don’t, Laura.”

“What’s that? A dozen shirts? All in blue? Rhinestones included? I don’t know, that’s a tall order, but okay,” Laura says because she’s ridiculous.

Stiles laughs and pushes her gently. “Okay, that’s not cool. Firstly, I know you heard me because you’ve got hyper-hearing, and secondly, if you make those shirts anything like you just described, I will leave town and never look back. Minimum wage in Hawaii is sick, I hear.”

“Oh, what a cute threat,” Laura coos with a wink. “Fine. I’ll just make a modest, like, small and exclusive number of shirts. For family and close friends.”

“Don’t make the shirts,” Stiles pleads and tries to be stern about it but he’s smiling so hard that it’s almost impossible. “Come on, Laura. Be cool. Don’t.”

“What? But I was going to do like glow-in-the-dark meets lite-brite and had this mutant child and that would’ve been your shirts,” Laura teases and smiles widely when Stiles laughs. She looks to Derek and says, “I just really don’t understand how he doesn’t want that.”
“Something so gaudy and obnoxious?” Derek counters and feigns a considerate look. “He obviously doesn’t know what he’s missing.”

“Right? Obviously,” Laura agrees.

Stiles snickers and shakes his head. “Okay, I’m done with this whole conversation. I have to go, my dad’s waiting. Bye. Bye. Please don’t do the shirt thing. Bye.”

Laura pulls him into a hug that lasts longer than it should (but Stiles doesn’t mind) and she lets him go when he complains about the way she grinds her knuckles into the top of his head. She tweaks his nose before she leave him be. She waves at one of her fellow cheerleaders in the bleachers before she climbs the stands to have a lively conversation.

Derek cocks his head and says, “You seem better then you were before.”

Stiles blinks, thrown, and says, “What does that mean?”

Derek shrugs. “You just looked like you were down about something earlier. Laura and I both noticed but she didn’t want to bring it up. I’m a lot more straightforward though, so, I’m bringing it up,” he says as he lifts both eyebrows brazenly.

Stiles huffs and rubs the back of his neck sheepishly. “Yeah, I had — earlier I just kind was thrown off about something someone said to me. It was like — you know when you try and come at something with the best intentions and it blows up in your face?” He drops his hand with a sigh. “Yeah, well, I kind of had that moment and it really bummed me out. I basically — it just really threw me.”

Derek crosses his arms and flicks his gaze over Stiles’s face like he’s searching for something. “You can’t always get it right,” he supposes but it’s almost profound the way he says it. “Sometimes you got to take the good with the bad, I think. Grain of salt, and all that.”

Stiles feels his mouth twist with an amused frown. “That’s deep, man.”

Derek rolls his eyes. “You’re better at this then me. I thought maybe I’d try and say something that would strike a chord. I don’t know. We’re friends and friends say meaningful stuff to each other.”

“Meaningful stuff,” Stiles echoes with undisguised mirth. “Right.”

Derek gives a heady sigh.

“Okay, sorry. It’s just — thanks. That was — helpful? Maybe, I don’t know, we’ll work on it,” Stiles promises with a humored grin. “And the feeling’s mutual, about the friend stuff, I guess. I didn’t know we decided to be friends.”

“We have an unspoken bond, can’t you tell?” Derek states, giving Stiles the flattest look.

“Not really, to be honest. I still haven’t quite forgiven you for the taco incident, so…” Stiles says and shrugs in a ‘what can you do?’ kind of way, but by the way Derek rolls his eyes again he can tell the other teen knows he’s joking. “Okay, but I really have to go. I guess I’ll catch you — when we catch each other. Do you wanna do some math stuff tomorrow?”

Derek looks indefinably amused. “Sure. Before first period, though. I have basketball practice right after school.”

“Priorities,” Stiles snorts and starts backing away. “Later.”
“Later,” Derek returns before sprinting up in the bleachers to join his sister.

Stiles doesn’t bother to watch them, the stands are mostly empty by now with only a few people lingering around. He makes his way quickly to the parking lot where Isaac and his dad are waiting in his dad’s rumbling cruiser, back and front taillights shining brightly even under the heavy glow of the tall street lamps.

Stiles doesn’t feel as hot as he did before, but it’s still a relief to him to slide into the backseat with Isaac and feel the blast of the car’s air conditioner, compared to how damp and humid the night air had seemed.

Isaac is leaning against the door on his side of the car, looking up and out of the window like he’s trying to count the stars because there’s nothing else of particular interest going on.

His dad shifts into drive and they’re pulling away from the curve to head home. He says, “That was a really good game.”

“You think so?” Stiles asks, suddenly giddy again at what he’d managed to accomplish. He fidgets in his seat with a grin when his dad glances at him in the rear view mirror. “I thought I’d puke when I first went out there.”

His dad hums thoughtfully at that and keeps his eyes on the road ahead of him. “Pre-game jitters,” he supposes. “Happens to the best of us. I got them all the time back when I played football, but, Jesus, that seems like forever ago.”

Stiles snorts. “You’re not that old.”

“Old enough,” his dad argues. “You wanna stop somewhere?”

“We still have leftovers,” Stiles points out because they do. He and Isaac had cooked a tuna casserole earlier that afternoon before the game. Isaac had had about three servings of it and Stiles had been too down at the time to really tease him for it. He continues, “We don’t need to stop anywhere.”

“Fine then,” his dad says. “If that’s what you want.”

Stiles sinks back against the seat and lets the silence seep in between the chirp of his dad’s radio. “Dad, what do you do when — if you know someone is in trouble and you want to help but they don’t want you to?”

His dad stops at a red light and says, “That’s a tricky one. Depends on the trouble they’re in. If it’s immediate, you kind of want to get it taken care of right away. If it’s something else, well, sometimes you can’t help people if they don’t want to be helped. You just have to keep letting them know that you’re ready to help when they need it. Why?”

“Nothing, I, um,” Stiles says, choosing his words carefully. “I have this friend who knows this friend and they have a drug thing with the family.”

Isaac glances over at him with this knowing look.

His dad looks at him sharply through the rearview mirror. “Stiles, if someone is selling you drugs or —”

“Dad,” Stiles says, flailing. “I’m not — it’s not like that. I just have this friend who knows this friend who I think might be in trouble but I don’t want to make it worse.”
His dad deflate partially. He moves the car when the light turns green. “You know there’s a such thing as anonymous tips, right? You can tell me enough without having to tell me everything and I’ll see what I can do. How’s that?”

Stiles nods rapidly and tells him about Erica, keeping it short and simple because for whatever reason, the whole thing seems to be making Isaac uncomfortable.

Maybe it hits too close to home.

His dad makes a promise to look into it cautiously and that leaves Stiles feeling better about the whole thing.

They pull up to the house and his dad parks the cruiser in the drive before they all climb out.

Stiles is surprised but happy to see Kira sitting out on her front porch steps with her guitar. He tells Isaac and his dad to go on in the house without him and that he’ll be in shortly, while ignoring his dad’s speculative looks, which he sends between Kira and Stiles like he’s trying to get a read on the situation. He doesn’t comment though, and he follows Isaac into the house.

Stiles makes his way across the lawn and over to Kira, but not without tripping over the garden hose with a mangled swear. He leaps to his feet with an embarrassed flush that Kira smiles softly at and he stands at the bottom of her porch steps as she stays seated on the middle steps. He says, “I’m sorry about earlier.”

“It’s okay,” Kira says with a light shrug. “I mean it’s not okay but, you know. Uh, Cora approached me after school and dragged me to the ice cream parlor before grilling me with questions. She paid for the ice cream, so — even though she didn’t apologize, I guess that was her way of doing it.”

Stiles laughs a little and rubs the back of his neck. “Yeah, that sounds like Cora,” he supposes. “She’s a — tough girl to figure out.”

“I noticed,” Kira merely says. “She’s actually not so bad.”

“No. She’s really not,” Stiles quietly agrees. “Are we — I mean, we’re good, right? You and I? I just wouldn’t want you to think that I — that, that kind of behavior is okay with me.”

Kira furrows her brow.

“And I just — I’d hate for it to sour our friendship if — you’re really cool and I don’t want you to think that I hang around with jerks, which I kind of do, but please believe they’re jerks with pure hearts of gold,” Stiles promises.

Kira grins and says, “We’re good, Stiles. You have a good quality about you that I think gives you a fair instinct about the company you keep. Cora is — she’s some kind of something. But you’re okay — we’re okay.”

“Cool,” Stiles says but he can’t help but to notice that she still seems subdued for some reason. “Are you sure? Because —”

“I got into it with my mom again,” Kira explains, stalling his worries. “I just — don’t worry about it.” She gives a heavy sigh. “That woman drains me.”

Stiles makes a sympathetic sound. “Well, um — did you still want to see that movie next week? I’m still game if you are, and we totally don’t have to bring Cora if you preferred not to.”
Kira exhales a quiet laugh and wordlessly nods.

“Okay,” Stiles says. “Well I guess that’s that then. Movies next week, sans Cora.”

Kira smiles and ducks her gaze down to her guitar, which she strums listlessly for a moment before slapping a hand over it to quiet it before she says, “How was the game? I’m sorry I missed it.”

“It’s fine. The game was — it was —” Stiles moves his hands around with an unintelligible gesture and Kira laughs at him for it. “Just, you know?” He makes a fist and punches it in his open palm and makes another gesture. “Like that. But better. Better than what I expected, at least.”

“Great. That’s really great,” Kira remarks sincerely. Her mouth fidgets with a fond smile and she bites the corner of her lip before she says, “I should get inside. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Stiles nods and watches her go before he makes his way to his house, swatting his way through a cluster of fireflies that always seem to like to gather around his house lately. He locks the door behind him and moves to tuck away in the bathroom, ridding himself of his uniform before he climbs under the hot jet of the shower. He lets the steam settle in all around him so he can breathe it in, turning the temperature down when he begins to feel lightheaded and flushed.

An hour and a half later he climbs out, wet and pink, but clean. He wraps a towel around his waist and gathers his dirty uniform on his way back to his room. When he gets there, he dumps it all in his laundry basket before he slips into some sleepwear. He notices a manila envelope resting innocently on the middle of his bed with a sticky note that has his dad’s messy scrawl scribbled across with the words: These are as many photos as I could get without rousing any suspicion. Don’t make me regret this. Use with caution.

Stiles stuffs the envelope into his backpack and switches off his lights before settling down into bed with future plans of delivering those photos.

That night he dreams about a raging sea of black water.

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Early Wednesday morning, two hours before the start of school, Stiles drops Isaac off at his school for early morning breakfast before he peddles into town to see Deaton with the spare time he has before he has to meet up with Derek in the school’s library.

Deaton seems to be restocking his book collection when Stiles arrives, and they exchange brief greetings before he hands over the envelope. He says, “If I wanted to catch a Mermaid or something...how do I do that?”

Deaton lifts both eyebrows as he carries the envelope over to the glass counter display and stands on the other side of it. “That would depend on the form they’re in.”

“Well, say they did the full-Ariel and were walking around on a fresh new set of legs,” Stiles says, making a motion with his hands that doesn’t really equate to his words. “What then?”

“It also depends on where they’ve come from,” Deaton says.

“The mountains?” Stiles offers, unsure if that’s helpful.

“Ah. I see. Then you need no longer refer to them by Mermaids, because in human form they become Nymphs,” Deaton clarifies. “As Greek mythology will tell you, they are famously beautiful creatures, yet treacherously selfish at heart and attention-seekers. In order to remain in their human
form they thrive on three things: carnality, intemperate dynamism, and music.”

“Sounds like your typical high school party,” Stiles jokes.

Deaton, however, looks less than amused when he says, “Yes.”

Stile blinks. “Wait — you can’t actually mean —”

“Yes,” Deaton repeats. “Nymphs are easily located at parties, and as you so cleverly stated, even more likely a high school or college party.”

Stiles exhales a long stream of air as he fishes for his phone. “Peter’s going to love this,” he mutters as he texts the older man. “Thanks.”

“It’s my pleasure,” Deaton merely replies. “I’ll examine these pictures thoroughly and tell you what I find.”

Stiles nods before he gives a light wave and exits the shop. He mounts his bike and peddles to school. He locks up his bike and notices there’s not a lot of students or teachers wandering around, which is understandable because it’s still pretty early. He heads inside and makes his way to the library.

Derek’s sitting in the corner, doodling idly in his notebook, long legs stretched out underneath the table.

Stiles walks over and sits across from him, dumping his backpack next to Derek’s on the floor. He says, “So you get invited to parties a lot.”

Derek blinks and straightens, feet knocking into Stiles’s in the process, but he doesn’t apologize for it as he lifts a brow. “Yeah. Sure.”

Stiles nods as he drums his fingers on the surface of the table and casually asks, “Have you been invited to any lately or heard of any that have already happened in the past?”

Derek looks at him evenly for a long moment before he cocks his head and replies, “What are you getting at with this?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Stiles says as he widens his eyes innocently. “This is just one friend asking another friend about their social life because said friend is interested in having as equally as a good of a time, if not more.”

Derek leans forward slowly and rests his forearms against the table as he says, “You realize you can’t lie to a Werewolf, right?”

Stiles flushes and flounders for a bit before he chokes out, “Lying? Me. Lying. First of all, how dare — this is just an outrage — that you would accuse me of — I would never — okay, damn it, I am. Stop looking at me like that.”

Derek rolls his eyes and motions for him to continue.

Stiles explains, ”Peter’s got me looking for some Mermaids or Nymphs or whatever, and since you’re you, I figured you know about parties and stuff.”

“Parties and stuff,” Derek repeats flatly as he gives Stiles a skeptical look. “Why would I know anything?”
“Your face is — you have what the folks call — there's just a way you — I mean, you're popular,” Stiles struggles to explain. “Why wouldn’t you know?”

Derek snorts and leans back, and he’s wearing that stupid cocky grin that never fails to irritate Stiles beyond reason. He says, “I think you gave me four different compliments without actually giving me those compliments.”

Stiles rolls his eyes and counts to five before he says, “Okay. Now that we’ve properly stroked your ego here...can you please help me out?”

“Well,” Derek says and leans forward again. “Sunday night, some freshman named Greenburg threw a party at what everyone thought was his lake house. Turns out he just broke into the place, but anyway, he had a ton of people come out, including a few of my teammates. I think some of yours went too. A lot of people ended up getting sick with something called dilutional hyponatremia. You know there’s a rumor floating around about that. Maybe your Mermaids had something to do with it.”

“Oh my god,” Stiles says as it hits him. “Dilutional hyponatremia.”

Derek furrows his brow and lifts them as he shakes his head questioningly.

“Dilutional hyponatremia!” Stiles repeats as he flails his hands. “Also known as water poisoning.”

Derek cocks his head at that. “I guess that just confirms it then,” he supposes.

Stiles fishes for his phone and when he finds it, he shoots Peter another text with his discovery. He says, “Alright, one last thing. Do you know of anymore parties coming up?”

“I heard something about a college party on the other side of town,” Derek offers with a shrug. “I can get more details if you need.”

“I need. I so need,” Stiles assures as he puts his phone away. “Okay, enough about that. Let’s do the math stuff. Mrs. Cassidy passed out this study packet so we can have something to prepare for finals, which, by the way, I’m mortified of.”

Derek snorts. “Just show it to me and we’ll figure it out.”

Stiles digs into his backpack for the thick packet and he slaps it down in front of the other teen. He gives Derek his attention earnestly, drifting off once and a while but Derek drags him back by pressing his warm fingers down on the pressure point of his left wrist while asking him targeted questions that Stiles has no choice but to answer just out of genuine interest or confidence.

Though sometimes his line of thought gets derailed when Derek smiles with frank indulgent pride whenever Stiles does something or answers anything correctly.

Stiles feels something light and frothy expand in his stomach like thick soapsuds tickling at his insides. But because it’s so blunt and baffling, the sensation being entirely new to him and all, he just does what he always does when he can’t quite deal or assimilate.

He pushes it down — like way, way, down until it’s deep and as far as it can go, and then he stubbornly ignores it.

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Apparently Stiles and Cora aren’t on speaking terms still, if the way she ignores him through all their
shared classes and avoids him at lunch is any indication.

That’s fine. Totally fine. He’s not the one in the wrong here.

Cora can have as much space as she wants to have in order to get over herself.

Stiles distracts himself from the issue by helping Laura pass out cookies frosted with a picture of her smiling face on them as she looks down.

Kira’s such a good sport that she chips in too.

Stiles is more amused than anything when he notices the way people tend to flock to her more than they do to him.

It’s probably her killer smile and her bubbly attitude.

Two military jets pass overhead with a loud sound.

Stiles cups a hand over his face to shield his eyes from the sun as he tries to follow them. They zip by so fast that it’s no use.

A sophomore girl with freckles and braces edges over to him with a shy smile and takes a cookie from his tray.

Stiles mumbles, “Vote for Laura.” before he glances back up to the sky.

Six minutes later, those two jets make their rounds once again.

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Stiles takes Isaac with him to Eichen House when both their schools let out, but he makes sure to ask the preteen if he’s really fine with it.

Now, sitting on their bikes in front of the vine-covered iron gates, Stiles asks again, “You sure you’re okay to come in?”

Isaac shrugs and picks at a limp weed coiled around one of the rusted bars of the gate.

“Seriously, Isaac. If you don’t want to come in, I’d understand,” Stiles assures. “I just — it’s a creepy place and I’m trying to be sensitive here and I don’t want to do anything that’s triggering to you and —”

Isaac straightens suddenly and he looks upset, like he’s been woken from a good dream. His mouth scrunches in annoyance and he says, “Don’t assume.”

Stiles kind of stares at him with parted lips.

Isaac deflates then and looks away. “I don’t think you do it on purpose. But...sometimes you make these assumptions about what I’ve been through and it’s...I know I haven’t shared enough with you for you to understand, so that's partly my fault. But I only ask that you don’t treat me like — like I'll break at any moment. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t think I could handle it,” he goes on to say. “Don’t assume, okay?”

“Okay,” is Stiles’s snap response because he doesn’t want to make an idiot of himself and he really shouldn’t be assuming. “Sorry.”
Isaac nods once and that’s the end of that.

Stiles pushes the gates open and together they make their way up the walkway, to the cracked steps, and up to the top where they lock their bikes. After they make their way inside, they sign in at the front desk and wait for Ms. Morrell (who shows up a little less than seven minutes later).

“This way,” Ms. Morrell says as she glances between Isaac and Stiles coolly before spinning on her heel and striding down the hall. She doesn’t lead them to the stairwell, but rather to the double doors that lead out to the courtyard.

The courtyard is an enclosed space that resides at the heart of the facility. Its clean-cut bushes, trees, and grass are obviously well looked after. There’s an orderliness to it that clashes with the wandering disorderly patients who walk about in a sort of dazed state, mumbling unintelligible noises and conversations to themselves, or even to each other. Which still isn’t coherent because by the way it sounds, two patients talking to each other often have differing responses, and it only seems like they’re have two different conversations.

It’s less cloudy today, and the afternoon sun looms brightly in the sky, making things seem blaringly brighter and more contrast.

There’s a large water fountain on the far end of the courtyard and Lydia is sitting on the stone bench that faces it under a shedding cherry blossom tree. She’s wearing a strapless ivory jumpsuit, her strawberry blonde hair spilling over her delicately pale shoulders like a curly waterfall, and that same black birdcage funeral veil pinned to her hair. Her feet are bare, but like her fingernails, the toenails are painted with a deep plum color.

Stiles sits down in the space to Lydia’s right while Isaac walks along the edge of the water fountain, the light of the water reflecting against the scarred features of his face. Stiles wonders if he’s looking at the coins in the fountain — if there are any coins in there to begin with. He’d like to think that even mentally unstable people have things that they wish for.

Lydia’s gaze stays straightforward, even as she draws what looks to be a crying mother in a hijab cradling her limp toddler with the large drawing pad in her lap and the stick of charcoal in her right hand. There are steady streams of tears rolling down her pink cheeks, and something about the way she doesn’t wipe them away makes Stiles find it to be striking in its own way.

There’s something to be said about someone who lets you see them in all their pain without trying to conceal it.

Lydia’s not broken, he realizes. She just feels more deeply now.

Stiles looks down and studies the sketch curiously and, even though he’s sure to get no response, asks, “Who’s that?”

Lydia stares unblinkingly at the fountain as her hand never ceases. It’s amazing how detailed the drawing is because she’s not looking at it at all.

Stiles needs to get to a point where he can stop being surprised by the things his cousin can do. He traces his eyes over the sketch and notices that the mother in the picture has teeth that are slightly fanged, and the hands she has buried into her toddler’s pea coat are lengthened into claws. He realizes with a slight jolt that Lydia is drawing Werewolves.

Lydia’s hand finishes with the mother and daughter, so she begins to work on the background, which quickly forms into two gathering mobs: a line of policemen and a line of protesters — both on
opposite sides.

Stiles furrows his brow as he tries to take in the implications.

Lydia starts singing the National Anthem softly as a slow breeze glides through the courtyard, making her hair come to life against her pale shoulders.

Stiles isn’t sure what to do, so he lets her be. He scoots over until their shoulders are touching and he watches Isaac sit on the edge of the water fountain while two tittering female patients wander over with shy smiles and a bouquet of ripped flowers, which they present to him in no form of graceful fashion.

Isaac still accepts them with a wordless nod and he doesn’t complain or look uncomfortable when they sit on either side of him, eyeing him curiously as they mumble into their fingers.

Stiles stiffens in surprise when Lydia rests her head on his shoulder. She doesn’t stop singing though, so he figures he should talk to her about something. He decides to tell her about how his week has been going so far, about his time with the Hales, about Erica, about the Mermaids, about the lacrosse game, about Kira, and about Danny’s progress.

Lydia tenses up more and more all throughout Stiles’s narration and he can’t figure out why. She has stopped singing and drawing, which makes it obvious she’s really listening, so he doesn’t stop talking but he pays special attention to her behavior.

Ms. Morrell comes to retrieve them nearly an hour later. “I believe that’s enough for today.”

Stiles nods and reluctantly eases away from Lydia with a gesture to Isaac, who stands with some soft goodbyes to his new friends and he seems a little thrown when the two females begin to sob. He takes a quick moment to soothe them with encouraging words and it makes Stiles smile to see him really try.

Lydia reaches out suddenly and yanks Stiles close so that she can whisper in his ear, “Underneath their skin lies an Animal. Don’t let it fool you.”

Ms. Morrell pries her hand from Stiles’s shirt. “Okay, Lydia. That’s enough.”

Lydia lets Ms. Morrell stand her up and usher her away but she never takes her eyes off of Stiles’s. Their eyes meet within the instance she shakes her head, and again, strangely enough, it’s like seeing it happen in slow motion, and suddenly all he can hear is the leaves whispering in the trees, the splashing of water in the fountain, the sighing wind, and the groaning of the tree branches. It’s like that moment in the hallway with Mayor Argent and his creepy orphan children.

It kind of freaks Stiles out because he’s becoming hyper aware that it’s not just a mental thing — something that’s just happening in his head — but it might be something else entirely. Like Spider-Man in most of the comics that Stiles reads, it’s like he’s got his own brand of spider-sense where time slows and the noise of the world either fades away or becomes startlingly clear.

Isaac touches his shoulder and Stiles gasps sharply as he snaps out of it and blinks rapidly as things come into focus at normal rate. He turns to see Isaac looking at him with concern, and the preteen quietly says, “You stopped breathing.”

Stiles exhales and inhales, just to feel himself doing it, and he realizes that his heart is racing in his chest. He curls his shaky hands into fists at his sides. “Let’s go,” he mumbles and makes his way quickly out of the building. He has a hard time getting his bike unlocked because his hands are still shaking so bad, and he feels a little lightheaded.
Isaac kneels down beside him and rests his warm hands over Stiles’s to arrest his movements. Then he pulls the older teen into a hug, laying his hands flat against Stiles’s shoulder blades and ducking his head low so he can rub his forehead against Stiles’s collarbone. “Please breathe,” he whispers. “Breathe.”

Stiles swallows and takes some shaky breaths before he clutches Isaac close as he shuts his eyes. He’s having a panic attack and there’s no use in pretending it’s anything else but that. He does as Isaac asks and he breathes, but he does it carefully. He takes slow inhales and even slower exhales until his chest doesn’t feel tight anymore, until his heart isn’t pounding like it might pop out, until his hands aren’t shaking like they’ll never stop.

Isaac waits a beat after Stiles has calmed down before he pulls away, but not completely. He eyes Stiles from head to toe with focused determination, his brow furrowed, and his mouth set in a prominent frown. He pulls away some more and drops his hands to his thighs as he looks Stiles in the eyes. “Better?” he questions.


“You’re my brother,” Isaac mumbles as he ducks his gaze away shyly while he picks at a loose thread on his jeans. “I care when you’re not okay. That would — it does matter to me.”

Stiles smiles and presses his knuckles into the curving line of his mouth when it feels like the smile might completely overtake his face. He just gives up and lets it be as he throws his arms around Isaac in an enthusiastic hug. “You’re my favorite,” he swears. "My absolute favorite." Then he adds, “Don’t tell dad.”

Isaac huffs out a small laugh and just pats Stiles on the back before he gently urges the other teen to let him go.

Stiles rewards him with a smile as they stand. “Come on,” he says. “I still want to visit Danny before we go home.”

Isaac nods and they unlock their bikes before carrying them down the steps, rolling them up the walkway and through the black iron gates before mounting them so they can pedal into the heart of Beacon Hills where the hospital resides.

Jackson is already there in Danny’s room with Allison and Malia.

Scott’s visiting his grandmother, apparently, which is why he’s absent.

Boyd’s already come and gone.

Stiles takes the chair beside Jackson’s and he quietly studies Danny’s prone form. He’s bandaged up pretty tightly and there are all kinds of tubes running to and from his body as the heart monitor chimes steadily with Danny’s vital signs.

Malia moves to sit on Allison’s lap so Isaac can sit down since there are no other chairs.

Allison squirms under Malia’s weight, but she makes no general complaints about this seating arrangement, though she does wrinkle her nose with a dimpled smile when Malia starts playing with her hair.

Isaac takes the seat, leans back, and folds his hands over his stomach as he watches the way Danny’s breath fogs up the oxygen mask placed over his bruised and swollen mouth.
Stiles watches Jackson watch Danny with a furrowed brow while Malia and Allison animatedly recount past stories, all of them with Danny as the main character.

Jackson only speaks up once and awhile, but it’s only to correct them about their facts on a certain memory, or to generally add to it with something that he deems important for him to say.

Stiles settles in his seat with a sad smile as he watches their interactions with a slightly whimsical mood.

It’s hard, however, to ignore the faint buzzing in the back of his mind trying to flag his attention.

It’s like he’s forgetting something.

Through the open window, the sonic booms of those military jets making their rounds again causes Stiles to fidget even more restlessly.

The buzzing gets worse. It’s like a horde of drunken flies smacking against the inside of his skull, looking for a way out.

Stiles twitches and bounces his right leg as he chews on his fingernails anxiously.

Isaac is probably the only one that notices.

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Later that night, Stiles relays his conversation with Deaton to his dad over some cheesy hamburger helper that his dad actually makes (since he’s pretty good with that kind of stuff, outside of grilling). It kind of became a necessity after his mom died, and his dad needed to be good at a few throw-together meals like sloppy Joe and tater-tot casserole when he wasn’t ordering takeout because Stiles was seven when she passed and still too young to manipulate the stove without adult supervision.

As Isaac rises to make himself a fourth helping of food, Stiles looks across the table at his dad and says, “So I want to go to that party.” His dad’s face goes severe with disapproval and Stiles quickly adds, “But I was thinking maybe you could saddle me with one of your deputies. Preferably one who doesn’t look like a cop and could still pass for a college student.”

“And you think you can?” his dad counters with this look that never fails to make Stiles fidget. “I’m going to be straight with you right now and say that I’m not comfortable at all with this idea. You could be putting yourself in danger.”

“That’s — undeniably true,” Stiles reluctantly agrees as he pokes his fork at a piece of softened macaroni. “But the worst I could get is water poisoning — at best! But, you know, I don’t really think I’m their type. They tend to go after the more good-looking ones.”

His dad looks at him like he’s an idiot. “You and I are going to have a talk about your self-esteem issues, but for now, I’ll agree to this little plan. Only because —” his dad quickly adds before Stiles can do a victory dance. “— only because you’ve asked me to include one of my deputies, which I’m assuming is because you realize you’ll need a chaperone, and also because, strangely enough, whether I’m comfortable or not, I trust that you know what you’re doing. I have to at this point because I’m starting to get that you’ll sit there and argue with me until I go along with what you want, and if I don’t then you’ll just go and do it anyway.”

Stiles flushes guiltily and mumbles something like, “I totally respect your wishes.”

His dad just huffs and says, “Parrish. He’d be the man you’d want with you. He’s the youngest
Stiles perks up at that and nods. “Cool. So I’ll call him, or you can explain and then I’ll call him.”

“How about you let me talk to him, and then I’ll have him call you so you guys can touch bases,” his dad suggests.

“Yup. Yup. That’s totally — yup.” Stiles shoves a forkful of food in his mouth before he asks, “I’m not sure when the party is but I can ask Derek to see what he found out.”

His dad nods and takes his plate to the sink. He walks over to the steps but pauses to say, “Also, while you’re at it, tell Derek we’ll have to go fishing Sunday morning instead of Saturday. Something came up. Goodnight boys.”

Stiles is left to blink after his dad and he looks over to Isaac, who just lifts a brow and shrugs. They finish their food in silence and clean up the kitchen together before they go their separate ways.

Stiles tucks away in his room and goes hunting for his phone after he changes into some sleepwear. He dials Derek’s number and when the other teen picks up, he says, “Why are you going fishing with my dad?”

Derek snorts and replies, “Well hello to you too, Stiles. Yes, my day was good. Basketball practice went phenomenally. My free throws are definitely on point.”

Stiles rolls his eyes.

“I got more information about that party,” Derek goes on to say. “It’s hosted by fraternity Zet Pi something, something. Anyway, it’s gonna be themed. My buddy mentioned something about it being one of those marker parties.”

“Marker party?” Stiles repeats in confusion.

“It’s where you bring your own marker and draw all over everyone. You can write your number, or maybe scribble some sage advice. Your favorite lyric or poem. Sometimes people get really mean with it and doodle dicks and what not,” Derek says and Stiles is envious of how casually he explains it, like he’s speaking from experience. “It’s happening this Friday. I’ll text you the address.”

“Cool,” Stiles mumbles as he sits down at his desk and boots up his laptop. He pulls up Google and starts perusing though recent articles having anything to do with the military.

Derek says, “And how was your day?”

Stiles blinks and pauses. "What?"

Derek huffs, amused. "Your day. I told you about mine."

"Yeah, but...I thought you were being sarcastic."

"Of course not," Derek says, cheerily. "I'm more than happy to tell you what I get up to. Return the favor. How was your day?"

"Oh, um." Stiles scrambles for something to say. He didn't quite imagine the conversation going this way. "Pretty okay. I visited...friends. Um. Yeah."

Derek makes a thoughtful sound.
Stiles fidgets in his seat. Not sure what else to say.

Derek breaks the silence by saying, "I'm fishing with your dad because my dad likes to fish too, and I've never been. I just made the suggestion that the three of us go together. Does that bother you?"

"No," Stiles quickly says because he doesn't want the other teen to get the wrong idea. "It's cool. I get it. Uh. It's fine. I was surprised, that's all."

"How'd you find out anyway?"

"My dad told me to tell you that your trip is being rescheduled to Sunday morning instead of Saturday. So. Yeah."

Derek hums thoughtfully. Then he says, "I'll let my dad know. I have to go. I'll see you at school tomorrow."

"Kay."

"Later."

"Later," Stiles replies, distracted because his online search leads him to YouTube. He barely remembers hanging up before he's zoned in on a news segment about how the military presence in America has grown exponentially in the last two years, almost if they're expecting some kind of civil war to breakout.

"— it's crazy, you know? I'm taking my kid to school and all of a sudden I see these weird looking tanks being escorted down the streets with some armed soldiers. And like, you're gonna ask about it, right? So I did and one of the guys, the soldier, he says that 'oh it's nothing' and they're like doing drills and whatnot. Something about standard procedure," some guy in New York says. A CNN news reporter has stopped him on his way to his car and the woman asks him about his thoughts concerning the heavy military presence. "But you do wonder like what kind of procedure requires them to do these kind of drills? Not to mention I've been constantly seeing those, what is it? Stealth fighter jets or drones? Yeah, like — what the hell is that about? Is there a war going on that we don't know about? Like let me know, man. Let me know."

Stiles switches tabs and watches another video while he scrolls through the list of recommended videos that pop up on the side and selects related video after video, until it all becomes the same story.

The Department of Defense is not only arming each state with new weapons of war, but they're giving it to local and state police, as well as the national guard — and these people are being trained to use them in the same ways a soldier would be taught to fight overseas.

Stiles would really like to know why, but he can't find any answers for that, and he eventually gives up and goes to bed. All he does is toss and turn, though. His mind is too anxious with this new information. He thinks about the picture Lydia drew. He thinks about the sign that homeless man, Frank, held up. He thinks about the things the Ghouls and that Demon talked about weeks ago. He thinks about what they could have meant when they mentioned a *New World*.

He thinks and he thinks and he thinks until he can't stop thinking.

He doesn't get much sleep. His mind is alive with questions, and there are no correlating answers to put them to rest.
Thursday morning, just as Isaac and Stiles are exiting the house to meet Kira on the sidewalk so they can ride to school together, Peter and Kate pull up in his flashy red car with a pair of matching designer shades, and sharp grins. They look like a pair of well-dressed sharks.

Stiles looks to Kira and Isaac as he says, “Give me a moment.” He rolls his bike over to the passenger side of Peter’s car and says, “You guys look like high-priced drug dealers. What’s going on?”

“We’re here to treat you to breakfast,” Peter merely says. “Also to discuss certain things.”

“I have to take my brother to school,” Stiles points out.

“Get your cute little friend Kira to do it,” Peter suggests dismissively. “This is important.”

Stiles scrunches his mouth in annoyance before he returns his bike to the lawn and walks over to Isaac and Kira. “Okay, so — I need a favor,” he says. “Do you mind taking Isaac to school? It’s just that — something super important came up and I would not ask otherwise.”

Kira says, “No, it’s fine. It’ll give us a chance to bond.” She nudges Isaac with a sunny smile.

Isaac just lifts a brow wordlessly and starts peddling to school.

Stiles sighs and shakes his head when Kira looks at him. “It’s — that’s progress. I totally owe you one.” He reaches out and hugs Kira quickly before he stumbles towards Peter’s car. He slides into the backseat and buckles in.

Kate says, “Awe, wasn’t that cute?”

“ Tooth-rotting, really,” Peter drawls as he switches gears and drives.

It’s only a few minutes later that they’re being seated by a waitress in a booth next to the windows at Ramona’s Old Fashioned Eatery on Mulholland Blvd.

Peter and Kate sit across from Stiles, huddling close to share a menu, even though they were given two. Kate spends most of the time combing her fingers through Peter’s hair as she whispers in his ear.

Stiles doesn’t even want to know because whatever she’s saying is fueling the wicked smirk plastered on Peter’s face. Stiles’s eyes dart down to his menu and when he decides on what he wants, he closes it and sets it down.

Deputy Parrish strolls into the diner a moment later with a slight look of befuddlement as he approaches their booth.

Peter’s smirk just widens as he straightens. “Ah, Parrish. Nice of you to finally join us. Please sit down. We were just about to order,” he says and turns to make a gesture at their waitress.

Stiles scoots over to make room for Parrish, who glares at Kate and Peter before reluctantly sitting down. He offers Stiles a tense smile before he picks up a menu and scans it anxiously.

The waitress saddles up to the booth with her pen poised at the ready over her small notepad.

Combined, Peter and Kate’s order could probably feed three more people.

Stiles’s order is a lot more modest. He just wants the raspberry peach short stack of pancakes.
Parrish just asks for a cup of orange juice.

“Now that won’t do,” Peter drawls. “It’s my treat.”

"Yes," Kate adds as she grins. "You know how Peter loves to spoil you."

"Careful, dear," Peter warns lightly as he shoots her a look that goes ignored. He turns his gaze back to Parrish as he smirks again. "Order anything you want."

“What I want is a cup of orange juice,” Parrish replies as he looks at Peter evenly. His whole vibe is still hostile. “But thanks for footing the bill for it.”

Peter’s smirk only widens.

Stiles clears his throat and fidgets when the tension between them escalates. He says, “So is there a reason why we’re all gathered here? I have school in about forty minutes, so if we could get to it then that would very helpful.”

Peter doesn’t break his staring contest with Parrish as he says, “I heard there was a party you wanted to go to. Well, the Sherriff was kind enough to clarify. I, of course, am offering my assistance in capturing our runaways.”

“The Mermaids,” Parrish states, point blankly. "You want to lend a hand with reeling in the Mermaids?"

“They’re in human form, so — nymphs,” Stiles lightly corrects but he doubts anyone notices.

Peter hums noncommittally before he finally flicks his gaze away to look at Stiles. “You’re not going to that party,” he simply says.

“What?” Stiles protests, hackles immediately rising. “But — you can't juice me for info and then yank me out of the situation like I have no right to it!”

"Absurd,” Peter replies, unmoved. "We all have a part to play, and yours has ended. I would think you would be thrilled. I know how reluctant you are when it comes to social engagements."

Stiles can feel his cheeks heat out of anger and embarrassment because of that personal jab. "This is different and you know that."

"Ah, yes, I know a lot of things," Peter agrees. "And one of those things is that you are not going."

"You are such a dick," Stiles snaps, trying his hardest not to throw a tantrum. "You’re the one that got me involved with this in the first place anyway!"

“‘That’s true, more or less. But I didn’t ask you to be directly involved. I’m afraid that won’t do at all. There’s a chance it could become rather unpleasant. Which is why I think it’s best to take the reigns on this one myself,” Peter decides and Stiles does not get this guy at all. “College parties are more my area.”

Kate grins as she bites the knuckle of her thumb and who knows what she’s thinking.

Stiles is fuming.

“So why am I here?” Parrish asks.

“Because I still need you,” Peter replies. Then adds, “Unfortunately.”
Parrish glares and clenches his jaw.

Stiles softens his own glare at Peter to glance between them. He may be upset by the turn of events, but he's still curious enough to ask, “Is he a — are you like — what’s going on?”

Parrish and Peter both look at him.

“Are you a —” Stiles makes sure to lower his voice as he glances to the handsome deputy. “— a Werewolf?”

Parrish blinks, taken back by the question.

Kate snorts, while Peter looks heavily amused.

“What?” Stiles complains as his cheeks grow red. “Am I missing something?”

“You’re missing everything,” Kate cryptically reports. “He’s not what you think.”

Stiles stares at her before he stares at Parrish, who shifts awkwardly. “Then — what are you?”

“That is the question, isn’t it?” Peter remarks as he cocks his head. “Care to enlighten him, Jordan? Oops. I mean Kyle.”

Parrish glares at Peter venomously before he slides from the booth with a thunderous expression. “I’m done here. Phone it in if you need anything else from me,” he hisses before he storms out of the diner.

Stiles stares after the deputy’s sulking form before he turns his frown to Peter. “I have no idea what’s going on, but I know enough about you to know that what you did was pushing it,” he states knowingly.

Peter shrugs and doesn’t deny it. “We’ve never seen eye to eye,” he supposes.

“Untrue. They used to be best friends, way back when,” Kate chimes as she texts away on her expensive smartphone. “Almost as close as lovers.”

Peter glares at her. “Kate. That’s too much.”

“Whatever,” Kate huffs. “Don’t deal a low blow if you can’t handle one.”

Peter rolls his eyes and pulls away from her as their food arrives.

Stiles cuts into his pancakes angrily and says, “Seriously, I’m being kept in the dark about a lot of things as is. Can you tell me what the deal with Parrish is?”

“Ask him,” Peter says, deflecting — his mood seems to have darkened. “Hurry up and eat. I’m dropping you and Kate off as soon as we’re done here.”

Stiles sighs but he eats.

Looks like he isn’t going to that party after all, which, whatever.

He’s got to pack for his trip to Chicago anyway.

So.
He totally doesn't even care.

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At lunch, while Stiles and Kira hand out large campaign buttons with Laura’s face plastered across them, Cora pulls him aside and says, “I get it okay? I won’t — I’ll be better about how I treat your friends.”

Stiles feels both of his eyebrows shoot up at that. It sounds as close as an apology as he’ll ever get from Cora. He says, “Yeah? You can stand to be decent for a little while?”

Cora glares.

Stiles lifts up both hands to show he means no harm. "That’s all I’m asking.”

Cora gives him a hard look before she sighs. “Fine, then,” she says as she fidgets with a scowl. She looks a bit cagey. “So are we good or what?”

Stiles grins, amused. “Why? Did you miss me?”

"Don't be stupid."

"Be honest. It just burns at you when we’re not on speaking terms, doesn’t it?"

Cora gives him a flat look.

“You’re not denying it,” Stiles points out before he perks up and touches her hair. “Hey, you colored your hair.”

Cora nods and leniently lets him fiddle with her hair before she bats his hands away. “Sabrina did them for me. She’s pretty good.”

“Yeah. She is,” Stiles agrees as he studies the tips of her hair, which have been dyed purple. “You ready for the trip?”

Cora gives him a look. “Didn’t you hear? That’s been canceled.”

“What? Why?”

“Apparently there’s like some major unrest right now. Some cop shot a toddler and then her mom, so people are going in with protesting and looting.”

“Wait, wait — when did this happen?” Stiles asks as his mind begins to tinker away.

“It started yesterday, I think,” Cora says. “I — hey, where are you going?”

Stiles bolts into the school and heads to the Teacher’s Lounge because there’s sure to be a TV.

There is, but the lounge is crowded with teachers as is, all of them watching the huge flat screen mounted high up in the corner of the room. All of them have a range of emotions painted across their faces, from shock, to horror, and disbelief.

Stiles stands by Mrs. Cassidy and asks, “What’s going on?”

Mrs. Cassidy, without prying her eyes from the TV, says, “I don’t know. They’re saying an off-duty cop shot a toddler and then her mom for no apparent reason. But his department is stating that they
were attacking him like animals and he had no choice. Now there’s an outcry for justice for the killings because they believe it was violent act of discrimination because the mother and daughter were Black Muslims but others are saying it was because of something else — I don’t know. They’re declaring Martial Law in Chicago.”

Stiles turns to look at the screen right in the moment a picture of the victims are shown, along with the officer being accused, and it’s like a bucket of ice has been dumped on him.

It’s them.

The mother and the daughter that Lydia drew — it’s them.
The rest of Stiles’s classes for the day aren’t really much like classes at all. His teachers just use their Prometheans boards to show them about the events currently happening in Chicago through their choice of news channel.

It’s baffling.

It’s almost like looking at another country. The police march through the streets with camouflage uniform and guns in their hands, pointed up at the peaceful protesters as they spray the area with orange pepper spray. There are also candles and flowers and fake swaddled babies being left on the sidewalk where the mother and daughter were killed. Witnesses give accounts of the events since this particular incident happened just outside of a diner. A lot of them say:

“The little girl and the mom had been sitting in the back,” a black elderly woman says with several microphones hovering near her mouth. She’s got thick, toffee colored glasses that make her look like a bug. “I remember her mouth and fingers were sticky with some kind of chocolate — I’d found it so adorable at the time. She’d started crying out of nowhere. Held her own head, you know — she cupped her hands over her ears like this.” The old woman demonstrates. “Then she started wailing something awful, you know, like she in pain, but the momma tried calming her down. She looked confused too. So she took the little girl out the front and she had to stop, I guess. She stopped right out in front of them windows and she got on her knees in front of the little girl. Look like she was saying or asking, you know, asking her what’s wrong? What’s wrong? She looked so confused because the girl wouldn’t stop screaming and shaking, then finally that officer came on to check on them I guess, asking to see what the problem was, and you know, also maybe to make sure the mother hadn’t been hurting the girl, but next thing I know, the little girl wrapped her little body around his leg and she gets to biting at his thigh. And the officer screamed as clear as if it had been some savage dog or something and he pepper sprayed the girl but she started to crawl up his body like a little monkey — that’s when I heard it. Four gun shots. Little girl went down, then the momma came at him. Again, four gun shots. Both them lay on that sidewalk and — we all kinda knew.”

The granddaughter of the old woman, speaks up with an angry frown and says, “I don’t care if that officer had probable cause. A bite to the leg isn’t some kinda go ahead to execute a little girl and her mom out in the middle of the day on the street. I’m a nurse for a mental ward and half of my shift is spent fighting off patients half my size, with twice my strength but not once do I ever have to use a gun to put them down. Mind you, this was a little girl. She clearly — and you heard what my grandma said — she wasn’t right from the start. She was having a fit, and I don’t know because I’m not a doctor or anything, but the little girl could have been dealing with something that made her react that way. We don’t know cause neither the mom nor the little girl is here to say, and that, to me, is what’s so awful. I just know I don’t feel safe. I might sneeze, you know, and one of them officers will shoot me down too.”

There are more accounts, and they’re shown between the cutaways to the downtown streets of Chicago, though that’s not where all the peaceful demonstration happens. All of that happens in Grant Park, where there are masses of citizens from all walks of life. They’re linked arm and arm, never faltering with their march as they cry out for justice. They hold up signs that say the same thing: HUMANS ARE THE REAL MONSTERS.

The sight of it is particularly jolting to Stiles because it carries the implication that Weres have come to a point where they seem not to care to hide themselves anymore. But none of them have been caught shifting, however, or in any other form. Outside of Stiles and perhaps anyone else who may
know of the existence of all the Mythical Beings, people may take the signs as pure irony instead of what it really is.

Not everyone is peacefully protesting though. Some of the more opportunistic citizens of Chicago are using this standoff as a chance to loot, or create more tension amongst the opposing sides. By the time Stiles reaches his last class, things have escalated so fast that all power in Chicago has been cut off while everything (businesses, hospitals, etc.) have been shut down to encourage the submission of the discontented crowd.

Not only that, but the local and even national media sent to cover the events have been disbanded. His teacher is forced to go on twitter and follow the #Chicago tag. The bell rings and Stiles quickly snatches his backpack from the ground and heads to his locker to dump all his books since he hadn’t been assigned any homework in all his latter classes, and he’d finished all his assignments from his classes that came before lunch.

The volume of voices carry through the school (as students pour out of their class and into the halls like a river), all circling back to the topic of what's happening in Chicago.

Stiles navigates the crowded halls in search of Kira as he starts whistling and he finds her by her locker chatting with a couple of girls that Stiles recognizes from the softball team. He doesn’t want to interrupt so he stands off to the side and sends Kira a wave when Kira tosses him a grin before she turns back to the small group of girls flocked around her, who also glance over at Stiles with curious eyes.

"It's Stiles, right?" one of the girls call over. She has honey-brown curls that fan around her reddish-brown face like a halo. "You moved here like a month ago?"

"More than a month ago, but yes," Stiles answers in kind. "I'm sorry, what's you name?"

"Nicolette," is the reply, and it's followed with a wink. "I'm the captain of our softball team. You should come to our games sometime. Kira needs all the support she can get."

"Oh, yeah, sure," Stiles says, unsurely.

Nicolette doesn't say more than that. She turns away with a sly grin and murmurs something to the other girls. Then, there's a moment when they all eye him with interest, puffing up to toss him disarming smiles that kind of throw him to be honest.

Stiles straightens against the lockers and rubs the back of his neck awkwardly as he nods at them all with a polite smile.

They all turn away with a giggle and say something to Kira who blushes but rolls her eyes with a happy grin.

Stiles doesn’t have to wait long after that because Kira shoos them off with a promise to see them at practice on Monday. He pushes away from the locker he’s leaning against just as she closes hers and pauses his whistling. “So,” he says. “Baseball.”

Kira nods happily as she bites her bottom lip and bumps their shoulders together. “I know! I’m so like, gah! And it’s last minute of course, but I talked to the coach and she’s been super nice and cool about it. Even with there being a month left of school — I just — this is so good,” she rambles as they make their way out the exits. “I’ve never played softball though.”

Stiles laughs because he’s not even surprised. “I think I have an old bat somewhere in the basement. We can, I don’t know, give it a try if you want.”
Kira beams and nods as they head over to the racks so she can unlock her bike.

Stiles begins to whistle again as he watches all the students and teachers disperse from the school and the parking lot. Then he follows Kira as she mounts her bike and starts peddling lazily since Stiles doesn’t have his bike to keep up. He whistles for a long minute before he says, “So you heard about what’s happening in Chicago?”

Kira’s smile shrinks and her expression goes somber. “Yeah,” she says quietly. “It’s awful, isn’t it? I mean, I just don’t understand how people can do the terrible things they do.”

Stiles hums noncommittally. “It’s a bad situation,” he says as they walk along the side of the road towards Isaac’s school. He starts whistling softly again.

“That’s funny,” Kira says.

Stiles stops whistling with a frown and says, “What is?”

Heavy metal music blasting from an overbearing monster truck down the road behind them cuts Kira off mid-sentence as it comes whipping down the road.

Stiles gets a warning chill that sinks into the bones of his hands and makes them stiff. All the sounds of the forest zeros out, leaving him in a muted silence.

There’s an instance where the truck seems to pass in slow motion, giving Stiles enough time to see the two hardened faces of Rick and Carter, Erica’s older twin brothers, with their shaved heads, bulky body-building bodies and a tattoo of a cat’s paw print under their right ear. The only difference between them is the fact that Rick has a claw shaped scar across his mouth and chin.

Finally the truck grinds away and the world comes into focus again, and Stiles inhales and exhales a little shakily as Kira grabs him with a look of concern but they spring away from each other because the touch feels like they’ve both been zapped by a small spark of electricity.

“Crap. I’m sorry,” Kira says, fingers twitching as she shakes it off. “I thought I was over doing that— damn. You okay, Stiles?”

“Fine,” Stiles mumbles as he rubs at his elbow. He can still feel the feather-like touch of static on his skin. It feels like pins and needles almost.

“Well, sorry again, but that’s not what I meant,” Kira says as she shifts off of her bike so she can bodily face him. “Before that. You had — you were — you stopped breathing,” she says, fingers twitching at her sides again. “What’s wrong?”

“Honestly, I don’t know,” Stiles says as he scrubs his face tiredly. “I don’t know what’s going on with me. I mean I do but I don’t.” He wants to tell her — wants to share everything just to have someone who he can really talk to about it. But he can’t because he knows it isn’t sensible and also because how could she understand? He drops his hands with a sigh. “Maybe I’m just tired,” he says because what else can he say? Not the truth, that’s for sure.

“Maybe,” Kira supposes but she still looks concerned like she can pick up on his mood and everything he’s not saying. It makes him fidget but she turns away and begins walking again. “So,” she says. “What are your plans for summer?”

“Driver’s ed,” Stiles responds, grateful for the change in subject. “Hopefully I’ll pass with flying
“God, I wish I could do something like that,” Kira says with a whimsical sigh. “My mom would never let me. She’s so lame. I mean I love her with everything in me, but she is so frustratingly close-minded about so much. It makes me wonder how she and my dad ever got together because they’re such opposites.”

“Opposites attract,” Stiles offers with a wry grin.

Kira snorts. “I never really believed that.”

“Yeah, me either,” Stiles admits. “I think it’s more to do with two people being able to complement each other. Coming together to show the best of the other person and not what they’re lacking of but what they can do for each other when they’re together. Kind of like —”

“Peanut butter and jelly,” Kira offers with soft smile. “Two different things combining for one purpose, even if you can enjoy them just fine on their own, it’s more about how those two things can be at their best when together. It’s an awesome duo.”

“Yeah!” Stiles exclaims and snaps his fingers. “I swear, sometimes it’s like you’re reading my thoughts. That’s exactly what I was — you know? Only, you worded it better.”

Kira shrugs with a smile, pleased.

Stiles chuckles a little and bumps their shoulders together. “Listen to us. Getting sentimental over food.”

“It’s the best thing to be sentimental about in my opinion,” Kira says with a dramatic, dreamy sigh. “Like cheese — do not get me started on cheese. I could write a thousand sonnets about cheese.”

“I can write two thousand about tacos. But, you know, that kind of commitment isn’t for everyone,” Stiles teases.

Kira laughs. “Oh, that sounds like a challenge to me, Mr. Stilinski.”

“Only if you think you can meet it, Ms. Yukimura,” Stiles responds in kind.

“Okay,” Kira says, pausing just as they reach the parking lot of Isaac’s school. “You still going on that trip?”

“No.”

“I didn’t think so,” Kira says as she taps her chin before she perks up. “How about this? Two thousand sonnets about our favorite foods by Sunday, and — loser has to pay for both the movie and the winner’s choice of restaurant.”

Stiles pretends to really mull it over before he sticks out his hand. “You got yourself a bet.”

Kira shakes his hand and they both ignore the light static shock that passes between them at the contact. “Just to warn you, I have obsessive tendencies. I won’t let up for a second.”

“Yeah?” Stiles says as he lets her hand go. “Well, so do I. In fact, in the last six seconds I’ve thought of like ten different sonnets.”

“Only ten? I’m at twenty-three,” Kira brags, flinging her hair over her shoulder as she rolls her bike along the curb that leads to the front of the school.
Stiles mutters something resentful to himself for a quick moment before he jogs after her. He sees all his friends conversing and he smiles when Scott brightens with a happy expression. He laughs a little when Scott steps away from Malia and Allison to pull him into an enthusiastic bro-hug.

“Dude,” Scott says as his arms tighten around Stiles. “Dude!”

“Yeah, buddy, I’m here,” Stiles answers with an amused grin and they pull away from each other.

“Dude, you heard about Chicago, right? I mean, that could’ve — you were supposed to go,” Scott points out and his brow furrows with real concern.

Stiles rubs the back of his neck as he pulls away further. “Yeah, that’s true too — well, I’m — I didn’t go. So there’s...that, I guess?” He shrugs and glances over to where Isaac is sitting on the curb between Jackson and Boyd.

Jackson and Boyd seem to be having a conversation over him, but Isaac doesn’t necessarily appear to mind at all.

Stiles then glances over to where Kira is chatting happily with Allison and Malia.

Malia’s playing with Kira’s hair like she can’t help herself, while Allison keeps Kira’s attention with her dimpled smile and short replies.

“What do you think?” Scott says as he coils his fingers around Stiles’s left elbow to flag his attention. “About Chicago — what do you think?”

“A lot of things,” Stiles admits with a heady sigh as he scrubs a hand over the stubble of his hair, which actually, isn’t so much stubble anymore, but it’s growing into that awkward phase between being grab-able, and yet not. He begins to wonder if he should cut it for the oncoming summer but he shakes the thought away and drops his hand before he can truly drift. “Lydia drew a picture before it all even — just. I don’t know. I’d already seen the mother and the daughter when I went to visit her the other day. And I just — I don’t know. It means something.”

“You think it was an accident like they’re trying to say?” Scott questions with a deepening frown.

Stiles huffs and lifts his eyebrows as he shakes his head. “Honestly — my gut says there’s more to it than what we’re being shown. Possibly even — premeditated.”

“No way,” Scott says, taken aback. “You think it was planned?”

“More or less,” Stiles confirms as he bounces on his heels. The whole thought of it makes him anxious. Something warm is twisting in his gut. He glances around for a moment before he says, “How’s — has Erica seemed — how does she seem?”

Scott’s brow furrows at the question. “Uh, the same, I think? More distant but that’s not — she’s been like that for a while now, so I don’t think that’s anything to even pay attention to. Her brothers came and picked her up a little before you and Kira arrived, and they were all screaming at each other.”

Stiles rolls that around in his head. He wonders if his dad has looked into that whole situation like he said he would. It makes Stiles a little nervous but he tries not to let it overwhelm him. He whistles thoughtfully.

Isaac suddenly tenses and straightens as he glances sharply at Stiles with an expression Stiles can’t quite place.
Scott momentarily distracts him by saying, “I think everyone was trying to go visit Lydia. Did you want to come?”

Stiles pauses at that. Any other time he’d say yes, but for some reason, he has a strange, pressing urge to go home — if not to see if there are any new developments with what’s happening in Chicago but for some other reason. It feels important. He says, “Not this time.”

Scott nods like he understands, and maybe he does. He usually gets Stiles in his own way. He says, “Okay, that’s cool. I’ll say hi for you, and uh — actually I wanted to ask about Kira.” He lowers his voice to say, “Does she know about everything?”

Stiles shakes his head. “That’s a conversation I’m actually trying not to have. No reason why I should pull her into the thick of everything.”

Scott twists his mouth thoughtfully but he doesn’t say anything.

Stiles wonders what he’s thinking. He knocks his fist lightly into Scott’s shoulder and says, “Don’t think too hard.”

Scott scoffs and straightens. He says, “You don’t have to tell me that. It’s usually my motto.” He grins really quickly before he adds, “You know, maybe I’ll skip this visit too. I can always, I don’t know, see Lydia some other time. Actually that sounds really dismissive when I say it out loud, but it’s just that I feel like we haven’t been hanging out as much because of everything that’s going on. Does that make sense?”

Stiles smiles and throws an arm over Scott’s shoulders. “Yeah, man. That makes perfect sense. I’ve been feeling like that too.”

Scott smiles sunnily. “Okay, let me just tell the others we’re bowing out and I’ll grab my bike.”

Stiles nods and watches him go do just that. He rocks back and forth on his heels and begins whistling softly again but he stops as soon as he notices the way Isaac shoots him another odd look. He makes a mental note to ask about that because he wants to know what that look means.

Everyone begins to disperse with parting goodbyes (taking care to acknowledge Stiles as they do) and before long, it’s just him, Isaac, Kira, and Scott left in the parking lot.

But even they don’t linger.

Stiles chooses to ignore the familiar sonic boom of those military jets passing overhead and engrosses himself in a light banter with Scott over Marvel’s cinematic depiction of *Elektra* and where they went wrong (or how they could have done better).

Kira even offers a few clever remarks that immediately win Scott over.

Isaac keeps mostly to himself.

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Laura, Peter, Cora, and Derek are lounging on Stiles’s porch steps when he and Scott, Isaac, and Kira finally make it to the house. Stiles is used to them dropping by unannounced, and he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t curious as to why they’ve come by this time.

Isaac tosses his bike on the lawn, skulks up the steps and into the house, avoiding each Hale he crosses paths with as usual. He’s got his own copy of the house key so he doesn’t have to wait
around for Stiles to toss it his way anymore.

Kira saddles up beside Stiles alongside her bike with undisguised curiosity that he recognizes instantly because he’s worn that expression more than enough times since he’s been living in Beacon Hills and he sends Scott a desperately significant look.

Scott, like the true best friend he is, picks up on it right away and hooks his arm with Kira. He leads her towards the back, talking over her when she starts to protest and says, “Hey, you know, there’s a trampoline in the back and I don’t trust myself to jump on it without supervision…”

Stiles waits a moment until he’s sure they’re gone before he strides up to the bottom step of his porch. He glances at Cora and Derek, who are sitting at the very top, leaning against each other, before he flicks his gaze to Laura, who’s sitting on the middle steps to the far right beside Peter, who is leaning casually against the railing with crossed arms.

Peter wastes no time in saying, “I take it your girlfriend doesn’t know about Beacon Hills’s more mystical side?”

Stiles ignores him and focuses on Laura, who has red-rimmed eyes. He says, “What is it?”

Laura looks so angry and desperate. “You’ve seen, haven’t you? They murdered them.”

Stiles doesn’t even have to ask who she means.

“I want to go to Chicago. Mom’s against it. I have half a mind to go anyway,” Laura swears lowly. “We should be there! We should be standing with them. They were one of ours! They’re asking for a fight and I’m having a hard time reasoning why we shouldn't.”

Peter says, “Don’t be ignorant about this.”

“Fuck you!” Laura snaps as some tears spill over her cheeks (and there is a moment where everyone seems startled by the outburst). “We should be there. This matters.”

“I never said it didn’t,” Peter states calmly as he holds a neutral expression, but his blue eyes darken calculatingly. “But going when you don’t have explicit permission? Now that’d be a mistake, defying your Alpha like that,” he says with all seriousness. “I don’t always agree with Talia but she does usually know what’s best.”

Laura makes a disgusted sound and sniffs as her mouth twists with frustration. She stares at Stiles like she can see beyond him, and it strikes him how alike she is to Talia in that way. Quietly, so very quietly that he has to strain to hear, she says, “Tell me what to do. I’ll — anything. But you have to tell me. Tell me.”

Stiles inhales suddenly in surprise at the surge of white-hot certainty that slashes into his gut that he has to take a step back because something about the way she says her shaky petition strikes a chord in him that he wasn’t aware he had and Laura stares at him so intently like she just knows how to reach inside of him without even making any physical contact.

Peter frowns as he glances between them and he straightens abruptly in alert.

This causes Derek and Cora to straighten as well and their brows furrow at the change in the air.

Laura doesn’t take her watery brown eyes off Stiles. She doesn’t even blink. Not even for a second. It’s bewitching.
Stiles exhales slowly as a wind sweeps by, shaking the leaves of every tree on the block, as well as making the grass shiver. The sound of it intensifies in his ear. He can just — he can hear. He can hear it all, as clear as day.

There’s the constant slap of the sprinklers from across the street and the sharp rotation of the blades of a lawnmower hacking away at the grass from the lawn that’s down the street on the corner. Then it’s the rubber of wheels grinding against the asphalt, as well as the whirring of a motor engine as the cars make their rounds up and down the street. It’s the busy scramble of squirrels and the squawking of birds in the trees. It’s the clicking of bugs buzzing by or burrowing into the dirt. It's the sound of gravity.

God, he can hear gravity.

It’s a roaring sound (like the whirring of a vacuum).

It’s too much, all at once, out of nowhere.

This heightened sound makes Stiles cringe and he has to cup his hands over his ears because all of them begin to combine and crash into each other until he can’t distinguish one from the other and god, the sound is so startlingly loud. It’s like glass breaking against glass while knives are being sharpened in the background and he wants it to stop because he can’t take it — just stop, stop, stop, stop —

“...iles...St...es...il...Sti...Stiles!”

Stiles gasps and blinks dizzily as he stares up at Derek with wet eyes, breathless with his confusion. Dek’s hands are twitching over his wrists as he flicks his gaze over Stiles’s face anxiously, searching. He’s gently coaxing Stiles’s hands away from his ears. “You’re okay,” he says quietly and he waits for Stiles to nod numbly before his expression darkens and he glares over his shoulder at Laura. “What did you do to him?”

Laura’s face is twisted with guilt. “I just — I only wanted —” She presses a hand over her mouth, looking horrified. “Stiles, I’m sorry. Oh Mother Moon — I’m so sorry.”

Stiles doesn’t know what to say. He feels — he’s not sure how he feels. He can’t stop shaking. It’s like being a nerve: raw and exposed. She’d done something to him and she’d known what she was doing. She extracted some kind of truth that he had not consented to give. He clamps his trembling lips together as he fights back a wave of nausea. This is something he'd never expect from Laura. Peter on a bad day, maybe — but not Laura. There would never have been a need because Stiles trusts Laura — trusted Laura.

Derek rubs soothing circles with his thumbs into the inside of his wrists and he looks at Stiles like he wants to help but he doesn’t know how.

Stiles shakes him off and takes a step back. He wants all of them gone. He can’t — he needs them to leave. His voice is hoarse when he speaks, and he gets a sinking feeling that he might have been screaming but he can’t remember. “Go to Chicago,” he rasps, looking at Laura with wet eyes. “You wont be able to take a plane so you’ll have to rent a car.”

Laura says, “Stiles, you don’t have to —”

“Don’t interrupt me!” Stiles snaps and he has to swallow down the swelling anger trying to bubble up in his throat. “You don’t get to — this must be what you wanted so you better listen to what I have to say.”
Laura’s bottom lip trembles and she remains quiet all the while looking pitifully chastised. She shakes her head at Cora when the younger Hale growls and glares at Stiles. She takes a protective stance in front of Laura.

Derek just glares at both of his sisters warningly.

Peter raises a brow at them all and looks openly intrigued by the developments unfolding before him but he’s smart enough to keep any comments to himself.

Stiles swallows again and curls his shaky fingers into fists until his cuticles are digging into the soft flesh of his palm. He continues, “Get a large vehicle because a few of your family members will most likely want to come, but you’re also going to have to stock up on food because there will be a need for it. Keep it simple: water, nonperishable items like what you would buy during a storm when you know there will be no power, and wait to buy milk when you’re close enough because they’re using tear gas to keep everyone under control. I don’t know if that kind of stuff effects you but there are Humans who will be there and it will effect them. The milk will help.

"So help them. You need allies. This is a delicate situation that could get very ugly, very fast. No matter how many Supernaturals there are or may be, Humans will always outnumber them. Outnumber you. No good ever comes from fear and panic, we know this from Human history alone. We drop bombs on things we don't understand. Our first instinct is to exterminate." He pauses as his mind races. Then he says, “Take Peter with you because that’s the only way you’ll get Talia to agree to it. He’s a diplomat at heart, and a very clever wordsmith. He can smooth things over if needed. Besides,” he says as he turns his knowing gaze on Peter. “He knows there’s more to the situation in Chicago than what’s being shown and he wants to investigate because there’s something about it he recognizes.”

Both of Peter’s eyebrows shoot up at that but he doesn’t deny it.

Stiles begins to feel drained but he continues because he has to for the sense of urgency that’s festering inside of him has yet to flee. “Like it or not, you're going to have to be a leader, Laura. If only in this situation. Try not to let your emotions get in the way from making the smartest decision. Be brave, and hold yourself accountable for as many losses as you would with victories. If you fail this, don't take it personal — just try to stay positive from start to finish, despite how things look or seem at the moment."

Laura nods slowly.

"You can’t bring Cora,” Stiles firmly states.

Cora begins to valiantly protest but Laura lifts her hand and the motion makes Cora stop short.

Stiles scrubs at his face tiredly with both hands. “You can’t bring her. She’s not — she wont be able to keep herself in check and its safer that way. There’s too much enmity on both sides. The police are too aggressive and Cora’s got a temper not suited for this type of thing. Derek should stay behind too because Talia and Nana Hale will need help looking after the kids when the parents leave with you.

"And be careful because like I said, this will put you in command and every decision you make will matter. Things in Chicago might take a turn for the worst but concentrate on keeping peace. Instigating the negative focus will be bad, and there’s no cause for chaos. Not when there’s still the potential of reaching an understanding. I —” He stops and measures the looks on all their faces. They’re staring at him like he’s a completely different person, which is no surprise because he feels like one. He feels like he wants to crawl out of his skin. “That’s all. That’s all I got. I’m tapped out.”
Laura shifts and glances over to Peter, who gives a simple nod and herds Cora and Derek to his car, which is parked in the driveway. She waits until they’ve climbed in before she steps up to Stiles and tucks her long bangs behind her ears. Her voice is shaky when she says, “I’m sorry.”

“I know,” Stiles says, because he does. “But I can’t — I need us to be — Laura, there’s this ugly feeling inside of me that I don’t know what to do with because you forced my hand in a way I was totally unprepared for.”

Laura’s eyes mist over wetly and she nods with trembling lips. She sniffs and brushes her mouth over the knuckles of her right hand. “I really shouldn’t have done that. It was a betrayal to your trust, and I’m sorry. I hope you know that.”

“You have to be careful,” Stiles replies instead. He’s sort of numbing himself to this situation because he can’t take the conflict of being pressed between anger and sympathy. “Make friends in Chicago, but be careful. I don’t — this feels major and you should just be careful.”

“Stiles,” Laura whispers and looks at him with a helpless look. “Please know that I’m sorry.”

“You said that already,” Stiles says flatly. His next words feel sour on his tongue. “You can be sorry a hundred times over and I would still be — I am angry. You don’t get to make me feel like I shouldn’t be. You should go. Be careful.” He eases around her and flexes his fingers as he climbs the porch steps.

He doesn’t watch Laura slide into Peter’s car, nor does he watch the red vehicle reverse out of his driveway and take off. He’s too busy crouching down to pick up a bar of black soap wrapped in plastic and thin white nylon twisted package string. He frowns and turns it over in his hands as he straightens, glancing around before he carries it into the house, up the steps and into the bathroom before setting it on the sink counter.

Stiles has to splash his face with cold water and resist the urge to cry. It’s only a slight relief that when he glances up at his reflection, cheeks pink and face wet, he doesn’t see a complete stranger.

For the first time in ever, he knows exactly how Lydia feels. He hadn’t liked that at all — that overwhelming assault on his senses. As a Virtue, he’s not sure what he’s capable of but after that incident just now, he’s not sure he wants to know. It left him shaken and stunned — afraid.

Stiles sighs and pushes away from the sink to exit the bathroom. He tucks away in his room and crawls under the blankets of his bed. He squeezes his eyelids shut until they’re completely scrunched and the pressure of holding them like that causes him to see little flecks of light and colors. He focuses on it with all his might just because he’s desperate to wipe his mind of anything tangible.

He’s never been so grateful for silence.

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Two hours later, Stiles climbs out of bed lethargically, wiping sleep from his eyes and escaping the tomb of heat he’d encased himself in while he was twisted up in his sheets under his comforter. He doesn’t even remember falling asleep but he does feel a lot better for it. He also feels famished, like he hasn’t eaten in days, and he stumbles to his door with an annoyed sound when he’s realized he forgot to take off his sneakers. He rubs at his eyes again with a jaw-cracking yawn as he staggers down the steps, his equilibrium a little off for whatever reason, and he makes his way to the living room where Scott is taking up space and lounging on the big couch.

Stiles sits down on the floor next to Scott’s hip and stares at the TV until he recognizes what’s being
played. “Why are you guys watching Strawberry Shortcake?” He twists his head to look at his best friend.

Scott has his hands folded together behind his head, looking comfortable and at ease. He shrugs with a sheepish grin. “It was either this or Young Justice. We took a vote on it earlier. Isaac and Kira double teamed me, so.” He shrugs again. “She had to leave to go home ten minutes ago.”

Stiles snorts. He glances over to see Isaac curled up in his favorite armchair, enthralled. He really questions his brother’s taste in television. His stomach gargles loudly and he blushes a little when Scott snickers.

“Isaac made some tatter tot casserole,” Scott offers.

Stiles makes a desperately grateful sound as he climbs to his feet and makes his way into the kitchen.

The glass baking dish is still resting on top of the stove, and half of the casserole is already gone, so Stiles gets what he can before he pops it into the microwave. He idly takes note of the time (7:34 pm) before he takes his food out of the microwave to cool. He idly takes note of the time (7:34 pm) before he sits down at the kitchen table and he sees a few missed calls from his dad, Kira, Cora, and Deaton. None of them leave him any voicemails, but they do text him when they see he’s not answering.

His dad’s text reads: Working a double shift, won’t be home until tomorrow evening. Scott can spend the night, I talked to his mom. I left some money for food. If you're still going to that party, please be safe.

Kira’s text reads: TRIED TO STICK AROUND TO WAIT FOR YOU TO WAKE UP BUT YOU WERE SO UNCONSCIOUS I HAD TO RETREAT SO UM I GUESS ILL SEE YOU TOMORROW AND DON’T YOU FORGET OUR WAGER BECAUSE LIKE I AM LIKE SO AHEAD OF YOU BECAUSE WHILE YOU WERE NAPPING I WAS WRITING DOWN FIFTY NEW SONNETS XD

Cora’s text reads: You and I need to talk about some things because Laura and Peter refuse to tell me what the hell that was earlier. C A L L  M E.

Deaton’s text reads: Mr. Stilinski, I believe I may have found something. Seeing as I was unable to get in contact with you, I’ve decided to take the matter directly to your father. There’s no time to waste. We’ll talk soon.

Stiles frowns and lingers on that last text before he scrolls through his contacts and calls Cora. When she picks up, he says, “Are they gone? Laura and Peter and everyone else?”

“Yeah,” Cora replies but there’s a question in her voice. “It’s just me, Derek, and Nana. And the munchkins too but they’re out back playing. Mom’s gone to do something — she didn’t really say. I feel like she’s meeting up with your dad. Why? What is it?”

“Nothing, well — nothing,” Stiles says, even as his mind tinkers away, and he quickly barrels on before she can interrupt. “I need you to text me Kate’s number.”

“Okay…” Cora drawls. “Sure but —”

“We can talk later about that. Not now. Please,” Stiles says. “I have to go.” He ends the call and focuses on eating his food as he stares at his phone waiting for Cora’s text. It comes two minutes later but it’s also followed by a text from Derek that reads:
What are you up to

???

Stiles chews slowly and doesn’t bother to linger on wondering how Derek always seems to know when he’s plotting something. He just responds with:


Fine.

Stiles frowns.

That was almost too easy. He narrows his eyes at the screen of his phone.

When Derek doesn’t text him anything else he just texts Kate a quick message before he sets his phone on the table with the screen facing down and finishes up his food before he goes to make himself another helping. He doesn’t notice that he’s completely finished off the casserole until he moves to make another helping. He stands there for a second, staring at the empty dish, thinking about how he’s still hungry but also how he doesn’t normally gorge himself like this (outside of tacos but that was always pretty much a given).

Stiles frowns before he grabs the dish, rinses it out, and places it in the dishwasher. He makes himself two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and eats them like they’re nothing, but it’s not until he’s finished his third sandwich does he really start to feel vaguely satisfied. He’s too worried about overdoing it to keep going, so he retreats into the living room and talks Scott and Isaac into playing *Need for Speed* with him.

They switch the games around when Isaac and Scott get tired of being bested by Stiles and he’s lenient enough to let them.

He’s only trying to pass the time until —

*Honk, honk!*

Stiles blinks and stands before he eases over to the windows to peer out and sees Kate sitting in her shiny black Jaguar with the top down, texting away on her phone as she waits for him. He turns away to address Scott and Isaac, who are looking at him curiously. He says, “Okay, so, here’s the thing —”

Isaac shakes his head disapprovingly.

Stiles guffaws and flails his hands. “I haven’t even said — never mind. Look, I’m going to a college party to track down some Mermaids,” he explains.

Scott blinks hard at him like he’s fighting down a double-take. “You’re going where to do what now? Mermaids? Why are there Mermaids?”

“Technically, in Human form, they’re Nymphs,” Stiles supposes. “I’m going to a college party to — well I haven’t really thought about what I was going to do but —”

“Does dad know?” Isaac interrupts rudely but he doesn’t even blink. Stiles is starting to think that Isaac is getting way too familiar with him.

Stiles secretly likes it.
Isaac continues, “If dad doesn’t know, maybe you shouldn’t.”

“I told him what I was trying to do,” Stiles protests because he did. He just never mentioned that Peter tried to talk him out of going, which, let’s be honest, he would have ended up going anyway because Peter doesn’t have the final say in what he does. “He knows.”

Isaac doesn’t appear to be convinced.

Scott just looks confused all around.

“It’s all good,” Stiles promises and ignores the sound of Kate’s urgent honking. “Everything will be totally fine.”

"You say that in every situation that turns out to be the complete opposite," Isaac mutters, almost resentfully, but there’s no ignoring the underlying concern there.

The doorbell rings.

Stiles rolls his eyes and goes to answer it.

Kate stands on the other side wearing a high-waisted, aquamarine pencil skirt with a slit down her right leg, and a sleeveless white crop top with matching pumps. She’s showing so much skin, which makes her look far from being the high school senior she is. She pops the gum in her mouth obnoxiously as she lifts a finely arched brow. “You’re not going anywhere with me looking like that.”

Stiles frowns and looks down at himself. “What’s wrong with what I’m —”

“Yawn. Bored now. Don’t even bother asking that question,” Kate interjects and eyes him with a shake of her head. “Excuse me,” she says, flicking her hand at him. She waits for him to step out of the way so she can slide through and swagger towards the stairs. She briefly acknowledges Scott and Isaac with a smirk before she clicks her way up the steps.

Stiles quickly chases after her and he has to guide her away from Isaac’s room because she mistakes it for his.

Kate clicks her way over to his small walk-in closet, flinging the door open and waltzing in as she talks to herself.

Stiles pretends not to hear the flippant remarks she makes about his taste in fashion.

Kate pops her head out of his closet a moment later and says, “First chance we get, we’re taking you shopping.”

“With whose money?”

“My father’s of course,” Kate says, rolling her eyes like it’s so obvious. She disappears in his closet again. “The old man’s filthy rich, and he’d hardly notice if someone were dipping into the vaults.”

“Uh, that’s — tempting but no thanks. I’m fine with my taste in clothes,” Stiles says as he sits at his work desk and boots up his laptop and his tablet. He makes a quick work of scanning his emails and notifications for anything significant before he cruises through Twitter for some updates about Chicago.

“You can keep your tastes but even most people have church clothes,” Kate calls out from the closet.
“I don’t see one button down in here that’s not plaid.” She starts chucking his clothes out of the closet like she’s making a pile of what she wants to burn with some gasoline and a match.

“I like plaid,” Stiles grumbles, mostly to himself as he scrolls down the news feed. There appears to be some kind of candle vigil going on along the Lakefront Trail. “Always trust the plaid.”

“Even I have church clothes,” Kate remarks. “And I’m agnostic.”

“Not surprising,” Stiles mutters, mostly distracted. He finds himself thinking about Laura and Peter and wondering how far they’ve made it crossing state lines with a good portion of their family.

“Okay,” Kate breathes like she’s just ran a marathon. “I think I found something suitable.” She holds up a pair of ripped jean shorts, a stripped blue tank top that says ‘Edgar Allan Bro’ (this had been a gag gift from his friend Emmanuel last year on his birthday and he’d worn it once to be ironic), a blue beanie hat, some black-framed hipster glasses (god, he doesn’t even know where that came from because he doesn’t even need or wear glasses), and some blue flip-flops.

Stiles almost gags. “I’m going to look like such a douche.”

Kate smiles predatorily. “Exactly. You’ll fit right in. Welcome to college.” She drops it all in his lap.

“Get dressed. You got five minutes or I’m ditching you and going to that party myself,” she warns before she glides out of the room, slamming the door shut behind her.

Stiles manages to struggle his way into Kate’s carefully picked outfit in under three minutes (while almost spraining his wrist and breaking his nose in the process). He doesn’t feel any less unsettled when he uses his last two minutes to give himself a once over in the bathroom mirror. He may look like a ‘bro’ but damn it, he can’t deny the cleverness of Kate’s intentions because he appears less like the high school freshman that he really is. He appears to be more like a nerdy college freshman. So, you know, bright side.

Stiles sighs and flips off the lights as he heads towards the steps then down them just as Kate starts in on the car horn. He waves a quick goodbye to Isaac and Scott on the way out.

“Dude!” Scott says when he sees him and he falls off the couch from laughing so hard.

Even Isaac looks like he’s fighting down a smile, but he just uses Scott’s momentary distraction to take him down in the game (*Lego Marvel Super Heroes*).

Stiles doesn’t linger. He quickly locks the door behind him on his way out and jogs down the steps. Kate never lets up on the horn, even as she stares at him pointedly as he makes his way to her car.

“You’re going to wake the whole neighborhood,” Stiles complains as he buckles in.

“Good.” Kate wastes no time putting the car in reverse and backing out onto the street. She turns up the volume on her radio and blasts Miley Cyrus’s *Do My Thang*. After the song ends, she lowers the volume and says, “I heard you and Laura had a falling out.”

“Did Cora say something to you?” Stiles asks, hunching down in his seat as bounces his right leg and begins to gnaw on his fingernails.

Kate shoots him a look before she glares at the road ahead of them. “Don’t be stupid. Laura and I have been best friends since our sandbox days. She tells me everything. She sounded pretty wrecked about the whole thing.”
Stiles fidgets and drops his hand to pick with a loose thread on his shorts. “I’d rather not talk about that,” he says because his feelings are complicated on the issue. He’d probably know more about how he felt or where he stood with the issue if he understood what exactly it was that Laura had done, which, yeah, they’re totally going to have to talk about that when he’s not so pissed or troubled.

Kate seems to sense his shifting mood, so she says, “There’s three of them. The Nymphs. Two boys and a girl. The Mermaids in the mountains never said as much but it’s obvious in some ways.”

“Peter tell you that?” Stiles asks.

Kate looks at him like she wants to hit him. “How far do you think my head is up Peter’s ass? No, I figured that out on my own. It might interest you to know that between us, I’m actually smarter than him. He’d be six feet in the ground before he ever admits to it or ask me for help. He’s got his pride. Most men do. Peter just conveniently gets me to come along with him on most of his mischief. You know it was me that found those Mermaids in the first place, right? Of course you don’t. Peter would never say because then he’d have to acknowledge the fact that he’s not the smartest person on the planet.” She scoffs. “Peter can be stupid like that. He’s lucky he’s so pretty.”

Something about that makes Stiles smile a little and he huffs out a reluctant laugh. “Both of you are ridiculous,” he supposes.

“Probably,” Kate concedes as she turns down a street full of brick town houses. “But he’s the only person I know that can deal with my shit, and in this crazy world of ours, sometimes that counts for something.” She pulls up to a curb. “Do me a favor. Run up to that house and ring the bell.”

“Why?”

“Because if I do it, Parrish won’t answer the door and I know his ass is in there,” Kate says as she flips down her sun visor so she can preen over her reflection.

“This is where Parrish lives?” Stiles asks as he glances over the black iron screen door settled over a small stoop, which is wedged between some well-kept bushes.

“Yes, now go and convince him to come with us. Because of what happened this morning with Peter, he’s acting skittish and now he refusing to — just convince him to come. We need him. He’s got valuable skills,” Kate merely says as she fiddles with her radio. “And when I say valuable I mean he’s hot as fuck and he makes good bait.”

Stiles stumbles out of her car and makes his way to Parrish’s front door. He rings the doorbell three times and waits.

The porch light comes on and a second later the door swings open.

Parrish (who is shirtless) relaxes when he sees who it is and he quickly sets the gun aside so he can unlock the screen door. “Stiles,” he says with a furrowed brow. “What are you doing here? Is it — how’s Isaac? Is something wrong?”

Stiles shakes his head rapidly when his tongue won’t cooperate. It takes a minute before he can blurt out, “Holy crap! What the hell? Who did you think I was?”

Parrish grimaces and his mouth tightens but he doesn’t say. He pauses as he eyes Stiles’s attire with raised eyebrows.
Stiles flushes and fidgets. “Don’t say anything. Your face says it all. I know,” he grumbles.

Parrish looks vaguely amused but he clenches his jaw when he notices that Stiles isn’t alone. He glares over at Kate and Stiles turns in time to see Kate blowing him some lewd kisses.

Stiles laughs a little nervously as he turns away. “So, um, you have any plans tonight?”

Parrish flicks his gaze back to Stiles. “Not particularly, but I have a feeling you’re about to change that.”

Stiles rubs the back of his neck sheepishly, doing his best to look everywhere but Parrish’s naked chest. “Well,” he says. “No pressure.”

Parrish lips curl a little at that before he sighs. “Give a few minutes. I’ll trail you.”

Stiles nods and quickly returns to Kate’s car. “Should I have told him we were using him as bait?” he wonders aloud.

Kate snorts. “Better he doesn’t now,” she replies before she leans over and pulls down her glove compartment to fish out a stick of gum. “You ever play Easy Pitch?”

Stiles frowns and accepts the piece she offers him as he shakes his head no. He shoves it in his pocket for later.

“It’s something me and Peter play from time to time when we go on stakeouts,” Kate goes on to explain as she pops the gum in her mouth after spitting out the old one. “Basically, it’s like — say you and I were out together, and we saw this girl, well I would go up to the girl and ask her some fielding questions based on what I was looking for. If she seemed innocent enough, I’d tell her all your charming qualities until I’ve convinced her you’d be worth her time. Then I’d send her your way so she can give you her number, that way you’d know she checks out. Easy Pitch.”

“Okay,” Stiles drawls. “Actually no. I don’t get it.”

“Unless you have a better way of singling out the Nymphs, I’m all ears,” Kate says. “Play the game and we can send each other people who we’ve given the all clear to. Narrows down suspects.”

“Oh.” Stiles can’t say that it isn’t a good idea. But he’s going to have a hard time socializing because parties like these usually aren’t his thing. Actually parties in general aren’t his thing. But at least it helps to know that he’s not the one trying to get the numbers for himself because that’s just a disaster waiting to happen.

Kate shifts gears just as Parrish exits his house wearing a simple v-neck shirt with some fitted jeans and he strides across the lawn to his car. She snorts and pulls away from the curb, saying, “He would drive a Mazda.”

Stiles doesn’t get what’s so significant about that but he doesn’t ask.

Kate drives without saying much else. She definitely doesn’t drive like Peter does. She’s more calm and aware, if not laidback. She constantly glances at her rearview mirror as if to make sure that Parrish is trailing them like he said he would.

When it looks like they’re getting close, driving past the actual college campus to head towards the more student-oriented neighborhood, Stiles says, “You’re not going to tell Peter about this are you?”

Kate smirks and says, “Duh. He doesn’t need to know everything. It would serve him right,
wouldn’t it?”

Stiles silently agrees and when she parks they both climb out. “So what’s the story? I mean what’s the angle we’re playing with this Easy Pitch thing?”

“Well,” Kate drawls. “You can say I’m a newly signed model looking for a no-strings attached type of thing. And I’ll say you’re a photography major with that whole tortured artist thing but you’re worth a try because you’ve got a massive —”

Stiles splutters.

“— heart,” Kate finishes in amusement. “What?”

Stiles just shakes his head and flushes.

Kate snorts. “You’re just adorable, aren’t you?” She makes grabby hands at him. “Give me your phone.”

Stiles does and watches in amusement as she takes a selfie before handing it back.

“So they know who to look for,” Kate explains before she aims the camera lens of her phone at him.

Stiles just stands there awkwardly and waits for her to finish. When she takes longer than necessary, he opens his mouth and says, “What are you —”

Kate takes the picture with a smirk. “There. Perfect.” She eyes the picture. “You know you got such an obscene mouth. It’s criminal. I’m sure when I flash this picture to our targets they’ll come running to find you so they can see if you’ll let them take those lips for a ride.”

Stiles flushes again and pockets his phone when she hands it back over. “You make me sound like a hooker,” he grumbles.

“What’s so bad about that? Everyone loves someone who’s willing to go downtown, if you catch my meaning, which I think you do,” Kate drawls, wiggling her eyebrows in a ridiculous leery manner.

Stiles just gawks at her before he snaps his mouth shut and steps away from her car, turning his gaze to watch Parrish climb out of his car instead for something else to focus on outside of how obnoxious Peter’s girlfriend is.

Kate puts on some red lipstick as she clicks over to Parrish. “Keep an eye out for some obnoxiously good looking guys. They might be the Nymphs we’re looking for. Well, two out of three. I’m gonna go mingle and get drunk,” she decides.

Parrish grabs her elbow with a disapproving frown. “You’re underage, Kate,” he reminds, concern coloring his tone. “Peter wouldn’t like —”

"Oh and you suddenly care what he likes, then?" Kate fires back with a mean grin. "Would it hurt you so much to say that you're worried about me?"

"That's not — I didn't mean — of course I care what happens to you," Parrish stammers, looking uncomfortable. "But Peter —"

"What about Peter? He's got the good sense to know I can handle my own. And I'm eighteen now," Kate presses, angling her body more towards him. "If I want to drink, I will be drinking. But don't worry, if I feel like I want to get handsy with someone, I'll come find you."
Parrish flushes and quickly lets her go. "Kate..."

“Tough titty said the kitty,” Kate replies with a wicked grin. “You’re off duty, officer. Relax. Worry about him, not me.” And with that she walks up toward the fraternity house practically overflowing with college students who are practically half-naked, body littered with all sorts of interesting things like phone numbers, words, and so on.

All of them are clinging to red cups and to each other as they loudly mingle over the pulsating bass thumping from somewhere in the house.

Stiles can vaguely make out the song being played (*Turn Down for What*).

Parrish saddles up beside him and says, “Never went to college. Enlisted straight out of high school. Don’t think I missed much.”

Stiles snorts and says, “You’re fighting every judicial instinct in you that wants to card them, aren’t you?”

“IT’s almost painful,” Parrish admits as he eyes the crowd warily. “Don’t drink anything offered to you.”

“I know,” Stiles says. “My dad already gave me this talk.”

Parrish just nods stiffly and makes a gesture towards the house.

Stiles walks a little bit ahead of him, eyeing different people of interest as he navigates between them. He’s not sure what to look for specifically — maybe the Nymphs will be obnoxiously gorgeous like Kate said. That’s not saying much though because there’s a lot of good-looking people at the party as is and Stiles has never been one to discriminate when it comes to beauty.

He sighs as they enter the house and the blare of music crashes over him like a tidal wave. He winces and tries not to think about the incident earlier as he seeks out the kitchen, figuring it’ll do as a proper not-hiding but kinda hiding spot.

There are others hanging around but it’s not as crowded as every other inch of the house.

Parrish scopes out the area like he’s looking for a potential threat and when he finds none, he turns to Stiles and says, “I’m going to walk around. See what I find.”

“Okay,” Stiles replies. “I’ll text you if I find something.”

Parrish nods before he disappears.

Kate sends him a text that reads: **where r u?**

*In the kitchen.*

**good stay there**

**sending a couple of girls ur way**

**let u kno when we swtch off**

Stiles pockets his phone and waits, trying not to look as awkward as he feels. He grabs a red cup off of the sink counter (it smells really strong and he’s not sure what it is) and he holds it for
appearance’s sake.

A dark-skinned female with a busty figure, large hoop earrings and a short curly afro wanders around the couple making out and grinding against each other on the refrigerator. She makes a disgusted face and heads to the sink (where Stiles is currently standing near) and glares in the sink and then around. She looks at Stiles with narrowed eyes and points to the sink as she says, “Ey, did you see a cup of cognac sitting here? Cause I just dipped out for a hot second to go to the bathroom and I could’ve sworn I—”

“Oh, yeah,” Stiles says and hands her the cup in his hands. “I sorta picked it up and, um, I didn’t really know what to do with my hands so — don’t worry I didn’t drink it.”

“Oh huh,” she says, narrowing her eyes further. She sniffs at it before she just pours it down the drain. “No offense to you but I ain’t stupid. I don’t take chances.”

Stiles pushes his glasses further up his nose. “I don’t blame you. At all. You can never be too careful these days.”

“No you cannot,” she huffs in agreement. “And it sure don’t help your case hanging out in the kitchen with those two mid-coitus on that ice box. You know the party’s out there right?”

“Yeah. Which is why I’m in here,” Stiles confesses.

A look of dawning passes over her face. “You like my sister, Braeden. She the same way. Most people can’t handle her temperament in polite situations cause she ain’t polite to begin with. She’s kind of an undercover freak, if you catch my meaning. Real into that whole BDSM scene. She’s a Dominatrix. Using the money to put herself through this fancy preparatory academy up in New York. Refuses to let our mom help her pay but, you know. Some people got too much pride when it comes to things.”

Stiles coughs weakly and wonders why the name feels familiar to his ears.

She takes his coughing as a sign of dehydration so she walks over to the fridge and shoves the couple out of the way to retrieve some bottles of orange soda. She brings it back over and hands one to Stiles before she leans against the sink and says, “I’m Danielle Journey by the way, but everybody calls me Journey. Family calls me Danielle. Mom and sister call me Danny.”

“Stiles.”

“Interesting,” Journey says. “So, Stiles. What’s your major?”

“Photography,” Stiles says, thinking about what Kate said. He twists the top open on his soda and takes a generous sip before he says, “Yours?”

“Genetics, Biophysics, Psychology, and Anthropology,” Journey chimes. “I’m basically like Charles Xavier, only not quite as bald-headed, blacker, and sadly without mutant powers. Also note the lack of wheelchair under me.”

Stiles perks up at that with a slight grin. “Maybe you just haven’t presented?” he jokes lightly.

Journey smirks. “If only. But if I’ve learned anything about those kind of mutations, it’s that they have the tendency to surface around puberty. Though I suppose you have your late bloomers.”

“You’re the expert,” Stiles supposes with a full grin. “So do you read the comics or are you a fan of the cinematic interpretations?”
Journey wrinkles her nose. “Never could get into the movies. Did enjoy the cartoons though, you know, way back when. As for the comics?” She throws her hands up and says, “I’ve read and collected as much as I could get my hands on ever since I was a shorty. They’re the reasons why I’m doing what I’m doing.”

Stiles nods. “That’s cool. Like really cool. I mean I’m not as dedicated but I’ve skimmed a few issues and I’m pretty familiar with the timelines in both Marvel and DC. What’s your favorite character?”

“Oh no, it’s Ororo Monroe aka Storm,” Journey admits. “Everyone always expects me to say Professor X but nah. Storm is my spirit animal, and it don’t hurt that she’s such fine piece of chocolate. They were right to pick Halle Berry for that role. I’d wife Halle Berry, I don’t care that they say she crazy. I can do crazy. I can do crazy all night long in every position imaginable.”

Stiles laughs without really meaning to.

“What about you though?”

“Halle’s pretty but I wouldn’t wife her,” Stiles replies and chuckles when Journey rolls her eyes. “No, but I’ve always favored Spider-Man.”

“Amazing or Ultimate?”

“Amazing for sure.”

“So you must be into Garfield’s interpretation?”

“Well I —”

Two leggy brunettes enter the kitchen and swagger over to them. They grin wickedly as they begin to scribble their names and numbers across his arm and the side of his neck.

Stiles stammers and blushes as Journey shoots him a confused but amused look.

One of the girls says, “Call me.”

The other says, “Maybe I can pose for you sometime.”

Then, they’re gone.

Stiles stares after them before he looks at Journey.

“Man, I don’t even want to know. Get back to what you were saying,” Journey says with a lenient grin.

Stiles sighs gratefully and begins rambling about how perfect Andrew Garfield was for Amazing Spider-Man (how he doesn’t get much credit for it). Well, in between the random flirtatious interruptions of people Kate sends his way. He flushes knowingly when they all look at his mouth with this odd gleam in their eyes and Stiles avoids wondering what Kate could have possibly said to them.

Journey takes the peculiarity of the situation in stride and she refrains from questioning or commenting, which Stiles immensely grateful for. She commandeers their conversation after a while by going on a rant about how she prefers Miles Morales in the Ultimate comics and how she would cast Jaden Smith or Childish Gambino to play the role. She then gives Stiles this appalled look when he confesses to not knowing who Childish Gambino is.
In the midst of Journey’s raving reviews to Gambino’s latest rap album, Stiles gets a text from Kate that reads:

k switch now. ur turn. ill b nxt 2 my car.

Stiles sighs and informs Journey that they’ll have to shorten their conversation without elaborating why.

Journey just lifts a brow and asks for his phone, which she puts her name and number in. She explains, “At least this way I’ll know for sure you won’t brush me off. You didn’t seem too interested in your little fanclub when they came to mark you up. And maybe when I ask you out for dinner you’ll actually say yes.”

Stiles gets flustered and doesn’t know what to say. He feels partially guilty that she doesn’t know the actual truth about him. She’s really pretty and loud, if not intimidating, but he’s prone to admiring those kinds of traits in people. He would take her up on the offer if he weren’t so underage. Boy, what a mess.

Journey just winks, flattered that she’s made him speechless and she hands him back his phone. “You’re a cool guy, even if you are twiggy. I’ll have to take you to a buffet if you do decide to take me up on my offer. Look up that album I was telling you about and let me know how you like it,” she says before she wanders off with a wave.

Stiles waves back dazedly as he pockets his phone. He shakes himself out of his stupor and makes his way through the house (which smells heavily of alcohol and weed intermingled with the stink of markers), flashing Kate’s picture at guys and girls alike.

He orbits the dining room first, moving around the house in a counter-clockwise motion until he ends up in the crowded living room. He tries to feel for some kind of nautical vibe, but he doesn’t sense anything otherworldly about any of the drunken college students he encounters. It’s actually a relief to his social anxiety that they’re intoxicated because they don’t really focus on him so much as trying to stay upright or not puking on themselves.

Stiles is ready to give up and call it a night, drained from his interactions with so many personalities, when his sense of smell is suddenly overwhelmed by the scent of fish and sea salt. Everything starts to slow down and Stiles turns his gaze to the open doorway of the living room just as the blaring sound of dubstep zeros out completely, only to be replaced by the sound of water. Well, it’s more like the sound of ocean waves rocking back and forth gently.

That’s when he sees her.

She’s tall and willowy, strikingly beautiful — more stunning than what should be normal. But that’s exactly what it is: abnormal. She has long, shiny dirty blonde hair that reaches to her tiny waist in gentle curls. She has leafy green eyes wrapped in thick dark lashes, a pointy button nose and cushy lips coated with some kind of lip-gloss. She’s easily the prettiest woman in the room and she becomes something he wants to watch. She’s wearing black/cream allover floral print denim overall shorts with ripped and frayed accents, and underneath she’s got a ripped up shirt that has a graphic of the movie Heathers on the front of it. She’s got no shoes on and unlike everyone else, her creamy white skin has been untouched by a marker.

That’s when Stiles knows.

She stops at the bottom of the steps and glances over her shoulder at him. She stares at him for a long time with a searching gaze before she turns away and continues up the stairs, or rather, gliding up
them like some kind of gorgeous apparition.

Stiles blinks and grimaces as the sound of the world returns to him as quickly as it left. Time passes normally once more and he’s staggers into a group of giggling, tipsy girls who are a bit too handsy for his tastes. It takes a minute for him to extract himself before he stumbles after the Nymph, who he names Heather in his head just because of her shirt and also because he doesn’t know what her actual name is.

He makes it to the top of the steps and he looks left and right down the long hallway, unsure where he should even start. He starts on the left, opening and closing every door (sometimes hastily closing with an apology because some of the rooms are being thoroughly occupied). He makes it to the end of the hall and carefully creeps inside the dark room. He flicks on the light but he sees it’s a mess of clothes, school books, cameras (old and modern), and lingerie. On the walls there are photos of all sizes but their mostly black and white candidts of random people of all ages and sizes.

Stiles frowns as he steps in the room because for whatever reason, there’s also an abundance of Paige’s picture on one lone wall. It sends chills down his spine and fills him with a sense of alarm. These aren’t artistic shots — these are the kind of photos someone with a disturbing obsession would take.

A dark shrine of fixation.

Stiles whips his gaze to the other side of the room where there’s a closed door. He sees a shadow move through the bottom crack of the door and before he can be reasonable or talk himself out of it, he moves to open the door. Then he freezes.

He expects to see Heather.

What he finds instead is Paige.

She’s on the floor, back to the side of the tub, head thrown back on the edge with her bare legs spread out before her across the fuzzy carpet. She’s wearing nothing but an oversized t-shirt (which she’s drowning in because it fits her like a short white dress). She looks nothing like how he remembers.

She’s so small now, so skinny — practically bordering on anorexic.

And her face — god, her face. It’s a mess of bruises.

Her right eye is blackly swollen shut, and her lips are cracked and split and bruised at the left corner. Her long pale throat has an impression of bruises that take the shape of fingers like someone has been choking her. The fingers of her right hand twitch around a used needle that is still sunken into the inner crease of her elbow on her left arm, which already has a network of track marks.

Stiles presses a hand to his mouth as a wave of nausea and horror passes through him. Through his shaky fingers, he says, “Paige?”

Paige moans weakly, her lashes flutter with the deep eye-roll she gives.

Stiles scrambles over to her and carefully pries the needle free from her grasp before tossing it aside. He cups his hand behind her head to lift her up some as his other hand presses around her face. She’s burning up but breaking out into a cold sweat and she looks so out of it. He feels his heart lurch when he realizes that it’s very likely that she’s overdosed on something.

Paige moans again as she starts to shake.
“Oh god,” Stiles croaks and fights down his panic as he scrambles for his phone to dial 911.

Paige suddenly jolts upright and lurches to the side as she vomits blood onto the floor before passing out.

Stiles makes a desperate sound as he picks her up (bridal style) and runs out of the room with her in his arms. He runs down the steps and out the door, ignoring all the bewildered stares as he carries Paige all the way over to Kate.

Kate’s giving a speech about condoms and consent to a group of jocks and frat boys but she straightens in alarm when she spots him. She takes in Paige’s state and the pink wetness of Stiles’s cheeks before she grits out, “What happened?”

“I don’t know,” Stiles sobs desperately and the sky begins to rumble above them. “God, she’s — something’s wrong! We have to get her to a hospital!”

Kate looks conflicted but she sighs heavily and spits, “Shit. Shit. Shit.” She unlocks her car doors and helps Stiles ease into the backseat with Paige still in his arms. “God damn it. Watch her head.”

Stiles sniffs with a nod and clutches Paige as he watches her face desperately. The sky gives another rumble. “Come on,” he says. “Come on, come on, come on.”

“Okay, okay,” Kate replies and scrambles for her keys before she starts the car. It’s only a second later that she’s peeling down the street in the direction of the hospital as she dials the hospital on her phone. “Yes, hello? I’m calling about an emergency…”

Stiles drowns out everything, focusing so heavily on the way that Paige breathes shallowly until all he can hear is a weak heartbeat and not the sound of wind rushing around them as Kate speeds. He begins to shake as he realizes that her heartbeat is beginning to dip dangerously. He makes another desperate sound as he clings to Paige’s skeletal frame helplessly.

Through his wet lashes, he sees a small bundle of something shimmery unfurl in Paige’s chest where her heart is and lines of silver like threads in a spider web begin to flicker in different directions as though they’re connected to different things. One of the threads seems to go from her to him and it’s thicker than the thread that goes from her to Kate, which is really wiry and thin.

Kate shakes him and Stiles is forced to snap out of it when he realizes that they’ve arrived to the hospital and all of the silver threads disappear like they never even existed in the first place as the sound of an ambulance rings in the distance.

Kate has them parked in the driveway of the hospital E.R.

A horde of nurses pry Paige from his arms to lay her out on a stretcher before they usher her inside.

Stiles sniffs and quickly climbs out of the car to follow them. He recognizes one of the nurses to be Melissa McCall and she’s placing an oxygen mask over Paige’s slack mouth. He tries to follow them all the way but Melissa stops him at the double doors of the restricted wing and lets the door close behind her after she assures him that they’ll take good care of Paige.

Stiles finds himself sitting in the waiting area, ringing his hands nervously while Kate paces the length of it as she talks on her phone to god knows who. He doesn’t pay attention; he’s too busy thinking about how pale Paige looked when she spewed blood from her mouth or how red her lips had looked afterward.

It leaves him feeling rattled.
Melissa keeps him informed about Paige’s progress and in between that Stiles calls Scott when Isaac doesn’t pick up to inform him of what happened. He tries to call his dad but it keeps going straight to voicemail, which is unnerving as it is worrying. He texts his dad, even after leaving him a gang of messages until his phone dies from overuse, which leaves him to do nothing but bounce his leg anxiously and stare at the muted TV mounted in the corner.

Melissa seeks him out one last time before she clocks out for the night and informs him that Paige is in critical condition but she’s stable.

Stiles is thinly relieved and he thanks her before he watches her disappear around some corner. He leans back in his chair and thumps the back of his head against the wall behind him to stare tiredly up at the buzzing fluorescent lights.

He idly wonders about Parrish and how he’ll react to being ditched if Kate hasn’t already informed him about where they are. Then there’s a brief moment where he thinks of Heather.

As his eyelids dips, his last thought before he falls asleep is: *This is going to kill Derek.*

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Someone gently shakes Stiles’s shoulder and he scrambles upright out of confusion, wiping the drool from his chin with the back of his hand before he fixes his glasses, which are sitting crooked on his face. He must have been sleeping with his mouth open because his tongue feels like cotton, not to mention the fact that his back is killing him. Must be from the contortion of how he was trying to spread himself across the hard wooden arms of the row of chairs lined up against the wall. He rubs his eyes tiredly before he blinks up at Derek, who is looming over him with a cup holder of coffees.

“Hey,” Derek says it so very softly like he’s afraid of speaking any louder. His brow is furrowed but his expression is very neutral. "Didn't mean to startle you. Here."

Stiles quickly accepts the cup of coffee offered to him as he watches Derek anxiously from under his lashes. He takes a careful but generous sip before he cringes and pulls the cup away to sniff it. “This isn’t coffee,” he says with a frown.

“Hot cocoa,” Derek says as he hands one to Kate as she clicks by with her phone still pressed against her ear. She accepts it with a wordless thanks before she scowls and hisses into her phone.

Stiles watches her leave with a deepening frown.

“Peter,” Derek supplies when he notices. He’s looking at Stiles intently, gaze searching. “He’s furious she took you to that party.”

“Tough,” Stiles mutters before he takes another sip of his hot chocolate with a sigh. "Yeah that's what she's saying basically," Derek says. "How is it?" He nods to the cup in Stiles's hand.

"Good," Stiles replies between sips. "Really good."

"You were shivering," Derek remarks suddenly, like he can't help it. He seems distracted somehow. "While you were sleeping. I just...I thought it might help."

Stiles pauses at that. It is doing a good job with warming his insides. He’s not exactly dressed to withstand the chilly temperatures of a hospital. "Thanks. You didn't have to."
Derek shrugs.

“How did Peter know I was — you didn’t tell him did you?”

Derek shakes his head no. “You asked me not to.”

“You don’t usually do as I ask.”

Derek shrugs again but he doesn’t deny it. He sits down on the edge of the coffee table in front of Stiles and begins drinking his own cup of hot chocolate as he stares at Stiles’s bare knees like he’s lost in thought.

Stiles has no idea what to say to him at this point because he not sure about what Derek knows. “Um,” he says, scrambling for something as he fiddles with the rim of his cup. “Did Kate call you?”

Derek nods silently but he doesn’t look up from Stiles’s knees. “Mom dropped me off a few minutes ago. She wouldn’t let me leave the house when Kate first called. I was — I went a little — she made me wait until I calmed down.”

“Oh,” Stiles says weakly before he clears his throat and shifts in his seat. “What did — um.” He isn’t trying to tiptoe but he really doesn’t know how to approach this. “What do you know about what happened?”

“Enough,” Derek says lowly as he catches Stiles’s eyes. “It must have been a shock. To find her like that.”

Stiles's tongue feels too heavy to confirm. It's only...well, Derek is being way too calm about this. Derek continues, "Are you okay?"

Stiles could almost laugh at the irony. “You’re asking me if I’m okay? Derek. This isn't about — what would it matter how I feel?"

Derek shrugs wordlessly but it looks like he has a lot more to say than he’s letting on. He takes another sip of his hot chocolate as he tracks his eyes over Stiles’s face and he stays silent.

Stiles stares right back at him. Sometimes he can't begin to understand the other teen.

Derek looks away before he says, “Paige’s family is sitting with her now. They said I could — that it would be okay to —” He stops short and takes a deep breath before he releases it. “I’m going to go see her for myself in a minute.”

Stiles nods and gulps down his hot chocolate for the better lack of having anything else to say. He feels anxious and nervous for some reason — maybe on Derek’s behalf since the other teen doesn’t seem to be reacting to the situation much. He fiddles with his cup as he chews on his fingernails. He glances around and notices that the waiting room is a little more occupied than it had been last night.

It's full of antsy children who dance energetically in front of their sleep-deprived parents, who nod into their cups of cafeteria coffee.

Stiles can smell the lemon wax and bleach spread across the newly waxed linoleum floors. Everything around him suddenly seems so abrupt and there. Maybe it’s the glare of florescent lights that chase away every shadow or the smell of ‘clean’ or the sanitizing cold. It makes everything about the hospital feel so final and real and unchangeable.
Derek straightens suddenly and drinks down the last of his hot chocolate before he crushes the cup as he stands. Then he walks over to a garbage bin and trashes it before he waits.

Not even a moment later, a tearful older couple approaches Derek, putting their hands on his shoulder as they say something to him that makes him stiffen. Then he’s rushing down the hall.

Stiles gnaws on his thumbnail and tries not to take that as a bad sign. He blinks and stands quickly when the older couple approaches him.

“You’re the one that found our daughter?” the mother says with wet cheeks and shaky hands.

Stiles nods wordlessly.

The mother bursts into sobs and clings to him as she mumbles her gratitude.

The father looks a little embarrassed and uncomfortable as he pries his wife away from Stiles. He says, “I’m sorry. She’s — we both are very grateful that you found Paige when you did. We hadn’t heard from her in weeks and we’d wondered.”

“I just don’t understand,” the mother says, choking on her tears. “What kind of monster does this to such a sweet and innocent girl? She would have never —” She cuts herself off with more sobs.

“We’ve contacted the police,” the dad says. “If you’re feeling up to it, could you give them a statement about all of this? We want to file a restraining order against her husband. We’re thinking of pressing charges but we need enough to bring to court.”

“Yeah, of course,” Stiles quickly agrees.

Paige’s father shushes his wife with comforting sounds as he leads her to u-shaped reception counter where a pair of deputies are waiting.

Stiles makes his way over as well and tells them everything that he can, with every detail he can remember. He makes sure to mention the state of the room he found her in and the things he’s noticed before he gives them the address to the fraternity house. Just basically anything he thinks will help.

He returns to the waiting room when they no longer have need of him and he sits beside Kate, who’s furiously typing away on her phone with a prominent scowl. He doesn’t ask. He just glances up at the TV mounted in the corner and watches the news. It’s nothing about Chicago, but it’s mostly fluff pieces.

The time on the wall clock reads: 7:56 am.

Stiles turns to Kate and says, “My phone is dead.”

“I got a charger in my car. I can take it if you want,” Kate offers but she’s already holding out her hand expectantly.

Stiles fishes his phone out of his pocket and gives it to her as he watches her stand. She walks off and he’s left to sit there by himself. He tries to watch the news a little more while taking idle sips of his (now cold) hot chocolate but he gets restless after a while. His stomach gurgles, so he stands and goes in search of a vending machine. He manages to get lost somehow as he navigates through the corridors and just as he’s about to flag down a nurse for help, he spots Derek exiting a room at the end of the hall.
Derek paces the width of the floor back and forth several times as he scrubs his hands through his hair, chest heaving until he punches the wall with an angry cry. He then stumbles back into the opposite wall, covering his face with his hands as he sinks down the length of the wall slowly with shaking shoulders and he drops to the floor.

It’s like a punch in the gut to Stiles. He can’t explain why. He and Derek aren’t even that close but that doesn’t seem to matter to his heart, which feels like it’s dissolving in his chest. He walks to the end of the hall, not even sure what he means to do, but when he reaches Derek, he just plops down right beside him.

Derek doesn’t acknowledge him, so lost in his grief. He continues to sob so very quietly into the palms of his hands. His knees are curled close to his chest and the back of his neck and the tips of his ears are a rosy color.

Stiles carefully, as if Derek might break under his touch, puts his right hand on Derek’s left shoulder. He can feel the way the older teen is trembling through that bit of contact and it makes something uncomfortable and hot swell in his throat. His chest is tight with his sympathy and his stomach twists restlessly as he listens to the way Derek tries to quiet his whimpers.

It’s a long time before Derek can fully stifle his sobs, and even longer before he lifts his head so he can stare at the ceiling with misty green eyes and wetly flushed cheeks. He keeps swallowing every five seconds, like he’s got something caught in his throat, and he sniffs as often as a person with hiccups would.

Stiles pulls away and folds his hands together in his lap. He takes a moment to look into Paige’s room through the open door and he eyes her prone form searchingly. She’s drowning under a network of tubes and it looks like her left hand has been set in a cast. He lifts his eyes up so he can look at the monitors crowding around the head of her bed but he can’t make heads or tails of what the vital signs mean. As long as her chest is moving up and down then everything is okay, he silently supposes.

Derek sniffs twice and says, “She’s pregnant.”

Stiles looks at him sharply with surprise.

“Her parents said that the doctors — if you hadn’t found her when you did —” Derek doesn’t finish the sentence, he’s choking over the words, but then again, he doesn’t really need to.

Stiles is afraid to ask but he does. “Is it...yours?”

Derek tenses up and snaps, “No!” Then he deflates and, more softly this time with a touch of sadness, apologetically repeats, “No.”

Stiles gnaws on his thumbnail as his mind explodes with new questions.

Derek scrubs at his face tiredly before he runs his fingers through his hair like he’s trying to tame it but he still looks so very out of it. He says, “I barely recognized her when I saw her. I didn’t even — she’s not the same. She doesn’t smell the same.”

“I know,” Stiles says around his thumbnail and winces at his wording. “I mean, I agree that she doesn’t — she smells different. I thought the same thing when I saw her.”

Derek growls and his eyes flash an amber color. “I should find that asshole and rip him apart.” His shoulders begin to shake. “I spent so long being angry at her, wishing that —” He stops and shakes his head sharply. “But she didn’t — didn’t deserve that. None of it. None of this.”
“No, she doesn’t,” Stiles agrees but he glances around quickly. “But you have to calm down, okay? You cannot wolf-out right now. Time and place, dude.”

Derek scowls but he shuts his eyes like he’s meditating. His hands flex at his sides and he exhales slowly before he opens his eyes again. They’ve returned to their original color.

“And also, I get the whole revenge thing,” Stiles continues as he looks back to Paige. “But it’s not going to solve anything. Sometimes the rules of the Wild Kingdom don’t apply. You’ve gotta let the cops sort it out. Her parents have already gotten them involved.”

Derek crosses his arms with a deep frown but he doesn’t say anything.

“It’ll work out,” Stiles assures.

Derek looks at him. “How do you know?”

“I guess I don’t,” Stiles admits. He turns to look at Derek. “But I’d like to believe so. I have to.”

Derek flicks his gaze over Stiles’s face like he’s searching for something. Then he says, “I didn’t know you wore glasses.”

Stiles frowns at the sudden shift in conversation. Then he just frowns in confusion before he groans when he remembers what he’s wearing. He takes the glasses off to fiddle with them as he replies, “I don’t, but Kate saw fit to dress me this way for the party. I feel like such a poser.”

Derek snorts and takes Stiles’s glasses so he can put them on himself. And of course, he looks really, unfairly nice in them. He leaves them on as he glances back towards Paige’s room, his expression darkening into something more melancholy.

Stiles doesn’t like seeing Derek so downhearted. Its just something about the way when the other teen is happy, he just looks like he deserves it and that he never takes it for granted. But when he looks sad, he really looks sad, like he’s lost and confused and he doesn’t know how to make it better or if it will get better. It makes Stiles’s own heart achingly heavy.

They sit there on the floor across from Paige’s room for what feels like ages as nurses and doctors and patients pass them by. They sit there as Paige’s parents return to sit vigilantly at her bedside; the father with his arms around his faintly weeping wife.

Derek doesn’t move to go back into the room. He just watches from a distance with that level of quiet focus he has about himself sometimes.

Stiles manages not to fidget so much or ramble unnecessarily about something because he’s feeling anxious. He doesn’t really have a mind to, not with Derek sitting beside him. He’s entirely too focused on what the other teen is doing (which isn’t much at this point) that he forgets about himself. He gnaws on his thumbnail as he glances at the side of Derek’s face as subtly as possible.

It’s probably a couple of minutes before Derek huffs and, without even looking at him, reaches out
with his left hand to press Stiles’s hand down and away from his mouth. He says, “Don’t do that.”

“What am I doing?”

“Watching me like I’m going to explode.”

“I don’t think that,” Stiles quickly assures and unconsciously brings thumbnail up to his mouth so he can chew at it but Derek stills the movement. “I don’t.” he repeats.

Derek finally looks at him. “I’ll be fine. You can leave if you want. I appreciate everything. You don’t have to worry.”

“Uh.” is Stiles’s eloquent reply and he goes a little pink. “It’s not that I — we just — we’re friends and I just want to be sure you’re okay.”

"I'm fine."

Stiles barely catches himself from making an annoyed sound. "You're not, and that's — I get it."

Derek just looks at him without saying anything.

Stiles finds himself fidgeting. "I mean I — I'm allowed to worry about you,” he insists.

Derek nods leniently, like he’s the one doing the comforting here.

That just kind of exasperates Stiles as much as it causes him to be bemusedly fond over the other teen.

Derek says, “Thanks. And I am okay. If I’m not, then I will be. I’m going to stay here. She might — maybe she’ll wake up. We haven’t talked since — and that’s —” He stops himself short and he gets a little frustrated with his articulation. His brow furrows and he opens his mouth to try again but then he cocks his head suddenly and looks past Stiles. “Your dad is here.”

Stiles turns his head. He doesn't see anything. But then sure enough, his dad is turning the corner at the other end of the hall some moments later with a tired expression. He fumbles to his feet (excuses himself) and quickly makes his way to meet his dad halfway.

The sheriff pulls him into a hug when he’s close enough. “You okay?” he asks.

“I'm fine,” Stiles mumbles into his shoulder before they pull away from each other. “I had — it’s been a little jolting but, yeah.”

His dad nods. “I wanna take you home,” he says. “I tried calling you back but your phone’s off. Here, your friend was nice enough to give this to me so I can return it to you.” He hands Stiles his (completely charged) phone. “I have a few things I want to tell you.”

“Oh. Okay,” Stiles says and he pockets his phone after he switches it on as his dad sidesteps him to stride down the hall towards Derek.

Derek quickly stands to stand face to face with the sheriff. His expression goes somber and he nods to whatever it is being said to him from the older man.

Stiles watches them curiously as his dad claps a hand over Derek’s shoulder before walking away.

Derek is left staring down at his feet like he’s thinking really intently about something.
When his dad is close enough, Stiles asks, “What did you say to him?”

“That’s between us, kiddo,” the sheriff carefully deflects. “Let your old man have his secrets.” He steers Stiles through the halls and past the waiting area where Kate is still stewing and scowling at the face of her phone like it’s personally offended her.

“Hang on, dad,” Stiles says and he quickly jogs over to the older teen. “I’m leaving now, but, have you heard from Parrish? Does he know —”

“He found the two boys,” Kate interjects as she looks up at him. “He’s taking them home now. Though we haven’t managed to find the girl.”

“I did,” Stiles blurts. “I forgot to mention with everything going on, but I saw her. I lost track of her but I know what she looks like now.”

Kate hums thoughtfully at that as she twists her phone idly in her hand before tapping it against her chin. Finally she sighs and says, “We’ll touch bases about it later. Not much we can do now. If she saw you then she’ll probably make it a point to avoid being caught.”

Stiles nods.

“All right, well,” Kate says as she straightens. “I’m going to stick around a little longer. In case Derek needs — in case of anything.”

“Okay. If anything happens, just, let me know,” Stiles urges before he walks backwards and returns to his dad’s side when Kate nods. They exit the hospital and then climb into his dad’s cruiser before his dad pulls off. “So you wanted to tell me something?”

“Yes,” his dad confirms as he turns on his blinker to turn left at the oncoming traffic light. “I’m going to have to summarize because I have to get right back to the station. But that friend of yours, Deaton, well he made a few things clear. He says that the reason I was seeing such conflicting results in the autopsy reports is because the coroner who performed them was being deliberately vague. The wounds were from an animal, not any kind of hunting knife.”

“The coroner was trying to throw you off?” Stiles questions as he thinks on it. “But why?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to figure out for the last twenty-four hours. We have him in custody at Eichen House.”

“Eichen House? Why Eichen House? And who is he?”

“Ines Reyes,” his dad says. “You remember that girl you were telling me about? The one with the drug problem? Well this man just so happens to be her father. You should also know that when I put out a warrant for his arrest and sent a couple of my deputies out to retrieve him, he locked himself in his office and cut out his own tongue.”

Stiles inhales sharply at the gruesomeness of it. “Why?”

“That’s something I’d like to know too,” his dad admits. “That’s why we had to take him to Eichen House. Deaton suggested it. He believes his sister can sort it out, I don’t know. I placed him under heavy surveillance while he’s being treated by not only her but a doctor as well. He really butchered his tongue because whatever he had to say he didn’t want to be forced to say it. Used a razor made of mistletoe and gold. Couldn’t make sense of it but Deaton and Dr. Morrell seemed to know why.”

Stiles shakes his head as he thinks on it. “So you think it’s him? The one who’s been doing the
killings?”

“Like I said before, hard to say,” his dad says. “I’m going to have to really dig deep with this one. I’ll need to talk to everyone he’s ever known. Figure out what kind of habits he had. Talk to his kids. His coworkers. His neighbors.”

Stiles doesn’t say anything to that. He’s curious, but he’ll save his questions for Deaton when he gets the chance to seek the older man out. “I’m not going to be seeing much of you this weekend, am I?” he asks quietly as they pull up to the house.

His dad sighs and puts the car in park. “I’m afraid not,” he says and reaches over to rest a hand on the crown of Stiles’s head. “Don’t worry. It’s the territory that comes with the job, and if your old man is as good as he thinks, I’ll have this all sorted out in no time. I just have to put the pieces in its proper place. But don’t you worry, okay? And I mean that. I think we got our guy so you don’t need to go nosing around about it.”

“I guess so,” Stiles mumbles and resists the urge to tell his dad that it just feels like they’re missing something. He’s got that anxious feeling again, like he’s forgetting something. It’s buzzing about in his head like horde of little fruit flies clouding around his brain.

His dad is looking at him imploringly. “Look, son. You’ve got a month of school left. Maybe you don’t need these distractions. I worry about you. I worry that what I do has an effect on you and Isaac. I just want you two to be comfortable.”

“We worry about you too,” Stiles says. He tries not to think about the fact that because he’s a Virtue, there’s probably no chance he’ll ever have a normal life. “You don’t need to worry about us, dad. We’re — we’ll be fine.”

“That’s what I hope for,” his dad says with a sigh. “I know how you can be. I know I’m asking a lot for you to take a step back and trust me with this. But you’d really be adding a few more years onto my life if you just focus on all that normal teenage stuff like school and videogames and junk food or whatever you kids do. Just promise me you’ll at least try.”

Stiles looks away and feels conflicted. He doesn’t say anything for a while but when he does, he tries to be as genuine as possible as he says, “Yeah, okay. I’ll — try my best.”

“Good. Come here.” His dad pulls him close and into a quick hug before letting him go. “Now go on and spend some time with your brother and your friend. I have to get back to work.”

Stiles climbs out of the car and gives his dad a hasty goodbye before he makes his way up the porch steps and into the house. The door is already unlocked, and by the loud gaming sounds coming from the living room, he can guess that’s where everyone is.

Well, it’s mainly Kira and Scott to be exact. They’re playing Mortal Kombat and Scott appears to be losing epically.

Kira pauses the game when she notices him looming at the edge of the couch and she flashes him a happy smile but frowns in confusion. “Why are you covered in numbers?”

Stiles blinks and straightens as he looks down at himself with a groan. He’d forgotten. “Oh, uh — I was at this party,” he vaguely explains.

“Okay,” Kira merely says but she looks like she wants to ask more questions about it. She doesn’t in favor of saying, “Did you still want to help me out with the baseball stuff?”
“Baseball stuff?” Scott says, interested. “I’m good at baseball stuff.”

Kira snorts. “Are you, really?”

“Yeah,” Scott confirms, puffing his chest out. “What’s there to figure out? You have a bat and you use it to hit the ball someone throws at you.”


“I know, right?” Scott exclaims happily. “I’m a well of knowledge.”

Kira laughs at that while Stiles rolls his eyes with a grin. He says, “Where’s Isaac?”


“Well I’m going to go take a shower. There’s a bat, I think, in the basement. You guys can try and find it. Do you know where the batting cages are?”

Scott nods before he stands and helps Kira to his feet, jolting in surprise when she gives him a slight shock.

Kira flushes in embarrassment. “Sorry. I do that a lot.”

“It’s okay,” Scott quickly assures. “It didn’t hurt.”

Stiles lifts an eyebrow at his best friend and glances between them. He doesn’t miss the way Scott sends her these little moony-eyed looks. The same kind he sends Isaac or Allison from time to time.

Wow, it’s amazing how quickly Scott develops crushes.

Stiles snorts and leaves them alone as he makes his way up the stairs and to his brother’s room.

Isaac’s curled up like a lump under his covers.

Stiles climbs onto his bed until he’s hovering on his knees over the preteen and pokes at his shoulder, waiting until he hears him make an annoyed sound. He grins and says, “Wake up. We’re going to the batting cages.”

Isaac grumbles and buries himself further under his covers.

“Well we’re not going now now, but as soon as I hose myself down and get dressed we will. You should probably get ready too,” Stiles suggests as he bounces to shake the bed and his brother (who gives a muffled complaint) before he jabs Isaac’s shoulder one last time. He climbs off the bed and turns to exit the room. He totally doesn’t expect to be hit on the back of the head with a pillow. When he whips around to shoot Isaac an offended look, the preteen just hides from view under his covers but there’s no mistaking the way Isaac's shoulders are shaking under the duvet. “Oh, real funny,” he mutters and throws the pillow back, missing horribly.

Isaac just snickers quietly like he knows.

Stiles throws up his hands and tucks away in the bathroom. He turns the gauge on the shower to set the right temperature before he strips down and climbs in.

It takes a full hour before he can get clean, and none of his soap seems to work. He gets frustrated after a while and the water is starting to go cold. There’s a moment where he peeks out from behind the curtain and stares at the bar of black soap he left on the counter the other day. He stares at it for a
really long time before he sighs and climbs out to get it.

He probably shouldn’t but he takes his chances.

And guess what?

It *works*.

Not only does he manage to rid himself of the marker stain, but his skin actually looks brighter. Like he’s glowing. But not like freaky alien glowing, just more like someone who spent the whole day doing a mud bath kind of glowing.

It’s curious. Very curious.

He tacks the soap on his mental list of things to be researched.

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Stiles, Kira, and Isaac trail behind Scott on their bikes as he leads them to Beacon Hills Park District (#3) so they can make use of the batting cages. They lock up their bikes before they walk to one of the cages.

Scott wanders off to go get some tokens for the machine, while Isaac goes in search of a concession stand.

It’s not as busy, maybe because it’s still early. It is the weekend, so there’s that.

Stiles leans back against the fence as he watches Kira lace up her cleats before she puts on her pink and black softball helmet. He smiles a little at how giddy she looks when he hands over his metal bat.

Kira smacks her helmet with the end of the bat as she bounces on her heels with a growl. “How do I look?”

“Adorably fierce,” Stiles laughs.

Kira goes red but she beams proudly. She pokes Stiles in his side with the end of the metal bat until he’s forced to jolt away with a laugh.

They chase each other for a bit and somehow Kira manages to coerce Stiles into giving her piggyback ride. He puts her down when Scott finally returns with a handful of tokens.

Kira lets Scott usher her inside the batting cage while she tosses Stiles an amused look over her shoulder.

Stiles responds with two thumbs up as he watches.

Isaac saddles up beside him with two trays of nachos and some hotdogs. He offers one of the trays to Stiles before he silently eats his portion as he watches Scott drop a few tokens in the pitching machine.

Stiles doesn’t realize how famished he is until he’s midway into his second hotdog.

Scott pauses to say, “Ready?”

Kira curls her hands over the handle of the bat and positions it over her right shoulder, widening her feet and bending her knees slightly. “Ready!”
The pitching machine whirrs to life and spits out the first ball.

Kira swings and her aim is true but something really weird happens. A current of electricity goes up the bat and it goes flying back into the fence behind her, magnetized.

Stiles chokes in surprise and he drops his food in alarm because the bat stops right where his face would have been if the fence hadn’t been there.

The ball Kira had hit slams into the pitching machine with such destructive force that it must knock something loose because it goes haywire all of a sudden, speeding up and whipping balls everywhere.

Kira squeals when a few baseballs hit her helmet, her thigh, and her right boob. She gives a pained sound and tries spring out of the way, dodging the balls like they’re on fire. “Turn it off! Turn it off!” she shouts and tries to dive out of the way.

“I’m trying!” Scott swears, looking panicked, slapping and punching at the machine to get it to stop.

Stiles turns to Isaac and says, “Go get some help!” before he rushes inside the cages to try and extract Kira, but he too gets pelleted with baseballs. They feel like well-aimed punches on his body, and he barely makes it to Kira before he shields her body with his. He grunts in pain as the balls fly at them.

One of the park’s engineers rushes inside the batting cage and powers it down.

Stiles falls on his butt beside Kira and they lean on each other in relief. “Okay,” he pants and winces as the gravity of his bodily pain really gets to him. “Show of hands. Who even knew that would happen?”

Kira gives a pained laugh and falls backward, sprawling herself across the ground like a starfish as she stares up at the blue sky through the front of her helmet.

Stiles sags against the fence behind him and waves off Scott’s concerns before he watches his best friend rush over to Kira with ample worry.

Isaac strides over to Stiles, looks him over silently for a long minute, and then just plops down beside Stiles to finish his nachos in peace. “I’m glad you’re okay,” he supposes between bites. “But you’re paying me back for the food you wasted.”

Stiles snorts.

Isaac gives him a look.

Stiles rolls his eyes when he realizes that his brother is being completely serious. “You’re impossible,” he mumbles but he’s more amused than anything. "I could have died just now."

Isaac just shrugs and turns his attention to his nachos again. “You didn't die. And your allowance is higher than mine. I’m allowed to inconvenience you,” he states magnanimously.

Stiles just huffs and lets his brother think what he wants. He sighs and fidgets as his body twinges with different aches.

His gaze lands on the bat above his head (still magnetically stuck to the fence) and he tries his hardest not to wonder at the peculiarity of it all.
Well, after the batting cage incident, they all take a vote to go to Ramona's Lucky Strike (which also happens to be a roller-skating rink) where they meet up with Boyd, Jackson, Malia, and Allison.

The bowling alley is a popcorn and beer smelling, UV-light having, glow in the dark carpet with alternative music playing in the background type of place. It's very popular by the looks of it.

Boyd decides it's the best time to introduce his mom to those in his circle of friends that don't already know her. "She likes to know who it is I'm giving free passes to — just to be sure I'm not 'getting taken advantage of' since my family has always had a good foot in the retail market in this town or whatever," he explains as he quickly disappears up some steps that lead to office resting above the building. He comes back down with a tall, sepia-colored woman who looks to be in her late forties. "Ma, I think you know most of the gang. But this is Stiles and Kira, who I don't think you know. Guys, this is my Ma, Ms. Ramona."

"Nice to meet you," Ms. Ramona says with a strong Haitian-Creole accent as she greets Kira first. She's a woman with a wiry frame like a cypress tree. She has black hair styled in tightly coiled curls, which fans around her comely face like a halo. She takes her time shaking Kira's hand with an impressive amount of sincerity. She turns to Stiles. "You are...the sheriff's other son?" she questions as she shakes his hand.

Stiles is about to answer, but surprisingly enough, Isaac jumps at the opportunity to speak, and says, "Yes, ma'am. This is my older brother. We call him Stiles."

"Ah, the one you speak so fondly of," Ms. Ramona remarks and Isaac gets a little pink. "My husband and I were beginning to think he may not be real from all the things you say."

Stiles sends Isaac a curious look that he valiantly tries to ignore. "All good things, I hope?" he probes.

"Nothing but," Ms. Ramona assures. She winks at him before she turns to address her son in French. She makes an indefinable gesture at Isaac.

Boyd suddenly looks embarrassed and his reply is shaky as he responds to her in the same dialect. Allison snorts and she says something in French as well that has Ms. Ramona laughing and Boyd looks even more embarrassed.

"Ah, okay," Ms. Ramona says, switching back to English. "Well, please enjoy yourself. It's pretty busy since its noon on a Saturday so you'll have to wait a good fifteen minutes before you can rent shoes, and get your own designated married lanes." She kisses Boyd on the cheek before she does the same to Isaac and walks away.

Isaac says, "What was that about?"

Boyd still looks a little embarrassed. "Nothing. My ma just got her own ideas about...it's nothing."

"Kinda seemed like something," Stiles lightly insists and looks to Allison.

"Oh my lips are sealed on this one," Allison says with a mischievous, dimpled smile.

Isaac looks like he wants to keep pressing but Boyd quickly drags him away, promising to treat him
to as much popcorn as he like if he just does not ask.

Two lanes finally open up in the midst of all this.

Stiles volunteers to stay behind to make sure no one tries to snag their lanes while the rest of them disperse to find an appropriate sized bowling ball.

Isaac returns a moment later to stay behind with him, munching on a bag of popcorn with oily fingers and offering Stiles some from time to time.

Stiles takes a good handful, cramming it in his mouth and swallowing before he whistles softly to himself as he leans forward to lace up his shoes.

Isaac stiffens up beside him like he did the other day and his chewing slows as his brow furrows with upset until he stops eating completely.

Stiles is about to ask what’s wrong but Isaac stands and shoves the bag of popcorn at him just as Scott and Boyd return with their bowling balls. He doesn’t really go anywhere, but he just stands there like he’s ready to flee at any moment.

Allison and Malia return then, followed by Jackson, who sits down at the control desk to type in their names.

Stiles reaches out to curl his fingers around Isaac’s right wrist gently and is partially relieved when the preteen doesn’t tense up like he normally would. He’s about to try and ask what’s wrong but Jackson flags his attention, asking him to enter his own name so they can go ahead and start the game already.

Isaac uses his momentary distraction to carefully pry Stiles’s hand away so he can bow out of playing, mumbling something about the arcade, and slipping away before Stiles can stop him.

Boyd watches him leave as well with a thoughtful face, and he decides he’s not going to play either. He ignores Jackson’s protests and moves to go look after Isaac instead.

Stiles makes sure to toss him a grateful look, which Boyd only answers with a small grin and an understanding nod.

“Okay!” Malia says, hopping up and lifting both hands before she lowers them and aims her pointer fingers at them all. “Since we’re at an even number now, how about we make this a little interesting?”

“What’d you have in mind?” Scott asks, still lacing up his shoes.

“Battle of the sexes?” Malia suggests.

Jackson snorts.

Allison shrugs off her jacket and says, “I’m down.”

“Who’s down with what?” Kira asks curiously as she returns after finally finding the perfect bowling ball. She plops down next to Stiles as she turns the galaxy colored bowl over in her hands.

“Battle of the sexes,” Stiles supplies as he takes the ball from her so he can examine it. He tries to wiggle his fingers in the three holes but he can’t even make it past the first knuckle.

Kira perks up and looks very keen on the idea. “What are we playing for?”
“Superiority,” Malia says as though it’s obvious. “Now come over here and stop fraternizing with the enemy.”

Stiles and Scott lean on each other as they make ridiculous whiny, wounded sounds and throw a hand over their hearts.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Malia agrees, waving a fist at them.

Kira snickers and takes her ball with a grin before sliding to the row of seats on the opposite side to sit between Malia and Allison.

The three of them put their heads together and whisper obnoxiously with delightfully beautiful grins.

Stiles finds himself watching them dazedly for that reason (he’s a sucker for a gorgeous smile) until Jackson plops down on the other side of him and elbows him. He grimaces and glares.

Jackson just smirks and says, “How good are you at bowling?”

“Guess we’ll find out,” Stiles mumbles and snickers when Jackson scowls. “I should be fine. Relax.”

“It’s not you I’m worried about for once,” Jackson admits and throws a pointed glance to Scott, who’s turning his orange bowling ball over in his hands with a focused frown. “You okay there, McCall? You know that shiny thing in your hands is supposed to roll across the shiny floor to hit those shiny white pins, right?”

Scott shoots Jackson a sharp look. “I’m not brain dead, Jackson.”

“Just making sure.” Jackson stands since he and Malia are the first pair to go.

Scott frowns as he watches them.

Stiles knocks their shoulders together. “Don’t worry about it. He’s like 99.9 percent competition. He lives for this kind of stuff.”

“Yeah, well,” Scott mumbles and his cheeks grows a little red as he sneaks a little glance towards Kira and Allison. “I just — I want to be good. You know?”

Stiles lifts both brows as he looks over at Kira and Allison as well, who are obliviously chatting with each other. Then he turns back to Scott to say, “Oh, okay. I get you. You want to — yeah, got it.”

Scott’s blush deepens and he groans. “I’m hopeless. I can’t even — I just...suck.”

“Well, I mean, I’m sure you’re not that bad,” Stiles reassures, patting his distressed friend on the shoulder. “If worse comes to worse, we’ll put up the bumpers.”

Scott makes a face as Stiles snickers. He says, “That’s not funny, Stiles. Bumpers are for babies.”

“How that’s not true,” Stiles protests as he watches Jackson release his plum-colored ball, flicking his wrist for a curve that gets him a perfect strike. “They give the babies these special metal ramps along with the bumpers, so — though if you’re that worried, I’m sure I can ask for one,” he adds jokingly.

Scott rolls his eyes and shakes his head. “Some friend you are.”

“What?” Stiles says in mock offense. “There’s no shame,” he swears as he watches Malia only knock down a few pins with her maroon bowling ball.
“Maybe you can distract everyone while I’m taking my turn. That way they won’t see how pathetically bad I am at this,” Scott reasons and he looks utterly serious.

Stiles picks up Isaac’s abandoned bag of popcorn from between his feet and starts munching on it. “I could start a fire,” he offers. "Like a small, completely contained one in the bathroom using paper towels and hand soap."

Scott snorts.

Jackson strolls back over with a triumphant smirk as Malia curses up a storm and plops down beside Kira moodily. He says, “You’re up, McCall. Don’t disappoint me."

Scott stands and he looks a little nervous as he carries his ball over to meet Allision at their lane.

Stiles claps and with a mouthful of popcorn, says, “Come on, Scotty! You got this!”

Allison lines up to take her shot and she steps forward before releasing her cherry red ball with an almost graceful flick of her wrist. She lands a strike and pumps her fist with a dimpled smile before she walks back over to Malia and Kira, who are waiting to high-five her.

Scott’s standing rigidly with his ball still cradled to his chest like he can’t stand to be parted from it.

Jackson huffs impatiently. “Any day now, McCall.”

Stiles elbows him meanly and looks as innocent as possible as he crams more popcorn in his mouth while Jackson glares at him.

Scott takes a deep breath and plugs his fingers into his ball and earnestly tries for the pins, but the ball rolls right into the gutters.

Stiles winces but he claps again. “Second time’s a charm!”

Yeah, only for Scott, not so much. On his second try it goes right into the gutter like he’s aiming for them. He turns with a crestfallen face and marches back over to his seat with red cheeks, avoiding everyone’s gaze.

Stiles pats him on the shoulder and says, “Dude, it’s okay. No one’s laughing.”

Scott just frowns at his shoes.

“You’re warming up,” Stiles insists. “Next time, you’re gonna land a strike so hard that all the pins in the alley will fall down in glorious awe of your perfect technique. Then the heavens will open up and angels will sing with horns and harps while both Kira and Allison pledge their hearts to you forever and always as rainbows arc across the sky —”

“Stilinski, shut up and go,” Jackson mutters irritably.

“Yeah, yeah,” Stiles says and pats Scott on the shoulder one more time. “I’m gonna use your ball. Give it some of that Stilinski magic.” He wanders over to grab Scott’s ball just as Kira moves to grab hers. He gives her a little grin. “So you’re my competition, huh?”

“Competition?” Kira scoffs. “This, my friend, is a lesson. And I’m about to school you.”

“Oh, well,” Stiles laughs, amused. “By all means, ladies first.”

Kira just winks and swaggers over to the end of her lane, lining up her shot to match the indicating
arrows on the ground before winding her arm back and releasing the ball with an impressive amount of force. The ball smacks into the pins and they all go tumbling down with a loud clatter.

Stiles is undeniably impressed.

Kira raises her hands as she swings her hips. “What, what,” she exclaims before jogging back over to Malia and Allison so they can all high-five each other.

Stiles just exhales and plugs his fingers in Scott’s ball as he cocks his head left and right before rolling his shoulders. He lifts the ball until its covering half of his face and he narrows his eyes in concentration. He creeps forward, stopping just an inch before the foul line, and aims for the edge of the lane before he releases the ball with a hook.

The ball rolls dangerously along the right gutter until it gets midway down the lane before curving towards the middle pin, knocking it down gently with a domino effect until they’re all down.

Stiles grins and turns to the others as he blows on his knuckles before rubbing them against his chest with a smug look.

Jackson lifts a brow but he looks grudgingly impressed. “Not bad, Stilinski,” he supposes and they even bump fists.

Stiles claps Scott over the shoulder while he sits down.

Scott smiles, looking a little more cheered before he turns to watch Jackson and Malia take their next turn.

Stiles nods at Kira and says, “Who’s teaching who now?”

“Beginner’s luck,” Kira protests, even as she grins.

“Lies. That’s your jealousy talking,” Stiles says and sticks out his tongue as she rolls her eyes with an exasperated smile.

“That’s your jealousy talking,” Kira mocks him childishly with a squeaky voice and giggles when he throws some popcorn at her. She actually tries to catch some with her mouth and manages to get one.

Stiles just takes that as permission to keep chucking pieces of popcorn at her to see what she can catch.

Meanwhile, Jackson lands another strike and Malia does better than she did the first time.

Scott and Allison rise to take their next turn (though Scott with a lot more reluctance).

Allison doesn’t get a strike but she knocks the majority of her pins down the first time around while Scott’s ball goes flying down the gutter.

“It’s all you, buddy!” Stiles calls out encouragingly and Scott shoots him an embarrassed but grateful smile.

Allison knocks down her leftover pins before she walks over to Scott and whispers something in his ear as her hand slides down his spine, causing him to straighten up.

Stiles isn’t sure what she says to him but it makes him curious because Scott flushes from head to two but he grins like a guy who’s just won the lottery.
Allison kisses his cheek and glides away with a secretive, dimpled grin, ignoring Malia’s accusations of betrayal as she tugs on Allison’s curls with a whine when she notices she’s being ignored.

Stiles shares an amused smile with Kira at Malia’s antics before he turns his gaze over to watch his best friend take his turn.

Scott, for all his lack of grace, manages to land as close to a strike than he’s ever managed beforehand.

Allison smirks triumphantly and Malia just complains louder.

Scott strolls back to his seat with a smile made purely from the rays of the sun (like it is seriously epically blinding). He accepts the enthusiastic bro-hug Stiles gives to him with a laugh.

Even Jackson huffs and knocks the back of his hand against Scott’s arm when they sit down as he nods approvingly.

Scott’s smile just gets wider as he glances over to Allison from under his lashes and she ducks her gaze low with a dimpled grin.

Stiles is too curious now. He huddles close and whispers, “Dude, you gotta — what did she say to you?”

“She um, she said to relax and — she said I should —” Scott looks completely flustered. “She just encouraged me.”

Stiles barks out a laugh and says, “Buddy, I was encouraging you. Whatever she said was something next level. Seriously, what did she say?”

Scott just shakes his head stubbornly with red cheeks and a secretive grin.

Stiles sighs loudly, and as dramatically as he can. “Fine. Keep your secrets,” he mutters and sniffs. He crams some more popcorn in his mouth before he stands to take his turn.

The rest of the game pretty much goes the same way. The girls lose the first game, but Malia demands a rematch and they win the second game. The third time around Jackson is the one to demand a rematch, but it doesn’t quite come to anything because both teams tie up. From there they have to give up their lanes for another group, so they grab their things and go to return their shoes before they walk over to the small food court.

Stiles asks Scott to save him a spot in the long line so he can go and grab Isaac and Boyd.

Boyd is leaning against the Hobbit-themed pinball machine Isaac is totally owning, and he’s watching with just as much fascination as the small crowd that’s gathered around Isaac.

Stiles manages to slip through and reach his brother, who doesn’t look up once as Stiles says, “We’re chowing down. Any requests? I’m buying.”


Stiles snorts and looks at Boyd but the other teen just shrugs in a ‘what can you do?’ kind of way. He says, “What about you? Did you want anything?”

“Both of you suck. You should totally be taking advantage of my offer, because this isn’t something I’m going to be offering again,” Stiles warns (a weak threat) and he slips through Isaac’s adoring crowd to wander back to the food court. He finds Scott and saddles up beside him in the line, ignoring the ten year old boys complaining behind them about the unfairness of cutting.

Scott and Stiles get a boatload of chicken nuggets and some cheese fries before they squeeze into the booth Malia attains for their little group.

Jackson is sandwiched between Allison and Malia, with Allison on the end.

Stiles sits between Scott and Kira, with Kira on the inside. He grimaces a little when Scott accidentally kicks him in his haste to lace his feet with Allison’s under the table.

“Sorry,” Scott quickly mumbles before he stares at Allison adoringly.

Stiles just snorts before he turns to find Kira embezzling his cheese fries. “Hey, hey! That is not allowed,” he complains and moves his tray out of reach.

Kira just snickers and says, “They have cheese on them. The temptation was too hard to ignore. If anything, it’s your —”

“Victim blaming,” Stiles interrupts as he points an accusing finger at her. “Stay away from my cheese fries and buy your own.”

Kira pouts and looks up at him from under her lashes, which is so completely unfair and it totally reminds him of that one part in *Shrek 2* with Puss and Boots.

Stiles makes a strangled sound before he hands over his fries. “Here, god, here! Just stop looking at me like that before I offer you my goddamn kidney,” he complains.

Kira perks up with a toothy smile and dumps a good portion of his cheese fries on top of hers before she gives it back. “You’re a good friend,” she praises as she pats his shoulder.

Stiles just grumbles and stabs at a chicken nugget with his fork before he dips it into the pile of ketchup he has slathered on the corner of his plate.

“So what’s everyone doing for the summer?” Malia asks between bites of her cheesy pizza puff.

“Could be going international,” Jackson supposes as he strangles a packet of ranch dressing over his strawberry poppyseed and chicken salad. He’s health conscious like that. “Visit my grandparents with the triplets.”

"You have siblings?" Stiles questions because he completely had Jackson pegged as an only child. "Older or younger?"

Jackson huffs. "Older. Brothers. They're in college."

"Jackson's the baby of the family," Malia gleefully points out.

Jackson scowls but he doesn't deny it.

Malia grins mischievously as she adds, "By far the ugliest too."

Jackson shoves Malia as she cackles. His frown deepens as he ignores her and stabs away at his salad in a way that eerily echoes Cora for some reason. "My grandparents are in London but they want to have what they like to call a 'holiday' in Paris," he adds.
“Oh yeah? I’m headed out that way. Maybe I’ll see you,” Allison reports as she dips her fork into his salad and eats some of his strawberries. He sighs and lets her as she rewards him with a dimpled smile and continues, “My dad wants me to spend the summer with him in France. He thinks maybe it’ll make up for all those other times he’s not around.” Her mouth begins to curve down as she pops a crouton from her Caesar salad in her mouth. “I probably wouldn’t go if not for the fact that this year’s Archery World Cup Final is being sponsored by the Fédération Française de Tir à l’Arc.”

Kira perks up at that. “No way. I thought for sure they’d do it in Australia. What happened?”

“Allison supposes, holding a hand over her mouth politely as she chews. “Something about the Prime Minister and the Chairwoman getting it on. She’s supposed to be pregnant.”

“Psychedelic,” Kira breathes in amazement. “I heard those rumors too but I didn’t think — oh wow.” She shakes her head. “Well, good luck to you. I tried for the Final back when I was in New York, but I had to drop out because, you know, we were moving here and my mom thought it’d be better if I skipped out.”

“Awe, I’m sorry you can’t come. It’d be nice to have a familiar face from home there. All the other archers are a bunch of stuck-up snobs,” Allison says with a sigh as she stabs at her salad gently. “Dramatic bow-wielding prima donnas.”

Kira chuckles with an agreeing nod before she says, “All the best to you though. I’ll send up a few prayers to Apollo for your victory.”

Allison smiles widely, dimples and all.

“My mom wants to enroll me into a private school for high school, and even though I have like a year before I’m a freshman, she wants me to do some of the pre-institute programs,” Malia announces as she licks her fingers clean. “Which is just a fancy name for summer school. God, just shoot me now.”

“Private school?” Scott echoes with a frown. “But, I thought we’d all be going to the same high school. What private school?”

“Dunno. Mom’s being all mysterious about it,” Malia replies with a shrug. “And she keeps saying that we need to have a talk — whatever that means. If you ask me, she’s been sipping on one too many cocktails. It sucks because she’s not making Liam do anything. It’s not like I’m a problem child or anything.”

“She’s probably doing what she thinks is best,” Allison offers as she chews. She holds a hand over her mouth and continues, “Beacon Hills is known for it’s private schools being at a high rank in education.”

“Beacon Hills is known for a lot of things apparently,” Jackson remarks darkly and frowns down at his salad.

Stiles chews a little more slowly as he takes in the implications of his statement.

An awkward silence descends over them and Kira glances between them in confusion. She says, “I’m sorry. Am I missing something?”

Jackson snorts.

Stiles kicks him under the table and ignores the glare he receives as he turns to Kira to say, “It’s just
— nothing. There’s a — thing with the everything.”

Kira looks even more confused. “A thing...with the everything?”

“Uh, yes?” Stiles says and winces at his own idiocy. “Anyway, Jackson just has this burning hatred for private schools.”

“Yeah!” Scott exclaims, jumping in to have his best friend’s back. “It’s mostly that Devenford Prep. Bunch of no good wieners. God, we hate them so much.”

Malia bites her bottom lip to keep from bursting out in a fit of laughter.

Jackson just stares at Scott like he’s the most idiotic person alive but he says, “I mostly just have it in for their lacrosse team. Most of their players are on steroids.”

“Oh,” Kira says and considers that. “I can see that, I guess.”

Stiles clears his throat and jams some cheese fries in his mouth aggressively.

“Anyway, that’s how lame my summer is going to be,” Malia says before she sucks on her pinky. “What about you, Scott?”

“Me? Oh, I — every year my grandpa likes to take my cousins and I camping. Only it’s not really camping. We just stay at the Wilderness Lodge in Lake Buena Vista, Florida and go to Disney World. He says that still counts though,” Scott says as they all snicker.

“I like your grandpa,” Allison says and Scott gets all moony again. “Unlike my own, who gave me a .44 magnum for my fourteenth birthday this year and said ‘Shoot ’em high’.”

“Oh, charming,” Stiles says weakly and Allison gives him ‘I don’t even know what to do about that crazy old fool’ kind of look. “I’m going to be taking driver’s ed. If things go well, I’ll have my permit by July. Might also get a permit to work this summer too.”

“My aunt’s getting married, and well, my dad’s family wants to make a grand affair of it, so we’ll be flying right out to Tokyo as soon as school is done,” Kira announces as she wipes her fingers clean with her napkin so she can pull on the tab of her soda.

“Well,” Malia says, holding up her root beer float in a toast. “Here’s to a productive summer.”

Everyone toasts and that’s the end of that. They finish up their food before they make their way to the skating rink on the other end of the bowling alley.

Scott can barely keep himself upright, even with Allison’s help, so they go to the kiddy rink. She’s really sweet to stick with him as he flails around while six year olds pass them by with little to no trouble.

Malia and Jackson start up a competition with each other about who can skate backwards the fastest.

Stiles just skates lazily with Kira at his side as they mindlessly chatter about different subjects of interest. In the middle of them talking about their favorite action/adventure books, a group of kids rush past them, almost knocking Kira sideways and Stiles has to reach out and grab her hand to keep her steady.

Kira blushes but it’s hard to really see under the disco lights and she mumbles a quick thanks.

Stiles just sends her a small smile and she sends him one back, making him forget to let her hand go
as they come around the bend of the large skating rink.

Kira squeezes his fingers gently and picks up speed as the DJ plays what she claims is her favorite song.

Stiles lets himself be dragged around, never once thinking of the things that make him anxious, but merely enjoying the moment for what it is.

It’s nice for a change.

When it’s time to leave, Jackson pulls Stiles aside to say, “What’s going on?”

Stiles frowns and says, “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Jackson says with as much patience as he can muster. “When we went to go and visit Lydia the other day, we weren’t allowed in because of all the cops.”

“Oh,” Stiles says as he thinks on it. “Yeah my dad, he — they think they might have the person responsible for all the murders in custody.”

Jackson lifts a brow at that. “And? Who is it?”

“It’s —” Stiles stops short and thinks better of it. “I don’t think I should say right now. Just — I’ll let you know if something is made, you know, official.”

Jackson stares at him blankly before he huffs and fixes his leather jacket. “Fine. Whatever,” and then he’s storming off, throwing the others some moody goodbyes on his way out.

Scott frowns in wonder as he looks after him before he approaches Stiles. “What was that all about?”

Stiles just shrugs.

Scott’s nice enough to let it go. “I gotta head home, dude. My mom’s asking after me. I’ll see you later or you can, I don’t know, call me tonight or something,” he says.

Stiles nods and lets himself be pulled into a quick hug. He pulls away with a smile. “Don’t be a stranger,” he teases.

“Me? Never,” Scott says and waves before marching over to exchange a few goodbyes with Isaac and Boyd, then Malia, Allison, and Kira.

Isaac is the next to approach him, and he scratches at the side of his nose anxiously as he stares down at Stiles’s shoes.

This worries Stiles because he doesn’t normally do that much anymore. “What’s wrong?” he asks.

“I’m gonna spend the night at Boyd’s,” Isaac mumbles instead of answering. “I already — dad knows. So. I’m gonna go.”

Stiles is perplexed. He reaches out to place a hand on his shoulder but Isaac flinches away. Stiles swallows down at a swell of hurt at that. “Okay,” he says, feeling lost. He pulls his hand back. “That’s — okay.” What did I do?

Isaac fidgets but he never brings his gaze up. He turns and walks off with Boyd and Ms. Ramona.

Stiles just helplessly watches them disappear, wondering anxiously what he could have done to make
Isaac act that way. He scrubs a hand up and down the top of his head before he wanders over to Kira, Malia, and Allison. He says, “I’m gonna head home.”

“Oh. We’re about to head out too,” Allison states and reaches out to hug him. “Unless you want to go get your nails done with us?” she jokes.

Stiles smiles weakly as he pulls away and shakes his head. He’s got this pressing need to go home that he can’t quite explain. “Maybe next time.”

Kira notices his mood with a frown. She turns to Malia and Allison to say, “You guys go on, I’m gonna, um — I need to —” She makes a discrete gesture.

“Oh,” Allison says and she grins a little as she grabs Malia’s hand.

“What? What?” Malia says, confused. She fist-bumps Stiles quickly before she’s dragged away, saying, “No seriously. What’s that all about?”

Kira turns to Stiles with a tentative smile. “You okay?”

Stiles shrugs. “Fine. Just have a lot on my mind, I guess.”

Kira nods. “Well, I had fun,” she says, looking a little nervous and hopeful.

“Me too,” Stiles agrees with a genuine smile. “Except with the baseball thing and you making me share my fries.”

Kira laughs and pushes him lightly.

Stiles grins a little, pleased.

“Thanks for that by the way,” Kira says as she shuffles closer. “You really — were great and stuff. Shielding me, I mean. From the balls. Flying everywhere. And wow, I just have no grasp on proper adjectives and interjections.” She hits her palm lightly against her forehead. “I’m trying to be appreciative, or rather, express my appreciation for the way you used your body as a human shield.”

“Grammar’s overrated anyway,” Stiles scoffs and waves it off. “Plus, I couldn’t just stand by and let you get pelted with softballs. Even if my bat is still stuck to that fence — though they did promise to mail it to me once they could properly extract it.”

Kira chuckles in embarrassed before she quickly leans forward and kisses him on the right cheek. “I feel bad about that too. Thanks again. I — uh, I’ll see you later,” she says softly with a slight blush.

Stiles feels an answering redness in his own cheeks. He stammers, “Uh, yeah. I — yeah, we — you live next door so I kinda think, you know — we’re bound to run into each other, um.”

Kira grins as she bites her bottom lip, amused. “Text me,” she says before she quickly wanders off.

Stiles touches his fingers to his cheeks dazedly. “Yeah,” he murmurs to himself.

That was — was — he doesn’t know what that was.

Girls are seriously confusing.
The street lamps are turning on by the time Stiles gets home. He’d taken his time so that he could untangle his mind from a web of complicated thoughts. He’s somewhat surprised to see Derek sitting at the top of the porch steps with his dog, Jordan, sprawled over his lap as he rubs his belly.

“Hey,” Stiles says as he dumps his bike on the lawn and starts up the steps. “So this is unexpected.”

Derek shrugs as he pats Jordan’s side with affection. “Visiting hours are done at the hospital, so Paige’s parents asked me to come back another day. Didn’t feel like going home yet, though. They’d only hound me with questions,” he supposes. Then he lifts his brows. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Sure, I guess. I mean, not sure I do mind, but sure it’s cool with me. Well, if it’s cool with your mom too, that is,” Stiles says as he hikes up the sleeves of his shirt to his elbows.

“Mom knows I’m here,” Derek explains and scratches Jordan behind his ear.

“Oh, well.” Stiles rubs the back of his head as he looks down at Jordan, who wags his tail happily when he notices he’s garnered the teen’s attention. “Explains that weird feeling I had about needing to come home.”

Derek looks curious at that, and a little something else that Stiles can’t place.

Stiles coughs and shifts under the attention. "Uh. Can I ask why Jordan’s here?"

“Dunno,” Derek says with a furrowed brow. “He was just — waiting.”

“Waiting? Like here? On my porch?”

Derek nods. “Guess he knew I’d come here. He gets anxious sometimes when I’m not — when I’m unhappy,” he carefully explains.

Stiles is intrigued. He thinks back to something Talia said a while ago. “About the brother-cousin thing. You know, before, when I thought that it was just clever word play or something — that you were being all metaphorical and stuff, I didn’t stop to think that maybe you were being literal.”

Derek cocks his head as he confirms what he can of Stiles’s ramblings by saying, “We descended from the same subspecies, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I knew it,” Stiles mutters and ignores Derek’s snort of amusement. “So you’re literal brother-cousins.”

Derek nods slowly like he’s afraid Stiles either doesn’t understand or doesn’t believe him.

Stiles is intrigued. He thinks back to something Talia said a while ago. “About the brother-cousin thing. You know, before, when I thought that it was just clever word play or something — that you were being all metaphorical and stuff, I didn’t stop to think that maybe you were being literal.”

Derek nods slowly like he’s afraid Stiles either doesn’t understand or doesn’t believe him.

“Whoa,” Stiles says as he takes that in. “Can you do something special?”

Derek lifts a brow in question.

“Like, you know — do you share some kind of a psychic link? Is he like your familiar or something? You know I’ve read things about animism in the anthropology of religion where souls exist not only in Humans but in other animals, plants, rocks, mountains or rivers, or other entities of nature, you know, like thunder, wind, and shadows. I’ve always thought — always felt like maybe — I mean, just between you and I, and please keep this between us — but I’ve always agreed with that concept since it feels like everything around us is alive. Well not alive in a sense that most people understand. But you’re a Werewolf and so you must sense the, uh, the general vibes of nature. Because, I mean, who are we to say what does and doesn’t have soul or have some sort of sentient —” He flails his hands around as he scrambles for the right word. “— tangibility, and of course, arguably one might
say that there’s no way of really being sure unless you could see or provide unsubstantiated proof. But that’s ridiculous because not all things can be seen as much as experienced. I mean when it comes down it, the general world view should be that there’s a roughly equal footing between all agents of species and —"

“Stiles,” Derek calmly interrupts, amused. “You might want to consider breathing.”

Stiles inhales deeply as his cheeks grow red and he rubs the back of his neck sheepishly. “Sorry. That got away from me.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” Derek assures. “I just didn’t want you to pass out.”

Jordan leaps up and sniffs around Stiles’s feet before he licks at the back of his right hand before sprinting off to the side of the house.

“I completely forgot what point I was trying to make,” Stiles admits quietly. He tries to grasp for it but it’s beyond him now, so he sighs. He says, “How’s Paige? I know it’s only been a few hours, but um, well.”

“Fine,” Derek replies shortly, and it’s obvious this isn’t something he’s comfortable with talking about yet.

Stiles lets it alone and makes his way up the rest of the steps to sit beside him as the afternoon air sings around them. "So, I was a better alternative to your family, huh? What is the world coming to?"

he jokes.

Derek rolls his eyes. "Stiles, you're not the worst company. I'm certainly not here because I'm desperate."

"Trying to get on my good side?"

Derek smirks, "Depends. Is it working?"

Stiles smiles as he stands but he doesn't reply. He walks to his door as the other teen follows. He unlocks it and lets Derek slide through before he follows and closes the door behind him. He makes a gesture to the living room and says, “You can turn on the TV or something.”

Derek moves to scan the short bookcase filled with movies and videogames.

Stiles, meanwhile, grabs a mixing bowl from out of the cabinets so he can dump what’s left of the Lucky Charms and the Rice Krispies in it. He mixes it together and pours half of the milk over it before dropping a large wooden spoon in. He takes it over to the living room in time to see Derek setting up his Wii and putting on New Super Mario Bros.

Derek plops down beside him, close enough that their shoulders are touching (even though the couch is pretty wide), and says, “I’ve never played.”

Stiles snorts around a big spoonful of cereal. “Not surprising,” he says between bites. “It’s got no basketball in it so I don’t see why you would.”

Derek makes a face at him. “You shouldn’t talk with your mouth full.”

“My house, my rules,” Stiles argues and shoves another spoonful of cereal in his mouth. His cheeks puff out as he accepts one of the remotes so he can play too.
Derek eyes his bowl of cereal dubiously. “What kind of mix is that?”

“The good kind, now shut up and pay attention because I’m really going to take advantage of the fact that you’ve never played,” Stiles warns as he casts himself as Mario while Derek chooses Luigi. He uses the time that the game plays through the introduction to jam more spoonfuls of cereal in his mouth.

Derek snorts as he tracks his movements. “You’re gonna choke if you keep being greedy like that.”

Stiles just mock him childishly as he selects the first level of the first world. He lets his mixing bowl of cereal rest between his thighs as he picks up Derek’s character and throws him at an approaching brown mushroom with a smirk.

Derek bristles when Luigi dies. “Stiles,” he growls.

Stiles just laughs and jumps Mario around to get a flying power.

“What do I do?” Derek says, glaring at the screen.

“Shake your controller so I can pop you out of the bubble,” Stiles explains but because he’s a dick, he makes sure to avoid popping Luigi from his bubble when he reappears.

“Pop me,” Derek growls when he notices and he shakes his controller like he might break it.


Derek grumbles but he seems relieved that his character has been set free from his soapy prison. “Now what?” he asks.

“Follow me and do everything I do,” Stiles says, taking a second to cram some more cereal in his mouth. “And don’t die or I swear I’ll make you wait until the end before I pop you again.”

“That wasn’t my fault,” Derek protests as he does his best to keep up with the other teen. “You murdered me.”

“Nah. I’d never betray my bro like that,” Stiles swears, but he picks up Luigi again and throws him down a cliff. “Whoops.”

Derek slowly turns his head to glare angrily at him.

Stiles losses it and he just laughs maniacally as he gets Mario to do all sorts of acrobatic flips until he reaches the goal pole at the end. “Hey, you wanted to play,” he points out.

“I’m not playing. I’m dying,” Derek complains and disappears for a moment. He comes back with Jordan a second later.

“Did you lock the door?” Stiles asks and shoves another spoonful of cereal in his mouth.

“Yes,” Derek says lowly and picks up his remote again so he can sit back down beside him.

Stiles fidgets because Derek feels really warm against his side, and it’s kind of distracting. “Do you want to keep playing?”

“Not if you’re going to keep throwing me at and off of things.”
Stiles snickers. He *had* planned on doing that but he decides to be lenient. “Okay, I swear I won’t sacrifice you to the pagan gods anymore for the sake of my victories,” he vows.

Derek huffs and his lips curl a little as he presses their legs together. “You’re a dweeb.”

“You’re a dweeb,” Stiles returns, flushing at the contact, and finishes up his cereal before he sets the empty bowl on the coffee table. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

Derek is not exactly a fast learner, but he gets the hang of it by the time they reach World 4.

By then they’re unstoppable as a duo, and they make it all the way to World 8 on the last level.

Derek gets pretty smug at the fact that he uses Stiles’s trust against him for payback because while they’re skipping through one of the lava worlds, Derek picks him up, feigning like he’s trying to help, and chucks him into the lava.


Derek snickers quietly as he continues on his merry way through the level, making sure to avoid popping Mario from his bubble, no matter how hard Stiles shakes his controller.

“You — you —” Stiles is seething at this point. “I bet you were planning this all along, weren’t you? What is this, the *Count of Monte Cristo*? No wait — the *Count of Monte Mario*. Or would it be Luigi? Whatever, that’s beside the point! I can’t believe you betrayed me like that! Did our ride on that wooden plank through that toxic purple liquid in World 5 level 4 mean nothing to you? We’re supposed to be brothers in arms!”

Derek just keeps on snickering and playing, even as Stiles whacks him with one of the throw pillows.

Stiles lets up on him and stomps off into the kitchen to make some dinner. He makes some pan-fried chicken breasts with spicy plum and habaneros salsa, and some brown rice. Although, he really shouldn’t make enough for Derek because the damn traitor doesn’t deserve it, but he’s such a good person that he does.

The smell of the food seems to reach Derek and he comes nosing around just as Stiles is turning on the fan above the stove. He says, “What’s that?”


Derek leans against the counter beside the stove with a wolfish grin and says, “You know you can’t lie to a Werewolf, right?”

Stiles sighs, because yeah, he does. “It was worth a try.”

Derek just hums and watches him work. He even tries to dip his fingers into the pan and Stiles has to smack his hands away with his plastic spatula.

“If you could *just* — stop, it’s ready, it’s ready!” Stiles laughs, shoving Derek away as the other teen frowns impatiently. "Get some plates, traitor.”

Derek rolls his eyes long-sufferingly but he peeks through the cabinets until he finds the right one for the dishes and the drawer for the silverware.

Jordan sits at the bottom of the steps on his hind legs as he watches them curiously, tail wagging
Stiles turns off all the burners on the stove before he moves to go through the cabinets under the sink. He pulls out a dual dog bowl and fills one side with water and the other side with dry dog food before he sets it before Jordan. The dog comes over happily and Stiles scratches the back of his ears as he eats, smiling when Jordan licks his cheek quickly before eating.

Derek gives him a look that he can’t quite place.

“What?” Stiles mumbles self-consciously, wiping his cheek dry as he moves to make their plates.

“Why do you have that if you don’t have a dog?” Derek asks as he sits down on the opposite side of the table so he can watch Stiles carefully.

Stiles tries to ignore the way his gaze burns holes into his back before he answers, “I used to have — well, my mom had a little toy looking dog. Her name was Duchess and she was a terrible little nightmare but mom loved her like she farted rainbows and sunshine. Which she didn’t, by the way. I mean, let me tell you, for such a tiny dog, she sure could rip out some toxic ones.”

Derek snorts and says, “What kind of dog was she?”

“Bichon. But dad and I used to think that maybe she had some demon blood too. But my mom could talk to her for hours, you know, like she understood and was talking back,” Stiles replies and sets his plate before him before sitting down with his own. “Anyway, I — sometimes I — I don’t know. This is going to sound ridiculous but —” He struggles with the words as he pokes at his chicken. “She ran away two weeks after my mom died, and I used to think maybe she’ll, you know, come back or something. It’s stupid, I know, and she could be dead or something. I was young when my mom passed and I needed to cling to something so — but I’m older now and a little more sensible, I think. Still, I can’t stop myself from believing — it’s just that I figure stranger things have happened. And if the dog came back…”

Derek watches him for a long minute before he says, “That’s not stupid.”

“It is,” Stiles maintains with red cheeks. “It’s dumb and childish.”

“No, it’s not,” Derek insists. “Sometimes — and he’s going to kill me for telling you this — but sometimes during Christmas, my Uncle Peter will hang up his little brother’s stocking and mom says it’s because Henry always loved getting candy canes, so Peter will be hanging all our stocking on the fireplace, even Henry’s before he remembers that…” He let’s the words trail off and he gets a little sad for his uncle for a solid minute. He shakes his head and continues, “Mom says it’s a normal part of grieving. She says sometimes you never really stop thinking that they’re there. So, I don’t think it’s stupid.”

Stiles props his chin in his hand as he looks across the table at Derek. “Did you ever meet — I mean, do you know —” He stops because not sure how to phrase the question. “Your family members who…”

Derek seems to understand what he’s trying to say and he shakes his head sadly. “They died before I was born. We’ve got pictures and stories, but — it’s hardly the same, I think,” he supposes. “Peter doesn’t like to talk about it much. I think the wound is still as fresh as the day it happened.”

“I can understand that,” Stiles says, and he can. He doesn’t talk about his mother because he doesn’t really know how to do it without longing for her with an aching sadness.

Derek rubs the knuckle of his thumb across his bottom lip before he says, “I think it’s different for
Humans. Losing family — losing pack is...” He shakes his head again. “It’s like losing a part of yourself. Like losing an important limb.”

Stiles considers that for what it is and he can’t help but to feel as though he already knows the sensation. Losing his mother had been like losing a vital limb. He doesn’t say this to Derek though. He doesn’t want to think about this anymore. He says, “We should eat before the food gets cold.”

Derek nods and does so without arguing.

It’s basically quiet outside of the sound of their forks and knives hitting the plates.

Then Derek says, “This is really good. I didn't know you could cook.”

Stiles smiles a little and he can’t help it. He says, “It’s just chemistry and stuff.”

Derek tosses him a flat look before he rises to make himself another plate.

Stiles clears his plate and rinses it off before dropping it in the dishwasher. His phone buzzes in his pocket and when he pulls it out to look at the screen, he’s got a text from Peter that reads:

**Turn on CNN :))**

Stiles frowns and makes his way to the living room to find the remote. He changes the source of the TV until he’s on the cable input. He then punches in the channel number for CNN and sits down on the middle of the big couch.

It’s Laura, and she’s standing on a soapbox in front of the Dirksen Federal Building, which is a tall, shiny skyscraper with dark windows. She has a massive entourage of protestors standing before her as she holds up a wireless microphone.

“Derek,” Stiles says, flagging the other teen’s attention. "Derek."

Derek wanders over with his plate and freezes when he sees his older sister. “What is she doing?” he asks lowly.

Stiles shakes his head wordlessly, not that Derek can see, but he has no clue as well.

Laura uses timing to advantage because she waits a long while before she even utters a word. Finally, when a hush falls over the crowd, she says, “I want to start off by saying thank you to the producers of CNN for sending a crew of cameramen in and to the Patrol Captain of the National Guard, Evgeni Davydov, for permitting their filming of this event.” She nods to the crowd before she continues, lifting the mic a little higher as she stands a little straighter. The curious thing is that she keeps her gaze low to the notecards in her right hand, not once looking up. “My name is Laura Hale. I’m seventeen years old, soon to be eighteen, and I’m from Beacon Hills, California. When I was younger, I would love chasing fireflies with my cousins through the forests, and often, without even thinking about it, I would slap my hands together and crush some of them between my palms. I would do this until my father happened upon me doing this one day. He asked me why I was doing it and I simply told him I did it because I was afraid. I was scared of the fireflies, and instead of trying to understand how they worked, I wanted to hurt them. I wanted to kill them. I wanted to do this because then I could be sure they would never have a chance to do the same to me.

“Well, as you can imagine, my father was quite perplexed by my actions. As far as he knew, I had nothing to be afraid of. But it was because one of my meaner, older cousins once told me that if I weren’t careful, the fireflies would all swarm me and carry me away from my family forever. See at that moment, I was taught to be afraid. I wasn’t born with the fear of fireflies. I was taught it. So
there I’d go, crushing these poor, innocent, harmless fireflies between my hands because of a lack of understanding on my part. You see, to me, they were monsters, and it was my duty to protect myself from the threat that they posed.” Laura pauses and lets her words resonate amongst the crowd. Then she continues, “When my father found me that day, he didn’t scold me. He didn’t laugh. He said something to me that to this very day I still think about. He said, ‘Laura. Prejudice of any kind means that you no longer see anything as how it truly is, but merely the way you perceive it to be. To act in fear or hate of something not understood is the moment when you create an ill-advised concept in your mind. And that concept, itself, is already a form of violence.’ What that’s taught me is that when we act without considering the weight and the consequence of our actions, we are ignoring the good in individuality and killing the compassion that would have us stave our hand from destruction. We need more compromise. We need more understanding. And there’s so much in me that wants to really reach out and tell you proudly of who and what I am. But the world isn’t ready for that. It’s not. You want to know how I know?

“A little girl died this week. A little girl was killed. She was shot, pointblank, in front of her mother. She was executed. Call it what you will, but she was unlawfully executed. A mother had to watch an officer of the law, a member of civil duty, a person who has taken vows, who has sworn to protect and serve, shoot her little girl. She watched him take her child’s life, and then he took hers.” Laura’s voice gets a little shaky and her hands give a slight tremor. “There’s something in the Human psyche, I think, that condones the bloodshed of the innocent as a necessary evil, it’s a privilege, a sense of entitlement, that says that it’s acceptable to resolve conflicts with this kind brutality. But it’s the arrogance of all creatures that would have us place certain truths in the highest esteem because it may be all we know and nothing else, while on the other hand, it has become acceptable to ignore the voices of those that would show us that there is more to those truths than what is generally perceived. They would say that the world is unjust still. They would say that the media would have you believe we are at peace when we couldn’t be any more at odds. They would say that their petitions don’t fit the agenda of those who hold power of state and nation. They would say that a little girl was killed and that we are supposed to leave that kind of violence unchecked.

“We can’t blind ourselves to this situation. We can’t blind ourselves to each other’s pain. We have to stop recycling these negative cultures, these de facto behaviors. We have to be the generation that takes a stand and says no more. This planet belongs not to just one sentient being, but to all of us. This air that we’re breathing right now, it came from the trees, and not once do these trees discriminate or argue over to whom the air they provide rightfully belongs to or who is more deserving.” Laura gives another meaningful pause. “We have to own up to the mistakes we make. We’ve all made them. Recently I betrayed the trust of a dear friend of mine, and the look of hurt that I put on their face is something I will have to live with. I put my needs before theirs in a situation that didn’t call for that kind of behavior. I used what I knew of them as a manipulation. That wasn’t right, and I acknowledge the error of my ways. I hope that I can get forgiveness for what I’ve done. I think we should recognize that American culture teaches us that we must make demands, not compromises. That we must think of what we can do on our own and not together. I’ve learned from hurting someone I care about that there is something ugly in all of us that we have to force to the surface in order to confront and destroy in a manner befitting it’s nature.

“We have to check our privilege by asking ourselves questions we would not normally ask. Things like: Is this right? Is this fair? If it were me? If it was my life? If it were my child? If it were my parent? If it were my culture?” Laura takes a moment to swallow. “We have to take responsibility for making change, and though we may not be directly liable for these institutions of violence, it’s still our legacy to dismantle. It’s not about guilt. It’s about stopping the replication of ignorance — of preemptive warring — of generating the kind of fear that threatens to tear our world apart. And yes, I know what you’re thinking. So what’s her point? What is she getting to with all this? I’ll tell you. This is my petition to you. This is my call to action. I want you to imagine that you’re not you. I want
you to imagine that you’re three years old. I want you to imagine that the world is so much bigger 
than you. So much bigger than you can control.” She waits a moment before she continues, “Now I 
want you to imagine being in pain, no control of your actions, but you’re very afraid and confused. 
Your mother is desperately trying to calm you down. She’s trying to find out what’s making you 
behave this way because she knows you would never act like this. You’re a sweet little girl who loves 
playing with Legos and eating apple pancakes and sometimes playing dress up in your mother’s 
clothes. But this person right now? This isn’t you. This is something else. Your mother is looking at 
you with wide and fearful eyes because she knows too. You want to say something but your tongue is 
like cement in your mouth. You can’t tell her that you don’t feel right. Something is making you lash 
out, and you don’t mean to but you start losing control of yourself. An officer walks up to assess the 
situation and you bite him when all you want to do is say your sorry, your so sorry, you don’t mean 
to but something is wrong. He doesn’t understand because he doesn’t hear these words. He acts 
without thinking. He points at gun at your head as your mother screams in the background because 
his fear is louder than your pain.

“ I’m not going to go any further, because we all understand how this story ends. But I had to let you 
see it for yourself. I had to show you through her eyes.” Laura has tears spilling down her cheeks but 
her eyes are glued to her trembling notecards. “Social progress is not always instantaneous, and 
sometimes it requires sacrifice and struggle. Albert Einstein once said, ‘Peace cannot be kept by 
force; it can only be achieved by understanding.’ So I’m urging all of you not to fight fire with fire. 
But to present to each other the different ways in which to suffocate that fire so that we can 
minimalize the destruction that fire can fashion when left unchecked. I hope you will consider 
everything I’ve said. That’s all I have to say. Thank you.”

Stiles finds himself clapping along with the hordes of people on the TV in between drying his wet 
cheeks. When he glances over to Derek, he sees nothing but pride and a tiny smile before he springs 
ap, typing furiously on his phone before he presses it to his ear.

Stiles watches him wander out the front door to pace the length of the porch. He guesses that Derek 
must be talking to Laura or Peter under a darkening sky, rumbling with the threat of rain that will 
never come. He stands with a sigh and makes his way into the kitchen to start cleaning up as Jordan 
noses his way around his feet before sitting vigilantly at his side like a furry guard.

He puts the last of the food in some Tupperware before shoving it in the refrigerator. He then turns 
on the dishwasher before he moves to straighten the living room, switching everything off as Jordan 
trails his every move. He turns off the lights but turns on the porch light as a courtesy to Derek before 
he makes his way up the steps and into his room.

Jordan sniffs around his floor for a bit before he wanders off in search of Derek when he’s sure Stiles 
has no plans to go anywhere else.

Stiles pushes his bulletin/whiteboard into his walk-in closet so he won’t be tempted to look at it. He’s 
too exhausted to really even contemplate his usual questions anyway. He changes into some 
sleepwear, letting his street clothes land where they may before he opens his window to let the cool 
night air in. Then he grabs the charger for his phone so he can plug it into the socket behind his 
nightstand before he hooks it up to his phone.

He slides into bed and arranges himself comfortably, staring at the bright red colors of the digital 
clock on his nightstand as crickets sound off noisily outside his window. He's getting tired enough 
that it feels like he's floating back and forth in his exhaustion.

Derek eventually finds his way into his room and he flicks on the light before he rolls his eyes. “This 
shouldn’t surprise me. This really shouldn’t. Why can’t you ever keep your room clean?”
“Blame Kate. It was just fine before she accosted my things,” Stiles mumbles tiredly. "Threw everything just about everywhere to dress me up."

Derek frowns and says, “She’s been in your room?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you give her permission?”

“Hm?” Stiles mumbles as he shifts.

Derek exhales slowly. "Did you give her permission?" and there's a weight to his words and tone of voice that Stiles's foggy brain can't pick up on.

“Kinda?” Stiles mumbles between yawing. "I mean, extenuating circumstances and all."

Derek makes a soft displeased noise and Stiles doesn't really get why but he’s too tired to ask. “Her perfume is loud,” he says.

"I don't smell anything."

“Yeah, well it's everywhere and I can smell — it’s like she’s been rolling around in your clothes.”

Stiles grumbles dazedly as he wrinkles his nose at the imagery that gives him and he hugs his pillow close. “She picked out that outfit I was wearing, remember? She had to like, I don’t know, touch everything to sort through and make heads or tails."

"Had to," Derek scoffs. "Like she can't see without touching."

Stiles ignores him and continues, “She mostly just complained very openly about my tastes in clothes before offering to take me shopping, which, no thanks. Speaking of — where are my glasses?”

Derek furrows his brow and distractedly replies, “My pocket.” Then he pulls them out and sets them on Stiles’s dresser before he goes around the room for a moment, touching his hand to different objects like he’s trying to look for something or leave an impression.

Stiles knows he should be paying attention to the other teen's behavior (there's this hazy thought of 'scenting' that glazes over his mind) but he’s so sleepy that he just chalks it up to typical Hale behavior.

Derek touches his furniture, his bed, his walls, even the windowsill. Then he carefully picks up Stiles’s clothes one by one and folds them before setting them neatly in piles.

“Are you — are you cataloguing my clothes?"

"There's nothing wrong with being organized," Derek argues, and he sounds so hilariously offended. "You sound like Cora."

"I like Cora."

Derek scoffs.

"Do you have like control issues?" Stiles asks as he watches the other teen. "This feels like a control thing. You're even doing it by color."

Derek doesn’t reply, too focused on his task. He puts the folded clothes away in Stiles’s drawers.
before he sets to work on putting any leftover clothes on to hangers and then hanging them in Stiles’s walk-in closet.

Stiles feels his eyelids dip with the heavy pull of sleep just as Derek starts in on organizing all the other miscellaneous items set in random places. He slaps his pillow over his face and mumbles, “Neat freak.”

“Slob,” Derek retorts, sounding vaguely annoyed and amused.

Stiles snorts from under his pillow and shifts his legs until he’s comfortable. He hums sleepily when Jordan pads up to the bed before hopping on and curling up against his back.

He falls asleep to the sensation of Jordan’s tail thwacking against his leg.

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Sunday morning, and it is morning, even though it’s still pretty dark and the sun is only begin to paint a fiery orange across the horizon. Stiles internal clock lets him know its early morning when he wakes up with the taste of watermelon on his tongue. Before he can even rationalize it, he begins to whistle softly. Not that he means to. It just happens that way. He’s blinking tiredly up at his ceiling as his mouth shapes into a soft ‘o’ and releases a tune he doesn’t even recognize.

Jordan sits up and looks down at him with his head cocked and his flat tongue lolling out the side of his mouth before he hops down off of the bed. Then he goes padding out of the room.

Stiles is still whistling, like he can’t make himself stop, and the taste of watermelon is growing strong, almost overwhelming in a way on his tongue. It feels like he might choke on it.

Derek, who’s lying facedown on the other side of the bed, makes an annoyed sound and gropes around for a pillow with a furrowed brow before he slaps one over Stiles’s face. “Stiles,” he complains, voice still hoarse from sleep. “Too early.”

Stiles yanks off the pillow with an exasperated huff but it does the job of getting him to stop whistling. “Hey, it’s not my — I’m not doing it on purpose,” he protests and licks his dry lips. He can still faintly taste watermelon.

"Who wakes up whistling?" Derek mumbles as he fidgets under the covers. His foot accidentally bumps into Stiles's but he makes no move to slide his foot away.

Stiles idly wonders when Derek's become so comfortable about the lack of boundaries between them. He doesn't dwell on it long because he uses Derek's proximity to kick him. "No one told you to spend the night," he mutters and kicks him again.

"Quit."

"Kay." Stiles kicks him again. "Last one, I promise."

"Better be."

Stiles kicks him again.

Derek grumbles irritably, reaching out to pinch Stiles's thigh, huffing with triumphant when Stiles squawks indignantly and jerks away.

"Rude," Stiles complains and slaps a pillow on Derek's face.
Derek grunts before he cuddles the pillow close before turning his head away so he can go back to sleep.

Stiles sticks his tongue out at the back of Derek's head before he slides out of bed, grabbing his phone on his way out. He creeps out down the steps to the backdoor and is a little amused when Jordan sprints up to him, wagging his tail eagerly as he waits for Stiles to open the door completely. He does and watches Jordan pad down the steps, sticking his nose in the ground as he sniffs around the trampoline before wandering over to some bushes so he can pee on them.

Stiles walks with bare feet down the cold wooden steps and across the moist grass to climb onto his trampoline. He lies on his back and spreads out like a starfish as he stares up into the partially darkened sky.

It’s quiet, and a little foggy. It smells heavily of dew and the trampoline feels a little moist against his back but he doesn’t shiver because he’s a bit warm from lying in bed with two overheated beings.

Stiles tucks his left hand behind his head and blinks up at the screen of his phone as he unlocks it so he can scroll through the twitter feed for the Chicago tag, which is still trending. A lot of people are sharing their thoughts on Laura’s moving speech (give or take those few who make some sexist and unnecessarily ignorant remarks) but he just ignores those. He scans the pictures people have taken of her, a few of them have her captured with Peter, but what Stiles finds interesting is the fact that Laura and Peter always make sure their gazes are low, as if they know they’re being photographed.

He wonders if there’s a specific reason why they would.

Jordan hops onto the trampoline and lies down in the space above Stiles’s head, huffing as his tail slaps at the surface of the trampoline.

Stiles returns to the top of the feed and refreshes, blinking in surprise when a new trending tag called #majorityrules pops up. He follows the tag and quickly understands that there’s been a judgment concerning the officer who shot the mother and child (whose name still hasn’t been revealed at the behest of their family) and it says he’s been taken into custody and set to stand trial at the Supreme Court. It’s also been decided that the whole police force will be brought under investigation by the FBI. It feels as much as a victory as it seems.

Laura must be thrilled.

Stiles switches his phone off and lets it sleep as he goes back to staring up at the powdery blue sky. He thinks about what he wants to do. He wants to talk to Deaton because he has questions that need answering. He wants to talk to Laura because he doesn’t like being at odds with her. There’s more, but sometimes he can’t think about it all, and he has a tendency to forget certain things. He just knows those two are the most important at the moment.

Jordan suddenly hops up, alert.

Stiles glances up at him and watches curiously as Jordan cocks his head, ears twitching forward and then back as he gives a questioning whine before he leaps down from the trampoline to sprint up the side of the house. Stiles rises and holds himself up by his elbows with a frown as he tries to listen. He hears soft footsteps.

Isaac appears a second later with Jordan trailing behind him. He stops at the edge of the trampoline with his hands hanging limply at his side.
Jordan sniffs at his right hand with a curious sound, pressing his wet nose close before he wanders to the porch steps to sit on his hind legs at the door, watching them like he’s trying to make heads or tails of the situation.

Stiles glances away from the Tibetan Mastiff and to Isaac, surprised to see him here so early.

Isaac fidgets for a moment, looking uncomfortably uncertain before he climbs onto the trampoline with Stiles, urging the other teen to scoot over and make room before he lies back and folds his hands over his stomach. He stares up at the sky listlessly, and avoids Stiles’s searching gaze.

Stiles isn’t sure what his brother is thinking but he just sighs and lies back as well, and says nothing when Isaac scoots closer until their shoulders are touching.

They stare up at the brightening sky wordlessly, lost to their own thoughts as the birds awaken nosily in the trees.

Isaac quietly asks, “Who’s dog is that?”

“Derek’s,” Stiles replies simply. “He spent the night.”

Isaac says nothing to that. Then he clears his throat and asks, “Are you mad at me?”

Stiles frowns and pushes up until he’s got his elbows under him, holding him up before he stares incredulously down at the curly haired blond. “Now what did I do to make you think that? I was sure — I thought you were mad at me, if anything.”

Isaac shakes his head so fast that Stiles is afraid his head will pop right off. “No,” he says. “That’s not — you kept whistling and I thought —” He pauses and he chews on his bottom lip before he lowers his gaze.

Stiles waits for him to continue and when he doesn’t, he says, “Isaac, you have to tell me what you’re thinking because I’m confused. I got that you weren’t fond of my whistling, and I’d been meaning to ask about that but, well. I promise I wasn’t doing it on purpose. Sometimes I do things without really thinking about it or really understanding why.” He sighs and runs a hand against his hair.

“I know. You’re a Virtue,” Isaac says softly.

Isaac says, “I heard you talking about it that day we were at the antique shop and I waited outside. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop but —” He stops and gives a meek shrug.

“Do you know — do you understand what that means?” Stiles asks, gauging Isaac’s expression very carefully but Isaac just shakes his head. Stiles falls onto his back with a tired sigh and a short laugh. “Yeah, me neither.”

A steady silence passes between them as they blink up at the sky.

“I heard it the night they tried to burn us alive,” Isaac says suddenly, breaking the silence. “The whistling.”

Stiles cringes and his insides feel like their twisting the wrong way. He sits up and looks down at Isaac with horror, but Isaac is just staring up at the sky with glazed blue eyes.
“Never did see their faces, but I could tell there was more than one,” Isaac continues quietly. “I remember the smell of smoke and gasoline and the — the whistling. Even when I was burning and screaming — it was that whistling. It was all I could —”

“I’m sorry,” Stiles says shakily. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know why — I didn’t mean to make you think or have to — you don’t have to explain anything to me. I’m sorry. Isaac —”

Isaac just presses his fingers to Stiles’s mouth before he pulls the older teen close and hugs him. “I know. It’s just a misunderstanding, I think,” he mumbles into Stiles shoulder. “I know you’d never do anything to hurt me. That’s why I — you don’t have to worry about that.”

Stiles just nods frantically as he tightens his hold.

“But maybe if you could, you know, stop whistling like that,” Isaac adds lightly. “That’d be great too.”

Stiles laughs wetly and nods again. “I’ll try. If I slip up, don’t take it personal. I’m still trying to figure this whole Virtue thing out.”

Isaac pulls away with a tentative smile before he turns to look towards the house with a frown. It looks like he's listening for something. His brow furrows slightly and he says, “Someone’s pulling up into the driveway.” Then he clamors off the trampoline to investigate just as Jordan springs down the steps to follow out of curiosity as well.

Stiles is next to climb off the trampoline and wanders up the side of the house to see Scott and Melissa exiting her car with some groceries.

Melissa says, “Good morning, boys. Your dad mentioned you’d be at the house, so I thought I’d stop by and treat you all to some breakfast before I had to head off to work.”

“Yeah,” Stiles says, blinking. “Yeah, sure. Let me take that.” He grabs the bag from her arms before he heads up the front porch steps, pausing at the door when he remembers it’s locked.

“I got it,” Isaac says as he wanders around the side of the house to enter from the back. He opens the door and lets them all through (even Jordan) before he locks the door again.

Melissa walks over to the kitchen and takes her jacket off, revealing her cherry pink scrubs, before she stoops low so she can give Jordan a rub down. “Cute dog,” she comments. “Yours?”

“No, uh, he’s — he belongs to a friend of mine,” Stiles explains. “He’s still upstairs sleeping probably. Derek Hale? Maybe you met him.”

“Ah, yes. The Hales,” Melissa says in an understanding tone before she straightens, and Stiles is reminded that Scott and Jackson once informed her of all the supernatural happenings of Beacon Hills. She seems to be taking it well considering things. “Well, lucky for me, I brought enough to feed a whole family.”

Stiles accepts a quick hug from a smiling Scott before his best friend follows after Isaac dotingly, as the blond preteen marches up the steps and to his room. He snorts and shakes his head before he looks over to Melissa, who’s also shaking her head in fond exasperation at her son. He says, “Can I help with anything?”

“Why yes you can, thank you,” Melissa remarks and indicates to some long green-looking bananas. “Peel the plantains for me, sweetheart. Then cut them into eight pieces.”
Stiles nods and grabs the cutting board before bringing it back to the table with him, along with the garbage bin (which he removes the swinging top from). He sits down and grabs the bag of plantains and starts peeling all of them one by one, dropping the peelings into the garbage bin sitting at his waist.

Melissa searches through the cabinets for some pots and pans before she sets them on the stove, filling one of them with water and turning the burner on a medium-high flame.

Stiles says, “What are you making, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Melissa grabs the extra cutting board and a knife so she can sit at the table across from Stiles. She starts dicing some purple onions as she replies, “Los Tres Golpes.” Then she translates, “The Three Hits. It’s a common Dominican delicacy. I don’t make it often. Just when I’m feeling homesick or for special occasions. Today it’s just as a treat to myself. It’s my birthday.”

“Oh, happy birthday,” Stiles says immediately.

Melissa smiles kindly, and she looks really pretty with the way she does it. “Thank you. I’m trying not to feel ancient,” she admits jokingly.

“You certainly don’t look it,” Stiles assures. “I’m sure you turn heads wherever you go.” Then he mumbles, “You certainly turn my dad’s head whenever you’re around.”

Melissa laughs suddenly with a light flush and Stiles, with a flush of his own, realizes she must have heard him.

“I, uh,” Stiles stammers. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to imply that — I didn’t mean anything bad by it or —”

“Stiles, it’s okay,” Melissa assures gently. "Your father turns my head just the same too." Her dark eyes are reflecting her kind smile charmingly.

Stiles is struck by the thought that Scott definitely gets his eyes from his mother before he says, “Oh, cool. Uh. Good to know. Um. So what are your plans for today?”

“Work,” Melissa admits with a sigh as she goes back to chopping the onions. Her eyes get a little watery. “But it’s not so bad. I really enjoy what I do.”

Stiles begins slicing the plantains into eight parts. He says, “I think that’s really cool. That, you know, you’re doing something you enjoy. A lot of people have — it’s not the same for most, I’m told.”

“You are told correctly,” Melissa confirms. “Sometimes it's tough getting it right the first time. It took me a long time before I got here, though. I had Scott when I was very young, and most of the time I took all sorts of odd jobs to put myself through nursing school because Scott’s dad was too busy getting drunk off his ass to really —” She stops suddenly and closes her eyes with a grimace. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring up that.”

“It’s fine, I understand,” Stiles reassures, if only to wipe the look of embarrassment and shame from Melissa’s face. “So where are you originally from?” he asks, changing the subject.

Melissa gives him such a grateful look before she responds, “Puerto Plata. It’s a city in the Dominican Republic. I spent all my younger years there, until I turned fifteen, then my parents saw fit to move us to Jacksonville, Florida, which is where they continue to stay and have never really forgiven me for following Scott’s father to the other side of the country. But we see how well that
worked out. Anyway, a majority of my family still lives there, in the Dominican Republic, so around Christmas, Scott and I will travel with my parents for our annual reunions."

“That sounds really cool,” Stiles says because it does. He’s almost envious. “I’ve never been out of the country, well, I mean — there was that time when I was first born and then again when I was three, but I don’t really remember either time. My dad and my mom took me to visit my grandparents in Poland. But they passed when I was five so, you know.” He shrugs.

“Were they your father’s parents or your mother’s?” Melissa asks curiously as she stands to go in search of a bowl. When she finds one, she slides the diced onions into it so she can have some space to begin slicing the stick of salami into sizable pieces.

Stiles says, “My mom’s. My dad doesn’t really — he never knew his parents. He was moved from foster home to foster home in Canada."

"No me digas! He's Canadian!” Melissa laughs, more from surprise than anything else.

"Don’t tell him I told you, but yes. He tries really hard to hide the accent,” Stiles admits with a humored grin. "Anyway, I don’t know a lot about his childhood but that’s because my dad doesn’t really like to talk about it. But he always said the experience is what makes him such a great father. I don’t think he wants Isaac or I to go through what he went through."

“Ah,” Melissa says thoughtfully. “I see.” And she goes quiet as if she’s thinking on his words intently.

They work in succession and Melissa shares the recipe of the dish she’s making while he helps her, and she seems happy to have someone to share the experience with. She then goes on to explain that she can never get Scott interested in cooking and she doesn’t mind much because he somehow manages to burn everything he touches.

Melissa then goes on to share some of her favorite baby stories of Scott and smiles softly as Stiles cackles at the more embarrassing ones. For example, she tells him about when she first started to potty train Scott, and his dad made some stupid remark about how the toilet eats poop and poor Scott was so horrified by that concept that he’d poop everywhere else but the toilet.

“It was a long time before I could get him to stop shaking whenever I’d make him sit on the toilet,” Melissa goes on to explain with a hearty laugh while she fries the salami as Stiles mashes the (now boiled) plantains in the electric mixing bowl. “I had to promise to reward him with twinkies.”

Stiles laughs as he imagines it. He is so going to use this ammunition later.

It’s reaching into 9 am before they finish and start setting the table.

Stiles volunteers to go inform the others while Melissa starts making everyone’s plate. He marches up the steps and wanders over to Isaac’s room first. He finds Scott and Isaac sitting on the bottom edge of Isaac’s bed.

Scott’s got a goofy smile on his face and Stiles can practically see the big hearts in his eyes as Isaac sketches him.

Stiles clears his throat and says, “Breakfast is ready.”

Scott perks up at that and quickly makes his way out the room and past Stiles to get to the kitchen table.
Isaac takes a little more time before he stands, carefully closing his drawing pad and sitting it on the edge of the bed, placing his charcoal pencil on top.

Stiles says, “I didn’t know you drew.”

Isaac just shrugs and scratches the side of his nose. "Sometimes. When it suits me," he supposes.

"Oh yeah? What do you draw?" Stiles asks.

"Different things," Isaac mumbles as he picks at a loose thread on his jeans shyly.

Stiles snorts. "Like what?" he presses.

Isaac shrugs quietly before he eases past Stiles, out the room and down the steps.

Stiles eyes the drawing pad with interest before he turns and exits the doorway before he can let his curiosity get the better of him. He goes to his room and is surprised to see Derek sitting up with his back to headboard of the neatly made bed, fully dressed and texting away on his phone. He says, “How long have you been awake?”

“Since someone started dicing onions,” Derek says and wrinkles his nose as though he remembers the smell all too clearly.

“Oh,” Stiles says. “Did you sleep well?”

"I would've if someone hadn't woke me up at the crack of dawn with their whistling."

"Wow. That sucks. You should probably give that person some feedback."

Derek sends him a flat look.

Stiles pretends not to notice as he continues, "So, yeah, come eat. Food’s all done."

Derek nods and leans across the bed to make use of Stiles’s charger before he stands. He slides into his sneakers and laces them up before he follows Stiles out the door and down the stairs into the kitchen. He gives Melissa a courteous smile and a nod as he settles down beside Stiles across from Scott and Isaac.

“Hello, Derek. How are you?” Melissa asks as she sets a plate of food before him and Stiles.

“Fine, thank you,” Derek responds politely as he bumps elbows with Stiles when he begins to cut into his food with his silverware.

Melissa wraps up a plate for herself before she shrugs on her jacket and grabs her purse. “Unfortunately I have to head off. But enjoy,” she says as she walks up to Scott and drops a kiss to the crown of his head before ruffling his hair. She pauses with a thoughtful frown. “Sweetie, I think it’s a time for a haircut.”

Scott whines and squirms. “Mom. My hair is fine,” he insists with a mouthful of food.

Melissa responds in Spanish with a stern frown.

Scott pouts and answers in the same dialect.

Derek snorts like he can understand and Stiles wonders if he can.
Melissa glances at Derek curiously and says, “Hablas español?”

Derek responds with a charming amount of fluidity, “Entiendo un poco de Español. Puedo leer Español mejor que yo puedo hablar.”

Scott gawks at him and Stiles finds his eyebrows climbing his forehead as he turns an assessing gaze on the other teen.

Isaac goes on eating like he doesn’t care either way about what’s happening.

Melissa just looks impressed. “Sonido bueno. Mejor que mi hijo.”

Derek flushes and says, “Gracias. Hago lo que puedo.”

Scott looks a little offended and says, “Hey! Su no justo para usted para decir esto! No esté medio conmigo, mamá!”

Melissa just shushes him and keeps her focus on Derek. “How were you taught?”

Derek shifts a little restlessly, and Stiles realizes with amusement that he’s being shy. “Some private tutors. And — my uncle.”

“Well again, you sound very good,” Melissa praises before she looks at her watch and grimaces. “Okay, I really have to get out of here unless I want to risk being late.”

“You’re allowed to be late,” Stiles chimes and stands to walk her to the door. “It’s your birthday.”

“Happy birthday,” Derek quickly says.

Isaac says the same, but more softly.

Melissa smiles at both of them. “Thank you.” Then she turns to Stiles in amusement as they walk to the front door. “I doubt the fact that because today is my birthday is enough to keep me from getting a strike on my record.” She steps through the door as she rifles through her purse for her car keys. “Between you and I, my CNO is a bit of a hardass, so...”

Stiles snorts. “Share some of your birthday cake with him or her. Cake makes the world go round.”

Melissa chuckles and pats him on the cheek fondly. “If only. You enjoy the rest of your day and try to keep my son out of trouble if you can.”

Stiles nods and feels warmth at the pit of his stomach when she kisses him on the cheek and walks very quickly to her car. He touches the spot faintly and marvels at the fact that he hasn’t felt anything like that ever since his mom passed. He swallows and tries not to let it overwhelm him as he returns to the kitchen table.

Both Isaac and Derek pause their eating to look at him curiously.

Stiles feels his cheeks grow a little warm because he knows without knowing that they must be scenting his emotions. He quickly says, “Don't breathe through your nose.”

Derek rolls his eyes but Isaac still looks concerned.

"I'm fine,” Stiles swears, trying to appease the speculative looks they're both shooting him.

Scott looks up at that with puffed cheeks and a furrowed brow. “What?” he mouths around his food.
“What happened?”

“The death of your table manners apparently,” Stiles jokes weakly, just so they can all stop looking at him with such needless concern. He starts cutting into his food and eats. “Oh wow, dude. Your mom is really awesome. This tastes amazing.”

Scott beams on his mother’s behalf before he goes back to eating.

Isaac soon follows.

Derek cocks his head and lifts his eyebrows.

Stiles should not be able to tell by that simple movement what kind of message is being relayed to him but apparently he’s stupidly fluent in eyebrow or Derek (one of those). He just shrugs to communicate he’s okay.

Derek watches him a little longer before he too goes back to eating.

Jordan pads over and rests his head in Stiles’s lap, staring up at him earnestly.

Stiles gives a short laugh and scratches behind his ear.

Derek snorts and says, “Suck up.”

Jordan huffs, like he resents that comment, and he continues to look up at Stiles adoringly.

Stiles gives him another gentle scratch as he whines happily, tail whacking against the floor.

"You'll spoil him like that," Derek comments between bites. "He'll lean on you anytime if he thinks you'll pay him attention and rub him."

Stiles grins wistfully. "I don't mind."

Derek rolls his eyes and moves to fill Jordan’s food bowl with fresh food and some more water before he sits back down.

Jordan doesn’t make any indication of moving any time soon, so Stiles lets him be, patting him between bites.

Breakfast continues without a hitch and Scott is nice enough to volunteer to clean up.

Stiles takes a moment to pull Isaac and Derek aside. “Before I forget,” he says. “I don’t think you guys have been introduced to each other. Isaac, this is Derek. Derek, this is my brother Isaac.”

“Nice to meet you,” Derek says.

Isaac doesn't reply.

"Laura and Cora have mentioned you a few times, which means they like you,” Derek adds as he slides his hands into the front pockets of his jeans, like maybe it will win him points with the preteen.

Isaac just eyes Derek very carefully before he flicks his gaze over to Stiles and then back. He scans Derek from head to toe once more and says, “Huh.” His lips curl a little and he looks marginally amused. “That actually makes a lot of sense.”

"Excuse me?” Derek sounds genuinely confused. "How do you mean?"
"Like you don't know," Isaac mutters. "Werewolves. Never subtle."

"Excuse me?" Derek sounds offended now. "Seriously, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that your intentions are pretty clear," Isaac clarifies. "Don't forget, he was my family first."

Stiles blinks and frowns. “What? Isaac, what are you talking about?”

Isaac shakes his head and eyes Derek once more with a snort before he wanders off to tuck away in his room.

Derek turns to Stiles with a furrowed brow but he looks a bothered about something.

Stiles just throws up his hands. “I have no idea either. That’s — believe it or not, that was progress. He usually doesn’t say anything at all when I introduce him to new people,” he swears.

Derek lifts his eyebrows and turns to look at the top of the stairs like he’s expecting Isaac to reappear. "He doesn't seem to like me very much," he mutters.

"Yeah, well, he doesn't like a lot of people, so try not to take it to heart," Stiles admits.

"He's your brother and he should like me or..." Derek trails off and he looks a little embarrassed.

"Or..." Stiles echoes, waiting for the older teen to finish that confusing thought. He's a bit entertained by the fact that this seems to bother Derek, even if he doesn't get why.

"Nothing. Forget it. Werecats." Derek sighs like he's given up on trying to understand before he moves to help Scott clean up.

Scott shoots him a grateful smile and they begin conversing in Spanish.

Stiles just decides to leave them to it since he has no hope of understanding and moves to settle on the big couch in the living room. He switches on the TV, and he does some channel surfing until he stumbles upon a _Jurassic Park_ marathon. He spreads himself out on the couch as he watches one of his favorite scenes.

Scott hops over the back of the couch and on top of him, causing them both to go sprawling onto the floor.

Derek sits down on the end of the big couch and takes advantage of their scuffling to switch on a basketball game.

Stiles pushes away from Scott with a light kick to complain until Derek rolls his eyes and relinquishes control of the remote. Stiles wastes no time turning back to the previous station before settling on the opposite end of the couch.

Scott sits on the middle and watches the TV with avid fascination, snickering or smiling goofily from time to time when Stiles makes some kind of obnoxious remark or adds his own personal commentary.

Derek throws a couch pillow at him and says, “Shut up. I can’t pay attention with you doing that.”

“Rude,” Stiles grumbles with a frown and hugs the throw pillow to his chest. He gazes down at Jordan, who’s lying at his feet and he wags his tail happily when he sees Stiles is paying him notice. “You love my incessant babbling, don’t you?” he coos at Jordan. “Derek has no appreciation of the
Derek snorts and tries to concentrate on the movie.

“Haven’t you ever seen this before anyway?” Stiles asks, scratching Jordan behind his right ear because Stiles has quickly learned that Jordan likes to be touched there the most. He turns to look at Derek from across Scott. “I mean, I know it lacks basketball, but still.”

Derek scowls and it eerily echoes Cora. He says, “I’m not that obsessed with basketball. I just don’t watch TV as much as you do. So no, I’ve never seen this before.”

“You don’t have to be defensive,” Stiles says as Jordan licks happily at the back of his right hand. “I just figured you’d be more into movies like *Remember the Titans* and *The Basketball Diaries* or even *Like Mike*. That one’s my particular favorite, by the way.”

Derek just shrugs and grudgingly admits, “I’ve seen them.”

“Ha! I knew it,” Stiles says. “God, I bet you even had like some kind of *Space Jam* themed birthday party when you were an ankle bitter.”

A rosy flush starts crawling up the back of Derek’s neck and to the tips of his ears as he studiously avoids looking everywhere else but Stiles.

Stiles gapes before he gives a disbelieving laugh. “Dude. You really did, didn’t you? You so did and —”

The doorbell rings.

Stiles frowns, wondering who that could be, and he gets up to go answer the door.

It’s Peter.

Stiles glances past him and over to Laura, who’s leaning with her back against the banister, her arms crossed as she stares off into the distance. He turns back to look at Peter, who’s wearing a rather frightening grin. “Uh,” he says and fidgets as Peter’s grin lengthens. “What’s up?”

“I’ve come to collect my nephew,” Peter merely says before he flicks his gaze over Stiles’s shoulder. Stiles turns to see Derek standing at the end of the foyer with Jordan and a questioning frown.

“Pack meeting,” Peter says. “Full Moon is tonight. Sister dear says attendance is non-negotiable.”

“I have to grab my phone.”

“Grab it then,” Peter replies patiently before he turns his gaze back to Stiles with that eerie grin. “So. Did you enjoy your weekend? You certainly *smell* content.”

Stiles’s face twists and he understands where Peter’s going with this. “I went to a party,” he pointedly admits. “It was super.”

Peter hums noncommittally. “Yes, Kate’s told me all about your little night out.” He drops his grin and that’s almost as frightening. “Must I remind you that actions have consequences?”

“No, I’m pretty clear on that.”

“Yet you still went,” Peter presses. “Even in knowing the danger.”
"Wouldn't be the first time."

"Yes, but it could've been the last," Peter snaps and Stiles blinks in surprise. Peter takes a moment to calm down before he says, "You could’ve been hurt."

"But I wasn’t," Stiles says, annoyed. "And last I checked, my father was the sheriff. Not you —"

"Clearly," Peter interrupts stiffly, visibly irritated.

Stiles continues, annoyed himself, "— and even he was fine with me going. Also, you can’t just drag me into this stuff and then push me out when you get a little antsy about my well-being. That’s not how it works."

"It’ll work how I want it to work," Peter calmly responds as he stares at Stiles intently. "You should be grateful that I would even —"

Stiles bristles and says, "You better think carefully about what you’re going to say to me next. I’m serious, Peter. You’re not going to yank me around anymore or take advantage about how lenient I can be with your cryptic behavior, okay? Enough is a goddamn enough. Don’t bother with me because I’m useful and convenient. I’m not a wind up toy."

Laura stiffens at that and she turns her head away.

Peter straightens and he looks at Stiles for several long quiet moments. “I...apologize,” he says but not without difficulty. “It wasn’t my intention to —" He pauses like he's fishing for the right words. Finally, he just says, "I’ll be more mindful in the future."

“Don’t apologize. Apologies only work to make the person saying them feel better,” Stiles remarks evenly. “You say thank you. Thank you for being so patient with how stupid I’ve been and I’ll make sure to use my brain when asking my friends for favors and not demand them or waylay them because it’s convenient.”

Peter's expression sours and he says, “You don’t really want me to say that.”

“Yes I do. I really, really do.”

Peter smiles wryly and it looks like he’s swallowing down several scathing remarks. “Thank you for being tolerant of my behavior.”

“And?” Stiles encourages as he fights back an amused grin.

“And I will be sure to think very carefully of how I ask for your help.”

"And?" Stiles pushes, biting down on his bottom lip when Peter looks like he wants to throttle him.

"And I’ll be sure not to expect help from you or manipulate you into helping me because you are not a wind up toy and I should be more respectful of your wishes," Peter adds. “There. Am I missing anything else?”

“I think that covers it for now,” Stiles supposes with a long-suffering sigh.

Peter just hums before he drags Stiles closer and into a warm hug. He whispers, “Please put my niece out of her misery. She’s reeks of guilt and she’ll be an absolute pain to deal with during our run tonight if she doesn’t get this little issue resolved between the two of you.” He releases him just as Derek approaches. “Do you have everything you need or do you need more time to get pretty?”
Derek ignores him and moves to engulf Stiles in a hug.

Stiles flails a little in surprise because Derek isn’t usually that tactile with him. He awkwardly pats the other teen on the back until he’s let go and tries to rationalize why his heart is beating so fast.

Peter lifts a brow but he smirks a little.

Stiles’s cheeks get a little pink and he glares warningly at the older man.

Peter snorts and refrains from commenting as he grabs Derek by the scruff of his neck to drag him down the steps and to his car as Jordan jogs after them with a loud bark.

Laura straightens and stalks over to Stiles before dropping to her knees and pressing her lips to the inside of his right palm with a tenderly meaningful kiss. It’s a bold display of submission.

Mrs. Doyle from across the street is eyeing them openly from where she’s watering her plants.

Stiles grows flustered and he tries to urge Laura to her feet as she kisses his hand. “Laura! Laura, you can’t —” Woah, and that's definitely some tongue being added to the mix. "Jesus, I’m not even — okay, okay. You have to get up because I don’t understand what you’re — come on, get up.”

Laura does but she yanks him into a perfumed hug. She hides her overheated face into the side of his neck with a shudder.

Stiles blinks up at the doorway and strokes a hand down between her shoulder blades. “I’m not mad anymore,” he says softly, hoping to calm her down.

Laura mumbles something against his skin and the shape of her lips as she forms her words feel like a desperate apology.

“It’s okay,” Stiles assures. “I mean what you did wasn’t but we’re — we’re okay. I can get past it if you promise to never do that again.”

Laura nods hastily as she begins to sob.

Stiles shushes her and gathers all of her hair so he can pull it over her other shoulder and away from his nose and mouth. Then he rubs soothing circles against her lower back until she relaxes in his arms.

Laura sniffs and mumbles, “A pull.”

“What?” Stiles says as he walks backwards into the house and closes the door behind them so they can have at least some kind of privacy because Mrs. Doyle won’t stop staring. “Say that again.”

“It’s called a —” Laura tenses up suddenly with a slight growl but she doesn’t pull her face from his neck.

Scott peeks his head out from the living room and glances at them with widened eyes. “Dude, um — is everything okay?”

“Fine,” Stiles stammers as he blushes because he can only imagine the sight they make, what with Laura clinging to him like she’s never going to let him go while she growls warningly at Scott. “Stop,” he whispers. “That’s my best friend. He’s not — stop with the grr. We don’t growl at Stiles’s friends.”

Laura doesn’t stop growling.
Stiles rolls his eyes and looks imploringly at Scott. “Can you give us a minute, please?”

Scott nods dumbly and scrambles up the steps, most likely ducking into Isaac’s room for shelter.

Laura finally relaxes and stops growling but she doesn’t let him go or lift her face from his neck.

Stiles rubs his hand up and down her spine as he wonders why she’s being so assertive with her scenting. She’s normally a lot gentler and he wonders if it has to do with the fact that it’s going to be a Full Moon tonight or maybe because she’s getting close to her eighteenth birthday.

“A pull,” Laura mumbles lazily. “What I did to you the other day. It’s called a pull.”

Stiles rolls that around in his mind.

“It’s something only Alphas can do, but they only use it in times of a crisis. They can use it on anyone. Human or not. It’s like bending a person’s will to match yours,” Laura goes on to explain. “I shouldn’t have done that to you though. You’re not even completely pack. You haven’t even pledged — but sometimes I’d like — I’d want you to be in my —” She cuts herself off with a frustrated growl and seems to be struggling with her words. She pulls away from him suddenly and she looks a little dazed, her cheeks a lovely rosy color as her eyes flicker from amber to red and back to amber before returning to her original color. She gives a full body shudder and puts more distance between them. “I should go. I’m not myself and I — I want — I’m sorry. Mom would kill me if she knew I’d come to see you when I’m like this, but Peter thought it would help if I could just —” She shakes her head and takes another step back. “And I still don't feel like myself. I'll talk to you later, okay? But I need you to move from the door so I can make myself leave without pinning you to the ground and biting into your side to claim you as mine — to make you pack.”

Stiles wordlessly inches along the wall quickly in alarm until he’s at a safe distance.

Laura’s eyes track his movement closely like a predator would when cornering its prey. She clenches her hands and her voice has a husky pitch to it as her eyes bleed amber, flickering to red inconsistently while she says, “Stay inside tonight. Don’t try to — just stay indoors. Don’t give me a reason to come looking for you — to hunt.”

Stiles nods dumbly.

Laura turns away sharply and storms out the front door with inhuman speed.

Stiles thumps his head against the wall behind him repeatedly and tries to make sense of what just happened.

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“Maybe it’s a wolf thing,” Scott supposes some time later, when the sun is setting and they’ve finished watching every Jurassic Park movie there is to watch before gorging on some hotdogs and the leftovers from last night.

They’ve moved the coffee table over to the window so they can be free to lie on their stomachs before the flat screen TV as they play Modern Warfare 3.

Isaac is curled up in his favorite armchair with Stiles’s tablet, playing what sounds like Sims Free Play.

“A wolf thing?” Stiles finally replies when he’s not so distracted trying to flank Scott in the game because Scott is horrible at these first person games.
“Yeah,” Scott says as his thumbs move restlessly over his controller. “You said she’ll be an Alpha soon, right? Maybe she wants to make you pack. I mean, that is what she said.”

Stiles never considered that, mainly because he and Laura never talked about it. It’s not something he would have guessed. They’ve gotten along fine, and they’re comfortable with each other, but Stiles can’t imagine why Laura would want to include him into her pack because he didn’t think building a pack is something she wants to do.

It’s kind of confusing.

“Laura wants to go to New York and be a star on Broadway. She doesn’t want to build a pack,” Stiles denies as he curses when Scott gets shot down but he quickly avenges his best friend.

“Instincts can be a crazy thing;” Scott mutters with a frustrated sigh. He pauses the game on his side and turns to face Stiles. “You don’t think that she’ll like come looking for you when she does the whole, you know, thing?”

“Shift, you mean,” Stiles corrects. “And I don’t know.” He pauses the game on his side. “I’m not sure how any of it works on the Full Moon.”

Scott opens his mouth to say something but the doorbell rings. He starts to look panicked and he scrambles for his inhaler.

Stiles snorts and climbs to his feet. “Relax, dude. I doubt Werewolves ring doorbells,” he assures.

Scott just sucks greedily at his inhaler as he flounders.

Stiles makes his way to the door and peeks through the peephole before he opens it with a frown. Kate’s standing on the other side with some dark jeans, a tank top, and a leather jacket made of the same material as her studded ankle boots. She’s also holding a sawed-off shotgun in her right hand as she pops a piece of gum obnoxiously.

“Kate,” Stiles says as he glances behind her, up and down the street. “What are you doing here?”

“Laura asked me to come,” Kate merely says. “Since, you know, you’re the apple of her eye.”

Stiles boggles at the shotgun. “And that’s for her?”

“Don’t be stupid. This is for me,” Kate huffs. “She’s not the only Werewolf in town. You can never be too safe on a Full Moon. Now are you going to let me in or do I have to set up camp out here on your porch. I gotta say, it’d give the neighbors something to gossip about. That old lady across the streets has been peeking through her curtains every five seconds like she’s waiting for a show.”

Stiles moves out of the way and urges her in.

Kate slides through, popping her gum before she says, “Thanks, buttercup.”

Stiles makes a face at that and he locks the door thoroughly behind her. He takes a moment to call his dad to make sure he’s somewhere safe. His dad sounds very bemused on the other end but he assures Stiles that he’s perfectly safe behind his desk at the station, sorting through old case files (he mentions he may be headed to Eichen House shortly — depending how the night goes). Stiles feels a little better knowing nonetheless and he pockets his phone when the conversation ends.

He pushes away from the door and moves to join the others in the living room but the doorbell rings
again. He frowns, wondering who it could be this time, and he looks through the peephole.

It’s Kira’s mom.

He opens the door.

“Mrs. Yukimura,” Stiles greets uncertainly. “Uh — hello.”

Mrs. Yukimura crosses her arms and holds onto her elbows as she says, “Good evening, Mr. Stilinski. I’m sorry to bother you like this, but, Kira didn’t come home last night and I thought perhaps you knew of her whereabouts.”

Stiles jolts at that. “Kira didn’t come home? I — no, I don’t — I mean, she was hanging with a few of our friends at the nail salon. Um, I can get you their numbers if you needed to call them.”

“Please,” Mrs. Yukimura says with a nod.

Stiles stumbles away from the door and to the kitchen to find something to write on. When he finds some paper and a pen, he quickly jots down Allison and Malia’s number before returning to the doorway.

Mrs. Yukimura accepts it with quiet gratitude. She moves to leave but she pauses at the top of the porch steps before she turns back to say, “I’m sure you’re aware of the differences my daughter and I have, but if you do happen to talk to her or reach her someway. Please tell her that I just want her to come home.”

Stiles nods wordlessly.

Mrs. Yukimura turns away and starts for her house.

Stiles pulls out his phone and scrolls through his recent contacts to find Kira’s name. When he does, he dials out and presses his phone to his ear, pausing when he notices that eerie orange alley cat sitting under the glow of the streetlamp across the street, and it’s staring at him with glimmering eyes.

“Hey! This is Kira. You know what to do after the beat — oh god, no, I meant beep. After the beep. Crap, how do you reset this?” Beep.

Stiles doesn’t stop staring at the cat as he says, “Kira, it’s Stiles. Your mom is freaking out. Okay, no, I’m the one kind of freaking out. Your mom was actually really Zen about the fact that you didn’t come home last night. So, uh, call me because I’m pretty worried about you. Or, you know, call your mom first. Yeah. Definitely call your mom first. Or even better, go home. I — yeah. Right. Bye.”

The orange alley cat’s tail swings lazy as though it has a mind of its own and that’s about all he can take of their weird staring match.

Stiles quickly shuts the door and locks it twice. He walks into the living room to find Kate dominating in the game as Scott stares at her in awe. He says, “Kira didn’t go home last night.”

That knocks Scott out of his stupor. “What?”

Stiles scrolls through his contacts to find Malia’s number. “Her mom was just here asking about her,” he explains as he presses his phone to his ear. “Call Allison and see if she knows something.”

Scott nods and fishes for his phone.

“Hello?”
“Malia, have you seen Kira?” Stiles asks.

“No. Why? Her mom just called me asking the same thing.” Malia replies. “I’ll tell you the same thing I told her. We got our nails and eyebrows done around six-ish. We left the salon around seven-thirty and went to get some frozen yogurt before we went our separate ways around nine. I caught a ride with Allison and her mom, and Kira just took her bike home. At least that’s what we thought.”

Stiles is overtaken with worry in light of this news. “Okay. Thanks. Just — if you do hear from her or anything, call me or text me or something.”

“I’ll send up some smoke signals,” Malia promises, trying to ease the tension.

Stiles just gives a pathetically shaky laugh before he hangs up and stares dumbly at the TV as his mind races.

“Okay. Yeah. I mean it’s not but — oh. Yeah. Yeah. Okay, thanks,” Scott says as he ends his call. “Allison hasn’t seen her. She said that they went their separate ways at the frozen yogurt place.”

“I know,” Stiles says faintly as he sits down. He scrubs at his face, trying not to let anything like panic overtake him. He’s trying not to imagine the worst scenarios possible. He really isn’t. It’s just that Kira is his friend and it’d wreck him something awful if anything happened to her.

Isaac sits up suddenly and looks to the stairs.

Stiles notices and says, “What?”

Isaac doesn’t answer right away. His brow furrows as his eyes lift up and he scans the ceiling above the kitchen. Then he says, “Someone’s upstairs.”

Kate abruptly pauses the game and doesn’t look away from the screen as she says, “Say that again.”

Isaac blinks and glances her way uncertainly. “Someone’s upstairs?”

Kate scans the TV before she calmly stands, swiping her sawed-off shotgun from off the floor. She snaps open the barrel with one hand, loading it quickly with a hardened expression of determination before snapping it close and says, “Where?”

“Stiles’s room,” Isaac says quickly and Stiles doesn’t blame him for the snap response. This side of her is pretty intimidating.

Kate cradles her shotgun in both hands and keeps her finger poised on the trigger as she marches over to the steps and up them, tossing a “Stay there!” over her shoulder.

Stiles mutes the TV as they all wait on baited breath, listening to Kate’s quiet footsteps move across the second floor, followed by the inevitable creak of Stiles’s door being opened.

A few moments pass, but there’s no sound of a gunshot.

Stiles frowns and looks to Isaac for clarification but the preteen just shrugs as he stares up at the ceiling.

Scott shakes his inhaler and takes a deep breath.

Kate returns with a puzzled expression as she settles her shotgun on her right shoulder. “I think you better come see this,” she says.
Stiles stands with a frown before he follows her up the steps and to his room. He pauses in the doorway.

That eerie orange alley cat is curled up on his windowsill with its tail swinging low. “Stiles,” he says.

“Uh cat...creature...thing...” Stiles returns as Isaac and Scott crowd up behind him to get a glimpse in his room.

“Did that cat just talk?” Scott questions with wide eyes.

“Yeah, pretty much,” Stiles says as he steps into his room fully.

The cat says, “Do I have your permission to enter? I wouldn’t want to upset the Hale boy with my unwanted intrusion.” He sounds suspiciously sarcastic and amused. "His mark is very prominent.”

"That’s what I said," Isaac mumbles.

Kate snorts as she leans against the doorway.

Stiles nods and watches as the cat hops down from the windowsill and onto the floor. “So, um — what’s up?” he asks and then winces at how lame it must sound considering the significance of the situation.

The cat doesn’t seem to notice or care. He says, “Your friend Kira is in grave danger.”

Stiles jolts at that. “What?”

“They’ve taken her to the abandoned subway station,” the cat goes on to explain, tail swinging anxiously. “I believe they mean to awaken her true nature.”

“Whoa, whoa,” Stiles says, holding up his hands because his mind is spinning. “Who’s doing what now?”

The cat huffs impatiently and says, “Those intolerable Reyes Twins. They’re trying to get your friend’s supernatural abilities to manifest for their own selfish gain.”

“What abilities?” Kate asks quicker than Stiles is able to. "She’s a Human. What could she do?"

“She’s a Thunder Kitsune,” the cat clarifies petulantly. “If they’re doing what I think they are, then they’ll take her to the power substation, not only to awaken her abilities, but to rid Beacon Hills of its power sources for as long as they need to do what they need to tonight.” He looks directly at Stiles as he says, “They’re trying to free their father, and they plan on doing whatever it takes. Including killing your father.”

Stiles suddenly feels as furious as he is afraid. “Why didn’t you come to me sooner or to my dad or anything? Why’d you wait until now to say something? And why should I trust you? I don’t even know who or what you are.”

“I may be made from magic but I’m not made of magic. I consider myself an educated guesser in most situations. Also, I’m hardly perfect. I had to be sure, so I followed those stupid boys until they led me to the girl, which wasn’t too long ago,” the cat tersely replies. “You should be grateful for that, instead of me sending you on some wild goose chase. And I couldn’t go to your father or even the girl’s mother because you’re the only one who can stop it from turning into a catastrophe.”
“That’s flattering and all,” Stiles says. “But you still haven’t told me why I should trust you.”

“Holy hell, you’re as frustrating as —” the cat cuts himself off with an annoyed sound. “You can trust me.” He pauses before he goes on to say, “I’m your mother’s twin brother, Claude. Well, what’s left of me anyway.”

Stiles inhales sharply and his mind goes blank in shock. He's a little dizzy.

“Surprise,” the cat adds dryly. “I had really hoped we could save this conversation for when you — well, never mind. We’re running out of time. We need to move quickly.” He hops up on to the windowsill and then springs out.

Stiles is still standing there in shock.

Kate pushes away from the doorway and says, “Stiles. We should get going like he said. Try to process this later.” She steers him out of his room and says, “You two stay here. Keep everything locked down.”

Scott and Isaac nod faintly as they watch the blonde herd Stiles down the steps.

Stiles is moving on autopilot as he climbs into Kate’s jaguar and buckles himself in.

Kate chucks her shotgun into the backseat before she hops in and starts the engine.

The cat springs into the car and says, “Let’s try the abandoned subway station first. Hopefully they’ve not relocated.”

Kate nods and peels out of the driveway before she whips down the road.

Stiles is still at a loss — even as he stares up at the moon sitting heavy and full in the black night sky.

His uncle is a cat.

What. The. Hell.
“How come mom never mentioned you?” Stiles asks when he manages to find his voice again. He shifts his body so he can look towards the backseat.

Kate is still speeding as they drive down that long stretch of road that divides the preserve. She’s keeping her silence as she pays attention to the conversation.

The cat — his uncle — god, he doesn’t even know what to call it anymore — says, “Not surprising. Her and I — the last time we spoke was before you were born. We had a falling out, but then again, when weren’t we fighting? Stupid really, the things we argued about.” He sighs. “Anyway, the last time we really had a falling out, well, I said some choice things. Though, perhaps using the word choice is being delicate considering. But the most memorable of them is that I said, ‘If you have this child, you’re dead to me.’” He straightens his spine as his tail sways to the left. “Of course, six months later, she gave birth to a bouncing baby boy. Who she named after our father and called him Mie—”

“You’re a dick,” Stiles interrupts purposefully. “Why would you say that to my mom? What am I? Some kind of an abomination? Who says that to their own family?”

“I’ve made mistakes,” Claude concedes. “I didn’t want her to have you for selfish reasons — for what it would mean for me if she did. But I can’t take those words back. No matter how much I want to. I loved my sister, but I was angry with her for the longest time. She made me what I am today. But it wasn’t until she died did I truly accept that she did what she thought she could to save me.”

Stiles doesn’t understand. He really doesn’t. “My mom...made you a cat?”

“She did a lot of things in her lifetime,” Claude says. “She was a Blue Witch.”

Stiles feels a delirious laugh bubble up in his already tightening throat. “My mom was a music teacher that ran a wine and candle shop on the weekends. She made gift baskets for weddings! She wasn’t some — some — Baba Yaga!”

Claude looks at him sharply. “You watch your mouth how you insult your mother’s memory,” he chastises. “I’m sure she didn’t tell you the old Slavic tales of our homeland during your bedtime for you to accuse her of the same wickedness.”

Stiles flushes hotly with anger and shame. “Then tell me what you’re trying to say because I don’t understand! You’re making me think that the woman I knew to be my mother isn’t at all who I thought she was.”

“I doubt she pretended to be anything she wasn’t. It’s more likely that you never knew the questions to ask,” Claude replies tightly as his tail swivels aggressively. In Polish, he says, “There was more to her than roses and candles and wine.”

Stiles inhales sharply and heat pinpricks at his eyes.

“What?” Kate says as she glances over to him. “What did he say?”

“My nephew understands perfectly what I said,” Claude calmly states as his yellow eyes stare into Stiles’s with piercing intent. “How long has it been since you were addressed in our language?”

“How can I bare to say? To even think?” Stiles replies shakily and the diction sours on his tongue,
like a piece of spoiled fruit eaten way past its prime. “Since mom,” he adds (in English).

Claude makes a thoughtful sound as his tail curls around him. Then he says, “Do you ever miss it?”

Stiles would say ‘always’ or ‘yes’ when he’s forced to think about it, like now. But he says neither of these things because he can’t get his tongue to move, it’s too weighed down by sorrow and longing. His mother’s tongue is just another reminder of what he no longer has. It's...hard.

Claude says, “Even though she lost her magic after having you, which is something that will often happen — she still would have been able to do some good deeds through tokens of festivity and timekeeping. When we were kids, she told me all about you. Of a dream she had about a beautiful boy that would make a difference in the world one day.” He huffs sadly and continues, “You look just like she said you would.”

Stiles exhales shakily because his head is so full of questions but his heart is aching terribly. He can’t. He can’t talk about this. Not like this. “So why now? Why come back now and play the caring uncle if you wanted nothing to do with us?” he asks.

“I care. I just made a lot of stupid mistakes along the way to figuring that out,” Claude confesses, his tail swinging anxiously. He turns his gaze to the back of Kate’s head as his ears swivel thoughtfully on his head. “Stop here. We can’t go any closer without them detecting us.”

Kate pulls over and parks in front of a bakery that Stiles vaguely remembers going to a long time ago with his dad when they first moved here.

This area is considered Old Town, because the shops have been standing since the twenties (practically historical in nature), and it’s obvious by the design of them as well as the bad upkeep. Old Town is settled mainly on or near to the outskirts of Beacon Hills, whereas the heart of the newer retail area lies within the folds Beacon Hills.

In saying this, there are a lot of abandoned buildings and houses that have been touched by the staggering American economy. It’s pretty creepy because it can be viewed like some kind of ghost zone or like something out of the Silent Hill video games.

Claude says, “Did you use that black soap I left for you?”

Stiles frowns as he turns his wandering gaze back to his feline uncle. “That was you who — what am I saying? Of course it was you.” He sighs. “Yes.”

“Good. That’s a special concoction of mine,” Claude goes on to say. “It’s power lies in the intention of other supernatural beings. For those who mean you harm, it helps to mask your scent. Makes you invisible from detection. Keeps you protected. Understand?”

“If the Reyes Twins mean to harm me, which is practically a given at this point seeing as how they kidnapped my friend, then the soap will keep them from being aware I’m anywhere around. I’m scentless.”


“It’s Kate. My old man calls me Kathryn,” Kate corrects as she turns off her car and jams her keys in her back pocket. She twists in her seat to face him. “What’s up, Cat?”

“Claude.”

“Whatever. What’s the plan?” Kate says, popping her gum.
“You and I will be creating a diversion, and my nephew will be slipping inside to collect the Kitsune.”

“Kira,” Stiles corrects because he wants to be sure that his uncle doesn’t forget that she isn’t just some arbitrary supernatural being. “She’s a person under everything else.”

Claude gazes at him for a long while after that. His yellow eyes glowing with bright, hot thought. He straightens and his tail sways above him as he leans back before leaping to stand at the top of Stiles’s seat. He knocks his forehead against his nephew’s with an amused huff. “So much like your mother. It’s painful,” he murmurs before he springs out of the car, transforming more into the shape of an adult-sized beige-white lynx. “Let’s go make some noise, Ms. Kate. We’ll head them off so Stiles can slip in.”

Kate nods and grabs her sawed-off shotgun from the back seat before she climbs out. She makes a gesture for Stiles to follow her to the trunk, and when he does, she opens it to reveal a nest of weapons lying under a hidden compartment.

Stiles is not even surprised. “You have a permit for all these?”

Kate’s teeth gleam menacingly as she grins and tugs free a .45 ACP pistol. “You let me worry about that. What do you know about holding a gun?”

“My dad’s the sheriff. What do you think I know?” Stiles retorts and takes it from her, skillfully loading it before holding it just the way his dad taught him. He lowers it in the next moment and puts the safety on.

Kate looks on with an impressed grin. “You’re just full of surprises, aren’t you?” She hands him a switchblade next. “Here, pocket that. It’s likely they probably have her strung up with some kind of binding.”

Stiles pockets the switchblade.

Kate spits her gum out off to the side and makes her way onto the sidewalk where she meets his uncle. She pauses and looks at Stiles from over her shoulder to say, “It’s likely we’ll run into some complications. You should be prepared for that. You should be prepared to defend yourself.”

“I know.”

Kate turns to fully face him. “But do you really?” she asks. “When Werecats shift, they become bigger, stronger — faster. They’re not like Werewolves. I don’t have time to explain the differences. Tonight they’ll be weak, so they can’t shift fully until first light, which, thank god. But still. It’ll take more than three bullets to slow them down. You want to hit them just enough so you and your little friend can make a run for it. Aim to wound, not to kill, because there is no killing them unless you separate the head from the body. Got it?”

Stiles swallows and tries not to feel uneasy. He nods.

“Good,” Kate says as she straightens the line of her small shoulders. “Laura and Peter would strangle me if anything ever happened to you. Don’t get me put in hot water, buttercup. You’re like treasure to those Hales.”

Stiles gives a heady sigh and nods firmly. “I’ll be careful.”

“We have to move,” Claude says before sprinting in the direction of the stoplight all the way at the end of the street where the town stops.
“Give us ten minutes, and then we’ll give you fifteen,” Kate says before she goes running after his uncle.

Stiles is left to alone to breathe in the humid night air. He glances up at the shiny moon as it sits fat and heavy in a sky the color of navy slacks. He stares and thinks briefly how the moon looks like some white stone that’s just been polished and then he starts to smell rain, despite the fact that there are no clouds to be seen.

He looks up and down the sidewalk, to the darkened store windows (most are boarded up now or say ‘Going out of Business, Everything Must Go!!’). It’s quiet here, undisturbed. There aren’t any cars, or even a fleck of garbage. It’s strange — strange enough that it tweaks at Stiles’s curiosity for some unknown reason.

It’s the stillness. It feels synthetic in a way.

Stiles gropes himself and closes his eyes slowly when he realizes that he doesn’t have his phone on him. It’s not too hard to imagine where it might be. He can picture it clearly in his mind: his phone vibrating from where it lies crammed between two couch cushions in his living room, unheard.

It occurs to him, that even in his shock, he should have had the mind to grab it, or even alert his dad to the situation somehow. He wonders idly if maybe Isaac may have (it’s likely since his little brother is more cautious about these things than he is).

Stiles stands fretfully for a while, painfully aware that he hasn’t got a clue on how to be able to know how much time has passed. He’s bad about that without a watch or some kind of device.

He has to wing it.

He waits a few beats before he carries himself in the direction that he saw Kate and his uncle go. It brings him all the way to the end of the street, and after that it’s not too hard to know what he’s looking for. Like a lone ship, the abandoned subway station sticks out like a sore thumb on a lonely stretch of land wiped clean of trees or all manner of green vegetation, sealed with concrete so that nothing wouldn’t ever grow afterwards.

Stiles approaches the large building that, upon further inspection, looks as hollowed out on the outside as it actually is on the inside. The interior of the building is like a warehouse, with high arching ceilings held up with a metal skeletal frame. Or maybe it’s iron. Stiles is hardly an architect so he doesn’t really know. It’s just that it doesn’t exactly look like an abandoned subway station. Certainly not like any you’d see on TV or read about in books that chronicles the life of a person who lives and breathes city transportation. This subway station resembles more of a graveyard for broken down or decapitated train cars with busted windows and graffiti spray-painted on the sides.

It’s not exactly quiet. There’s a stuttering hum of electricity flowing through the building, making the ceiling lights flicker every three seconds like there will be some kind of power outage any moment.

It’s Kira. It has to be.

Stiles’s heart thumps with anticipation as he winds his way into the gut of the station. There comes a point where he comes across a grouping of electrical chords, and he follows the veins of it to the lower level (basement) to a lone train car with busted windows. He settles the gun in his hand in the back of his pants so that he can use both hands to climb up into the tall train car.

Kira’s anchored in the middle of the train car, tied to a standing pole by steel chains as the lights flicker on and off around her while her eyes glow with a blood orange color.
“Kira,” Stiles says and he sprints to her. He doesn’t touch her right away. He just assesses her from head to toe. She appears to be unharmed but he’s picking up a weird loopy vibe from her. “Kira,” he says again as they make eye contact.

Kira looks right at him and then bursts with giggles. “They got you too?” she says between giggles. “That’s — that’s so awful.” She starts to really laugh.

Stiles expected her to be traumatized, or freaking out but he didn’t expect this. It’s like she’s — “Drunk,” he says aloud as he gapes. “Kira did they — were you drugged?”

“Nope, and nope.” Kira smiles widely as her head sways from side to side. It also seems that the chains holding her to the pole is also keeping her up. Her small-heeled boots are scrapping against the dirty floor in a sloppy manner. “They just tied me all willy-silly and started to do this vibrate-y thingy.”

“I have no idea what that means,” Stiles admits as he starts to circle her.

Kira just gives an ugly snort. "There were lots of cords and metal and it was like how you do a car when it runs out of juice because you leave your tail lights on all night long."

Stiles notices that Kira’s connected to some jumper cables. It occurs to him that they’re feeding her the building’s electricity, and it’s having some sort of intoxicant effect on her.

Kira starts bobbing her head like she’s listening to music and she hums for a little while before she starts singing softly in Japanese.

Stiles looks for either the start of the chains or the end. When he finds the lock that’s holding it all together, he reaches out to touch but stops short when the small hairs on his arm start to stand on end. He quickly yanks his hand away in fear of electrocution and gnaws on his bottom lip as he tries to think of a way around shocking himself.

Kira starts snorting. “You know what I just thought of? Watermelons? What’s the deal with watermelons?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll try and think on it,” Stiles vaguely promises as he straightens. “Kira, listen. I’m going to go and find the box — the fuse box thing or whatever and I’m going to shut it all down, okay? It’s probably going to get dark but I’ll be right back.”

“Okey-dokey-smokey,” Kira says with a solemn nod before she starts giggling again. Then she pouts. “He spit them at me, you know — Ricky. The seeds. The watermelon seeds. He kept eating slices of them and spitting the seeds at me like it was a game. Spitting and spitting, while the other one kept count between his laughter. So impolite and cruel. You know Ricky, right? The one with his left eye scarred shut. You know the one I mean.”

“What?” Stiles says, trying to follow what she’s saying before thinking better of it. “I can’t — Kira, you’ll have to tell me later. I gotta get us out of here.”

Kira pouts again but she stays quiet.

Stiles quickly makes his way out of the car and follows the veins of the electrical cords all the way to the source, which happens to be a commercial generator (emergency service backup for lost power) relatively the size of a short yellow bus. He circles it about three times before he comes across the control push button panel. He doesn’t have to think hard about what he should do next, because it’s pretty self-explanatory. He presses down hard on the power button — punching it when gentle pressure offers no reaction.
The generator (which is whirring really loudly with shaking vibrations and the panting of its internal fans) winds down to a halt before completely quieting.

Stiles turns back to the building to find it pitch black (as it should be). He makes his way inside, and gradually feels his way down to the basement. It takes a little longer than he’d like because he has to be so cautious, but he eventually makes it back to the train car where Kira is.

“You look funny,” Kira giggles in the inky blackness.

“You can see me?” Stiles says as he reaches out for her.

Kira snorts and says, “Well duh. You’re right there.”

Stiles follows the sound of her voice before groping the chains for the lock, cursing when he realizes he should have gotten some kind of metal cutting tool on his way back down. So now he’s fiddling with a lock like an idiot, trying to come up with all sort of inventive ideas about how he can possibly break —

“Uh oh,” Kira says suddenly.

Stiles stiffens. “Uh oh? Why uh oh? What’s —” He feels himself being hauled up by the scruff of his neck by rough and steely fingers.

“Che cosa è questo? La piccola Kitsune ha un amico,” a deep guttural voice breathes in Stiles’s ear in fluent Italian, and he winces at the smell of watermelon and blood that wafts from the giant furnace pressed against his back. A massive clawed hand slides around the nape of his neck to his Adam’s apple and the pointed tips press threateningly into the curve of it. “So you’re the reason that little wolf bitch and the furry imposter had my brother and I chasing them in circles? Had a little plan, did we?”

“Carter?” Stiles says and winces when those claws press deeper, almost choking. “You don’t —”

“Ricky,” he corrects offhandedly, like it’s something he has to do often. He sniffs and tsks. “I smell that gun on you.”

Stiles closes his eyes regretfully when he feels Ricky yank the gun from the rim of his pants.

“You don’t smell terrified. Don’t you wonder what I will do, Árfaestnes?” Ricky shoves him away.

Stiles quickly spins around and even in the dark, he can still make out the one eye that’s glowing silver while the other is scarred shut. “If you wanted to kill me, you would have done that already,” he supposes with a nervous swallow. He hears the click of the safety being removed and he wonders if Ricky is pointing the gun at him. He reaches out for Kira and when he feels the cold metal of her chain bindings he stands in front of her. His hands twitch at his side when Ricky chuckles darkly, silver eye burning like a predator lying in wait in the dark.

Ricky says, “Do you know, in the old days, my kind worshipped the árfaestnes like gods? My father still does, and he taught my brother and I the old ways. Non devi preoccuparti di morte con me.”

“I don’t know what that — what are you — ”

“You’re a Virtue,” Ricky clarifies. “So you need not fear death with me. Cup your hands together. It may be against my religion to put a bullet through your head but there’s nothing in my bible that says I can’t put a bullet through hers. Now cup your hands together or you’re going to hear a gun shot in the next three seconds.”
Stiles cups his hands together quickly. He starts in surprise at the chill of a thin metal chain being wrapped around his wrists.

“You’ll have to forgive me for this,” Ricky supposes distantly. “But I’m sure that if you were in my position, you’d do the same. My father is innocent. Human laws won’t accommodate what he is — what we are. Family is the most important thing. We must always protect the Pride.”

“There are better ways,” Stiles finds himself saying, though it could be more shock talking than sense. He once read an article about a little boy singing to his kidnapper until the kidnapper couldn’t stand it anymore and let him go. Seeing as he can’t sing, he’ll have to approach this from a more verbal method. “My dad’s the sheriff — he could — I could talk to him and —”

“And what? They won’t free my father just because you ask really nicely. *Essi non sono più del nostro mondo che ci sono delle c’è,*” Ricky hisses angrily and shoves Stiles back until he loses his balance and falls on his butt next to Kira’s restless feet. “Tell me, what is it that you think you can do? You don’t have authority, Árfaestnes. At least —” He stops short and huffs. “This has already been decided.”

Stiles finds himself wondering whose blood it is that he can smell on Ricky.

“You’ll have to forgive me for this,” Ricky says again before he strikes Stiles on his temple with the bottom end of the gun.

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Stiles wakes up feeling wet and confused. His wrists ache like he’s been dragged by them and his head throbs. His vision is a little blurry when he comes to, but he finds himself on his back, staring at the darkened ceiling lights of what seems to be a new place.

Something wet warm is nosing at the metal chain wrapped around his wrists, and with a start his eyes jerk down to see a massively white nine-tailed Kitsune with purple electric energy furling all around the tips of it’s long, curled tails. But it’s the glowing blood orange eyes that really click a sort of knowing in him.

“Kira?” Stiles stays and when the white Kitsune gives a soft whine he feels his eyes bulge “Holy — thunder god.” He sits upright and has to blink against the onslaught of dizzying nausea that hits him. “How did you — did they —” He frowns. “Ricky did this?”

Kira sits back on her hind legs as her nine tails sway chaotically (uncontrolled) and she nods as her fox-like ears twitch in distress.

Stiles gnaws on his bottom lip and takes a moment to look around, though he can’t see much (outside of the light that Kira’s tails provide), and he just supposes that Ricky must have bodily moved them to the power substation.

Kira furls three of her tails around him and Stiles is surprised when he isn’t shocked, but rather, the energy flowing through her caresses his skin with gentle pricks of warmth, pulling at something under his skin he can’t name. When he’s close enough, she goes back to licking furiously at his chain bindings and it amazingly starts dissolving until it melts and Stiles’s bruised wrists are drenched in her thick saliva.

“Whoa,” Stiles says as he quickly climbs to his feet.

Kira straightens and Stiles baffles at the fact that she’s literally over two heads taller than him (and she’s still sitting on her hind legs).
“Whoa, okay,” Stiles mutters as he gapes. “You’re bigger than I thought.”

Kira huffs and licks at the front end of her paw, which is still quite strange to see.

“So you can understand me,” Stiles supposes.

Kira blinks slowly at him as she continues to groom herself.

“I'll take that as you confirming,” Stiles says and yelps when Kira presses her large paw into his chest to push him down on the ground and flat on his back. “Hey, hey, don’t — hey —”

Kira growls at him before she whips her head to the left and her ears twitch and swivel curiously.

Stiles snaps his mouth shut and remains completely still.

Kira ducks down and growls again.

“Watashi wa anata no hahadesu,” a gentle voice says in fluent Japanese. “You cannot forget your mother.”

Kira cocks her head and gives a curious whine.

Stiles cranes his neck to see Mrs. Yukimura stepping out of the shadows and into the moonlight with her hands held up with placating surrender, despite the fact that she’s outfitted in all leather and combat boots with a katana strapped to her back.

“It’s okay, Kira,” Mrs. Yukimura promises, stepping closer and closer. “I’m here to help. Watashi wa tasukete mimashou.”

Kira removes her paw from Stiles’s chest, coiling backwards before she springs forward, gliding through the air to her mother. She furls around the older woman beautifully and touches their foreheads together.

Mrs. Yukimura whispers something sacred before she plants a tender kiss in the space between Kira’s glowing eyes. She steps away and gazes at Stiles indifferently as he climbs to his feet. “This could have been avoided had you informed me,” she points out curtly.

Stiles has the decency to let a guilty flush wash over him before he responds, “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to me, Bitoku,” Mrs. Yukimura corrects. “Apologize to Kira. And be warned. Her wrath is much more passionate than my own.”

“Oh,” is Stiles’s intelligent reply.

Mrs. Yukimura seems unconcerned with his incoherence. “Go. Your friends are waiting for you out front. I will look after Kira, and I’ll see if I can get the town’s power operational.”

Stiles nods and watches as Mrs. Yukimura leads her daughter away.

Kira pauses only once to look back at him, but even at that distance Stiles can see the questions swimming in her eyes.

He wonders if she can see any of the same kind mirrored in his own.

Outside the station, Claude and Kate await him, both looking mildly relieved when he appears to be
unharmed (more or less).

Stiles raises both of his eyebrows at them though.

Claude (still in his beige-white lynx form) is covered in patches of mud, while Kate looks unruffled (despite the fact that most of her clothes are partially torn and caked in dark blood that doesn’t really appear to be her own).

“What happened?”

Claude lazily licks at his right paw and rubs it against his face in an attempt to get clean. “We tried to lead them out into the forest, but they weren’t as idiotic as I’d hoped,” he explains.

“They split up when they figured out we were just the distraction,” Kate includes. “We would have made it back to you sooner but the one that stayed behind made sure to keep us well preoccupied.”

“He tried to bury me in a mud swamp,” Claude complains as his tail bristles and he licks furiously at his left paw.

“Meanwhile, I unloaded about fifty shells into him and he still wouldn't go down,” Kate huffs and shakes her head. “Then we heard an echo of howls.”

“That scared him off,” Claude supposes. “He had to have sensed a wolf pack nearby and he didn't want to take his chances. Not that he would have had any, being greatly outnumbered.”

“By the time we circled back to the warehouse, you and your cute little girlfriend were gone,” Kate finishes. “But her mother was there. Said she could pick up on her aura. She led us here, but midway all the lights in town started flickering.”

“That’s when we knew we wouldn’t make it in time. Everything went dark and that just confirmed it,” Claude says with a sigh as his ears swivel and twitch irritably. “I’m sorry.”

Stiles shakes his head and winces when it causes a swell of pain to explode between his temples.

Kate notices and she mutters a swear so quick that he’s not able to follow. “What’d he hit you with?” she asks, stepping closer to examine his head with a furrowed brow. She curls her manicured hand under his jaw and tilts his head so she can get a good look at him. “You’re bleeding,” she notes with an unhappy frown. “You better not have a concussion. Laura and Peter will throttle me.”

“It was a gun — the gun you gave me — he hit me with it but, I don’t know, I don’t think he was trying to hurt me,” Stiles reasons and he carefully pushes her hand away.

Kate’s frown deepens and it feels so odd to have her looking at him with that amount of concern (no matter how minor).

Claude, however, appears to be more concerned with ridding himself of the mud.

Stiles opens his mouth to assure Kate again that he’s fine but he stops short when he starts panicking as he starts thinking of how Ricky might still have her gun and how he might try to use it on someone. “We’ve gotta get to Eichen House. He’s got that gun. Where’s your car?”

“One of them gutted it. Pulled the engine out and everything. They’ll have to pay for it in blood if I can’t get them to write a check. You know, I think it was the uglier one,” Kate bellyaches and turns her head to spit out that same piece of gum from earlier. “We can try on foot. Might be safer seeing as all the power’s gone, which means no street signals.”
“Well how far are we?” Stiles asks.

Claude says, “Fifteen minutes. If we run.”

“I’m game,” Kate says and cracks her neck. “I’m fast like a gazelle. What about you, buttercup?”

Stiles ignores the nickname (once again) and says, “I was on the track team in junior high. I think I can manage.”

“Then let’s get to it,” Claude says and darts off.

Kate flashes him a dangerous grin before she goes running after the feline.

Stiles has no choice but to follow. His anxiety only grows when he asks Kate for her phone and she reports that it went dead when the power went out.

Whatever Ricky and Carter did to Kira didn’t only affect the main power but apparently also every device that relies on it (wireless or not).

It’s worrying.

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If Eichen House is eerie during the middle of the day, it’s practically terrifying at night (and during a power outage no less). It looks like it’s home to the most terrifying nightmares imaginable. There’s fog ghosting over the grounds, giving it that real creep factor.

There’s not a cop car in sight.

Kate wipes a sheen of sweat off her forehead and runs her bloody fingers through her short golden hair. She manages to look both soft and feral at the same time.

Stiles looks away from her and at the black iron gate. His gut tugs low as warning bells ding in the back of his mind. There’s a whisper of a threat here, and it’s more then just what the Reyes Twins mean to do (if they haven’t already done it). He can feel something dark but he can’t name what it is.

Claude shrinks down into his normal size as an orange cat. Then he climbs Stiles like a tree and settles comfortably on his right shoulder to say (in Polish), “You feel the disturbance here as well, do you not?”

“I always feel something when I am here,” Stiles replies quietly. Switching back to English (because he feels like they’re being rude to Kate), he says, “Why? I’m not the shape-shifting feline. Shouldn’t I be asking you what you’re sensing?” Then he adds, “Get off my shoulder.”

Claude huffs but takes a springing leap onto the ground. “You’ve got the gift, Stiles. There’s no running from that.”

Stiles glares up at the full moon (spitefully wondering how his uncle would even know what gifts he has since he’s been absent all this time) before he slowly lowers it to the roof of the building. “We should get inside. It’s too quiet. What’s the plan?”

“Power’s down,” Kate points out as she cocks her head with narrowed eyes at the building. “Tell me — what happens when you put prisoners in an electrical dependent prison?”

Stiles sees where she’s going with this. “I’m guessing that Eichen House also acts as a holding place for the criminally insane. Which means we’ll be stepping into some kind of live action horror movie.
“Yay.”

“You’re not afraid of the dark are you?” Kate says looking at him with a smirk.

“In this town? Was that a real question?” Stiles counters. “Because I have a list, okay. A list of why it is a good idea to always be suspicious of the dark.”

“Read it to me later,” Kate replies as she cracks her neck again and her knuckles. “What does kitty hear?”

“My name is Claude,” grumbles Claude as his tail bristles. “I hear no screams if that’s what you’re asking. Faint heartbeats. I don’t smell gunpowder.”

“We should enter in through the kitchens. Stick together. Sweep every floor,” Kate decides. “You want to get to your dad, don’t you?”

Stiles does but he says, “I don’t think he’s in there.”

Kate lifts a finely arched brow at that while his uncle looks at him curiously.

Stiles sighs. “It’s — I have a feeling. A gut feeling, and he mentioned he might stop by but...he never confirmed it either.”

“It is possible that they might be making rounds in light of the power outage,” Claude supposes.

“Then what are we doing wasting our time here?” Kate wonders aloud.

“I still —” Stiles pauses and exhales roughly. “We still can’t let Ricky and Carter walk away with their dad.” Then he adds, “Plus, I sorta — there’s someone in there that I care about. I need to make sure she’s okay. She matters to me.”

Kate looks mildly disapproving but she makes no move to comment.

“If your father isn’t here, he’ll be elsewhere,” Claude says. “The hospital seems a feasible place to start. I can check if you want me to. There’s not much I can do here but to caution you both to be safe. Those Reyes Twins may still be on the premises. Don’t let them fool you.”

Stiles starts at that. He’s heard the expression before (from Lydia). “What does that mean?”

“Werecats are shapeshifters,” Claude explains as he straightens. His tail swings lazy behind his hind legs. “Not only in nature but in form.”

“Why does it sound like your implying that they’re some kind of chameleon?” Kate says, intrigued.

“I’ve come from a long line of hunters and I’ve never heard anything like what you’re suggesting.”

“It’s not a well-known thing,” Claude confesses. “It’s their greatest defense mechanism but also a well-kept secret. I only came by this knowledge when I arrived in Beacon Hills shortly after my nephew did.”

There’s more to that story. Stiles knows it. He files these questions away, however, and saves it for later. What he does say is, “Find my dad, please. I need to know he’s okay, and he should know that I am as well.”

Claude’s ears twitch and he gives a subtle nod before he sprints off into the fog until he can no longer be seen.
“I don’t trust him,” Kate says as she continues to watch the fog.

Stiles sighs and says, “I know. Me neither. And that says a lot already since both of us have pretty good instincts when it comes to people...or creatures.” He shakes his head. “It’s a little too convenient that he happens to get over his grudge with my mom, or that he happens to know what Kira is and that Ricky and Carter would come after her. Not to mention him knowing some random not really well-known fact about Werecats?”

“He’s working for someone,” Kate decides. “The question is: who?”

Stiles can’t say because he doesn’t have a clue, but he’ll need to find out. Until then, he’ll pretend to be the reluctantly fond nephew.

Keep your enemies close as they say.

“We should enter through the kitchens,” Kate goes on to say. “Like I said before. We stick together.”

“Yes.”

“This girl you’re looking for,” Kate goes on to say. “She really worth it?”

“Yes,” Stiles replies without thinking twice. “She’s my — her name is Lydia.”

Kate gazes at him for a long moment before she shrugs and says, “Okay then.” She strides towards the iron gates and shoves them apart. Then she grabs Stiles by the elbow and drags him to the west wing of the building, all the way to the back until they reach a pair of steel double doors.

“Not that I’m not impressed,” Stiles says lowly as he watches her drop to her knees and use a bobby pin to pick the lock. “But how exactly do you know the layout of this place?”

“Two things,” Kate grunts and she works the bobby pin furiously. “My family is paranoid as fuck, and we keep an archive of all the blueprints dedicated to each building in town. And secondly —” She stands and pushes the door open. “My mom became somewhat a resident here after I was born. I heard she had postpartum depression or some shit like that. Heard she shoved her own wedding ring down here throat and choked herself to death in spite of my old man. That’s a hell of a way to go if you ask me.”

Stiles can’t comprehend the casual way she just offers this intimate information. He doesn’t know what to say. He just lets her drag him inside as she materializes a mini flashlight out of what seems like thin air.

Kate is like a walking Swiss Army knife.

“Lydia’s room is on the fourth floor,” Stiles says as they make their way through the kitchens. He silently notes that there are pots and pans everywhere, food on the walls, flour all over the floor — obvious signs of a rampage. “There’s a woman here — Marin Morrell? Maybe you know her. She could —”

“No,” Kate says as they stride across the cafeteria and to another set of double doors. “Peter doesn’t trust her. So I don’t trust her by association.”

Stiles doesn’t get it. “But —”

Kate looks at him sharply and presses a hand over his mouth as she quickly turns off her flashlight.
Not even a moment later, two figures sweep by. They pause outside the cafeteria door and sniff.

“What is it? You smell something?”

“I don’t know. I can’t tell. It’s been so long. They stick us in those rooms with the scent dampeners to punish us. I smell everything now. It’s all too much.”

“Too much. Everything almost smells sweet. I’m so hungry. I could eat a nurse.”

“Why don’t we then? I think I saw the ugly one go this way.”

The two figures scuttles away with dark chuckles.

Kate waits a little longer before she lowers her hand from his mouth. “Wendigos,” she notes with a small frown.

Stiles balks. “Why the hell are there Wendigos here?” he hisses.

Kate hums and then smiles meanly at him. “Why don’t you ask your buddy, Morrell? After all, she runs this facility doesn’t she?”

Stiles doesn’t know. He never gave it a thought to who exactly was in charge. He didn’t think he had to. “Wendigos,” he mutters.

“Might be a running theme tonight.” Kate clicks on her flashlight and presses her small hand between his shoulder blades. “Stay with me, Tenderfoot. Fourth floor, right? We can’t get to your friend if you waste our time by freaking out.”

“You suck at comforting,” Stiles says between gritted teeth as his hands shake.

Kate blows out an impatient breath and puts her flashlight in her back pocket. She takes his hands and squeezes them as she says, “I’m not a nice person. I do not do nice things. I don’t care much to try. I’d rather be at home right now binge watching The Vampire Diaries, lusting over Damon and Stefan Salvatore for two very different reasons, and eating red velvet cake with vanilla cheesecake frosting while simultaneously texting Laura and Peter terrible dog puns for them to find the next morning when they’re in their ‘Werewolf hangover’ phase.”

“You watch The Vampire Diaries?”

“Don’t judge.”

“I’m not. I just —” Stiles laughs a little. “Okay. I am. I’m totally judging. This is what this is. This is me judging you.”

Kate gives him a flat look but the corners of her mouth are twitching. “Don’t think I wont kidnap you and tie you to a chair and force you to watch it from the beginning until you convince me you like it too.”

Stiles eyes widen a little in horror at that prospect.

Kate smiles meanly; her teeth are white and pristine. “There now. Feeling better?”

Stiles jerks at the realization that his panic attack has passed. “How did you —”

“My brother. My older brother,” Kate explains. “When we were younger, our dad would take him out on some ‘hunting trips’ and he’d come back all freaked. So I researched how to — you know
what? This isn’t important. You don’t need to hear about my fucked up childhood. Let’s just do what we came here to do.” She shoves herself through the double doors and aims her flashlight to the other end of the hall. “Come on.”

Stiles follows her as they move through the dark and eerily silent hall. When they reach the end, the reception area is in view, and through the opening of the u-shaped front desk is a chilling scene.

A male and female Wendigo are tearing into a male nurse with their teeth and claws and holy god is that a spiked tail?

Stiles makes a silent gagging noise at the unmistakable sight of intestines (and a kidney) and yanks Kate back into the shadows. “They’re eating him!” he hisses and he winces as the sound of the male nurse choking on his own blood. “The door to the stairwell is across the room. How do we edge that way without being seen?”

Kate clicks off her flashlight as she whispers, “There’s no way. So I’ll provide the distraction —”

Stiles starts to protest.

“— yes, yes,” Kate continues on, ignoring him. “This ain’t my first rodeo. I’ll distract them and you go find your little friend London —”

“Lydia.”

“— whatever. Stop interrupting me and take this.” Kate gives him the flashlight. “You still have that switchblade I gave you?”

Stiles takes a moment to grope himself before he nods when he feels it in his back pocket.

“Good. Go for the eyes,” Kate instructs as she points towards her own with two fingers. “It’ll give you an ample chance to run like your ass is on fire. Be careful. In and out. It’s too risky at this point to try and put a fork in Ricky and Carter’s plans, so let’s be smart about this.”

Stiles swallows down his uncertainties and nods.

Kate steps away and straightens the line of her shoulder. She cracks her neck and her knuckles with a sigh before shaking out her hands. Then she puts on a cocky smirk as she swaggers into view.

“Now I’m all for a juicy burger, and occasionally I indulge in the rarest of steaks now and again, but this? This is a little much, right?” she says.

The two Wendigos stiffen and their heads pop up as their pupil-less eyes glimmer like a grey flashbulb. They snarl threateningly, exposing a dangerous amount of sharp, pointy teeth stained with blood like the rest of their face.

“Oh I’m sorry. Am I interrupting a family meal?” Kate drawls sarcastically. “Is this date night for you two?”

The two Wendigos climb to their feet and start stalking towards her.

“Go!” Kate shouts at him as she runs to the opposite side of the room where there’s a set of double doors that lead out to the garden.

The two Wendigos sprint after her without sparing him a glance.

Stiles quickly scrambles to the other set of doors that lead down a short hall and finally to the
stairwell. He sets his foot on the first step and slips with a mangled swear as his knee makes painful contact with the edge of a step. He puts his hands out before him to prevent from smashing his face in with the rest of the steps and gets a slippery grip as the flashlight goes flying with a loud clatter.

“What the hell?” Stiles pants as he straightens once he regains his balance and looks at his wet hands. He squints, but it’s so dark he can’t really see what’s on him. Though once he locates the flashlight, he aims the light at his left palm to see some kind of clear liquid. “What the hell?” he says again and sniffs at his hand, wincing at the strong scent of gasoline.

Stiles aims his flashlight at the floor to see a trail of it from the short hall he’s come from, and he also notes that it’s been poured all over the steps.

Someone is trying to burn this building down.

“Okay, that’s not good,” Stiles says, concerned. He quickly climbs to his feet and does his best to make it to the fourth floor. He slips a few times but there’s no serious injuries (give or take some bruises and scrapes). But the moment he steps foot on the fourth floor he knows something is off.

The ceiling lights are actually flickering (as is his flashlight) which is weird because the power is out everywhere else in the building. Not to mention the fact that every time Stiles exhales his breath fogs into the air and become visible.

It’s the temperature.

The temperature is off on this floor and it feels like walking inside of an active meat freezer.

Stiles exhales heavily and carefully makes his way to the end of the hall where Lydia’s room resides. He keeps a watchful eye out, even when he reaches the room and pulls the door open.

Lydia is huddled under her blankets, whimpering as the room flutters with supernatural wind.

The flashlight in Stiles’s hand goes haywire, blinking on and off like it’s doing Morse code.

Lydia shudders under her blankets as the frame of the bed shakes like it’s possessed.

“Lydia,” Stiles says, edging towards her. “We should get out of here.”

Lydia moans and whimpers as her shoulders shake.

“We really have to go,” Stiles urges when he reaches her. “Lydia.” He reaches out to touch her shoulder but a pale hand shoots out from under the bed and grabs him. He gives a startled cry as he springs back and falls on his butt. He scrambles with the flickering flashlight and aims it at the bottom of the bed.

Lydia is staring at him with watery eyes and trembling lips. She shakes her head at him and looks up at the bed shaking over her.

Stiles understands with a small lurch of horror that there’s something else in the room with them.

“Lydia,” he manages as calmly as he can. “You need to come over to me right now.”

Lydia presses a hand to her mouth and lets out a silent sob as she shakes her head.

“I know you’re scared,” Stiles says and tries to keep a wary eye on the mysterious whimpering figure on the bed. “But we have to go. I don’t know how much longer we have before this place goes up in flames. So please — come to me.”
Lydia continues to tremble like a leaf caught in the throes of a gusting wind.

"I'm not leaving without you," Stiles promises and even risks looking away from the creature on her bed to catch her eye. "Never."

Lydia inhales sharply with another sob but she nods, even though her shoulders are shaking. She darts a nervous glance up at the shuddering bedframe above her before she looks to him.

Stiles gets on his knees from where he is by the opposite wall and offers her a hand and what he hopes is a reassuring look. "I'm not leaving without you," he swears again and swallows as his heart races. "You can do this."

Lydia sniffs twice and nods again. Slowly she crawls from under the bed and towards him.

The covers on the bed fly off the mysterious figure at the same moment the lights of the room buzz to life and burn almost blindingly bright.

Stiles shades his eyes as Lydia crawls into his arms and hugs his body. He blinks and blinks and stares in shock at what he sees.

There’s an exact replica of Lydia standing on the bed with a cocked head and a disturbing smirk.

“Ricky?” Stiles guesses, remembering what his uncle said about Werecats.

Not-Lydia shakes her head slowly.

“Carter?” Stiles guesses again as he climbs to his feet and helps Lydia as well, who’s shaking like crazy as she buries her tearfully flushed face on the side of his neck.

Not-Lydia shakes her head again.

“Well, okay then,” Stiles says, voice cracking with fear. “We’re gonna go now and let you be all creepy and doppelgänger like.”

Not-Lydia cocks her head to the other side with a calm grin.

“So, yeah,” Stiles continues, edging to the door with Lydia in tow. When they make it, they run like hell. He kind of forgets that the stairs are oiled up with gasoline, so he slips (and because Lydia has such a tight grip on his hand, she slips too).

Both of them tuck and roll down the last flight of stairs until they end up on their backs on the floor with wounded sounds.

Stiles groans as blinding pain explodes at the base of his skull. He squints in pain before his breath hitches when he notices Not-Lydia lurking at the top of the stairs with a blank face as the lights flicker overhead. He wiggles onto his side to get a sight on Lydia and frowns when he notices she’s not moving at all. “Lydia,” he calls urgently and tries to pick himself up. “Lydia.”

Whistling.

There’s whistling.

Stiles stiffens because that tune — he knows it. It’s the same one he found himself whistling randomly. The same one Isaac said he heard the night of the fire.

The whistling draws closer, along with a splashing sound.
Stiles cranes his neck and winces as he glances towards the short, dark hallway. He hears footsteps, and whistling, and splashing. He turns to look back at the top of the stairs and his frown deepens when he sees Lydia’s doppelgänger is gone — the stairwell bathed in shadows again.

The footsteps pause and there is a long dramatic sigh. Followed by, “Con la luna a est e il sole ad ovest, non posso girare la testa senza vedervi.”

Stiles grunts as a foot nudges his shoulder, forcing him onto his back and he’s left blinking and squinting up at Carter. He knows it’s Carter because of the claw marks scarrring his mouth.

“This is not where Ricky and I last left you, Stilinski,” Carter notes before tossing a red gas container off to the side. He flicks open a silver lighter. “Bad timing once again. This place is getting turned to ash. You’re too late by the way. My brother and my father are long gone. And with the kind of smoke this place is sure to get when I light it on fire, I doubt anyone will care seeing as how they’ll be too busy with trying to put the flames out and keep it from spreading to the rest of the town.”

“Why?” Stiles says. “Why are you doing this?”

Carter shrugs and then glances sharply towards the steps. It should say something that he looks concerned. “Time to go,” he decides and tosses the lighter into the puddle of gasoline. Then he does something really confusing — he picks Lydia and Stiles up and carries them out of the building. He dumps them in the street as the flames start crawling out the windows and around the building.

Dawn is beginning to spread across the horizon in orange and red banners.

"Family is the most important thing, and we must always protect the Pride," Carter mutters, like it's a mantra — he says it with the same weight of importance as Ricky had.

Stiles watches Carter stare at Eichen House with a complicated expression before he shifts into a massive black panther (the size of a bear) and flees just as police cars, ambulances, and fire truck sirens ring off in the distance.

Lydia groans and it distracts Stiles into action. He shuffles over to her quickly and pulls her into his arms.

Kate appears, drenched in blood (looking dangerous but beautifully wild), right in the moment Stiles remembers to worry over her whereabouts. “You all right?” she asks, popping on a new piece of gum (where does she even get this stuff?). “How’s L'Oréal?”

“Lydia,” Stiles corrects as the police cruisers and fire trucks park all around them. “I don’t know. We fell down some stairs.”

“Classic.” Kate moves out of the way as some paramedics swarm to Stiles and Lydia after they eye Kate’s bloody form. She just waves them off and crosses her arms.

Stiles assures the paramedics that he’s fine as well and urges them to look after Lydia. He lets Kate pull him to his feet and out of the way. He watches as they put Lydia on a stretcher.

In the background, firefighters are working furiously to extinguish the flames but it’s obvious that it’s all in vain.

A wolf howls in the distance.

Stiles shivers with a sense of familiarity at the sound.
Stiles spends the rest of Monday morning at Lydia’s bedside (clothes still reeking of gasoline) at the hospital where Kate sees him off and mutters something about needing about six million showers. Lydia has a concussion and so he’s doing his best to keep her awake by reading her all of the ridiculous, trashy tabloid articles he can get his hands on.

Lydia doesn’t really respond all that much. She keeps her gaze fixed to the windows with her knees hugged to her chest.

The town’s power returns some time around noon.

His father finds them maybe an hour later.

Stiles stands and greets him with a relieved hug.

“Hey, hey, I’m okay,” his dad reassures, cupping a hand over the back of his head. “How about you?”

“Few scrapes and bruises,” Stiles mumbles into his dad’s shoulder and he let’s himself enjoy the comfort of his dad’s arms before he pulls away. “Nothing broken.”

His dad nods. “Good.” Then he says, “One day, huh? I ask you to stay out of it and you manage just one day? Should I ask about why you smell like a gas station?”

Stiles rubs the back of his neck sheepishly.

His dad looks to Lydia (who’s still staring at the windows). “How is she?”

“Got to her in time,” Stiles supposes. “The doctors said she had a concussion. We fell down the stairs but —” He tries to find the right words. “Dad. He’s gone. Erica’s dad. He’s gone.”

“I know,” his dad says with a heady sigh. “I put an APB out on him and his sons.”

Stiles frowns and crosses his arms as he presses his lips together with a furrowed brow.

“What is it? I know that face. What are you thinking?” his dad says, ducking his head to catch his gaze.

“I don’t know,” Stiles admits. “I’m conflicted.”

His dad’s eyebrows lift. “About?”

“Something Ricky said to me. He was convinced his dad was innocent and — I don’t know,” Stiles says with a shrug. “He didn’t kill me last night when he could’ve. And Carter saved me and Lydia — well I don’t know what you would call that. It’s all kind of a grey area. But, what am I supposed to think? What if we were wrong? What if we were intentionally being misled?”

“There’s no mistaking that they were bad people, son,” his dad says. “They’ve got criminal records. They may not be directly involved but they’re involved nonetheless. Ines Reyes could have possibly been the key to solving this whole mess.” He loosens his tie. “I meant what I said the other day. You let me worry about this, okay?”

Stiles bites the corner of his bottom lip and nods.

His dad claps him on the shoulder with a grateful look before he turns to grab a chair and drag it over
to Lydia’s bedside. He sits with a relieved sigh and gestures for Stiles to do the same. He says, “Tell me what happened tonight. The full story.”

Stiles obliges.

His dad’s forehead continually creases as his eyebrows climb higher and higher as the corners of his mouth and eyes wrinkle with disapproval and exasperation throughout Stiles’s colorful narration.

“Did you know?” Stiles asks at the end of it all. “About Claude? About mom?”

His dad shakes his head. “Your mother was secretive about a lot of things. Mutually, though, the family thing — neither of us liked to talk about that. That is to say, she never talked about hers and I never talked about mine,” he admits. “She has photo albums if you’re — if that interests you. They’re all in the basement.”

Stiles nods.

“As for your uncle,” his dad goes on to say. “His reappearance does seem to be a little too good to be true. Be careful around him.”

“I know,” Stiles says.

A nurse patters around in constant intervals to check in on Lydia and also to try and convince her to eat. “Please, sweetheart,” she says as places the orange food tray on Lydia’s lap. “You need to keep up your strength.”

Stiles fingers twitch with an itch and he pauses in what he’s saying to his dad to address the nurse, “She doesn’t like tuna.”

The nurse blinks at him. “My — mistake. Sorry.”

Stiles stands and snags the cherry jello from off the tray as the nurse halls it away. “She’ll eat this,” he decides and offers it to Lydia.

“That was the first thing I tried. She won’t eat —”

Lydia takes the jello from Stiles and removes the film on top. She starts to eat it without another word.

The nurse stares, flummoxed. “Well then,” she says, slightly perturbed. “Maybe she likes you better then me.”

Stiles shrugs, unfazed.

The nurse exits without another word.

Stiles can feel his dad staring at him. “What?” he asks as he sits back down.

“I wasn’t aware you and Ms. Martin were such close acquaintances,” his dad merely replies.

Stiles feels his cheeks burn. He’s reminded that he’s keeping some vital details from his dad, but he can’t spill some of it without having to spill it all. So he doesn’t, even though he hates lying to his dad. “I — she’s my friend.”

His dad narrows his eyes. “How’d you know about the jello thing?”
Stiles opens his mouth to reply before he realizes that he didn’t really know. It was — intuitive. He presses his lips together and tries not to fumble at his slip up as he shrugs casually.

“Uh huh,” his dad says, skeptical. He leaves it alone however. “We should get going. Melissa’s at the house now sitting with Scott and Isaac because I asked her to pick him up from school since I couldn’t, and I don’t want to make her wait any longer.”

Stiles frowns and glances at Lydia. “But what about —”

“Sheriff Stilinski.” Ms. Morrell is standing in the doorway.

His dad stands. “Ms. Morrell. I’m glad you could make it back into town on such short notice. I hate that I had to pull you away from your other business. But seeing as how Lydia is in your custody and has no other family on record for emergencies like these, well. You understand.”

Ms. Morrell just shakes her head and folds her hands in front of her. “It’s no trouble at all,” she assures. She glances at Stiles. “Hello, Stiles. Thank you for looking after Lydia. She’s lucky to have a friend like you.”

Stiles just eyes her with a frown and nods.

“We were just leaving,” his dad says.

“Just a second. I want to say goodbye,” Stiles says.

His dad squeezes his shoulder before aiming another nod to Ms. Morrell as he slips past her and out the door.

“Can I trust you?” Stiles asks point-blank once they’re alone.

Ms. Morrell lifts a finely arched brow. “Quite the question, Mr. Stilinski. May I ask what brought it on?”

Stiles stares at her. Then he offers her his hand. “Shake it.”

Ms. Morrell meets his stare dead on.

“Shake it,” Stiles urges.

Ms. Morrell makes no move to touch him. Then she does.

Stiles feels nothing but soft skin of her palm making contact with his own.

Ms. Morrell says, “Are we done?”

Stiles frowns but he doesn’t let go. He’s trying to sense something (anything) but he has no idea how this all works. “Peter doesn’t trust you.”

“And you trust Peter Hale?” Ms. Morrell scoffs. “There are things you don’t know about him.”

“There are things I don’t know about you,” Stiles counters cleverly. “Like what your role is in all this.”

Ms. Morrell squeezes his hand (not painfully) and takes a step closer until they’re toe to toe. “My duty is to protect Lydia. You can trust that.” She lets his hand go and moves to take her place at Lydia’s bedside.
Stiles lets the words settle in his mind and he combs over them to an obsessive degree before he turns to Lydia. He walks over to her and takes her right hand, pressing her knuckles to his lips.

Lydia does glance at him then. Quietly, she says, “Everyone has it. But no one can lose it.”

Stiles lowers her hand and opens his mouth to ask what she means.

“Goodbye, Mr. Stilinski,” Ms. Morrell interrupts before he can get a chance.

Stiles shoots her a look but he backs off. “Eichen House was burned to the ground. What will you do now?”

“I’m sure we’ll figure something out,” Ms. Morrell calmly replies.

Stiles backs away but pauses at the door. “Those people — the patients. They weren’t really patients were they? They were something else.”

“What they are, is all over town now,” Ms. Morrell corrects. “That little arson stunt Carter Reyes pulled saw to that. Now my brother and I, along with your father and his deputies, have to get to work with rounding them all up before they can do some real damage.”

Stiles rolls that around in his mind.

“You’re father is waiting for you, Stiles,” Ms. Morrell reminds. “You should go to him.”

Stiles frowns and turns to leave.

“And by the way,” Ms. Morrell adds. “I’d be careful about putting your trust in Peter.”

“You made that clear already,” Stiles mutters.

“Yes. I did.” Ms. Morrell adds, “Ask him about Isaac’s family. Ask him about the night Isaac and his family was almost burned alive.”

Stiles slowly turns to face her.

“Isaac’s told you about the whistling, hasn’t he?” Ms. Morrell goes on to say. “I can see it in your eyes you know where I’m going with this. If the Reyes were responsible for the Lahey fire, well. Who do you think pointed them in that direction? Who do you think was responsible for the Hale fire?”

“I don’t like what you’re implying,” Stiles says lowly and swallows. "That somehow Isaac's family was involved in the fire that killed Peter's family. And that Peter was vengeful enough to return the favor."

Ms. Morrell shrugs. "The truth can be ugly but it is still the truth."

Stiles walks away. His mind is reeling and it’s causing a headache to build between his eyes.

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Melissa, Scott, and Isaac are sitting out on the porch steps when Stiles and his dad roll up into the driveway.

Scott and Isaac ambush him with hugs and hound him with questions as soon as he steps foot out of his dad’s squad car.
His dad escorts Melissa to her car and they talk about whatever grown up things they talk about.

Stiles tries to fill Scott and Isaac in as best as he can, while darting glances over at the Yukimura house as he fidgets anxiously.

“What about your uncle?” Scott questions. “Where is he?”

“I don’t know,” Stiles admits with a sigh. “But I figure, he’ll turn up whenever he feels compelled. Like always.”

Scott nods.

Isaac frowns.

“Scott, honey,” Melissa calls from across the lawn where she’s parked on the curb. “Let’s get going. *Quiero cocinar y terminar la cena antes de irme a la casa para el trabajo.*”

Scott nods at her before he hugs Stiles again. “Text me. I’m glad you’re okay. You give me grey hairs, dude.”

“Join the club,” his dad states in good humor as he sweeps by and heads towards the house.

Stiles rolls his eyes but he smiles reassuringly at Scott.

Scott jogs over to his mom’s car and climbs in before she drives off.

Isaac waits until Melissa’s car has turned the corner at the end of the street to say, “You left your phone.” He takes Stiles’s hand and slaps the phone onto his palm.

Stiles grips at it. “Yeah. Sorry.”

“I couldn’t sleep.” Isaac looks upset. “I had to worry about you. I didn’t like that.”

“I’m sorry,” Stiles says.

Isaac shakes his head. “You don’t get to leave me behind.”

“Isaac —”

“Listen,” Isaac continues. “We’re family. You matter to me as much as dad does. I’m not going to sit around, twiddling my thumbs while you and dad go toe to toe with the bad guys. I can’t lose —” He pauses and flexes his fingers. “You two are all I have now.”

The words punch into Stiles’s heart like a freight train.

Isaac backs away and grabs his bike, climbing it and peddling away quickly.

Stiles watches him disappear down the street as those two military planes pass overhead with a sonic boom. He inhales and then exhales slowly as he makes his way to the house. He reaches the steps and pauses before he decides to take a hard left and start towards the Yukimura house.

Mr. Yukimura is the one to answer when Stiles rings the doorbell. He says, “You must be Stiles. Kira’s told me so much about you.”

Stiles rubs the back of his neck. “Is she — is she home? Is she okay?”
Mr. Yukimura looks a little glum. “She’s fine. Exhausted. But fine.” Then he steps outside and closes the door softly behind him. He says, “I want to say thank you. You risked your life for my daughter and that is a debt I fear I’ll never be able to repay.”

“Kira is my friend,” Stiles says.

Mr. Yukimura smiles sadly. “I know. She needs that,” he supposes. “But she’s upset right now, and it’s going to take some time for her to really accept everything. I’m sorry to say that she’s asked me to send you away.”

“Oh.” Stiles swallows down his hurt. “Okay. I — yeah, no. I understand. I’d be mad at me too.”

“Just give her some time,” Mr. Yukimura says before he returns inside.

Stiles scrubs his hands over his face before he makes his way to his own house. He feels so heavy as he drags himself into the upstairs bathroom, taking care to strip down to climb into the shower. He stays under the hot spray of water for a long time until he’s pink and flushed. It’s not until the water threatens to get cold does he pick up the black soap and uses it to scrub himself clean.

He climbs out of the shower, and picks up the trail of clothes he left (along with his phone) and tucks away in his room. He turns his phone off and puts it on the charger by his nightstand before he slips on some boxers.

Exhaustion crashes into him and he collapses on his bed over his covers without a thought and he’s out like a light in the next moment.

He wakes up on his back staring up at a silver sky with a bright lavender sun. The muscles in his body feel relaxed, and the grass underneath him feels as soft as a bed of feathers. He sits up slowly and realizes that he’s in field of glittering flowers (and they’re humming). There are pieces of cotton floating everywhere, along with fireflies and gold-red butterflies. There are bumblebees hopping from tulip to rose as a mixture of many-colored birds twirl high in the silver sky like they have no plans to ever land and go on merrily singing to each other.

There are children running in the fields with sparkling frocks made of different flower petals. They have lovely rosy red cheeks, glimmering eyes, and short curly hair with pointed ears. They’re being chased by elderly people with long translucent wings the color of a soap bubble caught in a ray of sunlight and these elders are holding flutes and harps as baby antelopes, deer, and lambs trail behind them as though they’re enamored.

There are many-colored elephants lazing around, thinking nothing of the chimpanzees that climb all over them as they playfully chase a pack of bear cubs. There are more sheep and lambs frolicking in the fields with the smallest of children, who are eating slices of apricot.

Even the wind carries a tune to it as it caresses his skin gently. He sits up and watches all the beautiful people sweep and run through the fields, picking flowers, singing songs, while others eat on fruits like plums and cherries and grapes (sometimes even feeding each other) or dote over their animal companions.

Stiles swallows as tears build up in the corner of his eyes, not from sadness, but from a joy he’s never ever felt before because for some reason this feels like — like home. His body vibrates in ecstasy and his heart sings as his mind clings and cleaves to the truth: this is home.

Stiles climbs to his feet and faces a tall, stately woman in the loveliest robes of champagne gold. Her eyes burn like golden embers and her cherry red hair (which reaches to her waist) is interwoven with
all kinds of runestones and beads and flowers. Her pointed ears are pierced with different bands of sliver. Her smile pierces his stomach and makes his knees tremble.

“Welcome to Faerie,” she says in a voice so clear and lovely like the tinkling of bells. “I am the Lady of the Garden.”

Stiles feels his legs give out on him and he falls to his hands and knees before her.

The Lady of the Garden lowers herself to his level. “You need not be afraid,” she goes on to say, touching his cheek with a soft hand. “We are your people.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Stiles admits softly, trembling like a leaf. “Why am I here?”

“Who can say? Perhaps it was your soul that cried out for us. When the spirit thirsts, what water in the World of Man can quench it?”

“What?” Stiles says and tries to make sense of everything.

The Lady of the Garden bends forward and kisses his forehead. When she pulls away, his face is burning. “While you slumber, your mind wandered to us, as it once did in times past. Though I doubt you remember since you were just a babe then — not even yet nine months away from us before Fate sent you to your mother’s womb. I even held you in my arms during those moments. Your smile was breathtaking.”

Stiles watches as she pulls a loaf of sweet bread out from the folds of her sleeves and offers it to him. He accepts it and takes a bite. It’s unlike anything he’s ever tasted. His tongue trembles and tears spill over his cheeks.

The Lady of the Garden takes his right hand and strokes it soothingly.

Stiles sniffs and says, “I don’t know what I’m meant to do. Everyone depends on me — well, I mean, that’s what it feels like. They want so much from me and I don’t know what I’m supposed to give. It’s like they know and I don’t. I want to know who and what I am.”

“Eat your bread,” the Lady of the Garden says and pulls him closer until their sides are flushed. “I will tell you what you are. You are energy. Pure energy. And everything around you flows on a current that is attracted to you.”

“I’m a magnet,” Stiles mumbles between bites. He tries to feel sourly about it but the taste of the sweet bread makes it impossible to feel anything other than good vibes.

“You are Faerie kind. We are the Keepers of the balance between famine and feasts,” the Lady of the Garden explains. “There are those of us who dance at funerals, and there are those of us who give the gift of life wrapped in the gold paper of wisdom and acceptance. You don’t have to try to know who you are, you simply must be. Use your night dreams as sources of communication with us, and when you wake, hold your respect for plants and animals as teaching spirits. They commune so often with the Faceless.”

“Who are the Faceless?” Stiles asks and thinks nothing of when a small lamb treks over and eats the rest of his sweet bread from his hand before curling onto his lap.

“The Great Gardeners. They take on dozens of forms from the Sun and the Moon to the Sea and the Mountains. They are anything and everything, but not —” the Lady of the Garden pauses as the sounds of trumpets ring in the distance.
“What’s that?” Stiles asks as the lamb scrambles away and runs off.

“Time for you to return,” the Lady of the Garden says as she stands and helps him to his feet as well. She removes a runestone from her hair. “I do not know when you should visit us again, but here is my advice to you. Make a garden for yourself using stones and water and prayers. This garden will give you the answers you need. Find yourself a Conduit. Close your eyes.”

Stiles has more questions but he does as she asks. He feels her lips touch his forehead and she murmurs a sacred prayer (“May the Sun and the Moon fight for your affection.”) before she slips the runestone in his palm.

Then there is nothing but darkness.

Stiles eyes snaps open in the next moment and he’s staring up at his own ceiling. His right hand twitches around something and he looks down and sees the runestone from his dreams. He swallows and picks himself up before he rummages through his dressers for some clothes. The dream starts slipping from his memory like sand until he can hardly remember much of anything.

He slips on some pajama bottoms and a cotton t-shirt before he makes his way out of his room with bare feet. He pauses in front Isaac’s door (takes note of the missing doorknob) and peers inside to find it empty. He frowns and moves to look in his dad’s room. He finds it empty too.

Stiles sighs and continues to the stairs, down them, and into the kitchen to find a note from his dad on the magnetized whiteboard stuck to the fridge that reads: Working late. Made dinner w/leftovers in the oven. Isaac is staying at Boyd’s. Pick him up from school tomorrow, please. Let me know if you’re not up to going to school so I can call it in. Text me if you leave the house at any point for anything. Love you.

Stiles uses his fingers to erase the message and draws a spilled bucket of popcorn before he moves on to the basement. He flicks on the light and jogs down the steps, ignoring the smell of dust and cardboard. He carefully maneuvers around his mother’s piano to the box in the corner labeled ‘Misc. Memories’. He sits down and pulls out a maroon colored album with his mother’s name scribbled across it.

The first few pages are full of old baby and toddler photos of his mother and her twin brother. The resemblance is uncanny. The only difference (outside of gender) is that Claude is always smiling, no matter what, but his mother isn’t. Sure, she starts off smiling sometime into infancy, all the way up to age six (gap-toothed and all) and until the age of eleven, his mom and Claude appear to be inseparable. But sometime around the age of twelve something changes. She just stops smiling and Claude is nowhere to be seen.

The last photo of the album is of his mother sitting under the shade of an oak tree. She’s wearing blue jean overalls and a white bucket hat. She’s thirteen and she’s staring into the camera blankly with deep purple bags under her eyes, and in her lap is an orange kitten and somehow Stiles just knows. The kitten in her lap is her brother, and Stiles may not yet know why, but she had something to do with his unusual transformation.

He closes the album and reaches in for another one.

This time it’s his mother from the age of fourteen to eighteen. He notes that eventually her eyes get lighter again, and her smile returns — but his uncle Claude makes less and less of an appearance (even as a feline), until finally he disappears altogether. But in his place there’s another, an older woman. She’s tall and lean with strawberry blonde hair and kind green eyes. She looks just like his Grandma Lynette and he’d always kind of known that she had a twin sister but supposedly they
weren’t on speaking terms for whatever reason. His mom never mentioned her and he doesn’t ever remember seeing her come around.

Stiles idly wonders if she’s Lydia’s grandmother — if this is what links him and Lydia as cousins (as family). He rubs his thumb across the seam of his bottom lip before he yanks the photo free and pockets it. He’s not sure what he means to do with it.

Stiles tucks the albums away and his fingers bump painfully into the edge of a photo frame. He hisses and wrenches his fingers away to shake off the ache before he reaches in again to pull out the chilly metal frame.

It’s a framed photo of him and his mom (he’s about six at the time) — one of the last they took together. They’re in the kitchen, covered in flour and chocolate frosting with matching blue aprons: his mother has her hands cupped over his small shoulders as he does a horrid job of spelling his dad’s name out over a rather burnt and lopsided cake.

Stiles smiles with watery eyes. He remembers this. His mother had tried to make a cake from scratch for his dad’s birthday and Stiles had insisted on helping. Only he wasn’t much help at all. He’d been this bundle of twitchy energy, on the side of too enthusiastic, not to mention clumsy.

But his mom — she hadn’t cared. She never cared. She just indulged him and smiled at everything he did as earnestly as he could like she thought he was perfect.

Stiles sniffs as tears spill over his cheeks and he carries the photo up to his room to places it on his nightstand right next to his digital clock. Then he scrubs his face dry using one of Derek’s stuffed wolves before exhaling shakily.

Sometimes he misses her so much.

Stiles drops the wolf onto his bed and turns on his phone. He’s got a lot of missed calls and texts (but none of them are from Peter or Derek or Cora or Laura). He sends out a group message to Allison, Jackson, Boyd, and Malia to fill them in on everything that happened last night. Each of them replies with more questions and he tries to field them as best as he can (while also reassuring them that Lydia is in good health). Though most of their questions have to do with why exactly his uncle is a cat.

Stiles would like to know that himself.

He spends the rest of the night in a quiet and dark house holed up in his room at his work desk, researching things about Faeries, Kitsunes, Doppelgängers, and Druids (on both his tablet and his laptop).

“Should you not be in bed? Children your age have times when they have to go to bed.”

Stiles jumps and almost chucks his tablet at his uncle (who’s curled up on his window sill). “I closed that window,” he grumbles sourly in the same dialect.

“I opened it,” Claude counters (in Polish) as he turns up his nose and stretches. “Did you hear what I said before?”

“I don’t have a bedtime. That’s so third grade,” Stiles says as he sets his tablet down beside his laptop, thinking carefully about how he wants to play this. He goes for casual. “I heard you met my dad. He didn’t freak like I did, did he?”

“No. He just looked at me and said, ‘Huh’ and then moved on,” Claude admits like he’s still
perplexed by it. If he’s pretending at being earnest then he’s a real good actor. “I have a feeling he
doesn’t like me, though.”

“You did tell my mom to drop dead some odd years ago. Pretty reasonable reaction considering,”
Stiles reminds him with a frown as he switches back to English. “I’m not even sure if I like you.”

Claude huffs and jumps down onto the floor before jumping up on the edge of Stiles’s bed. He curls
his tail around his feet. “Your bed reeks of the Hale boy,” he points out but it also sounds like a
prying question.

“Is there a point to this visit?” Stiles replies instead.

Claude mumbles something before he sighs and says, “You’re supposed to plant it.”

“Plant what?”

“The runestone. That particular type of runestone,” Claude clarifies as he glances to said stone
(which is sitting on the edge of Stiles’s desk) with curious yellow eyes.

Stiles grabs it and turns it over in his hands. It’s opaque colored and smooth with a long-stemmed ‘F’
with a crooked top and an open ‘O’. Obviously this is important and his uncle is trying to achieve
something here. He says, “How do you know that?”

“I have my sources,” Claude supposes vaguely. “I think your mother had one too when we were
younger. She planted it and it later became a tree she would talk to constantly.” He sounds a little
annoyed and jealous. “It also had the same symbol. I think I remember her telling me that it
represents strength, growth, fertility, magic, etc. Our Aunt Lorraine would have been the one to give
it to her. Can’t say where she got it from though.”

“So you’re saying I should take this —” Stiles holds up the runestone. “— and put it in the ground.”

“I don’t think I’m fond of that skeptical tone of yours,” Claude drawls as he straightens and begins a
lazy walk to Stiles’s open window. “It’s made of bone, you know. And magic. So. Bone-magic.” He
jumps up onto the windowsill. “Let’s go prove how right I am.” Then he’s gone.

Stiles frowns after him and then stares at the runestone before he makes his way out of his room,
down the steps and out the back door.

Claude is pouncing around, most likely hunting for the perfect spot.

But Stiles has already made up his mind. He glances at the Yukimura house before quickly looking
away before his mind can wander. He turns so he’s facing his bedroom window. He shapes his
hands into a frame and aims it at his window and then the ground and then his window and then the
ground again. Then six more times before he backs up three steps and drops to his knees, using his
hands to dig a hole.

“Why do you use your hands in such an uncivilized way?” Claude complains (in Polish). “Aren't I
the animal between us?”

“You don’t have to understand,” Stiles replies, not as annoyed with his uncle as he could be. It's the
feel of damp, cool soil on his hands that keeps him at peace — complacent almost. “I want to plant it
here.”

“Why?”
“Why not?”

Claude sighs and moves to perch on the edge of the trampoline.

Stiles ignores him in favor of digging a hole as deep as he can before he drops the runestone in and covers it up. He doesn’t honestly think anything will happen (he’s merely humoring Claude). He stares at the spot for a long time before he says, “Now what?”

“Well, if memory serves correctly,” Claude drawls, stroking the tip of his tail under his chin. “Your mother put her hands over the dirt after she was done and closed her eyes. Maybe she was praying to the stone. Telling it what she needed it to do. Try that.”

Stiles huffs. “You make it sound like it’s so easy. She was a Witch with magic. I'm just a...” He’s not even sure.

“You’re a Virtue,” Claude assures, filling in the silence. "Anything is possible for you.”

“One day,” Stiles grumbles as he puts his hands over the fresh small mound of dirt. “One day someone is going to explain to me what that really means.”

Claude shushes him. “Concentrate.”

Stiles rolls his eyes but closes them as he exhales. He waits and waits. Then he says, “Nothing’s happening.”

“You’re not really trying.”

“That’s very true,” Stiles admits as he resists the urge to open his eyes. “This seems really ridiculous. How am I going to make a stone — oh, excuse me — a piece of bone sprout into a tree?”

“Faith.”

Stiles makes a dying sound. “This is so corny. If faith was that powerful, I would have had the ability to fly years ago.”

“Stiles, please,” Claude begs and the desperation in his voice sounds genuine.

So he is after something.

Stiles’s frown deepens.

Claude says, “Just try. Once. That’s all I’m asking.”

Stiles sighs heavily and says, “Fine.”

"Good. Then do I have your permission to see?"

Now Stiles is really confused. "See what?"

"Your tree."

"Yes, I mean, I guess. Look, this is just crazy as is. But I don’t know what I’m supposed to be doing.”

“Pray to it. Prayer is about respect — given and received. Tell it what you need.”
Stiles needs a tree.

A tree he can climb and settle on like the shoulder of an older relative. A tree he can find shade in during the summer when it gets too hot to be inside of the house (which it surely will because his dad doesn’t believe in air conditioners). A tree that grows peaches and apples because he likes those best. A tree with leaves that could change color depending on his mood. Like a mood ring.

Mood tree.

Yeah. That’d be pretty cool.

He wonders if his mother’s tree was anything like that. He’d like to have a tree like she had. Maybe it’s him reaching desperately for some kind of connection but —

Stiles stiffens as the palms of his hands grow warmer and warmer. He opens his eyes as his fingers twitch against the soil while yellow and gold fireflies litter his backyard and—

What?

Stiles whips his gaze around to see dozens upon dozens of fireflies swarming the air all around him as his hands grow hot like they’re burning with a fever.

Claude’s nose twitches as he tracks the fireflies movements curiously but with a strange look of selfish satisfaction.

Stiles opens his mouth to question him but the soil under his heated hands vibrate with a pulse (like a rapid heartbeat) and his ears twitch with the sound of whispers. They come from everywhere and it becomes all he can focus on until he realizes that it’s the fireflies.

The fireflies are whispering.

Stiles stumble back as the ground shakes and suddenly, before he can even blink, it cracks open with a beam of light before there is nothing but smoke. When the puff of smoke settles, and the light extinguishes, a wide, fully grown camperdown elm tree sprouts out of the ground.

Poof. Just like that.

Just like magic.

This tree has a fat trunk and even fatter branches with purple-blue leaves and a lush mixture of peaches and apples. He steps a little closer and notices there’s a big triquetra carved into the lower middle of the trunk almost like a face. He reaches out and touches his fingers to it and it vibrates with warm energy.

“You’ve got the magic touch.”

Stiles yelps and wrenches his hand away before falling back on his butt with a grunt.

The face of an old woman takes shape in the triquetra. She looks exactly like the lady in the tree in Pocahontas.

What. The. Hell.

Stiles would find it hilarious if he weren’t so busying staring with a wide-eyed look of confusion and exasperation. “My magical tree is talking to me.”
“This magical tree has a name, silly child,” the lady in the tree harrumphs.

“Child? No, no I’m definitely older than you,” Stiles points out as he stands and brushes the grass off of himself, which doesn’t do much but smudge dirt into his pajama since he dug a hole in the soil with his bare hands and why is he arguing with a tree. He’s delirious. Obviously. He keeps going anyway, “I literally just planted you a second ago so you’re what? Not even a minute old.”

“Kids these days,” she bemoans as she shares a conspiratorial look with a highly amused Claude. “They think the concept of time and age holds precedence in matters of magic.” She turns her gaze back onto an indignantly bewildered Stiles. “I’ll have you know, tiny fae, that I happen to be one of the oldest woodland spirits on Earth and you should be so lucky to have me. Why, I’m over six thousand years old! You’re fifteen! Just a wink in my eyes. You should appreciate the fact that I came when you called. And in such a town as this! Lots of bad energy here, yes, a lot indeed. But you and I will fix this. We most certainly will —”

“Uh…”

“— though you don’t have much of a garden to begin with. We’ll fix that too. We’ll work on that first! You’ll need to draw in some friends. Oh, I do so love the little animals. Chipmunks to be exact. But we have to draw them here. We have to make this holy ground. Plants some nice daisies and posies. And as for my name, you may call me Nana. I think I’d like to be your grandmother.”

“Uh…”

“Now, sit. Sit. We have so much to talk about. You have questions and I have answers,” Nana supposes. “We should — hold on. What time is it?”

“Midnight, I think,” Stiles faintly replies.

“Oh goodness me! Don’t sit! Stand! Stand! Well this won’t do at all. You have school in the morning,” Nana exclaims. “Off to bed.”

“What? But you said that — and anyway how do you know I have school?” Stiles asks, swatting a firefly away from his nose.

“Do be careful!” Nana chastises as the firefly hovers near her left cheek. “Terribly sorry, Alferradawn. You must excuse my young ward. He’s spent way too much time with these brute Humans. He’s no idea about his impact on nature. He’s just now starting to dabble in forest magic —”

“Forest magic?” Stiles croaks.

“— Faerie kind are usually so considerate,” Nana continues, completely ignoring him in favor of talking to a firefly named Alferradawn. “Why I remember about seven hundred years ago when my spirit took up residence in a willow tree on the edge of this lovely little pond at the behest of a Virtue of Humility, and she was so sweet. Nasty temper at times but overwhelming modest.”

Stiles clears his throat really loudly.

Nana sighs. “Give me a moment, Alferradawn. I have to send this one to bed.” She aims her attention at Stiles. “I know everything there is to know about you, my dear. We’ve touched energies. We’re bonded through the magic of nature. I’ll explain more once I gathered my strength. It might take a little while since I’m about a hundred and fifty years out of practice, so be patient with me. Now run along, dearie. I need my rest as well.”
Stiles watches Nana’s face disappear and the big triquetra takes her place. His fingers twitch and when he looks down, he notices that his hands are no longer burning.

A gush of wind sweeps by and the fireflies scatter as though they’re no longer interested in watching the current developments.

Stiles looks up and gazes thoughtfully at the full moon sitting fat and heavy like a grey egg in the night sky. Then he turns and heads in the house, unsurprised to find that his uncle has beaten him to his room.

“Are you having a meltdown?” Claude questions (in Polish).

“Please stop talking to me.”

“We have a lot of catching up to do,” Claude supposes as he tracks Stiles’s movements.

Stiles is attempting to look for a clean set of pajamas. He replies, “Do we? Because there was a moment when you made it sound like you’ve been watching me this whole time my dad and I have been living here. What else could I tell you that you don’t already know?”

“You’re upset with me,” Claude realizes (switching back to English), but he doesn’t seem particularly concerned.

Stiles slams his drawer shut and exhales quietly. “I’m frustrated because no one is giving me any answers about anything.” He turns to face his uncle. “I’m just — frustrated.”

“It’ll all make sense soon,” Claude promises.

“I still can’t figure out why after all this time you decided to make an appearance in my life,” Stiles questions boldly and it’s unnerving how steady Claude’s yellow eyes remain as if he has no remorse over the situation. “There’s so much that doesn’t make sense.”

“I know.” Claude’s nose twitches. “Just trust me. Things will work out the way they’re supposed to.”

Stiles isn’t comforted.

“Okay,” Claude says. “Get some sleep.”

Stiles watches his uncle disappear out the window. His mind starts swimming with questions, but all he does is head to the bathroom to take a shower so he can climb into bed and try not to wonder about any of it at all.

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Stiles can barely pay attention at school the next day. It’s only made worse by the fact that it’s Tuesday. He’s never cared much for Tuesdays.

He spends most of his class periods in a seat by the window so he can watch lightning splash across the sky in like white veins among the grey clouds as his teachers drone on and on in the background.

It’s been thundering all day (but it’s not strong enough to be considered a storm yet).

Stiles doesn’t catch sight of Kira (though its not surprising that she would miss out on school after the ordeal she’s been through). But it makes him anxious. He’s afraid that he’ll lose her as a friend because of all the secrets he’s been keeping. She’s no doubt piecing it all together.
He builds up an apologetic speech in his mind, organizes it, memorizes it, and acts it out over and over in his head as he shoots her a few texts that read: *Can we talk? I’m sorry. I want to explain.*

Kira never responds back (unsurprisingly).

Stiles sighs and puts all his books away as he heads to lunch. He doesn’t feel much in the mood for eating but he still carries his tray over to the table Kate’s commandeered in the school’s cafeteria.

Kate steals his jello like she always does and says, “What’s eating you? You look all —” She makes a circular gesture with her hand. “— frowny.”

Stiles shrugs. “I’m tired, I guess. Maybe slightly stressed as well.” He waits a moment before he adds, “Where is everyone?”

“Full moon lasts for three days, so…” Kate takes a moment to shove a spoonful of jello in her mouth. “Started Sunday night, and tonight make’s three. We might see them tomorrow but they usually take a week off of school to recover every month anyway.”

“Yeah, I always thought that was weird,” Stiles remarks, and he had, way back when he was still completely clueless about their furry alter egos. “I think Kira hates me.”

Kate snorts around a spoonful of jello. “You freshmen. Always so dramatic.” She waves her spoon around aggressively as she adds, “Listen, that girl couldn’t be anymore in love with you even if Cupid shot her in the ass with a bazooka.”

“What?”

“Kira’s. In. Love. With. You,” Kate states, looking at him like he’s six years old.

“What?” Stiles chokes.

“Well maybe love is a strong word,” Kate supposes, but mostly to herself, though there’s no doubt she’s taking great amusement in the way Stiles’s face burns hotly as he splutters. “Let’s call it your atypical crush. She’s super sweet on you. How could you not know?”

Stiles drops his forehead to the table with a loud thud and a groan as he curses his own ignorance.

Kate snickers evilly. “Holy shit. You really didn’t know.” She laughs a little more. “I always thought Peter was exaggerating.”

Stiles frowns at the mention of Peter’s name. He’s unkindly reminded of the unpleasant conversation he had with Ms. Morrell and her accusations.

“You certainly understand now,” Kate goes on to say. “So, yeah. She doesn’t hate you. Probably pissed. But not hating you.” Then she adds, “I’ll eat your sandwich if you wont.”

Stiles straightens when his face has resumed its normal color and he pushes his tray towards her. “I don’t understand how you never buy yourself food. I think we both know you can afford it.”

Kate shrugs with a smirk. “Other people’s food always taste better.”

Stiles just raises an eyebrow as his pocket vibrates. He fishes for his phone and answers it when he sees it’s his dad. “Dad, what —”

“Son, I understand that my presence at home has been scarce,” his dad interjects with an eerily calm tone. “But I’m sure I would have remembered a tree growing in our backyard — you want to shed
Stiles flounders for a moment. It’s completely slipped his mind that he’d have to explain the appearance of a full-grown tree to his dad. “Uh, well — you see — the thing is — that — um.” He scrambles for something to say. “Remember the story of *Jack and the Beanstalk* and the mother was like, ‘Oh no, we’re starving’ and Jack was like, ‘Poverty sucks’ and then the mom decides to sell the cow — which to be honest, I never got because if they were so hungry why didn’t they eat the cow or make a market out of the milk? Like there’s a boat load of burgers and steaks and cheese and yogurt and everything and they want to sell the cow — although maybe I’m not remembering it correctly because it could be that they weren’t hungry and they —”

“*Stiles…*” His dad sounds like he’s gritting his teeth.

“The point is,” Stiles quickly says. “Reject the beans. Eat the cow. Okay bye there goes the bell talk to you later!” He quickly puts his phone back on vibrate.

Kate wipes at the corners of her mouth with her fingers as she looks at him.

“Don’t say it,” Stiles pleads and drops his forehead to the table again. “I panicked.”

“The other night we went toe to toe with all manner of vicious creatures and you can’t fess up to your dad about a tree?”

“I said don’t say it!” Stiles complains before slamming his eyes shut with a groan.

Kate snickers. “You’re such a hot mess.” Then, “Come help me pass out these flyers for Laura. She’ll know if we haven’t done it.”

Stiles lifts his head and shoots her a narrowed eyed look. “Now who’s scared?”

“I know when to pick my battles,” Kate says with a shrug as she stands. “I’d rather wrestle a Wendigo ass-naked and lubed up with vegetable oil then subject myself to Laura’s neurotic campaign nagging.”

Stiles accepts the plastic container full of white pens that have (oddly enough) Laura’s face plastered on them above the words ‘Vote for Laura’. “Where does she get this stuff?” he wonders aloud. "And why does she always look down in these pictures?"

“It’s Laura,” Kate merely says. "And Werewolves and cameras don’t really mix. Ask them about it sometime. They'll explain it better than me.” She swaggers away and corners a freshman. “Hey, you. Virgin!”

“I’m not a virgin!” the freshman squeaks, appalled.

Kate snorts as she marches toward him. “Oh, honey. Give me a break. With that haircut and those shoes? Virgin. You gonna vote for Laura or what?”

The freshman looks equally offended and nervous.

Stiles does not envy him at all. He smiles at a group of girls sitting at a table. “Vote for Laura,” he says and starts handing out pens.

They giggle amongst themselves and shoot him these moony-eyed looks.

Stiles pretends not to notice (because now he’s starting to catch on and it’s just weird to have to
accept that maybe he might be a great deal more attractive then he thinks).

His phone vibrates wildly in his pocket as he makes his rounds throughout the cafeteria (but he pretends not to notice that too).

His dad is going to strangle him.

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“You still mad at me?” is the first thing Stiles asks as he rolls up to the curb where Isaac and Boyd are conversing quietly over some small matter.

Isaac pauses in what he’s saying to Boyd to address Stiles with a, “I’m over it.”

“You don’t sound over it,” Stiles points out as he leans forward on the handlebars of his bike.

Isaac shrugs. Then he says, “Dad keeps texting me about a tree. That make any sense to you?”

Stiles straightens and flushes. “Long, long, long story,” he swears. “How was school?”

“Fine. You’re deflecting,” Isaac says knowingly. He turns to Boyd and does this elaborate handshake that Stiles is not jealous of at all. “See you later.”

“Text me,” Boyd replies with a nod. “Think about what I said.”

Isaac shakes his head and grabs his bike before peddling off.

Stiles follows after him. “What was that about?” he asks when he can’t stave off his curiosity.

Isaac huffs like he’s not even surprised. “Got invited to a party.” Then he says, “No. Actually Boyd got invited to a party by some rich kids who live in his neighborhood in Prairie Hills and he invited me.”

“You should go,” Stiles urges.

Isaac shoots him a look and slows down a little. “People aren’t really my thing.” He picks up speed so he can circle around Stiles like a shark. “Besides, all they’d do is stare at me and my scars and whisper things they think I can’t hear.”

“Then don’t go,” Stiles decides, fingers white-knuckling over the handles of his bike. He swallows down some anger. “When you say that they’re whispering —”

“Forget it. It’s nothing,” Isaac mutters as he circles Stiles again. “Boyd will accuse me of being a hermit if I don’t go.”

“It’s up to you. I could come too,” Stiles offers.

Isaac snorts. “Oh yeah. Let me bring my cool older brother. That’ll win me popularity points,” he drawls.

Stiles gives his best offended look (even though he’s secretly amused). “I can’t tell if you’re being sarcastic or not. Is this because of me? Am I really that much of a bad influence?” Then he adds, “My uncle —”

“The cat,” Isaac clarifies unhelpfully as he peddles beside Stiles.
“My uncle,” Stiles continues pointedly. “Mentioned something about how a Werecat’s greatest defense mechanism is to do the whole chameleon thing. Though I wonder if he meant with animals or like Raven in X-Men because that would be so cool —”

“You have to kill them first,” Isaac interjects. “Animal. Man. Doesn’t matter. Someone or something has to die first. That’s the only way it can be done. That’s the price you have to pay — the blood price. My dad and my older brothers would —” He gets a little pale at his slip up. Then he dashes off, peddling with inhuman speed.

Stiles is struck with an alarming realization, and he’s forced to play catch up until he actually manages when they both make it to the house.

Isaac throws down his bike and runs up the steps, into the house, nearly crashing into their dad as he makes his way out.

His dad looks confused for a second as Isaac scrambles inside but then his face turns severe as he catches Stiles by the arm at the top of the porch steps when Stiles attempts to follow after him. “Oh, no, no, no,” his dad says. “You and I? Talking. Now. Explain the tree.”

“Did you know Werecats could duplicate the things they kill?” Stiles says instead because, at the moment, it’s the most important issue.

“No. What —”

“Dad, I need you to listen to me,” Stiles urges and he’s relieved when his dad shuts his mouth. “Bank accounts.”

His dad stares at him.

“The murders? The victims. Yeah, you need to check their bank accounts like right away. Find the timestamps for any withdrawals or transfers. Put it alongside their time deaths, which need to be verified again since Ines Reyes was the one to do the last coroner’s report. Can you get ahold of Deaton to do that, you think?”

His dad just nods.

“Okay, good. If my hunch is right, you’ll find what you need to put this case to rest, and dad I swear —” Stiles holds up his hands when it looks like his dad is going to start firing questions. “— I swear I’ll tell you everything and anything you want to know. Everything.”

His dad gives him a measuring look. He points a finger at Stiles and says, “Everything.”

Stiles nods agreeably.

His dad looks partially unsatisfied as he grabs at the radio mic clipped to his shoulder and says, “This is Sheriff Stilinski. I need all the bank records linked to case number 4226-9.”

Stiles steps out of the way and watches his dad stride towards his cruiser as he continues with his demands. He waits until his dad drives off before he glances briefly at the Yukimura house and then quickly away. He enters the house and goes in search of his brother.

Isaac is curled up on his bed with his back facing the door and it looks like he’s trying to make himself small.

Stiles grips the doorframe and opens his mouth to say something.
“Don’t,” Isaac says hoarsely, even though his back is to Stiles. He somehow just knows. “Please don’t ask me about it. About them.”

Stiles’s breath hitches when Isaac turns his head to look at him from over his shoulder with watery eyes.

Isaac looks so broken and when he turns away, he starts sobbing quietly.

Stiles feels a swell of rage burst between the teeth of his ribcage and he fishes for his phone out of his pocket as he throws his book bag into his room before stomping down the steps. He dials out and slams the door behind.

“What do you want, buttercup?”

“I need you to come to my house and keep an eye on my brother. I have something I need to do,” Stiles grits out between clenched teeth as his fingers twitch.

“Sorry. Not sorry. I don’t do babysitting,” Kate drawls. “Kinda getting a pedicure right now anyway, so —”

“I’ll owe you,” Stiles swears. “Please.”

Kate gives a significant pause on the other end. “You do realize that I know what you are.”

“I don’t care.”

“Which is both incredibly stupid and noble.” Kate inhales and exhales loudly. “Okay. I’ll hold you to this debt. I’ll be there in five. My feet are a mess, I hope you know.”

“Thank you,” Stiles says and marches towards his bike. “I really appreciate —”

“Yawn. Bored now. Don’t think because I was in the middle of a pedicure that I’m some sort of gooey, bleeding heart. Go do what you need to do. I’ll look after Isaac.” Kate waits a moment before she adds, “Also. If you ever offer anything like what you just gave to me to anyone else, I’ll punch you so hard in your goddamn teeth, you’ll swallow them.”

Stiles fumbles to catch his phone when it slips in shock. Even as a threat, it still sounded like concern and that kind of thing from Kate is jilting. He’s not surprised to see she’s already hung up and he can’t help but to think how scarily alike she is to Peter.

They'll make horrifying parents one day.

He shakes his head and pockets his phone as he climbs his bike. He lets his anger build up again as he navigates through town by mere memory before he ends up on Parrish’s doorstep. He throws his bike off to the side, rings the doorbell and waits.

Parrish (predictably) answers with a shotgun, and once again, he’s shirtless but (strangely enough) covered in smudges like he’s been cleaning the inside of a chimney with his body. He quickly lowers it in confusion when he sees who it is and he unlocks his screen door. “Stiles. Is Isaac —”

“You don’t get to ask me that question anymore,” Stiles interjects, livid.

Parrish lifts both brows. “Okay. I’m sensing you’re upset with me. Did I do something?”

Stiles clenches his fists and stares at Parrish for a long time. “What was his name?”
“I’m sorry. I don’t understand.” Parrish frowns. “What was who’s name?”

“The name of the face you’re wearing,” Stiles bluntly clarifies. “Because it sure as hell isn’t yours. Am I right, Jordan Kyle Lahey?”

Parrish stiffens and he goes pale with guilt and panic.

“Wow,” Stiles says and he can’t even believe what he’s seeing. “So it is true. No wonder Isaac would freak or glare at you. You’re wearing someone else’s face. Someone you killed and you — oh my god, none that even matters because you left him. You left Isaac all alone and he almost died. I could —” Stiles cuts himself off and shakes his head. “Forget it. I don’t even know why I thought you were one of the good guys. Clearly I’m as oblivious as everyone says I am.” He turns to walk away.


“Don’t!” Stiles snaps and moves to push him away but both his hands grow hot and a bioluminescent beam of blue light shoots out of his palms and sends Parrish flying back with such brute force.

Parrish groans from where he lands with a hard thud on the cement sidewalk.

Stiles stares in shock at his shaky, glowing hands.

Parrish lifts himself up on his elbows and gawks at Stiles with a furrowed brow.

Stiles swallows down his panic and tries to mentally will his hands to stop glittering with bright energy; colors like the inside of a raw cluster of a blue amethyst crystals.

Parrish climbs to his feet and raises his hands in earnest surrender. “I think you better come inside,” he urges.

Stiles shakes his head as he stares at his sparkling hands.

“Stiles,” Parrish says softly, easing towards him carefully. “Come inside, please. Just until we can get you calm. You could be seen. Please.”

Stiles stares at his hands and swallows before nodding.

Parrish herds him into his town house and sits him on his couch. “I’ll make some tea,” he says and tucks away in his kitchen.

Stiles stares at his hands and wonders if they’ll ever stop shaking.
seven

Stiles’s hands keep flickering like a flashlight on its last bit of juice. He supposes this is because he’s mentally willing his hands to stop doing that shimmery glow-y thingy it’s doing right now. When that doesn’t work, he decides to just concentrate on something else. So he focuses on the interior of Parrish’s house or the fact that it smells like virgin olive oil.

It’s strange.

Parrish’s living room is kind of off-putting. It’s because nothing in here seems like it belongs to him, but rather maybe his grandparents or the previous owner’s. The couches are maroon-colored and wrapped in plastic.

That’s pretty old school.

The low carpet is an ill-fitting mustard color. There’s a sixties looking TV crammed in the corner on the right side of the room between two large potted plants (that are no doubt fake). There’s a grandfather clock settled against the wall across from him on the wall that separates the doorways that lead to the kitchen and the laundry room (which he also notices has some old school washing machines that look like they came right from the eighties).

There are no pictures hanging on the manila colored walls. There’s a short set of carpeted stairs with a dark wood banister that leads up to what Stiles can only assume is the second floor. Perhaps the most notable thing is the fact that there are huge vases plotted along the seam of where the wall meets the carpeted floor.

Adjacent to the front door of the house is an open door that leads to a really small ½ bathroom with nothing but a shiny aquamarine toilet and a simple sink. He won’t even get into what the tiles on the floor and on the wall look like because honestly he literally feels like he’s stepped back in time and he’s floating somewhere between the mid-sixties and the late eighties.

Parrish returns with a steaming red porcelain mug and he places it in Stiles’s hands before he sits down in the plastic-covered armchair across from him with a squeaky sound.

Stiles stares down into the dark tea as the heat of the mug causes the insides of his palms to itch. His hands aren’t glowing anymore (he’s not even sure how he made them stop) but they’re still shaking. He can’t stand the silence or deal with the way Parrish is looking at him like he’s a bomb. So he says, “What?”

“I don’t mean to be rude, you know, staring at you. But. Your eyes. Before. They were glowing too,” Parrish says as he keeps his back ramrod straight with his hands folded over his lap. Must be all that military training, Stiles supposes. “They were like drops of honey caught in the sunlight.”

Stiles winces and lowers his cup of tea from his mouth. “Yeah — we’re not having this conversation while you’re shirtless. You look like you’ve been cleaning out a chimney but the weird thing is that I don’t see one.” And he doesn’t. Stiles has already swept his gaze through the room for one. “Unless you have one upstairs?”

Parrish blinks and looks down at himself as though realizing for the first time his state of undress or his ashy and blackened skin. Then he stands quickly and holds himself stiffly as his hands clench into fists. “Sorry. I’ll just go — sorry.” He turns and disappears up the stairs.

Stiles lets himself relax into a sigh and blows a breath over his tea in hopes to cool it. He takes
careful sips as he thinks about what Parrish just said. His eyes — they’d been glowing too. What did that even mean? He’s left wondering for a long time before Parrish makes a reappearance.

Parrish tugs a black t-shirt on as he saunters down the stairs and back over to the armchair with some well fitted dark jeans, no shoes and a frown. His skin looks a lot brighter and his hair is still a little wet and disheveled, which means he’s taken a shower.

Stiles straightens and sits his empty mug on the coffee table.

Parrish darts his eyes down at it and furrows his brow like it bothers him, but he says nothing as he folds his hands over his lap. His shoulders rest in a straight line as his back remains perfectly straight. He’s staring at Stiles’s empty cup with a complicated expression. “I’ve never killed anyone,” he admits after some hesitation. “I know how this looks and I know how this sounds coming from me, even with me being in the army, but — it’s the truth.”

Stiles rubs at his right eyebrow as questions build between his eyes in the form of a thick cloud. He opens his mouth to say something but they both get momentarily distracted by the crack of thunder, which causes the lights in the house to flicker before the vibrations of thunder follow immediately after. He frowns and gnaws on the fingernails of his left hand before he mutters, “What happened to you?”

“The things I did — the things my father made me do,” Parrish starts and then stops as his gaze flicks over to his windows. His eyes are tracking each flash of lightening happening outside. “I can’t sit here and name every single inhumane thing I’ve done for a cause that my parents believed in, but I will take responsibility in the part I played for what happened to Isaac.”

“The fire that almost killed Isaac? You know something, don’t you? You know who did it and why?” Stiles asks as he sinks back into the couch with a weary frown. “Please be direct with me. I can’t take any more vagueness. I’m at my limit.”

“Isaac isn’t my brother,” Parrish explains, eyes still pinned to his windows.

Stiles raises his eyebrows at that.

Parrish runs his fingers through his golden hair and he looks nervously haunted. “How much do you know about Werecats?”

“I know that they can replicate the things they kill. And also there seems to be this unspoken feud between Werewolves and Werecats that makes them not want to get along.”

“We can get along,” Parrish supposes. “It’s just extremely hard to do.”

Stiles says, “Is there something else I should know?”

“Females aren’t the only ones that can...reproduce,” Parrish delicately states as a slow flush starts to spread across his handsome face. “Werewolves are either born or bitten. Werecats, on the other hand, can only be born. That’s why both genders carry the ability. More chances for our race to survive.”

“Oh — not that this crash course in Werecat sexual education isn’t fascinating or anything but, um, it’s just that I’m not sure I get what you’re saying. What does that have to do with Isaac not being your —” Stiles lets the sentence die before he can even get the question out. It clicks into place.

Parrish drags his gaze away from the windows and to Stiles’s hands (which have begun shaking again). “It happened when I was fourteen. There was — I had an altercation with Mayor Argent. I
won’t go into any details but I’m sure your imagination can fill in the gaps since I’m being very
delicate about how I’m phrasing ‘altercation’.”

Disgust, horror, and pity sink like stones in Stiles’s gut and his initial anger washes cold. “Isaac is
your son.”

“He doesn’t know,” Parrish explains, looking pained. “My dad didn’t want anyone to know. So he
and my mom covered it up. They always blamed me for how it happened. But after my mom died, I
wanted to claim Isaac. My dad wouldn’t hear it.”

“So…Mayor Argent is Isaac’s, uh, other parent?” Stiles asks because he just — he wants to know so
much more about this crazy situation.

Parrish looks like he’s swallowed something particularly unpleasant. “Yes.”

Stiles gapes. He can’t help it. “Does — does Argent even know?”

“I don’t know. Chris once told me that —” Parrish stops abruptly. “I shouldn’t be talking about this. I
don’t — I’m just trying to make you understand that when it comes to Isaac and I, it’s not so black
and white. My dad felt disrespected but he was too prideful to call Mayor Argent out on what he’d
done to me. It’d be like admitting a weakness and my dad hated the Argents enough to never spit in
their direction, let alone admit to...that. It was the family shame.”

Stiles tries to swallow but he can’t.

“I came so close to telling someone so many times but I’d think about how my dad threatened to
send Isaac somewhere far where I’d never be able to see him again and I just — I kept my mouth
shut,” Parrish goes on to say and he looks a little pale. “When I turned eighteen, I joined the army
because I couldn’t stay. And Isaac kept looking at me like I was his — when I’m really — I just
couldn’t. Isaac was four and all he knew was that I was the older brother that left him. I made my
mom promise she’d look after him until I could make other arrangements. But then she died and I
couldn’t come home because of my accident. Isaac was stuck with my dad and my older brother.”

“You heard that your dad and brother were in jail,” Stiles reasons quietly. “That’s why you came
back.”

Parrish gives him an odd look. “They’re dead, Stiles. Them going to jail was just another cover-up
the old sheriff fabricated before he died. I’ve been trying to figure out what happened. I came back to
make things right. When Isaac turns thirteen, it’ll be time for him to Present. I want to be there for
him when it happens.”

“He doesn’t know,” Stiles realizes with a growing sense of alarm. “He thinks you’re just his older
brother who abandoned him and he doesn’t know. God — Mayor Argent is his — and you have to —
you have to tell him.”

Parrish looks upset. “I’ve been trying —”

“You need to try harder. His birthday is in September and I don’t know how this whole ‘Presenting’
thing works but better he gets prepared for any unexpected complications now rather than later,”
Stiles says firmly. “Better he hears the truth from you than from anyone else. You owe that to him.
He thinks — he thinks he doesn’t have anyone else but me and my dad.”

Parrish nods stiffly.

“What about —” Stiles indicates to Parrish’s face. “— this whole situation?”
“I don’t know. I wasn’t lying before when I said I’ve never killed anyone,” Parrish swears. “I was doing a search and rescue mission in Papua New Guinea four years after I enlisted and it’s — I don’t really remember what happened. They sent me in a building because there were some hostages and a bomb — it’s all kind of a blur. I’ve tried to look it up on my own but oddly enough, it’s marked as classified. I would need top security clearance to see the details of the mission. The only credentials that fit for that would be the President of the United States.”

Stiles sags back against the couch. “Whoa.”

“Look,” Parrish continues. “All I know is that I woke up three years later in a hospital in Hong Kong as a coma patient with this face and no identification of who I was or how I even got there. I can’t change it, which means that, whoever this is, sacrificed their life for mine.”

“Is that what makes the difference? If the person is willing or not? What if they die unwillingly?” Stiles asks trying to absorb this new information.

“There’s some folklore about it. How the life of one being can be exchanged for another but for only a short amount of time in order to maintain the laws of nature. For Werecats, whoever and whatever they kill, it’ll only last the duration of a New Moon. If the life was willingly given, it’s permanent. Who you kill is what you become. Entirely.” Parrish adds, “Which brings me to asking you for a slight favor.”

Stiles indicates for him to continue.

“Actually, it’s better if I show you,” Parrish decides and he stands. He leads Stiles to a door in the kitchen adjacent to the pantry door and the fridge. He pulls it open and yanks on the metal chain of the light bulb overhead.

Stiles grabs his elbow before he can descend and says, “You realize that this is how every horror movie starts right? I don’t need you to show me where you bury the bodies.”

Parrish furrows his brow and replies, “Stiles, I’m not going to kill you or do anything indicative of a homicidal tendency.”

Stiles lets him go. “Okay.”

Parrish marches down the old, creaking wooden steps as he says, “At first I thought he was Human.”

“Your meat suit?”

Parrish winces. “He’s not,” he says, avidly ignoring Stiles’s phrasing. “Trouble is, I don’t know what he is — was.”

Stiles pauses on the last step as he takes in the sight of iron wall that splits the basement down the middle.

Parrish unlocks it from the outside and pulls the door open as its hinges groan with a metal screech.

Stiles squints and notices that the inside has walls comprised of charred bricks.

Parrish goes inside and stands in the middle of this isolated room. “I built this three days after I moved back. It took me a week or so. It’s a — personalized furnace.”

“This took you a week?” Stiles parrots in shock.
Parrish rubs the back of his neck sheepishly. “I don’t really sleep much these days. I don’t really ever seem to need to. Side effect, I think.”

“Why?” Stiles asks. “Why build this? What’s the purpose of it?”

“I’m always cold,” Parrish admits with a complicated expression. “The only time I’m not cold is when I set myself on fire.”

Stiles blinks and he’s suddenly reminded of earlier when he first approached Parrish (and how he looked as if he’d been cleaning the inside of a chimney). “Do I even want to know how you figured that out?”

Parrish rewards him with a self-deprecating grin and shakes his head. “My throat gets sore, and the only way to relieve that is to drink olive oil.”

“So that’s why it smells like that upstairs,” Stiles reasons as he approaches the doorway of the furnace. “So — fire and oil helps?”

Parrish nods. “I’ve heard from your dad that you’re pretty good with putting names to certain mythical creatures and I thought maybe you might be able to help me.”

“What do I get out of it?” Stiles questions, quite seriously.

Parrish says, “A few weeks before my dad died, he sent a postcard to one of my P.O. boxes and all it said was, ‘Isaac isn’t Argent’s only bastard.’” He looks a little upset having to phrase it word for word.

“Mayor Argent has more kids?” Stiles says, trying to piece it together.

Parrish gives a solemn nod. “I know you and your dad have been trying to figure out who to link to the recent murders. I think I might be able to help with that.” He goes on to say, “I didn’t say anything before because I wasn’t sure until only recently. I stumbled across encrypted folder meant for some under-the-table birth certificates. I knew they had to be because Dr. Tina Mahealani forged Isaac’s, labeling my dad and my mom as his birth parents — why wouldn’t she have done a few more if the circumstance called for it?”

Stiles scrubs his face tiredly as he takes it in. That name seems familiar to him. “Isn’t that Danny’s mom?”

“Yes. She helped me give birth to Isaac at her private clinic, and then helped my parents cover it up,” Parrish clarifies. “Like I said, I don’t think I was the only one she was helping that way. Apparently Mayor Argent got around in the Were community — but only to send some kind of twisted message that I’m still trying to figure out.”

Stiles fights down a wave a nausea. “Danny’s mom knew about Weres?”

“Yes. She helped me give birth to Isaac at her private clinic, and then helped my parents cover it up,” Parrish clarifies. “Like I said, I don’t think I was the only one she was helping that way. Apparently Mayor Argent got around in the Were community — but only to send some kind of twisted message that I’m still trying to figure out.”

Stiles fights down a wave a nausea. “Danny’s mom knew about Weres?”

“She was familiar with Were-kind, and got a lot of business because of that. But it was always mostly concerning pediatrics and obstetrics. After she died and Danny ended up in the hospital, I looked through some of the backlogs of her medical files for the year that Isaac was born to see if there was a connection. That’s when I found that folder meant for all the forged birth certificates and, here’s the thing — they’re all missing.”

“All of them? Like someone figured out what you figured out and got to it before you did,” Stiles says and then it dawns on him. “It’s Mayor Argent, isn’t it?”
“There’s an encryption signature, very vague and a little sloppy, but I managed to worm it out. That’s how I knew someone else had already been there. But when I traced it back, it led me to an IP address.” Parrish continues, “Danny’s IP address. The same night his family was slaughtered. Whoever he was helping decided to tie up some loose ends. I can’t say if Mayor Argent is directly responsible but he’s playing some key role.”

Stiles willingly follows Parrish to the underside of the basement stairs where he’s keeping a small dark grey safe locked with an electronic keypad. He politely looks away as Parrish punches in some numbers and the safe door pops open. Then there’s some shuffling of papers.

“Lydia’s father, Edward Martin, who was also Mayor Argent’s personal lawyer, handled all the legal discrepancies in the placement of the children and helped to keep it under wraps. He had some kind of privacy clause contract. I’m guessing that’s because, like me, the other parent of Argent's kids were underage since Gerard’s known to have those sort of tastes.” Parrish pauses for a moment and steps back before closing the door. In his hand is a small black jump-drive. “There’s a missing link that I don’t get. Something to do with the Hale fire and why Ines Reyes tried to cut out his tongue to avoid saying anything.”

“Peter,” Stiles mutters as he suddenly remembers. “Ms. Morrell said something to me the other day. She told me not to trust Peter — that he had something to do with the Lahey fire.”

Parrish frowns and he looks thoughtful for a moment. Then he says, “Peter’s a dick. But he’s not — he’s smarter than that. We may have our differences, and our past, but I can honestly say that I don’t think he can be blamed for what happened to my dad and my brother or Isaac.” He adds, “Ms. Morrell has her own agenda, I think.”

“What makes you say that?” Stiles blinks when Parrish slaps the jump-drive in his hand and he jolts when their skin makes contact, causing a surge of white-hot heat to sweep through his system in the instance of a second.

Parrish doesn’t seem to notice. He continues, “All those files I have on there. I’ve been reading and collecting any important files dated to the past thirteen years. Basically compiling a databank of information that would help me figure out what’s really going on in this town. I read about Lydia’s ‘hiking’ accident and one of the things that stuck out to me is how Lydia’s parents filed a restraining order against Ms. Morrell because her therapeutic treatments were heavily on the extreme side, and Lydia’s mother in particular expressed concern. It’s all very vague details but I just thought it was strange that Lydia’s managed to end up in her custody.”

Stiles feels a headache build between his eyes and there’s the strange taste of gold pressing on the back of his tongue. “I need to think about all this. My mind is muddled and I need more time to process.” His hand clenches around the jump-drive. “Are you really giving me this?”

“In confidence, and faith,” Parrish confirms. “I trust you’ll keep it safe. And I also trust that you’ll help me figure out what I am.”

“I barely understand what I am,” Stiles admits tiredly but he white-knuckles the jump-drive anyway. “But I’ll try and see if I can point you in the right direction.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Parrish responds. “You should get home. There’s a curfew now because all the residents of Eichen House are on the loose.”

Stiles quietly wonders if there’s any information about that place on the jump-drive. “Can I ask one more thing? Actually, two more things.”
Parrish nods but he moves to climb the stairs.

Stiles has no choice but to follow. “What’s the deal with you and Peter?”

Parrish snorts bitterly but there’s not mistaking the flush on the bridge of his nose. “There’s no...deal. We have — we had —” He shakes his head with a frustrated sigh. “It’s a lot of unresolved issues between Peter and I.” The flush is gone now but he looks uncomfortable as he walks Stiles to his door. “He’s the one that told me about the fire. That my dad was dead. He told me to come back. So I did — without saying I would or when that might be. I'm sure he resents me for that, among other things. And as much as I would like — it’s not — it can’t be how it used to be between us. Not that it matters since there's Kate.”

Stiles is really confused. "What does Kate have to do with it?"

Parrish grows noticeably silent.

“What about Isaac?” Stiles asks, deciding to change the subject because Parrish looks so uncomfortable. “What are you going to do about him?”

Parrish shrugs weakly.

Stiles doesn’t press. “Does my dad know? About any of this?”

“No. Not yet,” Parrish replies. “Only because I think there’s a reason he adopted Isaac. I’m worried about why that is. I can’t tell him about everything I’ve uncovered without running the risk that he’ll go around asking questions that could put him or Isaac in danger.”

“But you're willingly giving me all this information,” Stiles points out.

“I trust you, Stiles,” Parrish swears with a look full of meaning. “Your dad’s a good man and a good detective, but you have to remember that he’s Human. He’s not going to see things like how you and I will see things. We have to put the pieces together before we show him how to solve the puzzle. It’s complicated logic, yes, but this is how we have to do it. The world is still governed by Human laws.”

“I told him to look at bank records before he came here. He’s already asking the right questions,” Stiles mumbles as he begins to anxiously gnaw on his nails.

“Then I’ll keep a busy eye on him,” Parrish promises. “It’s the least I can do since you’ve been looking after Isaac as well as you have.”

Stiles doesn’t know what to do with that so he says nothing and sees himself out. He pockets the jump-drive and climbs on his bike to begin his ride home.

The sky is dark but clear with stars and the moon is no longer full. It smells earthy and damp, but for whatever reason, this is a comfort for Stiles. He lets his thoughts muddle around in his brain as he tries to figure out how he can go on acting normal around Isaac when he knows what he knows.

That is, assuming that Isaac will ask about where he’s been this whole time when he gets home —

Stiles’s bike jerks under him and sharply veers to the left and right into a curb, sending him flying up and over his handlebars, and into the grass with a yelp and loud thud.

“That looked like it hurt,” a male voice says.
Stiles squints against the pain biting up and down his back as two shadows hover over him.

It’s Violet and Garrett (and their wearing those creepy identical smirks).

“Oh no,” Stiles groans as he tries to wiggle to his feet.

Garrett snorts, grabbing him by the shoulders and hauling him to his feet with a surprising amount of strength.

Pain slithers into his sides and the back of his skull until Stiles is cross-eyed with nausea. This will be the second tumble he’s taken.

“Easy, easy,” Violet warns as she watches Garrett catch Stiles just as he slumps from poor equilibrium. “We’re supposed to treat him with care, remember?”

“You’re the one that made his bike whip out of control,” Garrett points out with a moody tone. He gets a solid grip on Stiles’s upper arms and keeps him upright as they both face Violet. “If he’s got a few broken ribs or a concussion, it’ll be because of you, not me.”

Violet sends Garrett a look from over Stiles’s shoulder. “Just shut up and keep him still.” She reaches behind her and pulls out a single cotton swab. “Now. This won’t hurt a bit.” Her hand grabs his chin and she shoves the end of the cotton swab into his mouth, twisting quickly until she pulls away and it’s shiny with his spit. “Perfect,” she praises and seals the swab away carefully in a small test tube before shoving it in her back pocket.

“What just happened?” Stiles asks blankly.

Violet just unzips her leather jacket to reveal a thin chain hanging around her neck with a pink crystal at the end resting against her exposed belly button. She inhales deeply as she cups her hand around the crystal.

Stiles’s breath hitches as he watches her eyes glow pink as she stares into his. He feels a wave of energy flow from her and at him, but something under his skin recoils at it and pushes it away.

Violet frowns as her eyes burn brightly with the pink of her glowing irises and she begins chanting (in Latin), “Mens. Corpus. Spiritus. Imperium. Ad me omnes, et fecerit.”

Stiles attempts to wiggle out of Garrett’s iron grip. “What the hell are you guys doing?”

Violet shoots Garrett a worried glance before she turns her burning gaze back to Stiles and chants again. “Mens. Corpus. Spiritus. Imperium. Ad me omnes, et fecerit.” She reaches out with her right hand until she has it hovering over his heart. “Ostende mihi, et cogitaremus veritatem tuam.”

Stiles stops struggling and just stares at Violet.

Violet smirks and says, “Now. Tell me. What were you doing with Lahey?”

“Minding my own business. Like you two should be,” Stiles says, looking at her like she’s crazy. “Seriously, what the hell?”

Violet wrenches her hand back in shock.

“What is this, Vee?” Garrett says. “You sure you did the spell right? He doesn’t sound like he’s in a trance.”

“You’re kidding right?” Stiles gawks. “You guys are trying to put a hex on me?”
Violet glares at him darkly. “If I wanted to hex you, you’d be dead already.” Then she frowns as she eyes him from head to toe. “Though — I’m not sure if that’s even true.”

“Vee, what’s going on?” Garrett questions impatiently.

“My spells aren’t working on him.” Violet suddenly looks a lot more pleased than what Stiles is comfortable with. “He’s a fucking Seven.”

“Seven? What’s a Seven?” Stiles asks.

“Well I’m not going to tell you so you can use it against me, *Virtue*,” Violet drawls with pure contempt.

“You’re shitting me right?” Garrett snaps but he sounds a little frantic (if not worried). “That means you can’t wipe his memory. That means he’ll remember all of this. Fuck, Vee! What the fuck?” He shoves Stiles away like his hands have been burned.

“Relax,” Violet calmly urges. “He’s not going to say anything to anybody.”

“What makes you so sure?” Garrett hisses, looking edgy.

“Actually I would like to know that too since I’m about two seconds away from calling the cops and pressing charges, so…” Stiles spreads his hands apart and lifts both brows.

Violet lifts her right hand and rotates it into a snap until ivory and cream cardstock appears with a pink spark. “Mayor Argent is hosting a private fundraising event tomorrow night at his manor. I was urged to extend an invitation.” She holds it out to him.

Stiles just lifts a brow, but he doesn’t take it.

“You’ll want to go,” Violet urges as she releases her hold on the invite but its not sent to the ground by the force of gravity. Rather, it levitates and hovers by Stiles’s chest on pink clouds of smoke. “I think I remember seeing a few Vampires on that list, as well as a few people you might know.”

Stiles swallows and takes in the blatant threat.

“Oh well.” Violet just shrugs. “I can’t force a Seven to do anything they don’t want to do. Though — you do know the folklore about Vampires right? Aren’t you the least bit curious to meet one? I’m sure they’d be gagging to meet you. They might even behave if you’re there — no bloodletting and all that.”

Stiles snatches the invitation out of the air as the pink clouds disperse. “I get it. You can stop with the thinly veiled threats.”

Violet smirks and Garrett relaxes.

“Who are you guys?” Stiles asks when he can’t come to some sort of conclusion himself.

Violet’s smirk widens. “We’re the ones that are going to keep you from falling into the wrong hands,” she simply replies.

“Like the Benefactor,” Stiles counters cleverly.

Garrett looks at him sharply. “What do you know about that?”

“I know it’s Mayor Argent,” Stiles boldly accuses.
Violet snorts. “If you think Gerard Argent is the Benefactor then you haven’t been paying attention at all.” She lifts her wrist and glances at the time. “We should start making our rounds.”

Garrett makes a noncommittal sound and begins walking away in an unknown direction.

Violet glances at Stiles with another smirk. “Wear a tuxedo,” she urges. “And have a safe trip home. You’re pretty precious to a lot of people.” She lets herself disappear in a cloud of pink smoke as her eyes burn with the same color.

Stiles is left to do nothing but watch and try not to have a nervous breakdown.

He makes it to his bike without having one (but it’s a near thing).

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It’s the choking and coughing sounds that urges Stiles to dump his bike on his front lawn and sprint to the backyard when he makes it home.

What he’s not expecting is a hysterical Kate with literal tears in her eyes as she uses her expensive smartphone to record Isaac (who is on his knees before her) gagging down a half jar of jalapenos mixed in a 2 liter bottle of fizzy orange soda and wasabi sauce.

“What the hell?” Stiles exclaims, throwing his hands out wide.

Kate pulls it together long enough to say, “Little punk challenged me to a dare-off. Thought I wouldn’t come with my A-game.”

Isaac finishes the mixture, chucks the bottle towards the garbage cans at the side of the porch steps, and falls to his side. His face is red and he’s gasping, “I think I’m dying” over and over again.

Stiles’s mouth twists with concern. Then he shoots Kate a look (she’s still filming this for god’s sake!) and says, “You’re literally the worst babysitter in history.”

“What? Untrue,” Kate argues and she finally clicks her phone off before shoving it in the back pocket of her ripped jeans. “You should have seen the concoction he made me choke down. I swear I’ll never look at sardines the same way again.”

“I don’t even want to know,” Stiles swears, exasperated. He steps around his brother and goes to his elm tree, taking care to climb and pick a piece of fruit, working on pure instinct. He climbs back down with the juiciest peach he can find and offers it to Isaac (who accepts it gratefully and tears into it with these little softly pleased mewls).

“Well if you don’t need me anymore —” Kate looks at the watch on her wrist. “— I might be able to catch the nail salon before it closes and finish what I started.”

“I’ll walk you to your car,” Stiles offers quickly because he’s desperate to talk to her.

Kate lifts a finely arched brow and she looks more amused than anything. “How sweet of you to offer, Tenderfoot.” She glances down at Isaac and snorts at the way he’s licking juices from between his fingers. She nudges his knee with her foot. “Hey, Curly-top.”

Isaac huffs but he glances up at her. “You owe me fifty bucks.”

“Fucking do I though? I won fair and square,” Kate says, matter of fact.

“Language,” Stiles says, sighing weakly, and wondering if he should even bother. He’s then struck
by the sudden thought that this is Kate Argent and Isaac is quite literally her biological little brother and neither of them know.

“You lost. Pay up,” Isaac orders and offers a sticky hand.

Kate scoffs but she fishes out her wallet and slaps a hundred in his hand. “The extra fifty is for making me laugh so hard,” she explains. Then she smirks and turns on her heel.

Stiles stumble after her, throwing a, “Go inside! I’ll be in, in a minute!” to Isaac, who’s too busy eyeing the money in his hand like he’s wondering if it’s counterfeit. Stiles eventually catches up to Kate and notices the car she parked in his driveway is not her Jaguar, but some kind of 2009 Nissan Altima. “Uh —”

“Rental,” Kate explains as she makes a face. “I feel so middle class.”

Stiles rolls his eyes and walks around the hood of the car before climbing in the passenger seat. He silently mimes for her to get in as well.

Kate slides into the driver’s seat with a questioning look.

Stiles points to his ears and then to the house.

A look of dawning passes over Kate’s beautiful features and she spends a quick moment turning on the car and then turning up the radio to some random station.

Stiles takes a moment to think about what he wants to say. He sets aside his afternoon with Parrish because that’s obviously off-limits and not within his rights to gossip about. So he focuses on his encounter with Garrett and Violet. “Tell me more about your surrogate siblings. How much do you know about them? What have you learned?” he asks.

“Other than they’re creepy as hell and spend way more time with my old man then what’s healthy — I’d say nothing. Why?” Kate hones in on his face likes she’s trying to read his mind.

“Earlier when I went to — do what I was doing — I got into an altercation with them,” Stiles merely says. “Violet tried to do some witchy hexing on me so that I would spill my guts to her about anything she wanted to know. Then when it didn’t work, her and that jock guy freaked and she called me something. It was a Seven, I think.”

Kate doesn’t say anything for a long while and her lips twist a thoughtful frown.

“They also invited me to your dad’s charity whatever tomorrow night with some vague threats. Did you know there are going to be Vampires there?” Stiles continues. “What’s your dad doing inviting Vampires?”

“Old money probably,” Kate off-handedly replies. Then she says, “He does these charity galas when he’s got some grimy project he needs funding for. His latest endeavor has been that old car factory.”

“I read about that,” Stiles says.

“Yeah well, what you probably didn’t read is that though he’s swung some sort of deal with the Kind company, he’s expected to meet their offer with a pricey deposit,” Kate explains. “He must really want them to set up shop here, which is suspicious enough.”

“Recreating the community,” Stiles quotes, verbatim. “In that article I read about it, that’s what he said.”
Kate’s brow furrows and she gives a heavy sigh. “Damn. And I had plans to get me some dick tomorrow night,” she complains, mostly to herself.

Stiles gives an awkward cough.

“What? I have a healthy libido and Peter is incapacitated currently. I have plastic toys to do the job when he can’t,” Kate drawls with a minor smirk. “God, no one can make me come like he can though. Hey did you know we talk about you sometimes? Like what we’d do if you were there and —”

Stiles goes red and splutters.

Kate throws her head back and laughs. “Okay, okay. I give. I’m totally fucking with you,” she admits. When she calms down, “Though, personally, even if Peter sees you as his spastic little brother, I don’t. Like I said before — your lips are obscene. I won’t lie and say I haven’t fantasized about sitting on your face when I’m fingering myself in the shower.”

Stiles doesn’t think he’ll ever stop blushing or choking.

“Anyway, I’m assuming you don’t have a tux, so you and I can go shopping after school tomorrow,” Kate decides and grabs a pair of shades she has crammed between the lid of the sun visor and the roof of the car. “I’ll try and figure out what my old man’s up to in the meantime. I’ll give you the details at lunch tomorrow. Now get out of my shitty car.”

Stiles huffs (happy his face has finally cooled off) and says, “Thanks for looking after, uh, Isaac.” He coughs awkwardly and tries not to spill his guts when the urge arises.

Kate just waves him off. “Yawn. Bored now. You just remember that debt you owe me, buttercup.”

“Stiles. It’s Stiles.”

Kate gives him the middle finger and peels out of his driveway once he’s properly exited the vehicle. She rolls down all her windows and begins blasting some Spice Girls with no shame as she disappears down the street and around a corner.

Stiles briefly glances at the Yukimura house and then away as he marches towards the backyard and to his elm tree. He touches his fingertips to the rounded edges of the big triquetra carved into the lower middle of the trunk and says, “Nana?”

No response.

“I need to ask you a few questions. Please.”

Nana appears a moment later with a deep yawn. “What is it, child? I’m still so very tired. I need at least three days of sleep before I can be in working order, you know.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Stiles promises. “Sorry.”

“It’s no matter. I’ll always be here when you need me,” Nana croons sweetly. “Now, what’s troubling you, dearie?”

“What’s a Seven?”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand,” Nana admits. “How do you mean? It’s a number, is it not? I’m told Humans are quite fond of numbers. Keeping time. Oh, and counting things.”
“No,” Stiles says. “Earlier this — I don’t know what she was. But she called me a Seven.”

Nana’s wooden face frowns. “Touch your hands to my cheeks. I’ll have to see the memories for myself.”

Stiles lifts both eyebrows but he does as he’s told. He presses his palms to her cheeks and starts at the way his hands begin to tremor and the air suddenly feels too sharp. There’s a press across his mind, a gentle nudge, and it invades his thoughts like soap bubbles popping and reforming.

Then it’s gone.

“Ah,” Nana says, her face moving under his hands with her words. “You can let go now.”

Stiles drops his hands and lets them rest limply at his sides.

“How familiar are you with Dragon-kind?”

“Dragons?” Stiles exclaims. “No way.”

“Very way, I’m afraid. They’re rare. Just like you,” Nana goes on to explain. “Perhaps even more so.”


Nana scoffs. “Heavens, no. That oaf of a boy she’s with is just another brute Human. But the girl — she’s a Practitioner.” She adds, “Practitioners aren’t born with true magic like real Witches are. Like you and I are. They have to forge their own substitutes, pulling mainly from dark spells that derive from dark places. It’s not called Black Magic for nothing, dearie.”

Stiles takes that in. “Why did she call me a Seven?”

“She couldn’t touch you with her unclean powers. You’re too pure,” Nana explains. “You’re even rarer than what I imagined. You are a Seven.”

“Seven Virtues,” he mumbles.

“Seven Virtues,” Nana chuckles. “You’re not only exhibiting signs of just one field — but all seven! You can do and be any which you choose at any moment. How extraordinary! To think. My very own apprentice! A Seven! By the gods of this world and the Faceless of ours, indeed.”

“Who knows? You pave your own destiny, little one. I can only aid you in this journey,” Nana sympathizes. “Now, as for Vampires. I imagine you have questions about them.”

Stiles nods quickly.

“I’ll give you the short facts and the rest you’ll have to research on your own,” Nana continues. “Long ago, there is said to have been a Sun Witch who desired the power to live forever. Now what
she did was consult with the Watchers of the Dead who, by today’s terms, are modernly labeled as Demons because there was no other who knew the secrets to avoiding death. It is said that this Witch made a pact with one of these dark creatures by sacrificing the one thing she drew her power from: the Sun. By doing so, she was condemned to only roam during the night. And in swearing allegiance with the Watchers, she was given the vital ingredient to immortality: blood of a living creature, namely, Humans.”

“So — the first Vampire was a Witch who made a pact with the Devil to live forever,” Stiles states in his own understanding.

“Callously put, but, true nonetheless,” Nana confirms. “From my understanding, she’s spent centuries turning only those on their deathbeds as penance for giving over the one thing that fueled her magic. In some circles, she’s called the Mistress of Night. Last I heard, she bound herself in a tomb under the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul back in 1862. Her children still roam the world freely at night I’m told.”

“And what are they? What do they look like? You said she visited people on their deathbeds.”

“The Kanayan Biri, or ‘Bloody Ones’. They are elders. She absolved them of their past sins when she drained them. If given any other name, Vampires would be known as Sin Eaters. That’s the pattern of their feeding.”

“Elders, though? Like — old people? Like, ‘Look kids, we’ll all miss grandpa but he’s in a better place now. And when I say better place, I mean he’s become a creature of the night. Bram Stroker styles.’ I mean, come on!”

Nana looks marginally amused. “The Mistress moved freely during the Bronze and Iron Age, turning those who survived long enough to see middle age. She was always quite keen on never turning anyone under the age of forty. She believed Humans were at the prime of their life by this point.”

Stiles finds that surprising. The myth and lore he knows all put most Vampires somewhere around the ages of 17-30. “So, middle-aged Vampires. Do they feed? You said they did but on sins?”

“Yes, but the sin lies within the blood. However, their temperament and consideration causes them to keep a firm reign on their moderation and consumption. They’re well-behaved when not provoked, I believe. They usually don’t kill but this doesn’t mean they won’t. They love their mind games, but I must warn you — they do not tolerate an ill attitude. They quite literally eat the rude. I suppose they reason that they’re doing the world a favor,” Nana reports. She gives a lengthy yawn. “You’ve got homework that needs doing. I suggest you go do it and leave an old soul to rest.”

Stiles huffs and nods even though he has a million more questions.

“Goodnight, dearie. We’ll talk soon.”

Stiles watches Nana’s face disappear and the big triquetra takes her place. He’ll have to leave his questions about the blue bioluminescent energy that shot out of his hands earlier for another day. For now, he makes his way inside just as the curfew horn rings in the distance, signaling that it’s officially eight o’clock.

Not even a second after he enters the house, there’s another siren signaling the warning for a lightening storm (which Stiles thinks is a little too late by this point).

Isaac is curled up in his favorite armchair, blinking drowsily at the ceiling when Stiles reaches the living room. “Dad came back home while you were gone.”
“Yeah?”

“He was acting like you do when you’re preoccupied with something.” Isaac gives a jaw-cracking yawn. “He left with a bag. Said he had to fly out to Mexico for something really important and we should call him if anything happens while he’s away.” He yawns again.

Stiles fishes his phone out of his pocket and notices the missed calls from his dad. “You should go up to bed,” he suggests distractedly as he reads a vague text from his dad that says he was right about the bank records and how he’s following a lead. “Go to bed.”

Isaac simply shakes his head with another watery yawn and falls asleep right then and there.

Stiles rolls his eyes (sends his dad a text that reads: keep me updated and stay safe), then takes a moment to grab a wooly blanket and throw it over Isaac with gentle care. He runs his fingers through a few of Isaac’s more wild curls and grins softly when Isaac twitches in his sleep but leans toward his hand; he doesn’t stir otherwise.

A solid mass of guilt hardens in the pit of his stomach like a small stone when he thinks about what he’s keeping from his brother — what he has to keep from his brother.

He sighs and pats Isaac on the crown of his head before moving away completely to straighten the disorderly living room.

The kitchen is worst. It’s a mess of condiments and strange jars and bottles filled with weird looking/smelling concoctions that are practically gag-worthy.

Stiles sighs and mentally curses Kate and Isaac’s little dare war before he gets to work with cleaning it all up.

He spends the rest of the night juggling homework and researching everything he can about Vampires and Dragons. He doesn’t touch the jump-drive Parrish gave to him (he’s not ready to explore that yet; it’ll have to wait until the weekend) and he stashes it in an old shoebox and buries it in the back of his closet for safekeeping.

(He comes across a recurring name in the Vampire lore: Hannibal Barca).

When he attempts to contact Deaton about it, his calls go unanswered and he’s forced to leave a vague voicemail in the hopes that Deaton will respond with some answers.

The thunder from the lightening storm keeps the house trembling for the rest of the night.

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Wednesday’s lightening storm is twice as loud as Tuesday was but they still keep all the schools open (go figure) because it’s not supposed to last past noon. Though if someone asked Stiles about it, he’d have to admit to not noticing since he practically slept his way through most of his classes (because of the lack of sleep the previous night).

The thunderous grey sky causes sort of this rippling effect through everyone’s mood, causing them to coast through the halls and sit in class with this sort of blasé attitude.

At lunch, he finds Kate in her usual spot, texting away on her expensive phone. He sits down with his tray of food and just shoves it at her before she can even steal anything.

Kate eats the jello first because she always eats the jello first and says, “My dad is so fucking
paranoid. His study is locked with one of those keypad code doorknob things. I put my birthday and then I put his birthday in and then I put my brother’s birthday in and even our mother’s birthday in and nothing.” She huffs. “So before school, I went to his office at Municipal Hall. I knew he wouldn’t be there because he’s too busy terrorizing the caterers for his little dinner party tonight. I lied to his stupid little secretary about how my dad needed some kind of bullshit and he let me in. You know how I mentioned my dad has friends in high places right?”

Stiles nods because he vaguely recalls.

“I’m going through his shit right? Like his paperwork and all the stuff lying around on his desk and he has dozens of correspondences on letterhead from, get this, the fucking Secretary of Defense.” Kate licks the last of her jello off of her white spork.

“Secretary of Defense? As in William Barrow? The guy who is not only in charge of the military, but also employs a civilian force of thousands? That guy?”

“You’re almost as smart as you are pretty,” Kate praises with smirk as he starts in on his nachos. “Apparently, he’s keeping my father updated on something called the ‘EPC Project’. Seeing as how I couldn’t take anything with me, I took a few pictures of certain words and names. Here.”

Stiles moves to her side of the table as she gives over her smartphone and he swipes left through her gallery. “Ultrasonic? Radio frequency? Doesn’t that have to do with —”

“High frequency waves? Yeah. Big time,” Kate confirms. “Look at this. It’s a photo of the most recent letter my dad received. Barrow writes, ‘Dr. Simon Frankenstein notes that contained subjects 3487 and 5920 show promising results to the 1905HeCa virus. Despite past failures during monitored trials, a more evolved strain could possibly become stable enough for distribution. The ‘Chicago Incident’ shows that we may be closer to convincing our President that municipal law is required. You just be sure that you’ve done your part. Most of this depends on the jus in bello of your ‘liaison’. ’ Bizarre, right?”

“Jus in bello,” Stiles mutters to himself as he thinks. “Jus in bello — why does that sound familiar?”

“It’s the law that governs the way in which warfare is conducted,” Kate remarks off-handedly as she chews. She takes a moment to swallow. “I’m more interested in this 1905HeCa virus. I tried to place it against the periodic table but that was a dead end.”

“Ca stands for calcium and He for helium. Calcium doesn’t react with helium,” Stiles supposes. “Unless we were talking about the collisional profiles of ionized calcium perturbed by helium or the nuclear fusion in stars.”

“Exactly. Which means that the HeCa stands for something else,” Kate concludes before she shoves the food tray away to snatch her phone back with a furrowed brow. “Maybe 1905 is a year, and something happened in that year that has to do with HeCa.”

The bell rings, signaling the end of lunch.

Stiles stands and says, “I don’t know. Google it. And forward some of those pictures to me. I’m going to do a little research about William Barrow and Dr. Frankenstein, which, by the way, is the most ironic last name to have if you’re a chemical engineer doing experiments.”

Kate snorts and replies, “We live in a world that has no shortage of strange things.”
Isaac is instinctively suspicious when Stiles rolls up with Kate in her rental to come pick him up later that day at his school. He doesn’t say anything at first though. He just drags his bike to the back and crams it into the trunk alongside Stiles’s before climbing into the back behind Stiles.

“So, how was school?” Stiles asks and tries not to squirm at the way he can feel Isaac’s eyes boring into the back of his head. “Anything interesting happen?”

“What’s she doing here?” Isaac asks instead.

“Ouch. Easy, tiger. You might hurt my feelings,” Kate purrs, stopping at a red light and using the momentary pause to primp and preen in the mirror of her sun visor. “Didn’t we have fun the other day?”

“I was bored yesterday,” Isaac retorts, his annoyance evident. “I don’t like you today.”

“Isaac,” Stiles gently scolds.

Kate chokes on a bit of laughter. “Whoa. Kitty’s got some claws.”

“Where are we going? You’re keeping things from me again. I hate that,” Isaac goes on to say, ignoring Kate completely so as to hone in on his brother. “What’s going on?”

Stiles opens his mouth to deflect, but Kate beats him to it by saying, “My old man’s throwing this charity gala thing and it just so happened that your brother dearest has been invited. He’s lacking a tux and I, in all my charitableness, have decided to rectify that.”

“You’re buying me one too,” Isaac decides firmly.

Stiles twists around in his seat. “Isaac!”

Isaac glares at him. “You’re not pawning me off on another babysitter. If you go, I go. That’s the deal.”

“What if I don’t like that deal?” Stiles challenges, but only because he’s concerned for Isaac’s well-being (and because he doesn’t want Mayor Argent within a hundred feet of his brother) but of course he can’t just say that without having to confess to a few other things. “What if I say no deal? There’s going to be Vampires there, you know.”

“I don’t care. You’ll be there. So I don’t care,” Isaac swears and there’s a look in his eyes that says he won’t back down no matter what. “Stiles.”

“Okay, okay,” Stiles relents. “Those eyes, dude. You’re killing me.” He sighs. “If anything happens to you tonight I’m going to be in so much trouble.”

Isaac just shrugs and eyes the back of Kate’s head.

Stiles thinks better of asking.

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Tuxedo shopping with Kate goes like this: they keep their mouths shut and let her do all the talking.

That’s it.

That’s the rules.
Kate’s got impeccable rich-people taste anyway, so Isaac and Stiles mutually agree it’s not worth disputing.

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The Argent Manor literally looks like it could pass for the Xavier Institute for Higher Learning. The private driveway even curls around a huge marble water fountain with stone statues of naked men and women and children. In front of the manor are catering trucks and valets but Kate surpasses all of that to park in a six-car garage located in the back.

“You’ve got Lamborghini’s and you’re driving a rental,” Stiles notes with a smidge of exasperation as he climbs out of the car.

Kate scoffs. “Three of those are my brother’s cars and the other set is my dad’s. I don’t play with other people’s shit.”

"Besides the fact that you steal my food all the time," Stiles interjects.

Kate ignores that and continues, "I like my own toys, thank you very much.”

Stiles doesn’t say anything to that because that is so Kate.

Isaac looks particularly interested though. “You should let me have that 1967 Ford Mustang GT Fastback,” he suggests.

Stiles tugs him closer and says, “You can’t even drive. What are you going to do with it?”

“I can drive. I just don’t have a license,” Isaac reasons. “Legal driving age in Alberta is 14.”

“Alberta?” Stiles repeats.

“Canada,” Kate clarifies. “But that’s with supervision, squirt.”

“No one is talking to you, Katherine,” Isaac says, pressing a hand between Stiles’s shoulder blades as he glares at her from the opposite side of the car.

Kate smirks slowly with a wink.

Stiles can feel rolls of tension wafting off of Isaac, so he quickly intervenes by saying, “We should get ready for the party. Isaac, we’ll finish talking about how neither dad nor I will ever let you behind the wheel for the next three years.” He pats Isaac’s hip before he moves to grab their tuxes from the trunk.

Kate grabs her own gown and then indicates for them to follow. She leads them through a huge stainless steel kitchen flooded with cooking and waiting staff frantically moving about. Then she leads them up a small winding staircase that brings them to the second floor.

Stiles briefly notices all the large portraits of the Argent women reside on the left side of the hall while the Argent men are on the right side. Under these expensively framed portraits are even more expensive vases and statues and furniture. All the doors are closed but when they get to the end of the hall, they just go up another winding staircase that leads to the third floor.

On this level, it’s pretty much the same as the second, only the portraits on the wall are family portraits. They stop midway down the hall and Stiles eyes the family portrait that has Mayor Argent, some young looking guy, an unhappy woman, and an even unhappier little boy.
It’s the woman’s face that really catches his attention.

She looks undeniably like an older version of Kate.

“If you stare any harder, you’ll set the whole damn thing on fire,” a voice says behind him.

Stiles jumps a little to see Kate eyeing him with a blank face and crossed arms. “I was — I just thought —”

“Yes. That’s my mom and my older brother. Before I was born,” Kate interjects calmly.

“Oh,” Stiles says and clears his throat. “She looks — you look, um, just like her.”

“So I’m told,” Kate merely says. She looks up at the portrait with this sort of faraway look.

Stiles glances back at it as well. “Who’s that? Standing next to your dad, I mean.”

“My Uncle Alexander. He kind of went banana-balls like my mom,” Kate replies. “Shot himself in this creepy motel infamous for guest suicides.”

Stiles feels something pluck at him. He can’t really place it but what she just said is hitting on the vibes that usually tell him something’s not right and he should pay attention to why that is.

“What?” Kate’s looking at him. “What’s with that face?”

Stiles quickly tries to change his expression. “Nothing — where’s Isaac?”

“Probably snooping through my things,” Kate supposes but she’s still eyeing him closely. “Come on. We can chill in my room for a bit before the party starts. Are you hungry? I can call up one of the help to whip something together.”

Stiles shakes his head before following her into her bedroom, and the inside looks like something out of some trendy teen magazine.

She’s got waist-high teal-blue chests lined against the walls on the left side of the room on either side of the tall windows with sheer drapes. She even has her own balcony. Along the right side of the room there’s a personalized white desk littered with thick books, expensive devices, and dismantled radios. At the head of the room is a king-sized bed with teal-blue and white pillows and comforters, and also two doors on either side of the bed: one that leads to her ridiculously huge walk-in closet crammed with designer clothes and shoes and makeup and a vanity mirror, and the other one leads to a huge bathroom with three stand-in showers and a Jacuzzi bathtub.

This is where Stiles finds Isaac.

Isaac is fiddling with the temperature gauges for the Jacuzzi bathtub while also dumping honey-scented foaming liquid into the gathering water.

“What are you doing?”

Isaac watches the bubbles form when he turns on the jets. “Taking advantage of the hot water. I always end up showering after you and it’s like swimming in the Atlantic.”

“You wait until the last minute!” Stiles argues. “I get up early enough.”

“I like to sleep. You’re not normal,” Isaac counters as he tugs his shirt over his head.
Stiles bites his tongue and tries not to stare at the burn scars littering the left side of his brother’s body. He fidgets and presses his lips together to keep from blurting out something stupid.

Isaac knows him though. He’s getting excellent at reading Stiles’s body language. Which is why, as he kicks off his shoes, without even looking at him, he says, “You’re allowed to ask.”

Stiles rubs the back of his neck and mumbles, “I’m trying to be considerate.”

Isaac shoots him a look. “Just ask. I want you to.” He starts unbuckling his pants.

Stiles slaps his hands over his eyes to preserve Isaac’s modesty. “How much do you remember about — what happened? Before, you said you remember whistling.”

“Well I remember how much it hurt,” Isaac says, and then there’s a splashing sound. "You never forget the touch of fire when it's licking flames against your skin."

Stiles peeks through his fingers and notes with amusement that Isaac is covered in bubbles. He drops his hands and gnaws at the corner of his mouth. “Did it — was it —”

“Worst pain I can ever describe,” Isaac replies, spitting away some bubbles from his mouth. “The kind of pain that changes you. Makes you question why life is even worth living. It's the only time you actually look forward to dying.”

Stiles feels his stomach drop.

“And I did for a long time after,” Isaac admits, combing his long fingers through his hair to slick his curls away from his partially scarred face. “I wanted to die. I didn’t have anything to live for. Everyone I cared about has either hurt me or left me.”

Stiles winces against the sting that pricks into his heart at those words and he opens his mouth to say something.

But Isaac moves closer to the edge of the tub and white-knuckles it with wet and soapy hands. “Dad never told you about how we really met, did he? I’ll tell you. I was on the roof of the hospital. It was close to midnight. That’s when the hospital staff thins out, and no one would actually notice I’d snuck out of my room. I’d been there for about two months already — recovering. The fire that killed my dad and my brother was started on the night of Thanksgiving, you know. And it was New Years by this point.

"I didn’t want another year on this Earth in pain. So I stood out on that ledge, staring down at the ground with my arms out wide and even being so high I never felt so low. But then I heard a voice say, ‘Once you make that jump, you can’t change your mind halfway through.’ And when I turned, I saw dad edging towards me with his hands up. He introduced himself and asked me for my name. I didn’t give it but he kept talking at me anyway. He told me about how he became a patrol officer for the southern end of the Golden Gate Bridge after your mom died.”

Stiles inhales sharply because dear god he remembers that. “I — I was the one that told him to — I asked him to —”

“He said that you saw how sad he was,” Isaac gently interjects. “He laughed a little and said how you would do this thing where you’d find somewhere to hide when he was talking on the phone so you could eavesdrop. And one day you must have heard that one off his colleagues offered him a spot as a guardian on the bridge. He was about to say no —”

“But I felt it. I felt his answer and I sprung out and told him that he had to because it'd be the best
thing for him,” Stiles faintly remarks. “I couldn’t even explain the feeling at the time but I just knew he had to. And he listened to me.”

“He told me the first night, during his first patrol, he came across a woman sitting on the cord near midspan. She looked to be about his age if not a little older,” Isaac goes on to say. He folds his arms over the edge of the tub and then leans down so he can rest his chin on top. Water and soap spill from his arms and over slowly down the edge with the motion. “He said he asked her if she was okay or if there was anyone he could call but she started telling him about how she and her husband spent their first date walking the length of this bridge and he told her about how he heard a myth about how traveling between the two towers will lead you to another dimension if you were to leap. And that the fall frees you from all your worries and grief, and the waters below will cleanse your soul.”

Stiles frowns a little. His dad never told him this story.

“I asked him if she jumped,” Isaac continues quietly. “He told me he spent three hours telling her about how the impact shatters bones in the most crushingly painful way and that if she survived that then she’d only survive long enough to flail before eventually drowning. He told her that there was nothing romantic about it at all. He said that whatever she was going through with her husband, he can kind of understand but he promised her that it does get better. He said she could see it in the way the sun rises. In the taste of a chocolate muffin. In the exhilaration of watching some kid from a small town make their dreams come true through some reality dance competition he would never have any chances of winning.”

Stiles smiles a little at that. “Dad sucks at dancing.”

Isaac smiles a little too. “For three hours he listed all the things that made him happy — that kept him going. He said some days are harder than others but one day it won’t be a struggle. He said he talked to her about you and how you drive him crazy but he loves you so much because half of you comes from your mother. The woman on the bridge was quiet at the end of those three hours. She thanked him and wished him a happy and full life. Then…”

Stiles shakes his head as he wrinkles his nose. “I don’t — I don’t think I want to know. Please don’t — don’t tell me,” he begs gently. He takes a deep breath before continuing, “What about you? How did he change your mind? Why didn’t you jump?”

“That is the question, isn’t it?” Isaac drawls as he straightens and dips his hand in the water to scoop up some soapsuds to blow in Stiles’s direction. “It doesn’t matter now. I don’t have that pain with me anymore. I’m not alone. I have you and dad. He was right. It does get better, even if it takes time. For the first time in twelve years, I’m truly happy. You guys make me happy.”

Stiles grins sadly, guilt tightening in his chest at the thought of the major secret he’s still keeping from his brother. He turns and coughs awkwardly as he get’s a little misty-eyed. “I’ll let you soak. Just don’t take too long. I call next.” He makes his way to the door but then pauses in the doorway. “Wait a minute. I thought cats hated water.”

Isaac huffs, ducks under the water and out of sight as if to prove a point.

Stiles closes the door behind him and makes his way over to Kate (who is wearing glasses).

Kate’s sitting at her messy desk, typing away on her computer as she flips through a few of the open books settled before her.

Stiles traces his hand over the spine of one of them, squinting when he makes out the title. “Why do
you have a book on the —” He picks it up and squints harder at it. “— *Theory of Ordinary Differential Equations? Really?*

“Hey, give me that,” Kate complains and snatches it from him. “It’s what I consider light reading. And anyway, I borrowed it from Derek and if anything ever happened to it, I’d never hear the end of it.”

Stiles balks. “Derek. Derek Hale? We are thinking of the same person right?”

“Yup,” Kate easily replies, putting a pop on the ‘p’. “He’s a lot smarter than he wants people to believe.” She goes back to her typing as she adds, “Did you know he’s super into aerospace engineering? I think he wants to be a rocket scientist.”

“What?” Stiles says because that doesn’t make sense. “Derek loves basketball. He’s obsessed.”

“If that’s what you think then you haven’t been paying attention,” Kate primly replies. “Come on. You think he was just with Paige for her plain Jane looks? He likes brainy. It’s a Hale thing. They always go for the brainy ones.”

“Okay,” Stiles simply says.

“Pull up a chair. Tell me what you found out about William Barrow and Dr. Frankenstein,” Kate says, scooting over to make room for him.

Stiles grabs a fold out chair and plants it alongside her as he digs his phone out and pulls up his web searches. “So nothing so far for the Dr. Frankenstein guy but interesting thing about William Barrow. He used to live here. In Beacon Hills. For a number of years. He grew up here, went to college here. For only about two years though, mainly to get some prerequisite courses out of the way while he waited to be officially enrolled in Harvard’s law program because he was wait-listed. When he finally did get in during the fall of 1984, guess who he became all buddy-buddy with.”

“My old man,” Kate answers knowingly. “He would have been a grad student by that point.” She rubs at her mouth. “I wonder what they would have talked about.” She pauses and then says, “I’ll ask him. Not straight out because he won’t tell me, but I’ll work an angle. Get him to spill.”

“I need my tux!” Isaac yells from the bathroom.

Stiles stands and moves to bring it to him.

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The charity gala thing takes place mainly on the first level of the manor, which is flooded with nothing but posh, stuck-up, and well-dressed old people.

Stiles fidgets in his tuxedo, though perfectly fitted, he feels out of sorts like an imposter. Which is why he hovers by the fireplace in the living room with Isaac, who has somehow managed to commandeer a whole silver dish of finger foods from one of the wait staff.

There’s an orchestra playing somewhere in the house.

Stiles isn’t sure which room but he can hear the music.

“Champagne?” a male waiter offers.

Isaac reaches out to grab one but Stiles snatches his hand away and says, “Dude. Seriously? We’re
underage.”

“Meh. Suit yourself,” the guy says and wanders off.

Stiles shakes his head and watches the guy disappear. “I’m telling dad you tried to drink alcohol.”

“Then I’m telling him you took me to a party with Vampires.”

“You forced me to bring you!”

“But Stiles, I can’t make you do anything you don’t want to.”

“You little punk —”

“What are you losers doing here?”

Stiles and Isaac turn to see Jackson decked out in a sleek tuxedo and totally owning it.

“This isn’t your scene,” Jackson goes on to say, stealing a bit of Isaac’s finger food and ignoring the glare he receives. He raises an eyebrow at Stiles. “Well?”

“We just — you know,” Stiles lamely replies. “Okay, Mayor Argent’s creepy adopted kids invited me with some veiled threats. Which, weird thing, I haven’t seen them at all.” He takes a moment to consider that before shaking his head. “What are you doing here?”

“Is that a serious question?” Jackson says with a smirk. “I’m rich.”

“Ah.”

“My parents figure we’re doing society a favor just by being here,” Jackson supposes, tone dripping with cynicism. “But we all know these gatherings are just an excuse for this town’s wealthy to jerk each other off and give each other pats on the back for pretending to care for some fraudulent cause.” He swipes a glass of champagne from off the tray of a passing waiter. “All these idiots are doing is throwing money at the mayor in support of his fucking Willy Wonka Chocolate Factory. Which, by the way, will not be as beneficial to this town’s economy as Argent wants you to believe. Four percent of the businesses within the proximity of the town’s outskirts have been closed. Bad, bad mistake seeing as how when tourists from outside come in, the first thing they’ll be seeing is a heap of foreclosures.” He pauses to down his champagne completely. “Fuckers should be supporting the International Committee of the Red Cross.”

Stiles stares at Jackson while Isaac looks unimpressed. “I’m starting to think you’re smarter than what you let on. What is with people in this town hiding their intelligence?”

Jackson scowls and steals another glass of champagne. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Stilinski,” he mutters.

“How did you know about all that stuff?” Stiles presses.

“I read it somewhere,” Jackson lies and downs his second glass.

Isaac says, “He’s second in his class.”

Stiles blinks. “Who’s first?”

“Weird,” Stiles notes. Then he looks to Isaac, who’s staring at his (now empty) tray. “Who’s first in your class?”

“I am,” Isaac mumbles and suddenly looks awkward.

“Yeah?” Stiles grins. “Good. That’s great.”

Isaac shrugs. “Thanks.” Then he says, “What about you?”

“Me?” Stiles takes a moment to think. “Yeah, I guess I come in first. Except in the classes I share with Cora. I’m forced to take second gracefully.”

“I can see that,” Isaac agrees. “I’m going to go get some shrimp now.”

Stiles snorts and waves him off. He watches his brother disappear through the crowd with a sigh as he slips his hands into the pockets of his slacks. He stiffens as a breeze tinged in mint sweeps across him and the sensation of something cool rides up the length of his spine.

“Good evening,” a smooth voice to his left says.

Stiles shifts his eyes over to a tall man with perfectly parted and combed hair and his well-groomed beard. He is extremely handsome, not just because of his strong presence, but also because of his intense grey eyes. And something in Stiles just knows. “Hannibal Barca,” he breathes.

Hannibal looks amused. “Now that’s a name I’ve not heard in centuries from a simple civilian,” he drawls.

Stiles just stares at him, unsure if he should be afraid or not.

Hannibal’s teeth are eerily white and blunt. “Don’t be rude,” he goes on to say and it’s terrifying how his eyes gleam with the words. “Introduce yourself, since you presume to be so familiar with me.”

“Stiles Stilinski,” Stiles stammers.

“Stiles Stilinski,” Hannibal echoes, sounding vaguely intrigued. His mouth shapes with the words as though he’s testing the syllables on his tongue. “And how much research have you done on me?”

“Coincidental, mostly,” Stiles weakly confirms. “Please don’t kill me.”

Hannibal blinks and then laughs gently.

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“Coincidental, mostly,” Stiles weakly confirms. “Please don’t kill me.”

Hannibal blinks and then laughs gently.

Stiles desperately takes that as a good sign.

“I’m curious to know why you think I would harm you,” Hannibal says, still chuckling. “How familiar are you with my tastes?”

Stiles bites his bottom lip.

“Sinners, Mr. Stilinski,” Hannibal purrs as his grey eyes scan the room. “That’s a delicacy. I find the world has no shortage of them, wouldn’t you agree?”

“That depends on how you define ‘sin’, ” Stiles replies and swallows at the frightening grin he receives.

“Shall I demonstrate?” Hannibal calmly questions. “Why not start with your charming companion?
“The one with the scars?”

“Don’t,” Stiles warns and he feels his palms warm defensively on the inside of his pockets.

Hannibal hums noncommittally. “Perhaps not.”

Violet materializes out of nowhere wearing a floor length gown with a plunging neckline and her hair is swept up in a messy, curly bun. “Mr. Wallace. On behalf of Mayor Argent, I welcome you to Beacon Hills. He’d actually like to have a word with you in private.”

“Ah.” Hannibal cups a hand over Stiles’s shoulder. “What say you, Mr. Stilinski? Take a walk with me?”

Violet’s smile goes a bit tense. “I’m sure he’d rather mingle with the rest of the guests,” she reasons.

“Would he?” Hannibal looks darkly intrigued.

“This meeting is exclusive,” Violet insists. “Leave him to mingle.”

“I suppose that is a thought,” Hannibal speculates with a soft sigh. ”After all, I brought a few companions of my own. I’m sure any one of them would love to keep him company.”

Violet’s smile completely withers as she stares at him.

Hannibal meets her gaze unblinkingly. “I hope you didn’t presume that I’d attend this affair at the behest of your mayor and not bring a few friends. I do not travel lightly, though I suspect your mayor prefers that I would.”

Stiles glances around and notices right away the handful of people scattered among the crowd and staring their way with the same kind of intensity about them that Hannibal has.

“The boy comes too,” Hannibal decides. “Unless there’s some particular reason you’re being so overprotective.”

Violet straightens and says, “Fine. This way please.”

“Of course,” Hannibal agrees cheerily, steering Stiles in the direction that Violet leads them.

They end up on the second floor in a large study where Mayor Argent is pacing behind his work desk, hissing furiously into his phone.

Violet wanders over to him and whispers something in his ear.

Hannibal steers Stiles to an armchair on the opposite side of the desk and pushes him down onto it as he unbuttons his tux jacket.

Stiles turns his head in time to see Garrett close the door to the study and stand in front of it like some kind of bodyguard.

Violet pulls away from Mayor Argent but keeps to his side.

“— deal with Marco or I will deal with Marco and you, my friend, do not want me to deal with Marco because Marco will find himself skewered in two. Goodbye.” Mayor Argent pockets his phone before straightening with a cold grin. “I apologize for that, but you know how it is when you have one that likes to fall out of line. As they say, you want something done right, you do it yourself.” He doesn’t look at Stiles once. “I was worried you wouldn’t come.”
“Your invitation peeked my interest,” Hannibal replies. “What is the nature of your business with me? You have to admit that an Argent calling upon a Vampire such as myself is quite curious.”

Violet won’t stop staring at Stiles.

“I’m a tolerant man, Mr. Wallace,” Mayor Argent supposes. “May I call you, Hannibal?”

“My friends call me by my given name, Mr. Argent,” Hannibal reports. “And you, sir, are no friend of mine.”

“Pity,” Mayor Argent merely replies. “This exchange might have been all the more pleasant for it.”

Hannibal gives a chilling smile and combs his cold fingers through Stiles’s short hair. “Is that a threat, Gerard?”

Mayor Argent doesn’t bat an eye.

“You know,” Hannibal continues, voice pleasantly even. “I’ve heard a rumor. Vampires talk, you know. And it’s said that Beacon Hills has recently inherited an invaluable treasure. A jewel. Now what might that be? Or —” His fingers tighten in Stiles’s hair. “— who might that be?”

“You’ll have to speak plainly,” Mayor Argent says, unmoved. “Old age has made me slow.”

Hannibal laughs throatily as he flashes his fangs. “Ignorance is unbecoming. You know of what I speak.” Then he pauses and cocks his head. “Or is this boy so worthless that you would not lift a finger to prevent me from snapping his neck like a twig?”

Mayor Argent gazes steadily at the other man.

Stiles swears he can feel his heart pounding in his throat.

“Come now,” Hannibal purrs. “By all means. Lie to me about his worth.”

Mayor Argent reaches into the inside of his tux and pulls out a small vial of clear liquid. “Let’s remain civilized, Hannibal. This doesn’t have to get ugly.”

“Am I to quiver at the sight of some holy water?” Hannibal taunts. “I am centuries old. One of the first made. You’ll have to try harder.”

“It’s not holy water,” Violet corrects. “It’s something far more lethal. Think hard.”

Hannibal narrows his eyes before he stiffens. “It’s not possible.”

“Oh it’s possible, my friend,” Mayor Argent assures with a steely smile. “Thanks to a generous donation from Mr. Stilinski.”

Stiles frowns as the fingers in his hair twitches, and his mind instantly goes back to the other night when Violet and Garrett cornered him and when Violet swiped the inside of his mouth with a cotton swab. Which must mean that small vial is his — saliva? Why in the world should a Vampire be wary of his spit?

“Please take a seat,” Mayor Argent urges. “And I won’t have to use it.”

Hannibal doesn’t move for a long moment, but eventually he loosens his grip and steps away before taking a seat reluctantly.
Stiles breathes a little easier. Just a little.

“There. That’s a good man,” Mayor Argent praises. He opens the top drawer of his desk and pulls out a manila envelope. “As for why I requested your presence, I believe you have some valuable information, but we’ll get to that. Garrett?”

“Yes, sir?”

“See if you can’t entertain one of Hannibal’s companions for a little while. Use the other vial I gave you if you have to.”

“Yes, sir.” Garrett leaves, closing the door behind him.

Mayor Argent takes a seat and steeps his fingers together under his chin. “Relax, Hannibal.”

Hannibal is puncturing holes in the arm of his chair with his pale fingers as he glares at Mayor Argent. “If your young ward harms a hair on any of mine — I will tear every single person in this house apart and paint your walls red with their blood.”

Stiles shivers at the threat.

Violet smirks, amused.

Mayor Argent scoffs. “Not necessary, my friend. I just need you to answer a few questions. Then you can carry on as you have been for all these centuries.”

“What do you want?” Hannibal questions lowly.

“A woman came to you some time ago.” Mayor Argent opens the manila folder and holds up a photo that Stiles vaguely recognizes. “Her name was Meredith Walker.” Then he shows another photo and Stiles is struck by the fact that he’s seen that face before because it’s the face Lydia had showed him through touch. “Her company was frequented by this man. Ines Reyes. Do any of these names sound familiar to you?”

That’s Ines Reyes? Stiles thinks, thoughts going wild.

Hannibal replies through clenched teeth, “The woman I can confirm but the man, I know not.”

“Just as well,” Mayor Argent supposes. “This woman is closely linked to the Benefactor. As is, it would appear that the Benefactor’s main mission in life is to see me dead. Now I have to admit to being confused because as far as I know, I’ve done nothing to garner such a vengeful agenda.”

Hannibal’s lips twist. “Your reputation, Argent, would show otherwise. I know of great families lost to fires because of your doing.”

Stiles inhales sharply at that.

Mayor Argent doesn’t bat an eye once again. “Strong accusations. I assume you have evidence to prove that?”

Hannibal says nothing.

“I thought not,” Mayor Argent says. “But I digress.” Then he says, “Meredith Walker. She was turned. By one of yours. I need the name of who.”

“So you can cut off their head to save your own neck?” Hannibal reasons. “Do you honestly believe
me to be so naive?”

“No, Hannibal. I do not.” Mayor Argent suddenly aims a dart gun and shoots Hannibal with it before anyone can react.

Hannibal stumbles to his feet and yanks the dart out of his neck.

Stiles quickly moves out of the way in fear of Hannibal lashing out.

Hannibal throws the dart down. “What have you done?” he thunders.

“Gave you a very diluted mixture of this,” Mayor Argent replies, waving the small vial. “Now it may not work as quickly as this would have but give it time. You’ll find it’s just as potent.”

Hannibal hisses, flashing fang as he bristles.

“Give me a name, and I’ll provide you with the antidote,” Mayor Argent bargains.

Ill-timing causes Kate to waltz in the room in her silk silver gown. “Dad, where’s Stiles? You —”

Hannibal is across the room in a flash, poised behind Kate with a hand wrapped around the front of throat as he forces her head at an angle so he can hover his fangs threateningly where her shoulder meets neck. “You’ve been terribly rude, Gerard,” he seethes. “What a lovely little creature your daughter is. I’d quite enjoy having her as a last meal.”

Stiles fingers twitch as his heart knocks away in his chest but he’s frozen with fear, unsure of what to do.

Kate’s mouth is twisted in a scowl as she struggles fearlessly under Hannibal’s hand.

“Don’t be an imbecile,” Mayor Argent says as he stands. “Let’s keep this between us.”

“Oh you’ve ruined any chances of that when you poisoned me, you old fool,” Hannibal fumes. His fangs lengthen and his grey eyes glow menacingly. He bites into Kate’s neck as she jolts and cries out. Hannibal pulls away just as quickly, mouth stained red by her blood. “Oh the sins I taste in her blood. It’s everything I can do not to rip her apart.”

Mayor Argent doesn’t move to stop him.

“What are you doing?” Stiles yells at him. “You’re just going to let him kill her?”

“Contain your emotional outbursts, Mr. Stilinski,” Mayor Argent calmly replies, not even sparing Stiles a glance. “No deal, Hannibal.”

“Then she suffers,” Hannibal spits. In the next instance, he’s gone.

Kate falls to her knees and Stiles quickly lunges to her in efforts to keep her from crashing face first into the floor. Her eyes flutter and she looks a little out of breath before she passes out in his arms.

“What’s wrong with her? What did he do?” Stiles asks desperately.

Mayor Argent ignores him. “She shouldn’t have interfered,” he says. Then he makes an indication for Violet to follow him out of the room.

Stiles is left alone to press a shaky hand to Kate’s bleeding neck wound. He tries not panic.
Isaac finds him a moment later.

“Help me,” Stiles says, tears building in the corner of his eyes, mostly from adrenaline. “Help me get her out of here.”

Isaac nods wordlessly, bodily lifts Kate and carries her bridal-style like she weighs nothing.

“Take her to the garage. I’ll try and find her keys,” Stiles instructs and they part ways when they exit the study.

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Stiles manages not to run them off the road or ram Kate’s rental into another car on the way to Deaton’s shop. He’s working on autopilot when he parks halfway on the curb and knocks desperately on the glass before he drags Isaac and Kate to the back. He knocks again and again as he rings the bell at the same time before the light hanging above the backdoor turns on and Deaton appears in the open doorway a moment later.

“Mr. Stilinski? What —”

“She’s been bitten by a Vampire,” Stiles interjects. “I didn’t know where else to go.”

Deaton eyes an unconscious Kate, still settled in Isaac’s arms before he looks up and down the alley. He then touches his hands to the doorframe until it glows white under his touch before completely fading away. “Come in,” he says and moves out of the way so they can do just that. He puts the seal back up once they’re inside and then locks the door. “Upstairs. This way.”

Stiles and Isaac are led to a small apartment located above Deaton’s shop and the only thing Stiles lets himself notice is that it smells heavily of incense.

“Help me move this table, please,” Deaton says, grabbing one end of his glass coffee table as Stiles grabs the other end. They move it more towards his leather couch, which is sitting against the windows that face the front of the buildings across the street.

Stiles moves out the way as he watches Deaton spread out a strange quilt with different symbols stitched into it on the floor.

“Lay her here,” Deaton instructs.

Isaac settles Kate over the quilt carefully before stepping away to stand beside Stiles.

Deaton then lowers himself to his knees to Kate’s left, turning her head so he can closely examine the bite mark on her neck with a furrowed brow. He makes thoughtful sounds but he never really says anything.

“What’s happening to her?” Stiles asks, chewing away on his fingernails anxiously.

“She’s evolving,” Deaton replies.

“Into what?” Stiles rasps.

“A Ghoul.”

“No. No.” Stiles shakes his head. “How do we stop it? How can we stop it?”

“Truthfully, I’m not sure we can. Once the process has begun, there’s no stopping it,” Deaton
confesses. “However, there might be one thing that can save her from such a fate.”

“What? What is it?”

“It’s not a sure thing,” Deaton warns as he looks up at him. “A tonic, theoretically, could be concocted to reverse the effects.”

“What ingredients do you need?” Stiles questions immediately. “I’ll get them.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Stilinski. I have mostly everything I need,” Deaton assures. “However, I do require a small donation of blood from the Vampire who bit her.”

Stiles slowly closes his eyes with a sigh. Then he opens them with a determined attitude. “I’ll get it.”

“Vampires are not to be philandered with,” Deaton cautions. “I urge you to stay alert. I’ll do what I can here.”

Stiles nods and turns to Isaac. “Can I convince you to stay here?”

“Not a chance,” Isaac says softly.

Stiles exhales roughly. “I thought not.” He looks to Deaton. “How long before she takes a turn for the worst?”

“You’ve got a six hour window at best,” Deaton replies. “I’d hurry, regardless.”

Stiles nods and grabs Isaac’s hand before dragging him out of the building. They make their way to Kate’s car and pulls free their bikes from the trunk before climbing them. “There’s no way those Vampires are still at the Argent Manor,” he supposes.

“So where do we look?” Isaac asks.


Isaac looks as unhappy about that as Stiles feels.
Once again, outside of the Argent Manor, they loiter in front of the glittering marble water fountain looking utterly disheveled in their bloodstained tuxedos with their bikes lying at their feet. They're standing so close to the fountain that Stiles can feel a cool mist ghosting over the back of his neck. It’s not thundering per say, but there are white flashes that silently appear behind the clouds in the sky.

Stiles flags over a valet (who raises his eyebrows and turns up his nose at their unusual state) and he tips the valet a twenty-dollar bill to collect Violet and Garrett and bring them outside.

It takes a few minutes but Garrett and Violet finally reach them with the same kind of questioning expressions the valet wore. Violet stands a few feet before Garret, who makes no move to stand directly at her side, acting more as a burly spectator.

Stiles says, “You’re going to help me.”

Garrett huffs as he combs a large hand through his styled hair before yanking gently on his tuxedo jacket as if to straighten it.

Violet look unutterably amused and darkly beautiful in her flowing gown, but she makes no move to comment as she looks on with patient indifference.

Stiles ignores the fact that they’re both looking at him like he’s a elegant pearl necklace blotted with flecks of mud and says, “This is how it’s going to go. You’re going to help me track down Hannibal, and it’s going to be well before midnight when you do.”

Violet lifts her eyebrows and pulls out the bobby pins in her hair before shakes out her hair, which causes her tousled raven locks to sweep across the delicate line of her shoulders as she says, “Or… what? I have to say, if this is you being threatening, I am very disappointed.”

Stiles squints his eyes in annoyance.

“This is a waste of time,” Garrett decides as his handsome face creases with aggravation while he jams his large hands into the pockets of his dress pants. “Seriously, Vee. We’ve got better things to do then entertain these two punks.”

Violet lifts her manicured hand and Garrett grows strangely silent.

Stiles might almost believe that she used magic to get him to shut up but Garrett grumbles under his breath and that notion dispels. He says, “Look, are you going to help us or not?”

“Or not,” Violet echoes, unimpressed as she presses that very hand she used to signal for Garrett’s silence to press to her chin thoughtfully.

Isaac straightens out to his full height beside Stiles and he’s got three inches over his brother (and wow okay when did that happen?) and he says, “If you don’t help us, we’ll walk right into that fancy party and make a scene like you wouldn’t believe.” Then he adds, “Which, if you really think about it, won’t be too hard to do seeing as we’re covered in blood. And something tells me that Mayor Argent won’t take too kindly to that. Nor will his guests. And how would he feel to know that you two were all that stood between us doing so, and you did nothing. But again, it’s up to you.”

Garrett glares at them both and widens his stance.
Stiles’s lips twist with a little pride and he says, “Yeah. What he said.”

Violet stares at them blankly, weighing the threat silently before she responds, “I want more of your spit.”

“That’s a strange request,” Stiles retorts as he blinks at her. “This isn’t a negotiation.”

“I disagree. You’re a Virtue — *everything* is negotiable,” is Violet’s apathetic reply.

“Maybe you're right, but I'm not negotiating anything with you.”

“You think Hannibal won't make any demands of his own when we find him? He’s centuries old. He isn’t stupid.”

“You let me worry about that,” Stiles merely says because he *had* considered that possibility. But Kate’s worth it. “You don’t get anymore of my DNA. You just get the satisfaction of helping me save Kate’s life. And maybe I convince her not to seek revenge.” He waits a few beats before he adds, “Or we can play this out just in the way my brother described. I have to warn you that I did theater back at my old school and I’ve been itching to do some public improvisation.”

Violet’s eyes flash pink for a brief second before she forcibly relaxes her shoulders. “I do nothing for free.”

“Today’s a new day,” Isaac drawls cynically, unmoved and, wow, yeah this side of his brother he can get behind. The deep level of sarcasm Isaac uses makes Stiles unbelievably proud. “First time for everything.”

“Call their bluff, Vee,” Garrett complains with an annoying amount of righteous indignation. “It’s not like we can’t stop them.”

Stiles feels his palms grow warm.

Violet stiffens and she must notice because something that looks like uneasiness flickers through her perfectly composed mask for an eighth of a second before completely vanishing. “I do nothing for free,” she clinically argues. “However. I can be generous in dire situations.”

Stiles relaxes. “Good to know.”

Isaac says nothing.

Garrett makes an aggravated and almost mournful sound.

Violet coldly disregards him. “Old Town. That’s where Hannibal is staying with his clan. I doubt any of them will be happy to see us after what Mayor Argent has done.”

“Again, you let me worry about that,” Stiles determinedly resolves.

Violet glances between Stiles and Isaac as Garrett approaches her from behind and rests his hand on her left shoulder. Her eyes glow pink as she snaps her fingers with a pink spark.

The bikes at Isaac and Stiles’s feet disappear in a thick cloud of pink smoke.

“Don’t worry. They’ll reappear when needed. I’ve enchanted them,” Violet informs them. She offers her right hand to them and says, “You’re not prone to motion sickness are you?”

Stiles furrows his brow in question.
“I’m a master of teleportation, if you can believe,” Violet explains with a long-suffering sigh. “It’s tricky when I have to do it with others. But it can be done. Just as long as you keep your mind completely blank. You wouldn’t want to end up...somewhere else.”

Stiles tries not to contemplate what she could possibly mean because that’s absolutely no good for his nerves. He glances down at the ground where their bikes used to be and then to Isaac who shrugs and looks unafraid.

“I’ll do it if you do,” Isaac murmurs lowly, looking both sincere and daring. It’s a small comfort.

Stiles takes a deep breath and nods at him before he clears his mind of everything. He reaches out at the same time Isaac does and they grab Violet’s hand simultaneously.

Then in a blink, with the sensation of pens and needles prickling over every inch of his skin, and his gut twisting in the way it would on an elevator going down at an incredible rate, they’re standing on the edge of Old Town.

Stiles stumbles away in surprise and catches Isaac in time to steady him when he does the same.

Violet and Garrett, however, look as composed as ever.

Violet glides across the gleaming concrete with her silk gown floating around her as though she were walking merely on the air. She glances back at them with glowing pink eyes that make her look dangerously ethereal and otherworldly to say, “Coming?”

Garrett tosses Isaac a disdainful look as he shoulders him out of the way so he can flock after her like the eager little minion he is.

Stiles glares at the back of Garrett’s stupid head as he steadies his brother once more.

Isaac just nudges him along until they’re both trailing after the Argent orphans.

Stiles glances around quickly at the shadowy faces of the old abandoned buildings/storefronts and tries not to comment on the irony of the thin layer of fog floating around them. It doesn’t keep the somewhat shattered or broken windows from glittering ominously.

An owl hoots in the distance.

The moon sits heavy and full in the sky; white and encased by blackness, the white lights of the stars punch holes in the sky all around it.

They keep a steady pace down the empty stretch of road spread out before them like a black tar rug as they venture deeper into the heart of Old Town.

Since Old Town is settled mainly on or near to the outskirts of Beacon Hills, it’s deathly quiet and creepy. This part of town is what nightmares are made of.

Also, it’s hard not to notice the crows perched on streetlamps overhead.

The ones that loom in the sky really give Stiles a proper spook — he’s read in Vampire lore that crows and Vampires are attracted to one another for some unknown, unearthly reason. So where there may be Vampires, there will be crows, or vice versa.

The point is that these stupid feathered black messengers of death are staring down at them with their beady little eyes like spectators watching a man walking to his demise.
They make it to the end of the street and approach a large pub made of wood and stone.

Violet knocks on the door twice.

A small window in the door slides open revealing a pair of grey eyes. “Cila është puna juaj këtu?” asks the voice on the other side of the door. Those grey eyes are watching them carefully.

Violet, without missing a beat, replies, “Unë vij si një dhuratë-mbajtës.” She gestures to Stiles.

Stiles wonders what’s being said.

Isaac, who seems eerily like he’s reading his thoughts, huddles close and whispers, “It’s Albanian.”

Stiles blinks and glances over to his brother.

“My mom and dad used to argue in Albanian,” Isaac quietly explains.

“You speak Albanian?” Stiles asks, amazed when Isaac meekly nods.

“It’s kind of my heritage,” Isaac discloses timidly. He seems a little embarrassed about it. “Do you want me to translate?”

Stiles nods.

“This is some kind of ‘blood-club’, so he’s asking about what our business is here. Only vampires are permitted. She’s telling him she has a gift for his master. That she wants to make amends for the wrongs of Mayor Argent,” Isaac explains softly with a brow furrowed in concentration.

Stiles feels an answering frown shrug the corners of his mouth down and he marks the word ‘blood-club’ in his mind as something to research or ask Deaton about when he gets the chance.

Isaac gets curiously silent at the same time Violet does.

It makes sense that they do in the next moment because the man on the other side of the door says, “Okay” in rough English before he closes the small window and unlocks the door to let them through.

It is just as foggy inside of the pub as it is on the outside. Not to mention there’s very little light.

Stiles keeps Isaac close to him as he squints to make up for what he’s unable to see but Isaac seems to have no trouble. In fact, he’s the one guiding Stiles.

There are lit candles hanging from the ceiling on chandeliers, casting long shadows on the booths, the bar, and the dance floor.

It smells like candle wax, herbs, rainwater, and blood. The sounds of moans and hisses float through the air along with the sound of soft seductive music.

Glowing grey eyes tack onto Stiles and follow him like the sharp gaze of a hawk in the dead of the night with its sight on prey.

It makes Stiles’s skin crawl and his palms warm defensively. He wills the feeling away, lest he does anything that will ruin their chances of getting what they came for.

“This way.” The large man who guards the door leads their little group into the far reaches of the pub and through dark, velvety curtains to a more private setting.
“Visitors. Why am I not surprised?”

In the center of the room sits Hannibal Barca. He sits above all the writhing bodies spread across the floor, both Human and Vampire alike, with an air of arrogance about him. His grey eyes are steely, even though he’s pale with black veins spread across the wound on his neck, disappearing down into the collar of his bloody dress shirt.

There’s a pretty blonde in his lap looking sweaty and dazed as blood pulsates from the curve of her left breast where it’s peeking out the cup of her green corset dress.

Hannibal bites into her wrist before holding the bleeding limb over a wineglass brought to him by one of his followers.

Stiles flinches a little against the sight.

Once the glass is full, the woman is carried away and out of sight.

Hannibal tugs his handkerchief from the pocket of his shirt and uses it to clean the blood around his mouth and on the edges of the wineglass. “So quiet,” he says without looking at either of them. He takes a generous sip. “Yet you bravely venture into my den. No doubt to make some demands.” He smirks and tosses the handkerchief off to the side. “So.” He glances up and examines each of them. “What would one need from a dying king, hm?”

Stiles swallows but he pushes his way to stand before Garrett, Violet, and Isaac. He says, “Kate needs —”

“I am well aware of what Argent’s little female spawn requires,” Hannibal interrupts bitterly. He crushes the wineglass and blood oozes down his hand. “But what I want to know is why you would be so bold as to ask me for it?”

“I won’t insult you by claiming that what happened tonight was just a misunderstanding,” Stiles nervously declares.

“Good,” is Hannibal’s callous reply. “Then you are as smart as you look. I feared the opposite when you wandered in.”

“I can get her to lift whatever spell she’s put on you,” Stiles swears as he gestures to Violet, who looks at him sharply in turn, but he just ignores that.

Hannibal’s expression goes blank. “This is no enchantment, boy,” he explains darkly. “They’ve poisoned me. With the very thing you use to keep that wandering tongue of yours from getting dry.”

Stiles quickly backtracks. “Then I’ll cure you.”

Hannibal pauses at that. He cocks his head and says, “Does she mean so much to you that you would save the life of a monster in order to rescue her?”

“I’m saying that no one has to die. Not if I can help it,” Stiles shakily replies. His nerves are getting to him.

Hannibal makes a noncommittal sound at that. He leans forward and says, “And if it is not enough? If I should request that you bring me Gerard Argent’s head on a spike? If I should request that you join my multitude and I for the rest of your days? What then? Would you still seek to save this woman’s life?”
Stiles swallows and curls his fingers into fists. He makes sure that he chooses his next words carefully because they will either make or break this deal. “You won’t ask that of me,” he says with certainty. He combs through his thoughts desperately before saying, “You can’t force a Seven to do anything they don’t want to do.”

Hannibal lifts a brow at that. Minutes tick by and by and by…and by. “Forgive me then,” he finally remarks after a long while and it almost seems too easy, too simple. “It was not my intention to be rude. It has been a long time since I was blessed to be in the presence of great influence.”

Stiles tries his best not to squirm in relief at the stunt he just pulled. Really. He had no idea that would actually work.

“Caitlin,” Hannibal suddenly says, and from the shadows appears a lithely beautiful female with short bubblegum-pink hair, and neon orange lips to match the neon tattoos littering every inch of her body. Even when she smiles her teeth seem to glow in the dark, right along with her white sundress. “You’ll have to forgive my paranoia. Old habits. I find when you have been in this world for as long as I have, you begin to mistrust the word of mortals. They tend to say just about anything in great times of perils.”

Stiles is struck by a feeling of unease. “I don’t understand.”

“Caitlin is very keen in detecting lies. While she may not be a Virtue, she still has her uses,” Hannibal clarifies. He gestures her closer, and she leans over until her ear is hovering near his mouth. Caitlin flicks her gaze over to Stiles as she nods in agreement to whatever Hannibal is saying. When she straightens, she ventures to Stiles and says with a silvery voice, “Do not be afraid of me. I will not harm you. I never neglect to show hospitality, for by doing this, I make myself open to having welcomed a paragon of Fate as guests without knowing it.”

Stiles still doesn’t understand.

“My name is Caitlin. I am a Sage. I consult with the gods — the Faceless. Do you know them?” Caitlin asks and she’s very gentle when she grabs his right hand.

“I — uh — I know of them,” Stiles stutters as she presses a kiss to the inside of his palm, leaving behind a smear of neon lipstick.

Caitlin straightens and smiles kindly at him the way a doctor or nurse would if they were drawing blood and trying to be very gentle about it. She traces her fingers over the smear before bringing them up to hover over the spot as she uses her other hand to keep the hand steady. She cocks her head as she stares down. “He speaks the truth, Hannibal. He is a Seven.”

“How well-heeled,” Hannibal crows, delighted. He claps his hands together as one of his kind bring him a bowl of water so he can wash his hands. “He wants to save me. Will he?”

“He is a man of his word,” Caitlin confirms as she lifts her head and Stiles is startled to see that her eyes have gone milky grey. “His word is his bond.”

“Excellent,” Hannibal says as he dries his hands. “Go on then. I know you’re itching to prophesy.”

“Heed my words. For I know the plans that they have for you,” Caitlin continues in a smoky voice. Her voice rings as clear as a bell in the darkness of the room. “You will do great things. You were chosen by the Faceless themselves. It is your birthright to bring about peace and balance. You were molded and shaped for this very reason. And so Fate rejoices over you with singing.”
Stiles blinks. “Uh —”

“But I see pain,” Caitlin warns sorrowfully. “You will lose as much as you gain. This life — there is a cost. She’s not meant to be saved. Death will always linger at her door. And her destruction will be her love’s undoing.” She blinks and her eyes go back to normal. “Give him your blood, Hannibal. He will heal you but you will need him again. Do not be discourteous to him. Keep a seat of honor at your table for him, always, and he shall make you prosperous.” She moves to return to Hannibal’s side and she stands by him silently.

Hannibal snaps his fingers and one of his followers bring him a jewel-encrusted gold goblet. He uses his own fangs to bite into his wrist as his eyes glow and he spills his blood into the goblet. He hands the goblet to Caitlin and she carries it over to Isaac.

Caitlin then turns to Stiles with a knife and takes the hand that she kissed and pricks his index finger. Stiles winces against the pain but says nothing when she smears his blood on a grape lollipop she pulled from between her cleavage. It’s weird.

Caitlin releases him and returns to Hannibal with the bloody lollipop, which he quickly pops into his mouth and it’s ridiculous how absurd this centuries old vampire looks sucking on a lollipop.

Hannibal’s skin clears within an instance though (all strangeness aside), and the black veins disappear as if the poison has been dissipated from his system. He straightens on his throne, looking unnaturally pale as ever but somehow healthier. “Well that’s certainly better,” he remarks, smirking around the white stem of the lollipop. His eyes twinkle as he looks at Stiles. “Go out in joy and be led by peace, my friend. We will cross paths again. Give Kathryn Argent my best.”

Stiles doesn’t waste a second to quickly herd his brother out of the pub; Violet and Garrett on their heels. He inhales shakily the instant they step back out into the night air as his nerves finally peak and decline.

Violet and Garrett say not one word to them as they disappear with a cloud of pink smoke.

Stiles could care less. He only cares that their bikes appear a moment after.

Isaac watches him fumble onto his bike as he climbs onto his own with more grace, juggling the goblet of blood with one hand as he steers with the other. He says, “I think this is real gold.”

And Stiles — he laughs. He laughs long and hard and deliriously because he just walked in and out a den of lethal vampires with nothing but a small prick on his finger.

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Deaton’s already fussing over an elixir in his kitchen when they return. He doesn’t question them when Isaac hands over the goblet of blood but he does look at Stiles with an assessing gaze before he turns to continue to toil away at the bubbling pot over the stove. It smells really loud and strange — like weird combination of peppermint and vinegar.

Stiles sinks onto Deaton’s couch as if his body is made of liquid and watches Kate struggle with every breath and it does nothing but shove him into a terrible mood. There’s a gob of dismay worming its way through his intestines.

Isaac manages to hunt down a first aid kit and he kneels before Stiles with it, silently wrapping an Elmo band aid over his meagerly wounded finger.
Deaton has Elmo band aids. Why.

Stiles winces a little but other than a few pricks of pain, Isaac really is quite gentle.

Isaac cocks his head up at him when he’s satisfied with his handiwork and says, “You smell upset. Why? You got what you wanted.”

Stiles shakes his head. “Even with everything that’s happened I had hoped that —” He stops abruptly. He’s not even sure about what he will say. ”It’s nothing. Never mind. Forget it.” He stands and extracts his phone from his pocket. “I need to make a few calls. Can you call dad and tell him what happened?”

“Yeah, but he’s not going to like it,” Isaac points out as he takes Stiles’s place on the couch.

Stiles just shrugs tiredly while saying, ”I’ll deal with it,” and tucks away in the bathroom. He calls Peter first.

“What have you done?” is the first thing Peter asks when he picks up after the first ring. “You never call me, so there must be something decidedly fatal happening. What is it?”

Stiles waits a good minute before he says, “I’m at Deaton’s. It’s — don’t freak out but — just.”

Peter makes a thoughtfully amused sound. ”Your pauses are really reassuring. And also quite dramatic,” he states. ”But I admit, there is a flare of suspense that has me on the edge of my seat.”

”Peter,” Stiles says in a tone he normally never uses with the older man.

Peter grows curiously silent on the other end.

Stiles uses the pause to take a deep breath. Then he starts again, “There was an incident. You should know Kate’s hurt. But she —”

Peter doesn’t let him finish. The phone goes dead on his end.

Stiles pulls his phone away from his ear to stare at his screen incredulously. ”Okay. That’s not good.” He quickly calls Laura. She picks up as swiftly as Peter had. “Please tell me Peter isn’t splitting out of there like a lunatic.”

”Nah. More like a bat out of hell,” Laura confirms, sounding both amused and concerned. ”What’s up?”

”Kate’s hurt. But, but —” Stiles sighs again as the phone goes dead on her end. “Why doesn’t anybody let me finish?” He exits the bathroom and as he passes Deaton in the kitchen, he says, “We’re going to have some company. Uh — you wouldn’t mind taking down the thing you have on the door?”

Deaton doesn’t look particularly thrilled or willing, but he does turn the fire low to a simmer and follows Stiles down the steps to the back door.

Stiles steps out into the alley and looks up and down expectantly. He’s not sure how long he stands there before Peter appears (surprise, surprise) completely wolfing out.

Peter stands before Stiles, fangs, claws, and all. He’s really growly and he glares lethally at Deaton, who’s looming in his own doorway with an unimpressed look.

”He may not come in like that,” Deaton states firmly and Stiles can feel his gaze burning holes in the
back of his head. It’s obviously nonnegotiable. “Talk him down.”

Stiles tosses his hands out wide and waves them up and down with exasperation like he’s trying (but failing) to fly. “Why does everyone leave these things to me? I just — I’m not even qualified to handle this stuff but here I am, right in the belly of it all, like a true soldier with generally no experience or complaints except just wanting to understand what the hell is going on, but really anyone with sense would be in the same position if they had to go through what I go through and I have to say that —”

“Mr. Stilinski,” Deaton interrupts and even though his voice neither goes up or down, it’s a little obvious he’s exasperated by Stiles’s babbling.

“Fine, fine,” Stiles mutters and stops his frantic gesturing. He stares right into Peter’s gold eyes and says, “You gotta cool it, Peter. Kate’s going to be okay. Okay? She’s — I took care of it. I would never let her — she's important to me too. Please tell me I’m getting through to you. She's going to be okay.”

Peter struggles but manages to shift back in slow degrees and it looks as painful as it sounds. Even when he’s completely human, he still looks pale and shaken.

Stiles has to double take because he doesn’t think he’s ever seen Peter like this over anything or anyone. He — yeah, okay, he gets it. The near-death thing is understandable. “She’s okay,” he promises again. “I took care of it. Deaton’s going to — he’ll make it better.”

Peter’s not saying a word, and that’s just as bad. He’s staring at Stiles like his whole world is shattering in ways he can’t hope to fix and he can’t do a damn thing about it.

Stiles leans forward as if to give him a hug but he reels back immediately when he realizes that this is Peter and Peter doesn’t want a hug. He just wants Kate and he’ll be on the verge of a nervous breakdown if he doesn’t get her.

There are literal tears sneaking into the corner of Peter’s blue eyes. He's been in this position before with his family. Thoughts must be flying wildly in his mind and Stiles suddenly knows what Hannibal’s Sage meant when she said that Kate's death would be her lover's undoing.

She seemed pretty sure that Kate is going to die someday.

And that — that's going to rip Peter's world wide open in the most painful way possible.

Stiles makes a strangled sound of anguish because damn it, this is his friend and he can’t bare to see him broken like this. “Oh Jesus, just — Deaton, let him in. Let him in.”

Deaton touches his hands to the doorframe until it glows and he steps back.

Peter’s gone as soon as he does, most likely following Kate’s scent up into the apartment upstairs.

Stiles feels his shoulders shake a little out of sympathy, and he barely has time to get himself together before Laura appears, and he has to do the dance all over again.

Deaton’s really silent then.

Stiles thinks it’s because Laura’s grown a whole four inches taller with her shifting. She’s like a beanpole. Her eyes are redder than anything he’s ever seen — her claws and fangs are longer than he ever remembered them being. “Laura, please.” At this point he feels a little drained. “Deaton won’t let you in when you’re like this. Kate’s okay and you — you guys really should have given me a
chance to explain. I took care of it. If you’d listen on the phone — if you’d let me finish you’d know
that I have it under control. Deaton’s working on making her better but you’ve got to calm down.
She’s not going anywhere.”

Laura growls at Deaton but she whines a little as she shuffles closer to Stiles and he doesn’t dare
move an inch as she shrinks down to normal size and returns to herself. She exhales and there’s
sweat glistening across her forehead. She looks exhausted by it all. “Take me to her. Please.”

“Okay,” Stiles says softly and wraps her arm over his shoulders so she can lean on him as they make
their way in after Deaton removes the magical barrier before putting it back up. He walks with Laura
up the stairs and guides her over to where Peter is cradling half of Kate’s body in his lap with his
nose buried in her cropped hair.

Laura shuffles over, suddenly weak-kneed as she falls onto her knees beside Peter and an
unconscious Kate.

Stiles feels a sudden shiver ride up his spine at the sight of the three of them, and it’s almost like
some kind of unpleasant case of déjà vu. He has to violently suppress and ignore it as he joins Isaac
on the couch because he doesn’t trust where that thread of thought might lead him. He feels worn-out
as he leans into his brother’s side.

Isaac lifts his arm and drags Stiles closer, silently comforting him as he continues to watch Peter and
Laura fuss over Kate with curiosity.

Stiles begins to completely drift just as Deaton carries over a steaming bowl of the elixir.

The last thing he hopes for before he completely succumbs to sleep is that they’ll all be in better
spirits when he wakes.

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Stiles wakes up on Thursday in Laura’s bed. It’s kind of confusing at first, which is understandable
because that’s certainly not where he fell asleep. He sits up with a yawn and scratches the back of his
head as he glances around, noticing it’s daylight and Laura’s nowhere to be seen.

Gumdrop’s lounging in her own huge sparkly bed, tail wagging lazily as she watches Stiles’s every
move.

Stiles grabs the change of clothes that’s been left for him at the end of the bed with a note that merely
has his name on it. He shuffles to the bathroom and strips down before climbing into the shower to
wash up. When he’s sure he’s squeaky clean, he climbs out, towels off and climbs into the fresh set
of clothes (which happens to be a pair of dark fitted jeans, a pea green hoodie, and some underwear).

Stiles knows without knowing that these are Derek’s clothes. He brushes his teeth with a spare
toothbrush before walking barefoot out of the bathroom and out of Laura’s room. He can smell food
and his mouth waters as he follows it into the dining room where everyone is communing over a
banquet of deli sandwiches made from a variety of fixings.

It’s mostly the adults and the older teens filling in the seats at the dining room table.

Stiles figures the kids must be in the kitchen like they usually are.

Nana Hale is sitting at the head of the table with Isaac (who’s in a fresh pair of clothes too), holding
Olive (surprisingly) as Cora goes to town on a meatball sandwich on the other side of him.
Laura waves him over to the empty seat she’s apparently saved for him and he sits down as he scans the contents of the table. “Did you sleep okay? You were completely knocked by the time my mom came to get us.”

“Yeah, I slept okay,” Stiles says with a slight frown. He must have been really tired to not have noticed being bodily moved.

Laura must read it on his face because she smiles slyly and says, “You can thank your brother for that one. He refused to let any of us handle you. He probably thought we wouldn’t be gentle or as careful as he certainly was.”

Stiles glances up the table at Isaac, who gets a little pink and stares at his tuna sandwich like it’s the most interesting thing in the world. Stiles can’t help but to smile a little at that. “He’s a bit protective,” he supposes.

“Oh I know how Werecats can be with their Pride,” Laura replies cheerily.

Stiles feels something warm and pleasant expand in both his chest and his head at that. "You, uh, think Isaac considers me his Pride?" he asks, completely aware that his little brother is eavesdropping.

Isaac continues to stare shyly at his food like he suspects it could disappear at any moment.

Laura laughs. "Is that even a question?" she retorts, and she does have a point. “I had to practically bribe him into letting you sleep in my bed. He stuck around after our hour debate and even slept on the floor. I swear he wasn’t going to let you out of his sight.”

Stiles snorts and reaches for a turkey sandwich and some plain potato chips. "Nothing I wouldn't have done in his shoes," he supposes with an approving tone and sends Isaac a quick smile before his attention shifts. “Where’s Peter and Kate?”

“Speaking of never letting someone out of their sight. Kate’s in Peter’s room with him,” Laura explains. “I think he was more freaked than I was. They may never leave his bed.”

“They’d better,” Derek pipes up from across the table with a pinched expression. “They keep having sex. My room is under his. And mom won’t do anything. She keeps saying it’s perfectly normal and healthy and it’s awful. She’s not suffering like I am. Grown ups are weird.”

“Well thank God you’re no closer to being one,” Laura remarks with a smirk and ducks when Derek hurls an entire pickle at her. “See what I mean?” she crows with delight.

Stiles laughs a little, feeling the weight of his bad mood completely disperse into nothing.

“Anyway,” Laura says between bites. “Isaac is smitten with my baby sister.”

Stiles glances up at Isaac, who is staring down at Olive like she’s the most precious gift in the world while Cora takes advantage of this to steal some of the food off his plate (like there isn’t already enough to go around). “I don’t blame him,” he says after a swallow. He crams some chips into his mouth as he says, “She’s a prize.”

Laura just retrieves the pickle that Derek threw at her from off the floor and dusts it off, mumbling about a six second rule before biting into it.

“That’s vile,” Derek complains from across the table as he silently gags.
Laura just moans like it’s the best thing she’s ever eaten.

Derek throws some cheese puffs this time.

Stiles sighs as a bit of it rains onto his plate and lap. He just follows Laura’s lead and eats them.

Derek shoots them both dirty looks. "Plebeians. Both of you."

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"Dad thinks it’s best if we stay here until he comes back,” Isaac explains as they sit out back on the swing-set while all the other little Hale younglings flutter around them, loudly playing games of tag and hide-and-seek. “Told you he’d be mad about everything. I think he’s gonna ground us when he gets back.”

Stiles sighs. “Yeah, that’s probably true.”

Isaac kicks back against the ground so he can start a good swing. “I’m going to miss so much *Cake Boss,*” he complains.

Stiles is startled into laughter about that. “I really question your taste in TV.”

Isaac shrugs and keeps on swinging. “The new seasons of *Toddlers and Tiaras* and *Dance Moms* are supposed to start tonight. I better watch them while I still have a chance. You think dad will let me DVR it while we're grounded? I can always catch up.”

“You are ridiculous and I question why I love you,” Stiles states flatly as he watches his brother swing higher and higher.

Isaac smiles like he’s won the lottery and Stiles doesn’t get why until he pants, “Love you too.” But then he ruins the moment by adding, “It smells so bad here. My nose is throbbing.”

Stiles knows it must be torture but he still feels it’s his diplomatic responsibility to say, “Be nice.”

“It does though,” Isaac insists. “Like a wet dog that's been outside too long. It's too earthy and...wrong. It’s awful. You reek too. You’ve got Derek all over you.”

Stiles groans and goes a little pink as he slaps a hand over his face. “Can you not say it like that? Geez.”

“But you do,” Isaac swears before sighing. “Might as well get used to it,” he mutters, mainly to himself.

“What? What does that mean?” Stiles asks with a confused frown.

Isaac opens his mouth to reply but a small pebble gets thrown at him and he jumps off the swing, landing on his feet gracefully like a cat before he moves to chase down the culprit.

Stiles never gets an answer to his question as he watches Isaac hunt down a pair of preteen girls who obviously have a crush on him. Stiles sighs and shakes his head before making his way towards the Hale house in search of his phone.

It’s in Laura’s room on the floor.

Stiles calls his dad as he watches Laura strip her bed down with loud meaningful complaints of how it smells like blood and old musty shoes. He rolls his eyes and leaves his dad a voicemail when he
doesn’t pick up, making sure to add a heartfelt apology in there in hopes it’ll alleviate the punishment he knows is coming.

Laura is unhelpfully amused. She waits until he hangs up the phone to say, “If it’s worth anything, I was very moved. And I’d only ground you for twenty-four hours.”

“Thanks,” Stiles replies flatly before pocketing his phone. “We need to talk.”

“Mm, I had a feeling you’d say that,” Laura says as she dumps the last of her covers in a laundry basket. “Follow me down to the laundry room and we can talk about whatever you want.”

Stiles thinks that’s reasonable enough, so that’s just what he does. They end up on the other side of the basement in a room that smells like detergent and fabric softener. He watches as Laura twists and presses at the buttons of the washing machine before it whirs to life.

Laura begins shoving her sheets into the mouth of it.

Stiles says, and not without significance, “Your eyes were red last night.”

Laura huffs a little bitterly and says, “So I might have come into my Alpha inheritance a little sooner than expected. Early bloomer. Lucky me.”

“You don’t sound particularly thrilled,” Stiles notes.

Laura swings the washing machine’s door shut and shrugs. “Being there with all those people. Speaking out the way I did — it changed me. It awoke something in me that I've been suppressing and I just — I don’t know.”

Stiles walks over to the deep freezer wedged in the corner of the room and he hops on top. He folds his hands together and watches Laura riffle through a mountain of socks. “You’re an Alpha now.”

“I’m an Alpha now,” Laura confirms as she tries pairing socks together. “God, I hate when they do this. I can never find my socks.”

Stiles smiles to himself a little. Then he says, “New York?”

“Still happening,” Laura confirms. She sighs and rubs her forehead before she chews on her bottom lip thoughtfully. She really is quite beautiful. “I think — I know that my dreams won’t wait. I have to pursue them. I have to do what I want or I’ll regret it for the rest of my life.” She looks to him. “Chicago is proof that I can be a great leader. That I have a voice. But no matter what my mom would hope, I have to love myself first. I have to choose myself first. Of course nothing is set in stone. And maybe I go to New York and things don’t work out the way I want.”

Stiles straightens as she approaches him and grabs his hands as she wedges herself between his knees.

Laura continues, “Maybe it all falls apart and I return home as an epic failure. But at least I would have tried. And I want it too much to let it go. I’m an Alpha now but I’m no one’s Alpha. You get me?”

Stiles nods and squeezes her hands comfortably. “Not really but kinda yeah.”

Laura rewards him with a gorgeous smile. She lifts his wounded finger and kisses it, leeching away some of his pain (not that there’s much to begin with, just a minor ache). “Tell me who did this. I want to know everything.”
"I thought Isaac would have said something," Stiles says as he watches her lips trace the slopes of his knuckles.

"He didn't. He values your privacy when it comes to us."

"I knew I loved that kid for a reason."

Laura just gives him a look as her eyes flash red for a split second. "Stiles."

"Okay, okay. Geez. No need to get all Alpha on me."

Laura rolls her eyes.

Stiles spends the next fifteen minutes giving an animated narration of the events as they transpired.

Laura stops him in the middle of his explanation of the letters Kate found on her father’s desk and their contents to ask, “Wait, say that again. What was the virus called?”


Laura’s brow furrows as she looks off to the side in thought before her face brightens while her eyes widen. “Fuck! I know that! I know that!”

Stiles tries not to look as startled as he feels. “You said a swear,” he dumbly mumbles.

Laura grabs him by the shoulders and shakes him a little. “I know what that is! Come on!” She grabs his hand and drags him all the way to Peter’s room. She knocks loudly. “I’m not coming in until I know you’re decent.”

Stiles distinctly hears some sniggering from the other side of the door before Peter tells them its okay to come in.

Laura bursts in the room with Stiles in tow and valiantly ignores the fact that Peter and Kate are obviously naked under Peter’s comforter and they’ve got really bad sex hair.

Kate’s got some gauze tapped to the side of her neck where she was bitten, but other than that she looks healthy; rosy cheeks and all.

Stiles clears his throat and tries not to think about the fact that it smells like sex in Peter’s room. He does glance around, ignoring the clothes scattered on the floor to look at how Peter’s room is really elegantly put together.

There are several bookshelves placed against the walls, along with dressers and a work desk with several computer monitors and books splayed open with highlighters wedged in the center like fat bookmarks. All his furniture looks handcrafted and his room is as large as Laura’s.

“The 1905HeCa virus,” Laura says, pulling on Stiles’s attention and making Kate perk up with interest. “I know what it is.”

“Well, fuck. Don’t keep me in suspense, Laura. I’ve been pulling my hair out trying to pinpoint it,” Kate admits as she leans back against Peter’s naked chest as he runs a hand through her chopped hair. “Spill.”

“In 1905, a French veterinarian by the name of Henri Carré discovered the first case of a viral disease that affects animals in the families Canidae, Mustelidae, Mephitidae, Hyaenidae, Ailuridae, Procyonidae, Pinnipedia, some Viverridae and Felidae!”
Stiles is lost.

Peter’s expression goes dark, however. “A distemper,” he says.

Kate lifts both brows. “Wait. So let me get this straight. The 1905HeCa virus is in actuality an infection?”

Stiles is still lost. “I don’t understand. I thought distempers were when a viral disease of some animals, especially dogs, causes a fever, coughing, and catarrh and oh my god they’re trying to weaponize a variant of Canine distemper.”

“And he finally gets it,” Peter drawls.

Stiles shoots him a mean look but he gets distracted by a sudden thought. “Chicago. In the letters there’s a mention about Chicago. I think that somehow what happened there wasn’t a mistake. They maybe were able to introduce a variant of the virus to the little girl and — and —” He starts pacing as his thoughts fly. “But what about the high frequency waves?”

“The witnesses that gave accounts of what happened just outside of that diner kept telling me that Ezra kept cupping her hands over her ears,” Laura explains before she looks to Stiles. “That was her name. The little girl. Ezra.”

Stiles gives a solemn nod. He thinks it’s nice that Laura knows her name, if not a little sad. He says, “There’s something missing. Her mother should have been just as affected by any frequencies lulling in the area like her daughter but she wasn’t. So why was Ezra affected so much and her mother wasn’t?”

“It could be like you said,” Kate supposes. “Maybe a variant of the virus was introduced to her.”

“Chocolate,” Peter says tightly. “She’d been eating chocolate. It was all over her fingers and all over her mouth. Laura, call their family and see if you can get any of them to tell you what type of chocolate she was eating.”

“That seems like an insensitive question,” Laura points out. “But I’ll try and smooth it over.” She wanders out of the room, smartphone in hand.

“Kate, I think we’ll pay my old friend, Parrish, a visit,” Peter decides. “If anyone can hack and get into encrypted autopsy files, it’s him.”

“He’s certainly ace at that,” Kate agrees with a smirk. “But I don’t think he likes you very much right now.”

“I don’t need him to like me,” Peter says dismissively with a frown.

Kate leans forward and nips at his bottom lip. “Please. You probably write about it in your little diary everyday, bemoaning the fact that you and he are so estranged when you used to be so intimately close.”

“You’re not as cute as you think you are,” Peter says as he gently pushes her away while she snickers.

Stiles clears his throat pointedly. When he gets their attention, he asks, “What should I do?”

“Better write that down, buttercup,” Kate chimes. “Peter’s never grateful to anyone about anything. This is truly one for the history books.”

Peter looks away and says nothing.

Stiles tries to sort out how that makes him feel. “So I’m supposed to sit around and do nothing while you guys figure it all out.”

“Pretty much,” Kate confirms. “We’ll fill you in when we can. Now are you going to scram or should I just pull back the sheets so you can see me in all my naked glory as I get dressed? I have to say that I’ve got nothing to be ashamed of, and me covering up is merely a courtesy to you. What’s it gonna be?”

Stiles makes a face and quickly backs up. “I’m just going to go and not be here.”

“Good choice,” Kate agrees. “Close the door behind you.”

Stiles does just that when he exits. He goes in search of his brother and finds him on the first floor of the house in the living room playing dominoes with Talia and Nana Hale.

Talia’s husband (Derek Sr.), with Olive lying face down against his chest, plays as a spectator in a rocking chair by the fireplace.

Stiles watches for all of five minutes before he wanders off to follow the scent of baked goods into the kitchen where Cora and Derek are baking Oreo cheesecake brownies while simultaneously playing some kind of card game as they sit on the stools on the end of the island counter. He joins them.

“What game are you playing?”

“The Oracle,” Cora replies. “You ever play?”

“I don’t even — I’ve never heard of it,” Stiles admits.

Derek snorts and says, “You’re supposed to shuffle the cards and then divide them among the players until there aren’t any cards left.”

“Then you put your pile facing down,” Cora goes on to explain. “When it’s the other person’s turn, you pick up a card from the top of your pile and ask them ‘What do you think the card is?’ and they have to guess. If they guess right, they get the card and they keep going until they get it wrong. If they guess wrong, you keep the card.”

“And basically the person with the most cards at the end wins. But it’s better if you collect the cards by guessing correctly than the other person getting it wrong,” Derek finishes. “Understand?”

“Sure,” Stiles says with a shrug.

Cora snorts and stands. “I have to go to the bathroom. Sit in for me and don’t lose. I’m winning so far.”

“Yeah right,” Derek disagrees.

Cora wanders off. “It’s my turn by the way!” she yells.

Stiles takes her seat and looks at Derek expectantly.
Derek picks up a card, glances at it, then flicks his gaze up and says, “What do you think the card is?”

Stiles shrugs and says, “Queen of hearts.”

Derek stares at him before huffing. “Lucky guess.” He hands the card over.

Stiles straightens. “Really? I was right? Cool.” He takes the card and puts it in Cora’s already growing card pile. “Do I get to go again?”

Derek nods and picks up the next card to ask, “What do you think the card is?”

“Seven of diamonds,” Stiles guesses.

Derek frowns. “Right.” He hands the card over. Then he goes again and says, “What do you think the card is?”

“Ace of spades.”

“This is ridiculous.”

Stiles laughs and claps his hands together. “Maybe I’m just that good,” he supposes and gleefully collects the card.

“Or you’re cheating,” Derek mutters, narrowing his eyes.

“Don’t be a sore loser. It’s not like there’s a mirror hovering over your shoulder,” Stiles points out.

“Or you’re counting cards,” Derek reasons as he picks up the next card. “Guess.”

“Me? Counting cards? You’re the math genius between us so how do you sound?” Stiles pauses and says, “King of clubs.”

Derek sighs.

“Really?” Stiles says and throws his head back and laughs when the card is handed over to him. “I think I like this game.”

Derek rolls his eyes with a grudging grin. “Just guess the next card. What do you think it is?”

“Two of diamonds?”

“I don’t want to play anymore.”

Stiles laughs and takes the card. “Come on. Don’t be like that. I’m really not cheating.”

“What’s up? Who’s cheating?” Cora says as she returns with wet hands, which she just wipes against her flannel shirt. She moves to stand beside Stiles. “Nice,” she comments as she notices that her pile has grown.

“He’s cheating. He hasn’t gotten one wrong,” Derek complains.

“What?” Cora says with a thoughtful frown. “Nana’s that good too.”

“Yeah but she’s only good with going three for three and she can’t guess any higher than that. He’s already on five.”
Cora blinks at that. "Bullshit." Then she winces and says, "Sorry, mom. I — yeah. Yeah. I know — I know I have to be an example. I’m sorry! It was a slip. No don’t tell — dad! Okay, mom! Okay, tell dad that I’m sorry." She pales a little but then shakes it off. "Give me the cards. Maybe it’s you."

"Me? Why would I have anything to do with it?" Derek questions with a furrowed brow. He looks hilariously offended.

"Your dumb face is probably super easy to read," Cora supposes as she shuffles his pile before facing Stiles, who is openly chuckling at their antics. "Alright. What do you think the card is?"

"Joker."

"Lucky guess," Cora mutters, narrowing her eyes. "Guess again."

"Nine of clubs."

"What the hell." Cora hands it over. "You’re totally cheating."

"I told you!" Derek exclaims.

Stiles just holds his sides as he laughs. He manages to choke out, "I’m not cheating. I swear."

"Nope. Nope. I refuse to believe that. Give me all the cards," Cora says and collects every single one. "See if you can find a bandana. I have a theory."

Derek gets up and goes off in search of one.

Stiles snorts. "What am I? Some kind of freak show?"

"Shut up. I have a theory," Cora insists as she shuffles the deck of cards just as well (if not better) than a professional from Las Vegas.

Derek returns with the bandana and he wastes no time folding it over before placing it over Stiles eyes.

Stiles sighs and presses the bandana to his eyes compliantly as Derek ties it. "This is a little much."

"Is that too tight?" Derek asks as he drops his hands onto Stiles’s shoulders.

"Uh — no." Stiles squirms under his hands. "Seriously guys."

"Shut up and guess the card I’m holding up."

"Well how am I supposed to shut up and guess at the same time? That’s kind of redundant, don’t you think?"

"Stiles."

"I don’t know. Five of hearts?"

"Son of a — how are you doing that?" Cora questions, voice laced with amazement and exasperation.

"He’s a witch," Derek mutters.

Stiles smiles and snorts. "I’m not a witch."
"Heresy," Derek maintains.

"I'm just supernaturally good at games apparently," Stiles insists as his mouth twitches with a smile.

"I say we throw him into the river," Derek continues, ignoring him. "If he floats —"

"Then I'm made of wood," Stiles interrupts as he laughs (very sure that the reference will fly right over the other teen's head).

"Or maybe you weigh the same as a duck," Derek adds nonchalantly.

Stiles is speechless for just a moment. Then he says, "You little sneak. You've totally been holding out on me!"

"I don't know what you mean," Derek denies with an innocent tone that Stiles does not buy for a second.

"You've seen Monty Python!" Stiles accuses. "Do you know how much material we could have been bonding over? How many of them have you —"

"Would both of you shut up for a second? By Great Mother. Look. I want to see if you get every single one. So keep going until I tell you to stop," Cora instructs. "Or until you get it wrong."

Stiles cannot see a thing but he nods. He starts listing every single card he can think of as randomly as he can. At the end of it all he's met with silence and he knows for a fact that there can't be any more cards left. So he unties the bandana and jumps in surprise at the overcrowded kitchen full of Hales, who are all looking at him like he's a shooting star.

"Uh." Stiles tries not to feel awkward. "Did I get them all right or —"

"I think you just set a record," Tyson chimes and there's a ripple of agreement that floats through the room, followed by some clapping.

Talia just looks amused from where she's standing between Nana Hale and her husband. "Okay. That's enough. The magic show is officially over. I need everyone to clear out so Rosemary and I can get started on dinner," she says.

Stiles makes sure to grab two Oreo cheesecake brownies on his way out. He hands one to his brother, who is gazing at him with an undecipherable look, and continues on until he's walking out the front door. He sits down on the top step of the porch and eats.

Isaac joins him and says, "I won at dominoes."

Stiles snorts and says, "Thank God. For a moment there, I thought I was the only winner in the family."

Isaac knocks their shoulders together playfully before devouring his brownie.

Cora appears a moment later and sits on Stiles's other side. "So you want to tell me what that was all about? I have a feeling it has something to do with that thing that Laura did with you."

Stiles shrugs. "I really can't say."

"But Laura knows," Cora guesses.

Stiles nods.
“So why can’t I?”

“You just can’t. It’s probably better if you don’t.”

“B.S.” Cora stands and starts down the steps. Then she turns and faces Stiles. “Don’t you trust me?”

“It’s not about trust!” Stiles exclaims as he wags his hands wildly.

Isaac makes an unhappy sound and ducks out of the way by scooting out of reach so he doesn’t get whacked in the face as he sucks chocolate off his fingers.

“Then why can’t you tell me what’s going on?” Cora says, throwing out her own hands. “You and Laura and Peter and Kate have your little fan club of secrets and what? I’m just not included? I’m not a member of the secret-y secret society.”

“Cora —”

“No. No, screw that,” Cora bulldozes on.

"I'm not trying to exclude you," Stiles promises.

"Maybe but I'm just telling you what it feels like from the outside looking in. It's not like I'm a little kid or something. We're practically the same age," Cora points out.

"It's not about age either."

"Then what? Why them and not me?" Cora presses. “I'm sick of it, Stiles. You don't get to just...leave me out. And they don’t get to be the only exception anymore! You’re my best friend! I care what happens to you!”

Stiles freezes at that.

Cora does too.

Isaac coughs awkwardly and mumbles something about getting another brownie before fleeing to leave the two of them alone.

Stiles stares at Cora.

Cora stares back.

There is generally a lot of staring.

Cora takes a deep breath and crosses her arms before looking off to the side. “It’s fine that you don’t feel the same way or whatever. I know you have more friends than you can count and maybe I’m not even in your top three — and I’m not — I just don’t, okay? Even have a top three, I mean. Because it’s hard for me to connect like everyone else. I have family and outside of that…you’re pretty much it.”

Stiles’s mind is literally blank right now.

Cora scowls down at her sneakers and she kicks at some dirt. “This isn’t a love confession or anything. Love isn’t even what I — just, that's not what I — it's not like that for me. So don’t — don’t think I’m — because I’m not. I don't have those kind of feelings for you but I do...care. In the way that makes sense to me, at least.”
Stiles stands and marches down the steps.

“Whatever you think you're doing, you better not. Stiles. I mean it. Don’t you dare hug me! I don’t like hugs. They’re just a way to hide your face.”

“Shut up, it’s happening,” Stiles mutters and yanks her close and he expects her to fight him but she just stands stiffly like a piece of wood.

Cora doesn’t even squirm. She tries to move as little as possible — she’s hardly even breathing.

Stiles just squeezes her tighter and presses his hands flat against her shoulder blades while hooking his chin on her right shoulder.

Cora stiffens even more before slowly lifting her arms to wrap around him. She then lowers her nose and nuzzles the edge of his ear. “This isn’t easy for me,” she says quietly. “I’m not good with — feelings.”

“You’re a cactus. We’ve established this,” Stiles jokes and jerks when she nips his ear with her teeth. He pulls away and slaps a hand over his ear. “Hey, hey. Be nice. That’s no way to treat your best friend.”

Cora’s cheeks go a little pink and it is the most amazing thing in the world.

“You’re blushing!” Stiles exclaims as he points a finger. “You can blush! I made you blush! Best friend. Best friend. Best friend.”

Cora looks livid and annoyed but it means nothing because the flush on her cheeks gets darker and darker the more he says it.

“Oh my god, I’ve found your kryptonite,” Stiles says, gaping at her. “Best —”

Cora slaps a hand over his mouth. “If you —” she starts lowly as her eyes flash to gold. “— say that word one more time.” She cuts a finger across her own neck. “Understand?”

Stiles shakes his head no and smiles.

Cora sighs but her flush dies. She removes her hand from his mouth and drags him deeper into the woods. “I just humiliated myself for you. The least you can do is be honest with me.”

“Oh okay,” Stiles agrees because that is the least he can do. He can’t get over how giddy he feels. “Where are we going?”

Cora drags him as far from the house as she can. “I’m moving us out of hearing range,” she explains after a while.

They end up at this old oak bridge that sits like an arched upside down horseshoe over the river.

Cora plants them at the middle of it and says, “So? Spill.”

Stiles starts by explaining the whole Virtue business because that’s always the most difficult thing to sort out. Then he talks about what’s going on in the town. He talks about how he’s related to Lydia and what Lydia is. He talks about Kira and he talks about the Mermaids. He talks about the murders and he talks about a potential virus being weaponized against Weres. He talks about his magical talking tree. He talks about the Benefactor and how he doesn’t trust Ms. Morrell or his Uncle Claude (the cat) and the creepy Argent orphans. He even talks about his little visit with Parrish and what he
learned about Isaac’s true parentage and Mayor Argent’s other kids who are still out there somewhere. He just really lays it on her.

“You can’t say anything to anyone about everything I said because most people in my circle know just bits and pieces,” Stiles pleads as he watches Cora toss rocks into the river below. “I’ve been more honest with you than I’ve ever been with anyone.”

Cora pauses to scratch the side of her nose to hide a smug grin and Stiles is so familiar with the gesture because Derek does it sometimes too. “I won’t say anything,” she promises.

“I’ll have to tell my dad everything too when he comes back,” Stiles admits. “That’s unavoidable.”

Cora gives him a sympathetic nod as she tosses another rock. “You mentioned before that you were frustrated about not getting any answers about much of anything. I get why. The Virtue thing is big,” she says.

“Apparently,” Stiles wryly states with a sigh. “I don’t know what’s going to happen next. There’s just so much.”

“What about Deaton?” Cora throws her last rock and turns to face him. “You said he offered to help you figure it all out when you start seeing the strings of fate or whatever. You said you’ve been seeing them.”

Stiles rubs the back of his neck sheepishly and ducks his head.

Cora snorts and shoves him playfully. “You’re such a little snot. You can’t avoid this stuff forever.”

“Meh,” Stiles simply says. “I can try.”

Cora rolls her eyes. “Yeah, let’s see how well that works out for you.”

“I’m completely okay with that,” Stiles replies.

Cora loops their arms together and starts a confident stride back to the house. “Dinner should be ready by now. It’s getting dark out anyway.”

Stiles looks up and sees that she’s completely right. The sun is easing towards the horizon.

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The spread for dinner is pork chops, salad, lima beans, brown rice, and mashed potatoes.

Stiles finds he’s not hungry. Mainly because he’s anxious and when he’s anxious he doesn’t have much of an appetite. So he declines joining as politely as he can and wanders back outside with his phone. He calls his dad and again it goes straight to voicemail. He tries (and fails) not to let it bother him.

Before Stiles knows it, he’s walking out into a clearing and along the edge of the river. He stops and sits down on the riverbank, enamored by the way the stars twinkle and reflect among the dark waters.

“Careful. Don’t stare too hard. I hear that how Narcissus died.”

Stiles turns to see Kate approach and he tries not to stare at the gauze covering her neck wound. He
huffs. “He died from falling in love with his own reflection in the water and then drowning when he
couldn’t leave. I was staring at the stars,” he clarifies.

“Yawn. Bored now,” Kate claims as she pours herself into his lap. She wraps her arms around his
shoulders, cocks her head and says, “I don’t think I properly thanked you for saving my life.”

Stiles blinks and frowns. “You shouldn’t have to thank me. I was just doing what anyone should
have done. I think it’s called being a decent human being,” he drawls wryly.

“Ugh, you’re such a goody-two-shoes,” Kate complains. “Here I am, all sexy in the moonlight,
giving you my gratitude, and you still trump it all by being all modest and shit. You make me sick.”

Stiles laughs. “Shut up, Kate.”

“You shut up,” Kate retorts and knocks their foreheads together. “Seriously though, Tenderfoot.
Thank you. I really —” She stops suddenly and her mouth twists in contemplation. “Nothing. This is
just — I’m so allergic to these pivotal emotional whatever.” She stands and scrubs her fingers
through her cropped blonde locks aggressively. “My dad is a son of a bitch.”

Stiles silently agrees.

“Peter wants me to move in. Here. With him. And his family.” Kate huffs and crosses her arms as
she shakes her head. She peers out into the dark waters of the river with a contemplative expression.
“I’m not going to do it. I feel for him. I do. But the moving in together? He’s got a bigger ego than I
do. It’d never work.”

Stiles supposes that’s a valid point.

“But I can’t stay with my dad. Not after what he pulled,” Kate reasons.

Stiles feels compelled to say, “Move in with Allison and her mom.”

Kate looks at him sharply. “What did you say?”

“I said you should live with your niece and your sister-in-law,” Stiles says as he climbs to his feet. “I
think — yeah. I know it’ll be a good thing.”

“Is that the Virtue in you talking?” Kate snidely questions.

“Maybe,” Stiles honestly replies. “But I’d prefer to think of it as a gut-feeling.”

Kate just hums and waves a hand at him with a noncommittal gesture. She then turns away to stare
out at the river. Then she says, “Isaac told me some psychic walking-glow-stick predicted my death.
Were you gonna tell me about that?”

Stiles chokes on his own spit in surprise.

“Thought so,” Kate murmurs and she peers at him from over her shoulder. “I’m not afraid to die, you
know. I really don’t care.”

“That’s twisted,” Stiles says and coughs to clear his throat. “And selfish.”

Kate says, “Circle of life.”

“Kate,” Stiles says because he really needs her to hear this. “Death doesn’t just happen to you. It
happens to everyone around you — to all the people left standing at your funeral trying to figure out
how they’re gonna live the rest of their lives without you in it. No one should go down without a
fight. No one.”

Kate turns to face him completely. Then she says, “Do not go gentle into that good night.” She
smirks and says, “Do people understand how lucky they are to know you?”

“Oh. Uh.” Stiles can feel his face warming. That’s not what he was expecting her to say. “You
should probably make some, um, arrangements for moving and getting your things.”

Kate snorts. “I’m going to have to teach you how to take a compliment, but okay. I’ll call Victoria.
See how she feels about me staying for a little while.” Then she says, “I’m still scouting colleges.
I’ve been accepted into Harvard and Oxford but I haven’t decided which one to go to. Laura and I
are thinking of doing a gap year after we graduate.”

“Gap year? What’s a gap year?” Stiles asks.

“A gap year, is a transition year, usually between high school and college, when a student takes time
to do something else. Anything else.”

“Huh.” Stiles never heard of anything like that. “Cool.”

“Sure is,” Kate agrees with a lofty exhale. “But anyway. The real reason I came out here to find you
is because Peter and I were able to convince Parrish to pull up Ezra’s autopsy files.”

“And?”

“Nothing abnormal outside the fact that she did have hyperkeratosis of the nose and foot pads, which
is a typical pathologic feature of Canine distemper,” Kate goes on to say. “So yes. Whatever type of
chocolate she’d been eating must have been laced with a very low dose of a single-stranded negative
RNA. Peter’s thinking it might even be the same kind of poison Kali’s puppy had been exposed to,
but it’s hard to say because Ezra had died immediately before the virus could spread and present
itself. But Peter still has a few samples saved of what he took from Kali’s puppy.”

“Kali told Peter that her dog had been fed something by some kind of blind man at the park. She said
it could’ve been chocolate,” Stiles points out as he thinks back.

“Right. Which is why Peter thinks that these two events aren’t so unrelated,” Kate says. “He’s going
to study those samples again once he’s done with his emotionally constipated conversation with
Parrish.”

Stiles lifts a brow at that. “Are they — making up or something?”

Kate just smiles widely. “Something like that. Whatever it is, it’s long overdue. That’s all I know.”
She shrugs and then adds, “Tomorrow Parrish and I are supposed to sweep through the park. See if
we can’t find this blind man or at least interview anyone there that might have seen him or can lead
us to him. Laura’s still trying to get Ezra’s family to divulge any kind of useful information that will
help up piece together this government plot against Weres.”

“What about the army?” Stiles says. “The Department of Defense is not only arming each state with
new weapons of war, but they’re giving it to local and state police, as well as the National Guard.
The military presence in America has grown exponentially in the last two years, almost if they’re
expecting some kind of civil war to breakout.”

“That is suspicious,” Kate admits. “And if anyone would know anything, it’d be my dad. But like
hell do I feel like talking to him. And even if I did, he wouldn’t tell me anything.” She taps her index
finger against her chin thoughtfully. “I’ll figure something out. Let me get back to you.”

Stiles shoves his hands into the pocket of his jeans.

“So,” Kate says, switching topics suddenly. “Laura’s birthday is next weekend. Saturday. Literally two days after prom, which is Thursday night, and the day after graduation, which is Friday at noon. Half day of school that day. Thought you oughta know.”

“Oh.” Stiles had been wondering idly about that. He thinks he should get her some kind of gift. “Thanks.”

“Sure thing, buttercup.” Kate moves to return to the Hale house. “Oh. And also. You saving my life does not forgive you of the special debt you still owe me.”

Stiles snorts. “I didn’t think it would. I’m sure you’ll put me to good use somehow.”

Kate winks and disappears in the trees.

Stiles’s phone vibrates and he expects to see his dad’s name flashing across the screen but it’s Kira’s instead. He hesitates before he answers with a soft, “Hello?”

“Hello. Stiles. It’s Kira’s father.”

“Oh. Hi, Mr. Yukimura. What can I do for you?” Stiles asks as he rubs the back of his neck in confusion.

“I know it seems strange to be calling so late in the evening. I hope I haven’t caught you at a bad time. I was wondering if you wouldn’t like to join us for dinner?”

“Uh.” Stiles doesn’t know what to say. “I thought Kira didn’t —”

“You appear not to be home. I could come pick you up. It’s no trouble at all. I wouldn’t want all this homemade sushi to go to waste. What do you say? Have you eaten yet?”

“Well no but —”

“Perfect. The fates are on my side it seems. Where am I picking you up from?”

“I’ll come to you,” Stiles is quick to say. “I need fifteen minutes or so.”

“Sure thing. We all look forward to seeing you.”

Stiles hears the line click and he drops the phone from his ear with a sigh before shoving it into his borrowed jeans. He starts trudging back towards the Hale house in search of Talia. He finds her already sitting on the front porch in a rocking chair with a book (Gaston de Blondeville) and some reading glasses on.

“I was wondering when you’d come back to us,” Talia says as she dog-ears her book and takes off her glasses. “I got a little worried when you declined dinner.”

“For a reason it seems. I’ve been invited to dinner by my neighbors,” Stiles confesses. “I’m wondering if I can trouble you for a ride? I’d understand if you didn’t —”

“Nonsense, Stiles,” Talia interjects softly as she stands and descends the steps to press a hand over the nape of his neck. “You’re practically family now. I’ll be greatly vexed if you should act as though you are a burden.” She kisses his temple and goes off in search of her car keys.
Stiles touches the place she kissed, feeling a little out of sorts by that slight display of affection. He can’t ignore the warmth gathering in the pit of his stomach and he shakes it off before it can overwhelm him. He sprints up the steps and into the house towards the kitchen where he finds Cora and Isaac polishing off the last of the cheesecake brownies.

Talia reappears not even a second later with her keys. “Okay, we’re set,” she says.

Cora frowns. “Where are you two going?” she asks.

Isaac looks interested in knowing too.

“I’ve been invited over for dinner by Kira’s dad,” Stiles explains.

Isaac immediately goes from intrigued to indifferent. He shows more enthusiasm in eating the brownie in his hand.

Cora, however, is wearing a sour expression. “What are they inviting you to dinner for? I thought —”

“Cora. No.” Talia gives her a significant look and Cora’s mouth immediately shuts but she doesn’t refrain from scowling openly. “Come on, Stiles. It would be rude to keep them waiting.”

Stiles follows her but sends Cora a helpless and apologetic shrug.

Cora just glares at him resentfully.

Stiles isn’t surprised when his phone goes crazy (vibrating) in his pocket the whole ride to the Yukimura house. But every time he pulls his phone out to see Cora’s demanding texts, Talia just shakes her head and tells him not to text her back.

“Let her be angry,” Talia says. “She needs to learn not to be so territorial. I fret the day she comes into her inheritance as an Alpha.”

Stiles snorts and tries not to imagine it.

“She is not as kind or as diplomatic as I would hope. I think perhaps it is a good thing she’s so taken with you. Maybe you might help soften her disposition. That is all I can hope,” Talia goes on to say with a prolonged sigh. She says nothing more after that as they pull up to the Yukimura house. She glances out the passenger window at the house with some thought. Then she says, “You can call me when you’re ready to return. I’ll send someone to get you if I can’t come myself.”

“Okay,” Stiles says as he unbuckles his seatbelt. “I don’t think I have your number.”

Talia holds out her hand and Stiles gives his phone over so she can enter her contact information before she returns it to him. Then she smiles and ruffles his hair. “Go on.”

Stiles gets a little pink as he stumbles out of the car, barely saving himself from face-planting onto the concrete. He quickly makes his way up the walkway, the porch steps, and to the door where he rings the doorbell.

Mr. Yukimura answers with a delighted smile and he looks over his shoulder to Talia and waves. “Oh, is that your mother?”

“Uh, no. Family friend,” Stiles says as he turns to wave at her as well.

Talia waves back at them both before she drives off.
“Come in, come in. Oh and please remove your shoes. My wife’s adamant about that,” Mr. Yukimura says as he moves to let Stiles in. “Unfortunately, she won’t be joining us tonight. She was called away last minute for a work emergency.”

Stiles hunches down and unlaces his shoes, taking note of the white carpet and the beautiful oriental furniture. He leaves his shoes by the door and follows Mr. Yukimura into the dining room, staving off his nervousness for as long as he can. He’s excited and anxious to see Kira. It’s an annoying combination.

“Please sit,” Mr. Yukimura urges, gesturing to the low-level table decorated with shiny porcelain dishes.

Stiles takes a seat on one of the floor pillows.

A moment later, Kira jogs down the stairs, taking her white ear buds out of her ear and says, “Dad, is the food done yet? I’m starving.” She freezes when she sees Stiles and her eyes widen.

Stiles gets the feeling that she didn’t know he’d be here.

Kira stammers as she gets pink and she looks at her dad. She starts fussing at him in Japanese, making wild gestures at Stiles to her father to her messy hair and then down at her attire (which happens to be some banana-yellow pajamas with monkeys patterned all over). Then she runs back up the stairs to her room and slams the door.

Mr. Yukimura just turns and smiles awkwardly at Stiles. “I may have forgot to mention you were coming over.”

“Yeah, I kind of picked up on that,” Stiles admits as he fiddles with his plate.

Mr. Yukimura rings his hands together before he says, “I should go check on things in the kitchen. Would you like some tea? I’ll get some tea.”

“I don’t really drink — and he’s gone.” Stiles sighs as he watches Mr. Yukimura disappear around the corner.

Kira reappears in a pair of salmon-colored overall shorts with a white turtleneck shirt underneath and her hair braided into two neat pigtails. She avoids looking at Stiles as she sits across from him.

This is awkward.

Stiles fiddles with the red chopsticks set by his plate and tries to think of a conversation starter that isn’t “I’m sorry for lying to you about a lot of things” or “So how is life as a Kitsune?”.

Yeah, he’s got nothing.

Mr. Yukimura returns with a tray filled with a teakettle and teacups. He breaks the tension as he pours them all cups and sits with a friendly smile.

Kira busies herself with pouring cream and sugar in her tea.

Stiles just stares at the steam rising from his cup and he wonders how he can politely decline his tea.

Mr. Yukimura takes a sip and says, “So. Stiles. Kira tells me you’re on the lacrosse team. I understand you’re quite good. Or, so Kira believes. Even though she hasn’t been to any of your games. She seems convinced you have skill. In fact, I believe she spent an entire afternoon
researching the sport —”

“Dad,” Kira hisses and shoots him a mortified look.

“What?” Mr. Yukimura says with an innocent expression. “I’m trying to make small talk. Would you rather we get right to the elephant in the room? Fine. Stiles, Kira is very upset that you’ve been keeping secrets. Kira, Stiles feels awful for excluding you. There. I think I’ll go get the main course.” He stands and leaves.

Stiles and Kira look at each other and silently flounder for something to say.

“Kira —”

“Stiles —”

“You go first,” Kira says.

Stiles says, “I was — I mean, I am sorry about everything. I feel completely responsible for what happened with the Reyes Twins and I’d like to explain why I didn’t really tell you.”

“It’s fine,” Kira says. “I mean it’s not but it is. I’ve been doing a lot of research. The Hales are a family of Werewolves and your brother is a Werecat and not to mention the murders or the two Goblins that used to occupy this house before we came along.” She stops suddenly and shakes her head as if to physically clear her thoughts like an etch-a-sketch. “I guess I was mostly upset that I was left out of the loop. It’s embarrassing when you’re the last person to reach the finish line.”

“I’m sorry. If telling you about all of this earlier would have avoided any complications, I would have...I don’t know,” Stiles admits. “I’d offer to explain but it seems like you already got most of it figured out.”

“Most of it. I get that Beacon Hills seems to be some kind of hotspot for the supernatural,” Kira confirms with a shy shrug as she ducks her gaze. “My mom’s been a big part of explaining things and history and all that.” She looks up with wide eyes. “Did you know she’s a Kitsune too? Apparently I come from a dynasty.”

Stiles doesn’t even know what to say to that.

“So in all fairness, I’m more upset with her than I am with you because honestly she probably should’ve been the one to do the whole big reveal,” Kira supposes as she blows a puff of air out the side of her mouth. “She’s a hundred and fifty years old by the way.”

“Your mom?” Stiles gapes when Kira nods. “But she doesn’t look a day over forty.”

“I know! That’s what I said!” Kira exclaims, hands flailing. “Nuts.”

“What about your dad?”

“Oh I’m forty-five,” Mr. Yukimura answers as he returns with a long rectangular tray filled with neat rows of sushi. “But I’m told I don’t look a day over thirty.”

Kira rolls her eyes.

Stiles grins in amusement.

Mr. Yukimura sets the tray down and says, “Wah-lah. Gourmet sushi. I hope you’re hungry, Stiles. I’ve done nothing but the best. You don’t have any allergies to fish?”

“Oh.” Mr. Yukimura stares down at the tray before he picks it up. “I’ll just order pizza. I can always save this for lunch, I guess.” He leaves with the tray, looking crestfallen.

Kira snickers and explains, “Dad makes all his sushi with a pinch of coconut oil. He calls it his secret weapon.”

“Now I feel bad,” Stiles admits.

“Don’t. His sushi is terrible anyway,” Kira whispers.

“I heard that!”

Kira stiffens before she looks at Stiles with wide eyes until they burst out laughing. She wipes an invisible tear from her left eye before she asks, “So what’s a Virtue? I tried to ask my mom about it but she got this pinched look on her face and fussed at me in Japanese.”

Stiles stares at her for a long time before he says, “How did — why would —”

“Well I remember bits and pieces from that night I was kidnapped and I remembered one of the Reyes Twins kept calling you this name in Latin and when I looked up a translation it said Virtue. Then I tried to look that up and I didn’t really come to anything. Then I asked my mom but that was a dead end like I said so I’m hoping you’ll clarify.” Kira smiles at the end of it all.

“Well,” Stiles starts. “Come with me.” He grabs her hand and leads her out the front door, down the porch steps, across the lawn and up the side of his house to his backyard.

Kira blinks owlishly at his tree.

“Nana,” Stiles calls as they stand before his tree. “Nana.”

Nana’s face bleeds into the triquetra symbol. “Hello, dearie.”

"Hi. I uh —” Stiles decides it’s in his best interest to be polite. "Um, how are you?"

Nana looks vaguely amused. "I believe I am in good health. And you, little one? How are you faring?"

Stiles just gives an uncertain shrug.

Nana hums thoughtfully at his response before she continues, "I see you’ve brought a friend. She’ll need permission from you to be able to see me, you know. I reveal myself unto no one unless you give me leave to do so."

“Oh, really?” Stiles says and he looks at Kira, who is staring at him in confusion. “What do you see?” he asks her.

“You talking to a tree,” Kira replies earnestly. “Why? Is this not just a tree with really cool leaves and — is that peaches and apples? Is that even biologically possible? I don’t think that should be biologically possible. Was this tree always here?”

“It’s a magical tree,” Stiles explains. “And I give you permission to see.”

“Hello, pretty girl,” Nana says.
“My, my. Quite tongue-tied, isn’t she?” Nana chuckles warmly before she squints and says, “And a Thunder Kitsune, no less! Oh, dearie, you have no shortage of intriguing companions. How old are you?"

“Fourteen?” Kira says, still in shock.

“How lovely! She’s still a baby,” Nana gushes.

Kira blushes.

“Introduce us, rude boy,” Nana chastises.

“Right. Sorry. Kira, this is my magical talking tree. She’s called Nana. Nana, this is Kira,” Stiles introduces. “How did you know she was a Kitsune?”

“How did you not?” Nana cleverly retorts. “Can you not see her aura? It’s like armor. Oh you have so much to learn, dearie. Tsk. Tsk.”

Stiles won’t argue with that. “She needs help understanding what a Virtue is. To be honest, so do I.”

“Well you’ve come to the right place. Have a seat,” Nana advises.

Stiles looks to Kira and she looks back. He shrugs and sits.

Kira sits as well.

It’s not too long before a swarm of fireflies start dancing and flying through the air around them.

Kira looks at Stiles like he’s to blame.

“I don’t know either!” Stiles flails. “They just pop up.”

“Fireflies are rightly attracted to Faerie kind and forest magic,” Nana explains. “Virtues are very much Faerie kind. Only wingless and without those cute Elvish ears.”

Stiles snorts when Kira reaches out to touch the blunt, rounded curve of his left ear, as if to confirm this for herself.

Nana adds, “Virtues are energy. Pure energy. And everything around them flows on a current that is attracted to them.”

“Like a magnet?” Kira inquires as she pulls her hand away and returns it to her lap.

“In simpler terms, yes.” Nana goes on to say, “They are the Keepers of the balance between famine and feasts.”

Stiles gets hit with a strong sense of déjà vu and he doesn’t know why. “I’ve heard this before,” he says faintly.

“In your dreams, no doubt,” Nana reasons. “You’ve been to Faerie. Many go and hardly remember once they’ve woken. It’s a common thing. Faerie is so much like a dream, and you’d hardly be able to grasp the concept of it any other way once you’ve gone and returned. You’ve probably danced with the Lady of the Garden herself.”
“Who’s that?” Kira asks.

“She’s the Faerie Queen,” Nana proclaims happily. “She looks after all the souls. Sorts them out.” She sighs wistfully as she adds, "She’s what stands between purgatory and paradise for supernaturals of all kind. Just as Humans have their Heaven and Hell — so do we in this way as well.”

“Wow,” Kira says. “Like a filter! Or a curtain.”

"In a way," Nana supposes. "The Great Garden is a veil."

"Wow," Kira says again, but with a lot more awe. "You must know so much."

"Why certainly, pretty girl. I’m a woodland spirit. We often know great things,” Nana boasts good-naturedly. “Do you understand now?"

“I think so,” Kira supposes. “Stiles is a physical embodiment of natural order as it is in constant movement with the laws of motion.”

“Indeed. So very well stated!” Nana praises.

Kira goes a little pink but she smiles.

Stiles is floored. “You’re smarter than I am. I would have never figured that out.”

“Of course I’m clever! I’m a girl,” Kira teases with a wink. “But seriously. Stiles, do you get how awesome that is? I feel like I just met an Angel or something.”

Stiles flushes and covers his face with his hands. “Kira…”

“Really! I’m so for real! You’re like basically a rock star of the universe or something. You must be capable of amazing things. Oh my god, what can you do?” Kira asks, voice laced with giddiness.

“Not much of anything yet,” Nana answers on his behalf. “The best thing he’s done so far is making me. There’s still so much to learn. He needs a mentor. I can only provide him with so much. What about that handsome fellow? What’s his name? The Druid.”

“Deaton?” Stiles says as he drops his hands and frowns. “He’s offered but —”

“You’re being stubborn about it,” Nana interjects knowingly. “I ought to swat you on the behind. You’re meant for great things. You can’t ignore that.”

“I can try,” Stiles mumbles and springs out of the way when a few peaches get thrown at him. “Nana!”

“You stop that talk right now, young man!” Nana says sternly. “You cannot stop being a Virtue anymore than I can stop being a tree. Lest someone burns me to the ground or strangles the life out of you, there is no escaping.”

Kira watches the two of them silently with interest.

“You’re not alone,” Nana goes on to say with a significant glance to Kira. “You have me and so many others. You are well loved and very well liked. I’ll hear no more of this self-deprecating nonsense. Am I understood?”

Stiles fidgets and says, “Yes. I do. I really do.”
“Good.” Nana sighs. “No one expects you to be a prodigy overnight. It is understood that these things take time. From the very moment you were conceived, your timing has been perfect. And your timing will always be perfect and well-met, dearie. Know that.”

Stiles takes that in with a nod.

Kira stands and says, “Pizza’s here. My dad’s paying the delivery guy now. We should get going.”

Stiles nods and looks to Nana as he says, “Thank you.”

“It’s what I’m here for, dearie. It’s why you chose me,” Nana says knowingly. “Go eat. We’ll see each other again. And it was so wonderful to meet you, Kira. I understand you live just next door. I assume I’ll be seeing more of you.”

“Certainly,” Kira agrees.

Nana smiles before she looks to Stiles. “You bring the Druid here to me so that I may meet him. That’s tradition. I have to approve of him before he teaches you anything. I believe now is the time to begin your lessons.”

Stiles and Kira watches as Nana’s face disappear and the big triquetra takes her place.

“Cool,” Kira says. “She is the coolest thing.”

Stiles snorts and lets Kira drag him back to her house where her dad is waiting with two large cheese pizzas.

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Properly fed and stuffed with pizza, Stiles and Kira retreat to her room where Kira shows him her worm farm and her pet ferret she named Levi.

“After Attack on Titan, of course,” Kira explains when Stiles asks. She dumps Levi in his lap as he sits on the edge of her waterbed (her whole room is aquatic themed, it’s really cool). “He’s friendly. He won’t bite you. I mean, he bites people, no doubt. But like, maybe he won’t bite you.”

Stiles stares up her with a look of panic and tries not to flinch when Levi sniffs at his hands before climbing his left arm to curl around the back of his neck like a scarf. He just lays there.

“See! Told you,” Kira says with a grin.

Stiles decides to distract himself from his internal dismay by asking, “So how many worms do you have?”

“A hundred. I named every single one,” Kira says as she walks over to the glass container. It looks like a fish container but with dirt and worms. She points and says, “That’s Andromeda. And that small one right there is Athena. That’s Hercules and Zeus. The one way at the bottom is Pegasus, and in the corner is Hermes.”

“There’s no way you can tell the difference,” Stiles says, sighing in relief when Levi darts off of him and goes to chase the moonlight on the windowsill. “They all look the same.”

“You come into my room, and you disrespect me and my worms?” Kira shakes her head and presses a hand to her chest. “I have to draw the line. That’s it. Our friendship is broken.”

Stiles rolls his eyes but he smiles.
Kira smiles too and turns to look at her worm farm. “You smell like them, you know. The Hales.” She puts her hands on her hips. “Like you belong with them.”

Stiles lifts both his eyebrows. “I don’t know what to say to that.”

Kira tucks her hands in the back pockets of her overall shorts and she shrugs. “You know, since we’re being honest with each other. Can I do something really foolish and confess that I have a crush on you?” she asks as her cheeks fill with color. “Is it crazy for me to hope you could feel the same?”

Stiles opens his mouth with absolutely nothing to say as his brain short circuits. Then he blurts, “You’re a lot braver than I am.”

Kira looks at him. “Well, that’s not exactly the answer I was hoping for.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” Stiles says with a grimace. “That wasn’t what I meant to say.”

Kira rocks on her heels and says, “Okay...”

Stiles fidgets, annoyed that he isn’t communicating properly. ”What I mean to say is —” he tries. “— you’re awesome. I think you’re great and I like you.” He pushes his next words out as delicately as he can. ”But just — not like...not like that.”

“Oh.” Kira blinks and looks as though she's trying to regroup.

Stiles feels awful. Maybe he could have done that better.

"You know, I’m starting to think the not knowing is better than the knowing,” Kira mutters as she ducks her head and gnaws on her bottom lip. “But, you know, thanks for being honest.”

Stiles doesn’t know what to say so he doesn’t say anything.

Kira takes a deep breath and puts up a brave front. “It’s getting late and I’m tired. I’m sure you are too, and I have to pack. I have to — there’s so much packing and I haven’t done any of it so...”

Stiles stands. “Yeah, I should go.” He spends a moment just suspended in not knowing what to do next and wanting desperately to mend whatever he’s broken.

Kira must pick up on it because she says, “Don’t do that.”

Stiles fidgets. "What? I didn't —"

"Stiles, I can scent your emotions," Kira states as delicately as she can. "I don’t want to stop being friends.” She rubs at her right eyebrow with a frown. "I just think it’s going to be hard for me. At least for a little while. For me to — for this to be, you know...normal.” Then she says, “And anyway, we’re supposed to be leaving for Japan Sunday night. So I think, you know, maybe some distance will probably do me — do us some good." She adds, "I'll email you. Or text.” She crams her hands in her pockets. "Promise.”

Stiles nods and without even letting himself think about it, he pulls her into a hug.

Kira stiffens for a moment before she gives over to it and buries her face into the side of his neck with a deep inhale. She squeezes him with a shuddering sigh before pulling away with watery eyes. “Have a good summer.”

“You too.” Stiles can’t even ignore the stab of misery that assaults his heart as he forces his feet to guide him to the door, out of her room and down the steps. He waves at Mr. Yukimura and climbs
into his shoes quietly before exiting the house.

The warm night air wraps around him and fills his lungs in an almost comforting way.

Stiles calls Talia and lets her know he’s ready to come back. Waiting for her to come and get him is a little bit of agony because he’s got no choice but to picture Kira’s dejected expression over and over again.

Though he knows he’s done the right thing by being honest, it doesn’t make him feel any better having done it.

He hopes he didn’t just lose a friend.

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Stiles’s mood doesn’t climb by the time he and Talia return to the Hale house. Whatever Talia must sense from him, she politely does not ask. She does, however, rest a warm hand on the nape of his neck during the duration of the car ride in silent support.

Stiles is more grateful for that than he can actually say. He just soaks up the contact for as long as he can before they actually arrive back at the house. He changes his mind about following her inside and makes a run for the swing set in the back. It’s a lucky thing that the area is vacant since he’s not up for company right now.

Stiles tries not to brood or think of what he could have done differently with Kira as he swings lazily while he looks up at the clear night sky.

“You look so gloomy.”

Stiles starts at the voice and he almost falls off the swing but manages to catch himself before that disaster happens. He glances over to see Derek standing with his hands in the pockets of his purple hoodie. “I’m not gloomy,” he corrects. “I’m thinking. It’s not a crime to think, you know.”

“Well, no.” Derek agrees. “But you don’t smell happy,” he points out.

Stiles opens his mouth with an unnecessary lie waiting at the ready on the edge of his tongue but he thinks better of it, snaps his jaw shut, and just sulks. He doesn’t have to justify his emotions.

Derek doesn’t really ask him to either. He says, “They moved Paige out to Arizona a couple of days ago.”

Stiles frowns at that, and seizes the meager distraction from his own angst. “What’s in Arizona?”

“The best rehab facility money can buy apparently,” is all Derek says but it’s enough. He doesn’t really have to say much more.

Stiles isn’t ignorant. He knows what rehabs are and he knows what they’re for. He’s read gossip magazines. He’s heard Amy Winehouse’s sultry accounts. He grips the chains of his swing as he studies Derek but his green eyes aren’t lined with tears and he doesn’t look like he’s been crying. He actually looks okay but it’s still hard to tell with nothing but the moonlight to go by. So he asks, “How do you feel about it?” because he’s a good friend.

“I don’t know,” Derek simply says. “A little selfishly unhappy, I suppose. I think there are some parts of me — the parts that are still just a little bit in love with her — that’s convinced that I could fix her somehow. And I know better than that. She needs help for what she’s been through and I figure...
if going to rehab is the best way for her to get it, well, I can’t really complain. And her parents said I could write to her if I felt led to.”

“Will you?” Stiles asks, because he’s curious and he wants to know. “I mean, I think if she knows she has support it could help. But that’s totally your decision, I’m not trying to sway you either way.”

Derek’s mouth twists with thought and he gazes at Stiles with an undecipherable expression. “So what’s got you down?” he asks.

Stiles is a little thrown by the redirection. It’s probably obvious because he gets defensive and says, “It’s rude to answer a question with a question.”

“And it’s unfair that I answer your questions but you don’t answer mine,” Derek cleverly retorts as he lifts both brows.

Stiles huffs because Derek’s got him there. He shrugs with a sigh and says, “I had to let Kira down gently and — that didn’t feel so good. I feel like I might have shot our friendship in the face. Like Lassie or something. Or was it Old Yeller? I can’t remember which dog they had no choice but to put down.”

Derek cocks his head. "It was Old Yeller."

"Oh yeah. Boy, that movie made me cry. So did, Bambi."

"I've never seen Bambi, but yeah, Old Yeller got to me too."

Stiles sighs and says, "Yeah, well, it felt a lot like that."

Derek watches him for a moment. Then, out of the blue, he says, “Come on.”

Stiles blinks. “What?”

“Come on. I want to take you somewhere,” Derek says and holds out his hand.

“Why do I have to hold your hand?”

“You afraid I’m going to give you germs?” Derek snidely replies. “It’s dark out but I can see better than you can. It’ll be easier if you just hold my hand. You’re not exactly graceful. Stumbling around in the dark is just asking for a twisted ankle.”

“Oh ha, ha. You use that pick up line on everyone?” Stiles jokes nervously as butterflies flutter in his gut. “Real charmer.”

Derek huffs but he grins a little.

Stiles hates that it makes him feel wobbly inside. “I’m confused by these rumors about my clumsiness because I’m not clumsy. I’ll have you know that I could find my way to Alaska blindfolded.”

Derek just lifts a brow. “I thought we both agreed that I’m the funny one.”

“Oh my god, shut up,” Stiles says with a laugh. “You are the worst. That wasn’t me being funny. What we agreed is that you’re not funny at all. And anyway, you don’t know when to let a bad joke die.”

“It’s not a bad joke if you find it funny every time I bring it up,” Derek retorts and shakes his hand.
“Come on. You may have all night but I don’t.”

Stiles hesitates before he stands and grabs Derek’s hand. “I hope you’re not taking me somewhere no one can hear me scream so you can Maul me to death,” he mumbles to make up for the fact that he’s blushing because Derek’s hand is big and warm and softer than he thought.

Derek snorts and tugs him along. “Don’t be so melancholy.” He guides him into the woods.

The forest seems so alive, even under the cover of darkness with the night sky acting as a canopy above them.

Stiles looks up and there are stars, just millions and millions of stars, peeking through the forest ceiling as the leaves shiver in the wind.

The ground under their feet feels soft and damp somehow. And every twig and broken branch they step on sounds a lot louder than it normally should.

Stiles glances over to Derek but he can’t really make out his face, just the back of his head as he allows himself to be dragged towards an unknown destination. All he can feel is how warm and careful the grip of Derek’s left hand feels on his own. His heart races a little at the sound of a faint rustling in the distance.

Derek snorts and throws him a knowing look over his shoulder. “It’s a rabbit. Relax.”

Stiles flushes in embarrassment and he grumbles, “Easy for you to say. You can hear everything and know what it is. I hear something and my heart’s about to parachute out of my chest.”

“Lucky for you, you’ve got an equally scary Beta wolf to protect you,” Derek teases as he yanks Stiles forward to wrap his arm over his shoulders as his eyes light up with gold briefly (the show off). “I’m skilled in the art of hand to hand combat. Or paw to paw if needed.”

“Ninja wolf,” Stiles reasons.

Derek huffs in amusement. “We’re almost there.”

Coming out through the thrush of trees, they come to the highest point in all of Beacon Hills, a hill (a looking point) that oversees the whole town of Beacon Hills. It’s like looking at a lit motherboard or a sea of lights.

“Oh man,” Stiles breathes, in awe and lacking in much else to say or express how amazing it is.

“It’s incredible right?” Derek says with a smile as he drops his arm and crams his hands in the front pockets of his jeans.

Stiles looks at him but Derek’s staring out into the distance, the lights making his face glow with gorgeous pride. He’s struck by the thought that Derek has obnoxiously long eyelashes and pink lips, and how it makes him look so stunningly like his mother that it’s unreal. He coughs and looks away because he doesn’t like how woozy his insides get from just looking at Derek look at something else.

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” Derek suddenly declares and grabs Stiles’s hand to drag him over to the tall, white water tower with the words ‘BEACON HILLS’ painted in black on it’s face.

“Here. Climb up. I’ll follow in case you fall or slip.”

“You’re confidence in me is so overwhelming,” Stiles drawls sarcastically but he reaches for the metal ladder and begins a climb. “You’re lucky I’m not afraid of heights.”
“Less talking. More climbing,” Derek says from below.

Stiles grumbles but does as he’s told until they reach the square opening at the top that leads to the balcony. He walks around until he’s standing at the face of the tower, gripping the metal railing as a warm breeze encases him.

The view up here is even better than below.

Derek stands to his left and lets their shoulders touch. “See? Was I right, or was I right?”

“You were right,” Stiles agrees breathlessly as he peers out at their lit town. "You were so right."

“Cora and I used to come out here when we were younger,” Derek admits. “We treated this water tower like a clubhouse or a spaceship. We’d bring snacks here, or the telescopes we got for Christmas when I was eight and she was seven. We don’t anymore, but I still come out here sometimes when I feel down or want to get away for a peace of mind.”

“Why’d you bring me here?” Stiles asks because he wants to know. If this place is so sacred, he doesn’t get why Derek would want to bring him of all people here.

Derek shrugs as he looks out into the distance. “Maybe because you’ve been a better friend to me than anyone I know. And I wanted to show you how much I appreciate that, I guess.” He looks at Stiles. “And maybe because I like the way you smell when you’re happy better than when you’re not.”

Stiles inhales softly at that. “Oh. Okay.”

Derek snorts. Then he says, “There’s more to me than just basketball. I have actual depths, you know.”

Stiles wrinkles his nose and looks away. “Yeah, I — sorry. I realize I’ve been pigeonholing you. Totally uncool.”

“It’s fine. We just need to get to know each other better,” Derek supposes, his gaze steady and burning into the side of Stiles’s face. “So tell me something. Anything.”

“In exchange for equal amounts of information from you?” Stiles counters as he white-knuckles the railing because maybe it’s how far they are from the ground or maybe it’s because Derek is looking at him like he’s the most fascinating thing he’s ever seen and he wants to know Stiles and it’s making him lightheaded and confused because he doesn’t feel this way about people. “What if I’m boring?” he weakly asks.

“I’ve known you long enough to understand that there’s nothing boring about you,” Derek replies knowingly and he shouldn’t sound as sure as he does. “Besides, any idiot should be able to see that.”

Red blooms in both of Stiles’s cheeks with indulgent pleasure and he suddenly feels lighter. “I don’t — I mean I — I might be —” he stammers. Then he flushes harder and squirms because of his incoherency. “You go first. I’ve suddenly lost the ability to communicate.”

Derek snickers and lowers himself to the edge of the balcony so he can sit and let his legs dangle. “I’ve received an offer letter from Beacon Hills University because they want me to teach a course in mathematics. It’ll be my first summer job.”

Stiles sits down beside him. “Dude, that’s amazing! You’re like only a sophomore in high school but apparently certified to teach math at a college level.”
“My mom and dad think it’ll look good on my academic resume,” Derek explains. “But I just want to do it because I’ll be paid to do something I already love to do.”

“Total bonus,” Stiles agrees. “Seriously. That’s awesome.”

Derek gives a modest shrug before he grins. “Now it’s your turn.”

“I don’t see how I can top that,” Stiles jokes and chuckles when Derek bumps their shoulders together. “Um. Well. I’ll be taking driver’s ed this summer. So I’m excited about that. And, uh, you know, other things.”

“Other things? What other things?” Derek says with a questioning frown that shouldn’t be as attractive as it is.

“I don’t think I should tell you. Well. I don’t think I’m supposed to tell you but, um.” Stiles keeps the sentence suspended as he tries to quickly weigh the pros and cons of being honest about who and what he is. “Laura knows. Your mom knows. I think maybe Peter knows. Kate knows. Cora knows. Kira knows. I guess one more person couldn’t hurt.”

Derek just shrugs the corners of his mouth as his eyebrows raise in expectation. Then he says, “Is this about you being a Virtue? Because I already know about that.”

“Oh my god, how?” Stiles exclaims.

Derek shrugs like he doesn’t get what the big deal is and he scratches the corner of his mouth. “Well, super hearing. I’ve heard you talking about it on several different occasions. And I might have asked Laura and Peter about it, though I never directly used your name.” Then he adds, “Your secret’s safe with me, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Dude, I don’t even know if my secret is safe with me!” Stiles groans and covers his face with his hands. “The whole town is going to know at this rate.”

Derek snorts and bumps their shoulders together in what Stiles assumes is supposed to be a reassuring way. “If you’re afraid of slipping up, then use a code word. Like bacon.”

Stiles laughs out rightly at that. “Yeah sure. Whenever I get a bad feeling in my gut about someone or something, I’ll just say, ‘Hey! My bacon senses are tingling!’ Like, really?”

Derek snickers. “It makes sense to me,” he says before he chuckles.

Derek rolls his eyes and drops his hands. “No thanks.” He sighs and straightens. “I’ll just be a lot more careful, that’s all. I’ll be ten times as careful. From this moment on, only a select few people will know about my —”

“Bacon,” Derek interjects and then laughs like he’s so utterly clever.

Stiles exhales the deepest long-suffering sigh and he swears it comes directly from his soul. Then he stands and grips the railing. “Well. Here I go. Over the edge. Such a short life lived. Gone too soon. With nothing to leave behind but my comic books.” He takes a moment to glare at Derek. "Your
banned from my funeral.”

"That's a bit extreme."

"It's not extreme enough, if you ask me. I kind of want to make you buy resold tickets that would
only place you in steep balcony with an obstructed view."

"Why are you selling tickets to your funeral?"

"I'm not. You're just going to be the exception."

"Resold tickets aren't even always legit."

"Oh I know. You'll be stuck outside when your tickets get scanned as 'already in use.'" Stiles turns
away and pretends to stretch for his morbid leap. "Anyway, like I was saying, this is it for me. Ask
for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man. A plague on your — not your house cause I
like the people that live there despite you — but maybe like, um, on your basketball games. Yeah. A
plague on all your basketball games."

Derek’s on his feet before Stiles can blink and he splays his large hand over Stiles’s stomach while
his left hand curls around the wrist of Stiles’s left hand as he huddles close until he’s flushed against
Stiles’s back. “Don’t be so dramatic. I’m just poking fun,” he says softly, and his words, the warmth
of his breath, tickles the shell of Stiles's ear.

Stiles exhales shakily and a wad of emotion expands in the back of his throat, making his next words
die at the tip of his tongue.

Derek lowers his forehead to Stiles’s shoulder with a sigh and makes no move to put any distance
between them.

“Uh, Derek,” Stiles mutters as he squirms. “You’re kind of — kind of close.”

“Is it making you uncomfortable?” Derek asks lowly, not bothering to lift his head. “I didn’t think
you’d mind. You’ve never complained when Laura or Cora scent you.”

Oh. Well.

Stiles supposes that’s true. Then he finds himself getting flustered for being flustered and it’s a bit of
agony. It’s just that Derek’s so close and this feels so intimate. It feels so different from when Laura
or Cora does it. Or even Peter. But he can’t pinpoint exactly why that it is because his heart is too
busy pounding in his rib cage like it’ll burst free because Derek feels like a solid wall of heat behind
him.

Derek eventually lifts his head and presses his lips to Stiles’s ear as he whispers, “Relax. I’m not
going to bite you.”

Warmth pools in Stiles’s gut as goosebumps break out over his skin and he lets out a slightly
hysterical laugh. “I can’t relax,” he admits and his heart beats faster. “I can’t. I really — I just can’t.”

Derek hums as his hand twitches against Stiles’s stomach. “Do I make you nervous?” he asks and
it’s so bizarre how calm he is about all of this.

Stiles squirms. “You don’t usually — I’m just not used to you — I didn’t think you'd care to —”

“I like you, Stiles,” Derek gently interrupts.
“Enough to want to scent me?” Stiles questions, trying to desperately understand why his heart and his mind are going haywire just from being this close to Derek.

“Would it be better if we were face to face?” Derek asks and bodily turns Stiles with a teasing grin. “Still nervous?” he says, sounding just a bit smug.

Stiles scowls as he goes scarlet. “You’re the worst.”

Derek just laughs and pulls him into the warmest and most comfortable hug that Stiles has ever had, spreading his palms against Stiles’s shoulder blades like he knows exactly how Stiles likes to be held and isn’t that insane?

Stiles will deny to his very last breath that he melts into the embrace or that the smell of Derek (vanilla and jasmine) acts like a trigger for all the tension in his body to flee. He tries to pretend that his hands aren’t trembling with nerves as he fists the sides of Derek’s hoodie or that there are not butterflies but full-fledged bats flapping around in his stomach and god what is this? He exhales and mutters, “This is weird.”

“You’re weird.” Derek sounds so unreasonably amused. “This is normal. We’re just two teenaged boys hugging it out at the top of a water tower with an ideally romantic view of Beacon Hills, as the stars twinkle poetically over our heads. You’re the one who’s heart is pounding like it’s trying to hammer out of your chest. So I think you’re the one making it weird.”

“Oh my god. Why? Why would you say any of that? Like it wasn’t your idea to come out here in the first place. Like it’s not extremely weird that you initiated this rather intimate physical contact. Because you did and you’re having fun at my expense and I swear you are the worst, okay? You are just the worst.”

Derek hides his face into the side of Stiles’s neck and laughs.

Stiles flails in his arms and grows even more flustered as Derek shakes against him in utter amusement and it makes him so deliriously livid. “Derek! Derek. Seriously. Stop it — stop laughing! You are nuts!” He tries to pry himself out of Derek’s arms but Derek just clings to him like an octopus and keeps on laughing. He opens his mouth to complain but the loud blare of the curfew horn rings off in the distance and it distracts him.

Derek finally pulls away and just says, “We should start heading back.” Then he moves to the metal ladder without waiting for Stiles’s response.

Stiles feels even more perplexed and annoyed. It feels like something significant just happened but he’s too dumb to really recognize what that is since he isn’t fluent in pack dynamics.

Derek’s waiting at the bottom with his hands behind his back.

Stiles squints his eyes at him.

Derek just let a slow grin spread across his mouth as he offers his left hand.

Stiles doesn’t accept it out of principal. He just walks off, too prideful to complain when Derek presses a hand between his shoulder blades to steer him in the right direction. He does glare at the other teen whenever he trips over an exposed root or a decapitated branch as they walk side by side because Derek won’t stop chuckling every time he does. “It’s not funny,” he whines.

“It’s a little funny.”
“I’m not holding your hand,” Stiles grumbles as he crosses his arms but he ends up stumbling again.

Derek just shrugs cheerily like he doesn’t mind at all and like he finds it more amusing to watch Stiles fumble around in the dark anyway.

Outside of this, a comfortable silence falls between them for the rest of the tread back to the Hale house.

They enter the house through the door in the garage that leads to the kitchen.

Laura and Kate are sitting at the other end of the island counter playing dominoes while Cora spectates.

Laura is the only one that looks up when they enter. She glances between them before she says, “Mom wants to talk you, Derek.”

Derek nods and slinks away in search of Talia.

“What were you two doing?” Cora asks as she tucks her hair behind her ears.

Stiles gives a weak shrug. “Making sacrifices to our pagan gods for a bountiful summer?” he says, trying for funny so he doesn’t fluster himself thinking about what they were really up to because he still has no clue what that was. His joke falls flat. “So, uh, who’s winning?”

Cora shoots him a strange look.

Kate says, “I am.”

“No way,” Laura disagrees.

Cora says, rather bluntly, “You’re sleeping with me tonight. You reek of my brother. It’s weird and I don’t like it.”

Stiles fumbles onto a stool beside her with a flush. “Do you have to say it like that?”

Cora just scoffs. “How else would you like me to say it? You smell a little less like Kira?”

“And that just pleases you, doesn’t it?” Kate remarks with a smirk. “You should be happy he smells more like Hale Pack now. Even if it’s mostly Derek putting in that work.”

Cora just gives her a mean look. “Bud out.”

“Cora, be nice,” Laura gently chastises. “And she’s right, Stiles. I could close my eyes right now and pretend very easily that it’s Derek here and not you. Just what were you guys doing?”

“Nothing!” Stiles swears as he flails. “Just nothing. We went for a walk. Why is everyone being weird about this?”

“You’re the only one acting weird,” Cora states flatly.

Stiles just flails even more in exasperation.

“Relax, Blue,” Laura says. “You guys went for a walk. We get it. No one is implying anything unsavory.”

“I am,” Kate says because of course she would. “But it’s cute that kids these days are calling them
'walks'. I could use a good 'walk' right about now. It's been a few hours since my last couple of 'walks'. Maybe Peter can 'walk' me right to sleep tonight. Maybe I can convince him to get Parrish to join us. Turn that 'walk' into a 'hike'."

"Oh god, please stop!" Stiles begs, flushing deeply because its amazing how she can make such an innocent word sound so filthy. "I can't take anymore innuendo."

"And what can you take?" Kate presses with a smirk that makes Stiles wanna choke on his own tongue. "I'd love to find out."

Laura gives her best friend a look.

"Or not. Stop looking at me like that," Kate complains as she slaps down another domino. "I was just teasing. I like how flustered he gets."

Cora stands and grabs Stiles's right hand. She says, “Let’s go find your brother and watch a movie.”

They locate Isaac in Olive’s nursery with Nana Hale as he watches the older woman feed the infant while Jordan (Derek’s dog) sleeps under Olive’s crib.

Cora grabs Isaac without letting Stiles go and drags them both down to her room (where Ginger yips happily and tries to slobber all over them like the bucket of sunshine she is). Cora fusses at the energetic canine before she shoves Isaac and Stiles up her white ladder that leads up to the indoor balcony above her bed with a sea of pillows on the floor of it and an entertainment system mounted to the wall. She asks, “What should we watch?”

“Anything but horror,” Stiles responds because he has a weak heart and a loathing for anticipation.

“Be more specific or I’ll just put on Ghostbusters,” Cora warns.


“Anything but that too,” Stiles pleads and chuckles when Isaac swats him with a pillow. "You and dad have worn that out. If I have to hear ‘Love Is an Open Door’ or ‘Let It Go’ or, god forbid, ‘Do You Wanna Build A Snowman’ one more time, I am going to scream."

“Fine, Mr. Picky,” Cora huffs. “You decide.” She tosses her remote to him. She looks to Isaac and says, "I haven't seen Frozen."

"You can borrow our copy. You'll love it."

Stiles fumbles with the remote a few times before he actually catches it and glares at both Isaac and Cora when they snicker. Then he goes into one of Cora’s streaming accounts in search of something to watch. “Oh, what about the Hobbit? The second one.”

“I haven’t seen the first,” Isaac admits as he makes himself comfortable.

“Well that just settles it. We’ll start with that first and move on from there,” Stiles reasons and turns on the first part of the Hobbit series.

Cora snorts and says, “I’m going on a snack run. Any requests while I’m in the kitchen?”

“Candy. Lots of it,” Stiles exclaims.

Isaac says, “Popcorn.”
Cora leaves and returns a few minutes into the movie with said items and divides the snacks between them.

It’s not long before a few of Cora’s younger cousins join them and pile in with their own snacks.

Laura climbs up and curls over Cora, draping herself along her little sister’s back when the movie reaches it’s midpoint.

Even Derek shows up when the first movie comes to an end, though not without grumbling that Peter and Kate are at it again. He squishes himself between Gracie and Sabrina.

Stiles turns on the next movie and tries to pay attention to what’s happening but his concentration is shot. He keeps glancing over to Derek, who’s grinning and playfully tickling his cousins, or patiently letting them crawl over him, or mess with his hair, and its unfairly adorable.

Stiles grabs a pillow with a groan and tries to suffocate himself with it.

He’s unsuccessful of course, so he just falls asleep instead to the sound of Kili crying out because he’s been struck with an arrow and there’s hazy moment when Stiles thinks, *same.*

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Stiles wakes up squished between Isaac and Tyson with Isaac curled with his back plastered along Stiles’s side while Tyson hugs his right leg and virtually almost kicks him in the face when his dreams make him twitch. Stiles has to be very careful when he slips away, taking caution to tiptoe around every sleeping form curled around Cora's satin throw pillows and each other.

He’s not sure what time it is, but all he knows is that he really has to pee. So he climbs down Cora’s white ladder and quickly makes his way to her shared bathroom.

Stiles sighs in relief as he empties his bladder before flushing the toilet and moving to the sink to wash his hands. It’s not until he’s wandering through Derek’s empty room to exit into the hall that he smells something sweet and delicious. He follows the aroma down the staircase and into the kitchen.

Nana Hale, who is wearing a floral cooking apron, is in the midst of making her infamous crêpes with Kate, who has on a white apron with cherries.

Kate’s the only one covered in flour up to her elbows.

Nana Hale just looks immaculate as ever.

Stiles slides onto a stool on the other side of island counter, opposite of them.

Nana Hale wanders over to him and kisses him on the cheek. “Good morning, sweetheart. Did you sleep well?” she asks as she cards her fingers through his messy hair affectionately with a twinkle of amusement in her eyes.

Stiles says, “Yes, thank you.” And he soaks up her affection happily.

“Good. Good.” Nana Hale plants a kiss on the crown of his head before she wanders back over to the stove to finish her cooking.

Kate picks up a beige mug and takes a long sip of it before she reaches towards the glass bowl of chocolate pieces and pops one in her mouth.

Even though Nana Hale has her back to them, she still calmly says, with a startling amount of
accuracy, “Kathryn. If you eat anymore of my chocolates I will ban you from this kitchen.”

Kate snorts and slaps a hand over her mouth to stop from spitting out the third piece of chocolate she’s crammed in there.

Stiles snickers too.

“I’m not,” Kate lies around a mouthful. “And anyway, you would never ban me. I’m your favorite.” She picks up the bowl and winks at Stiles while holding a finger to her lips as she offers it to him.

Stiles grins and takes a piece of chocolate to pop into his mouth.

Nana Hale sighs. “I can hear you two chewing.” Then she turns and swats Kate on her rear with the metal spatula.

Kate laughs and hops out of the way, running around to duck behind Stiles. “Okay! Okay! Sorry.”

Nana Hale points her spatula sternly and says, “Finish mixing. Everyone will starve at the rate you’re going. Come on. Mix. Mix.”

Kate wanders back over to the electric mixing bowl and pours more flour in before adding some eggs, coconut milk, and other ingredients.

Stiles is hit with a bit of nostalgia as he watches Nana Hale divide her attention and guide Kate’s hands with skilled coaching. It makes him think of how he and his mom used to cook together. He feels a pang of longing and he has to distract himself from it by grabbing a piece of banana from its designated bowl. He pops it in his mouth and smiles when Nana Hale wags her finger at him playfully with a grin before she turns to the stove.

“Morning, morning,” Laura yawns as she wanders into the kitchen with a moan and a lazy stretch before rubbing sleep from her eyes. Her shiny, long hair is wild from sleep. Then she saddles up behind Stiles, resting her chin on top of his head as she rests her forearms on his shoulders. “Mm, that smells good. Nana, you know Kate’s eating some of the batter right?”

Nana Hale turns and swats Kate’s hands with her spatula.

Kate yelps and glares at Laura. “Snitch.”

Laura just chuckles and Stiles can’t help but too as well.

Nana Hale passes over a bowl of grains and says, “Laura, be a dear and feed the birds.”

Laura nods and moves to accept the bowl. She taps Stiles on the shoulder and gestures for him to follow.

So he does, curiosity getting the best of him.

They exit through the door that leads to the garage and navigate around the parked cars to walk out towards the edge of the forest.

Laura says, “Want to see something cool?”

Stiles replies, “Yeah.”

Laura puts to fingers under her tongue and gives a piercing whistle before she throws up a handful of grains.
Within a matter of seconds, a horde of ravens come flying out of the trees, circling high above before diving down onto the ground to start pecking up the grains.

Stiles watches in fascination as they waddle around, shaking out their dark feathers before cawing at each other like they’re having an actual conversation.

“Ravens love wolves,” Laura explains. “They follow us wherever we go.” She continues, “Nana says that way back when, before phones and stuff, they used to act as messengers between packs. Sometimes they still do, but that’s only for times of urgency.”

“Cool,” Stiles says because in all honestly it is. He counts at least a dozen ravens pecking away at the ground.

Laura puts down the bowl of grain to strut over to pick one up. She takes great care in stroking along it’s back before she returns to Stiles. “This one we call Oscar. He’s the oldest one in the bunch. He’s like Papa Raven to the flock. He’s got a missing eye.”

Upon inspection, Stiles notes that this is true. He sees that Oscar only has his left eye in tact.

“He’s really protective. He lost the eye trying to protect my Aunty Rosemary from a bear during her first shift. He’s fierce but a real sweetie, otherwise,” Laura explains. “Here. Hold out your hands. He won’t hurt you,” she promises.

Stiles cups his hands together but doesn’t move a muscle when Laura dumps Oscar onto his palms.

Laura strokes a hand down Stiles’s back with a chuckle and says, “Chill.”

Stiles straightens with her touch but he tries not to be so tense.

Oscar shakes out his wings with a caw and cocks his head in Stiles’s direction.

Stiles nudges Oscar into one hand so that he can use his other to caress the back of Oscar’s neck with two fingers. His feathers are surprisingly soft and well-groomed.

Oscar caws, shakes out his wings, and nuzzles his head against the inside of Stiles’s wrist. Then he flaps his wings before floating off to join his companions again.

Laura passes him the bowl of grains before throwing her arm over his shoulders. “Toss them the rest.”

Stiles does as she asks as Laura skims the edge of his ear with her nose, chest rumbling with animalistic content. He listens with interest when she points to each raven and tells him their name.

Eventually a cluster of young Hales come ambling out of the house with bare feet and with as little clothes as possible.

Laura assures him it’s normal behavior as they both watch the younglings chase and play tag with the flock of ravens.

Isaac wanders out of the house and says, “Dad’s here.”

Stiles perks up in interest at that. He follows Isaac in the house where their dad is sitting in the dining room at the head of the table, conversing with Talia and her husband about who knows what.

His dad pauses, laughing slightly when Stiles and Isaac ambush him with a hug. He huffs fondly and pats them both on the head as they cling to him. “You’re both still in trouble,” he warns gently. “But
I missed you guys too.”

Stiles hugs him tighter before letting him go. “Dad, where’d you go? Well I knew where you went but why did you go down there? What did you find? Did you find anything good?”

The sheriff just continues to pat Isaac on the top of his head affectionately as the preteen clings to him. He says, “I got what I needed, yes. But we’ll talk later.”

Stiles grumbles impatiently and moves to sit opposite from his dad at the head of the table. He props his chin in his hand and tries not to fidget as he listens to his dad and Talia and her husband make small, boring grown-up talk with each other.

Eventually, Kate waltzes out of the kitchen with a tray of crêpes, with Nana Hale.

Talia says, “I’ll herd everyone in” before she sets off to do just that.

Peter seats himself between Isaac and Laura with Olive, who is swaddled up in a yellow blanket with ducks, in his arms.

It’s not long before the dining room is swarming with Hales of all different shapes and sizes and ages.

Stiles watches in amusement as his dad stands to shake hands and greet each one of them warmly. They’re very receptive and kind to his father.

Nana Hale even says, “Oh, you’re just so handsome. Just like your sons.”

His dad smiles and kisses the back of her right hand. “You must be Talia’s older sister.”

“Oh, stop it now. I’m way too old for you,” Nana Hale says, swatting him on the shoulder. “Sit, sit. You came just in time. I hope you’re hungry.”

His dad nods and settles back in his chair with Isaac on his left as Talia rejoins her husband at the head of the table.

Derek slides into the seat to Stiles’s right and scoots over until their elbows brush and the outside of their legs press together.

Stiles fights down an answering flush as his insides get all gooey again at their proximity and he mentally berates himself.

“Have to make room for other people,” Derek mumbles as if to explain why he has to sit so close.

Cora plops down in the empty chair to his left, glances at how close her older brother is to Stiles, and then rolls her eyes as she scoots her chair over until their sides are flushed. She drops a hand onto Stiles’s thigh as she lifts a challenging eyebrow at Derek.

Derek frowns and just stretches out his arm so that it’s resting on the back of Stiles’s chair. “Cute, Cora. Real cute,” he mutters.

“Cuter than you,” Cora drawls as she rests her head on Stiles’s shoulder. She gives Derek a sharp smile as she looks at him from under her lashes.

Derek makes an annoyed sound and rolls his eyes before he concentrates on eating instead.
Stiles says, “You mind easing up, Cora?”

Cora just scoffs and pulls away so she can pour strawberry syrup all over her crêpes.

Stiles thanks Nana Hale when she places his own special made peanut butter and banana crêpes in front of him before ruffling his hair affectionately. He digs in and blissfully enjoys what he can before Cora starts cutting into his food too because she’s finished all three of her plates.

He makes an even unhappier sound when Derek decides he wants dibs too and soon he drops his fork in exasperation and it clatters nosily against his plate as he sits back and folds his arms moodily.

Laura turns away from chatting with Kate to send him an amusedly fond look. She winks before she continues conversing with Kate.

Stiles nibbles on the last of his bacon as Cora and Derek clear his plate for him like it’s some kind of weird territorial competition.

Werewolves.
Stiles gnaws on his bottom lip as he gazes at his father across the table from under his lashes before he glances over to his brother, if only to distract himself.

Isaac pays no attention to the happenings around him, too involved with his meal as he often is when the occasion arises. It never fails to satisfy Stiles to see Isaac taking care of himself. Once upon a time, his little brother couldn’t be bothered with eating or sleeping properly; his eyes cloudy with gloom, despair, and a haunted past. Now he’s more receptive to the communication and attention of...
those around him, coming out of his shell little by little, though he still remains silent when it suits him. He doesn’t hunch down, but stands tall with certainty. He also eats without apology, and sleeps in that lazy way cats do whenever they please; his body now thickening healthily into an athletic build, and he’s growing like a freaking weed (Stiles suspects he’ll be even taller than their dad one day very soon).

Stiles especially loves (almost as much as his brother himself) the way Isaac can be as snarky and sarcastic as Stiles is in those rare moments. Of course Stiles likes to think that he had some influence in Isaac’s newfound behavior. He also knows his father has as well, giving Isaac the love and support of a father; something Stiles knows was never shown in all of his twelve years on this Earth.

Stiles turns his gaze back to his father who is finishing his third plate of crepes, making sure to voice his appreciation of the meal. Nana Hale just soaks up the praise, doting on him with a smile. His father is gracious enough to shoulder the affection easily. Stiles is struck by the thought that his dad must have been a lot like Isaac in his younger days as an orphan in Winnipeg (something he never seems to be open to talk about).

Derek and Cora are arguing over him. He has no clue what it’s about but they make a lot of gestures to him and to his plate. There are a few growls thrown into the mix, matched with gold eyes flickering on and off like a light switch — it appears to be very aggressive, but it could be normal when it comes to Werewolves (which he is beginning to appreciate as it’s own culture).

Stiles doesn’t really know what they’re doing, and neither can he focus on their little debate because he’s anxious and he’s kind of desperate to know what his dad found in Mexico. His right leg bounces out a sporadic beat; his body’s way of expelling all of his pent up energy and nerves that seem to swim in his body and his mind. There’s a slow buzz itching under his skin and his palms burn with a slow heat — it’s a sensation he tries his hardest to curb because he knows what it can lead to. And he does not need that right now.

His dad doesn’t seem all the wiser to his staring — or he more than likely does and is willfully ignoring it. Which, to be fair, Stiles kind of deserves after what he pulled in his absence with the Vampires, and the party, and putting not only himself, but also Isaac at risk. So when Nana Hale makes her rounds with a spread of desserts, with the assistance of Peter and Kate, his dad just tucks in and takes his time while not sparing Stiles a glance. He’s making Stiles wait.

Stiles feels his mouth fidget as his leg bounces in anticipation (it’s the calm before the storm), and he lifts his right hand to chew on his fingernails as Derek and Cora start another weird rivalry thing over the funnel cake (a la mode) that is set before Stiles. He doesn’t mind it so much this time because he doesn’t have the mind to focus on eating anything. He chews on the corner of his thumbnail as the rest of his fingers curl up into a fist.

“…not subtle at all, Derek. Even mom had to pull you aside to talk to you about how heavy you were scenting —”

“Mind your own business,” Derek quickly and sharply interjects. “I mean it, Cora.”

“Little hard to at this point,” Cora continues airily. “You know, he’s my friend as well. Maybe I’ll scent him too. Might drown him in it until it’s practically waxed on his skin. Mom’s been training me to leave long-lasting impressions, you know. I bet I could get it to stick for weeks.”

Derek mutters something so violently quick that Stiles has a hard time making sense of it.

“Derek Alexander Herschel-Hale the Third,” Talia snaps sharply, smacking her hand against the table, and the whole entire table shakes. It goes quiet as everyone flinches, stiffens before
straightening hurriedly, and duck their heads low.

His dad even looks a little wary before averting his eyes elsewhere out of respect and Isaac slumps down in his seat with a displeased frown as he keeps his eyes to his plate.

“Put your head down, Stiles,” Cora whispers gravely.

Stiles blinks before ducking his head and slides his teeth back and forth over his nail, but he peeks up to watch the scene unfold, inherently curious.

Derek stares at his mother with a slightly mutinous expression.

The tension in the room escalates.

Talia’s eyes bleed into red and firmly she says, “We do not use that kind of language in my house at my table with guests. You do not speak to your sister that way either. As if she were no better than a stranger who wronged you in the streets. You will not disgrace or undermine my authority, nor will you be any exception to the rules I’ve disseminated for this pack. Do not make me embarrass you. Back. Down.”

Derek turns an angry scarlet and he ducks his head low as some of the teenagers at the table snicker before coughing to cover the sound when their parents cuff them on the back of their heads in rebuke. Derek purses his lips before tilting his head to expose the long line of his throat.

Derek’s father sighs. “Das war unklug, Derek,” he says smoothly in German. “Was wissen wir über das Sprechen?”

“Wörter machen Leute,” Derek mutters sharply. “Man wählt seine Worte mit Bedacht aus.”

“And so this is what you must do,” Derek Sr. states before he turns to his wife. “Talia?”

“Well met,” Talia replies to the unsaid question, and it’s like the magic word because the tension breaks and diffuses. Everyone breathes a little easier and lifts their heads. “So let the sleeping wolves lie,” she continues, voice colored with humor.

Everyone chuckles and seems to forget the intense situation from before and the tension diffuses.

Derek relaxes as well and he rolls his shoulders as if shaking off his mortification of being scolded so openly by his parents.

Stiles sucks in some air quietly and opens his mouth. “You know German?” he asks.

“Yes,” Derek says shortly. Then he sighs and says, “My dad is Jewish, but his family migrated from Germany when he was a baby. They speak both of the languages equally, and so dad taught Cora and me. We even observe some of the Jewish holidays. Mom teaches us how to be Pack, and dad teaches us our Human heritage.”

Stiles thinks that’s absolutely fascinating. He doesn’t voice it, but it settles in his mind nonetheless. He’s also curious about the scene from earlier. He opens his mouth to ask what it all means and if it’s a normal Pack thing.

Derek says, “I don’t feel comfortable discussing that.” before he can even get the question out, and how he could possibly know what Stiles is trying to ask, is so beyond him.

“You don’t even know what I was about to say,” Stiles complains, trying to keep the whine out of
Derek huffs, and Stiles knows he failed. “You kind of project loudly with your scent,” he explains. “Cora, I meant what I said before,” he bellyaches, overlooking Stiles to continue the debate he had earlier with Cora. “Stay out of it.”

“Nope, not gonna happen. My allure keeps him captivated,” Cora boasts, flipping her hair over her shoulder, and whacks Stiles in the face, who, unfortunately, had his mouth open at the time.

Stiles wrinkles his nose and spits out the dyed tips of her hair out of his mouth.

Cora snorts and doesn’t seem to care that a fraction of her hair is covered with his saliva. She says, “See that. He practically wants to eat my hair. Undeniable charm.”

“Yeah the kind of charm that scares away everyone who gets within the proximity of your cantankerous gravity,” Derek criticizes.

“Oh, big word,” Cora smoothly interjects with a tone that’s dripping with sarcasm.

“Don’t patronize me,” Derek says with a disgruntled tone. “I’m surprised you haven’t scared him off.”

“Well I didn’t and now we’re best — thick as thieves,” Cora quickly corrects, a hint of color in her cheeks, but she still manages to brag.

Derek rolls his eyes. He says something in German that Stiles can’t even follow but it's enough to make Derek Sr. huff amusedly as he sends his son a warning look.

Cora frowns deeply at both of them as she replies in the same dialect.

Derek merely rolls his eyes.

Cora scowls in annoyance before she suddenly smiles at her older brother, white teeth gleaming threateningly and it’s a little terrifying. She cheerfully declares, “If you think I’m bluffing about how much he likes me, call me out on it.”

Derek’s mouth pulls down at the corners while he watches her take the last bite of Stiles’s funnel cake as though she’s making some kind of weird triumphant point.

Cora licks at the corner of her mouth with a smug grin. “I win.”

“You don’t even like funnel cake,” Derek complains as he glares down at the plate like he’s personally offended by it.

Cora just snorts and says, “Well maybe I’m into it now. Studies show that food preferences shift every seven years.”

“You’re making that up,” Derek says as he gives her a frown that seems to spread up to his eyebrows, which furrow thoughtfully.

“How would you know? There isn’t any space up there in that pea brain of yours.”

Derek makes an outraged sound. “I’m ranked first in all of my classes.”

“That’d be more impressive if we didn’t go to a school that’s bursting at the seams with morons,” Cora replies dismissively.
Stiles feels the corner of his lips twitch a little around his thumb. He’s not so distracted that he can’t appreciate how amusing this conversation is. It motivates him to say, “I’m a little insulted by that, as I go to said school.”

Both Derek and Cora swing their gazes his way as if remembering that he’s there, even though he’s been the subject of their little debate for the past thirty minutes. He feels a little heavy under their unyielding scrutiny.

“Oh, obviously I didn’t mean you,” Cora mutters, the first to break the prolonged staring contest and looks away as she scratches the side of her nose before tucking her violet ombre hair behind her beautifully pierced ear laced with a gold arrow impaled through her cartilage, and gold studs in both the piercings on the lobe of her ear. Her piercings are very similar to Kate’s and he wonders if either of them have ever considered getting a nose piercing because, honestly, he thinks they could pull it off very well. She uses a napkin to wipe the corners of her mouth and hands clean before she gets up and sits on Nana Hale’s lap with a pout as she lays her head on the older woman’s right shoulder.

Nana Hale’s mouth curls into an indulging grin. She kisses Cora’s forehead and whispers something over the skin.

Cora nods and gives Nana Hale a swift kiss on the cheek before she slides out of the older woman’s lap to stand behind her. She runs her fingers through Nana Hale’s waist length hair, the dark color streaked with threads of silver, and begins to braid the hair into two very long Dutch braids.

Stiles blinks out of the labyrinth of his thoughts as warm fingers curl around his wrist and carefully lowers his hand away from his mouth to his lap. He looks over to Derek, who still has his brow furrowed. “Uh…”

Derek doesn’t give him a chance to answer the unsaid question because he says, “You shouldn’t bite your fingernails like that. If you keep going you might bite into cuticles.”

“Hyponychium,” Stiles corrects before he can even tamper down the response. He twitches under Derek’s watchfully amused gaze.

Derek keeps looking at him, eyes roaming his face quickly as if he’s searching for something before he looks away with a small grin. “Sure, Stiles.”

“Don’t…don’t humor me,” Stiles says, slightly miffed by the thought that the other teen would.

“I’m not,” Derek replies, and he sounds so stupidly earnest that Stiles’s annoyance flickers and dies like a candle.

Stiles hands twitches with the urge to lift and bring his fingers closer to his mouth, but it’s then that he remembers Derek still has his hand pinned to his thigh. Stiles flexes his fingers pointedly under the hold. “I wont — I’m not going to — I’ll stop, just…” he falters and scrambles for the right words and tries not to feel like he’s making this newly tactile side of Derek into a big deal. “No more nail chewing. Promise,” he finally says, if only to distract himself from the expanding sensation of what feels like soapsuds swelling in his stomach.

Derek just hums thoughtfully before he lets go, fingers sliding across the inner part of his wrist and along the edge of his thumb, and Stiles can’t even tell if it’s accidental or not.

Stiles gets a little flustered just over contemplating it and his hand twitches again. He blinks and clings to the sound of utensils clinking against porcelain dishes in no exact order; the symphony of intermingled conversations, laughter, and the soft fight of voices rising and falling in the attempt to
wrangle and commandeer heated discussions. His leg starts to bounce again as he watches his dad talk to Talia with a severe and grave frown etched into his face.

Derek curls two of his fingers into the curve between his thumb and index finger.

Stiles gives a slight start at that and he zeros in on Derek.

But Derek isn’t even looking at him as he takes his hand away to reach out and take Stiles’s plate (which is smeared with the remains of melted ice cream, funnel cake crumbs, and streaks of hot fudge). He switches it with his own (which has a slice of peach cobbler on it and three scoops of ice cream) and says, “Eat that.” Then, lowering his voice, “You smell like you’re going to jump out of your own skin. It’s not going to make your dad move any faster.” Then he speaks normally, like he didn’t just read Stiles’s body language in a scarilly accurate fashion, and asks, “Do you want some syrup for the ice cream. We have hot fudge, banana, and caramel. Personally, I’m a fan of strawberry."

“I don’t want the pie crust, or the ice cream,” Stiles mumbles, a little bemused. Just when he thinks he’s got an understanding of Derek, the other teen never fails to catch him off guard and surprise him. “But I do like the way the peaches taste, I guess.”

“Cool,” Derek merely says. “You eat the peaches and I’ll eat the pie crust and the ice cream.”

Stiles isn’t sure what kind of expression he’s making but it makes Derek snort. So he pushes the plate over a little more in Derek’s direction so it’s between them. He grabs a fork and starts unearthing and separating the peaches covered with a thick layer of sweet syrup.

Derek uses the spoon in his left hand to eat the vanilla ice cream as he uses the long fingers of his right hand to peel away the pie crust, sometimes successfully and other times not; pieces falling apart into crumbs that sprinkle and stick to the shrinking number of peaches.

Stiles finds he doesn’t mind so much when he eats his portion of the dessert, and fitfully complains when Derek sneaks some of his peaches without asking, chewing and grinning in the way that never fails to bewilder, fluster, and annoy Stiles all at once.

They clear the plate together in less than ten minutes in companionable silence.

It’s not until Stiles drops his fork onto the plate with a loud clink does he realize all the anticipation and the anxiety is gone. His mind is clear and his thoughts are untangled. The buzzing itch under his skin has settled and his palms are perfectly cool. He scratches at his eyebrow as he watches Derek stand and takes their plates into the kitchen.

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All the younger kids are put on dish duty. They grumble and groan and whine (as kids do when it comes to chores); they clear the table, dragging their feet while they round the long oak table with names carved into it.

Stiles sometimes likes to slide the tips of his fingers over the indentions; following every curve and loop as each name settles deep within the nest of his mind and stays. He likes to imagine the person behind the name if he hasn't already met them face to face; and each time his imagination wanders.

Stiles knows he's a guest and he's not expected to contribute, but nonetheless, he feels a little bit better about the whole situation when he carries Cora’s dishes (including his dad's and Isaac's) into the kitchen.
Derek and he cross paths just as the other teen exits, using his left hand to shake out his hair while he tosses Stiles a disarming grin before disappearing.

Stiles denies that the grin doesn’t make his stomach feel like it’s trying to float out of his body. He just heads to the sink, gnawing on his bottom lip again. He barely manages to scramble right back out when Tyson gets ahold of the sink’s water hose and uses everyone as a bull’s eye; meanwhile all the other kids are shouting excitedly and throwing handfuls of soapsuds at each other.

It’s makes the ground, not only moist, but slippery too. Once or twice there’s a wet thud and a cry of pain, followed by uproars of laughter.

This is when Derek Sr. marches past Stiles and into the kitchen with a prominent scowl.

Stiles watches as the older man silently glares them all into submission and good behavior. He says a few cutting words in several different languages (it’s really quite impressive). It's then that Stiles decides that Derek and Cora definitely didn't get that scary look from their mother. He smiles a little to himself at that, only to notice that Talia is herding all the adults, give or take a few teenagers, towards the living room, placing his dad at the armchair in front of the fireplace.

So Stiles follows, both curious and confused.

The sheriff becomes the epicenter of focus as he sits facing at least three generations of Hales and his two sons.

Stiles sticks to the doorway of the living room and says nothing when Isaac pulls him closer, twisting his long fingers in the sleeve of Stiles’s (actually Derek’s) hoodie with a firm grip.

Derek and Cora stand shoulder to shoulder behind their Aunt Rosemary, who has a golden haired toddler in her arms that Stiles distinctly remembers not only by name (Artemis) but by memory.

It was only just this morning when Artemis had crawled his way on top of the table and made a mess of the fruit bouquet at the center. Most of the Hales, including Stiles himself, were very amused at the little boy's efforts. All but his mother, Rosemary, who swiped him up into her arms with pink cheeks, and a flood of apologies directed all around the room.

The boy was so beautiful that Stiles marveled at the way Rosemary was able to scold him without melting when he argued with her in garbled baby language.

"He likes watermelon," Cora explained at the time as she leaned over to finish the last piece of banana on Stiles's plate. "We try to limit how much we keep in the house because once he catches wind of the scent, he gets determined to have it."

"He's got a knack for stalking, being as young as he is. He's a natural tracker," said Derek with a smirk, looking for all the world like he was proud of his cousin. "Better than you even."

Cora had said nothing to that, but she did scowl in that way she does when she's very displeased while popping all the bones in her hands ominously.

Stiles blinks away the memory and turns his attention back to his father.

His dad glances around before he says, “Down in Mexico, while I was following a lead, I crossed paths with a hunting clan who call themselves the Calaveras.”

Everyone in the room tenses noticeably. There are even a few growls here and there.
Isaac's fingers twitch where he's holding onto Stiles's sleeve, but when Stiles turns to look at him, he's just looking at their dad with a furrowed brow.

Stiles opens his mouth to ask but Isaac just shoots him this bemused look, shakes his head, and says, "I don’t know either, but I’ve heard some things. It wasn’t — good." He looks uncomfortable.

Stiles wants to push the subject, but in respect, he merely nods and turns his attention back to his dad.

The sheriff presses on, despite the tension building in the room, "Listen, I understand there's some...bad blood to say the least —"

"For what they've done, there is no least about it," Peter smoothly interjects, disdain dripping from his tone. “That’s gravely undermining their gruesome methods when —"

Talia sends him a warning look as her eyes flash red.

Peter crosses his arms defiantly but he averts his eyes just as quickly as he does the gesture.

"Leave the boy be, Talia," Uncle Jonah urges gently, keeping his shoulders dipped as he cocks his head to show more of his neck when Talia turns her red-eyed gaze onto the older man. "His trepidation is valid. For all our sorrows, he has more reason to grieve than most of us. As do you."

Talia's expression goes neutral and she glances around the room as though she's weighing her options. "And the rest of you," she murmurs gently, but everyone stiffens; spines straighten with apprehensive watchfulness. "Do you all share in Peter's disdain?"

No one dares to say a word.

Peter scowls but keeps his gaze down. He looks like he wants to call them all cowards.

Kate pops her gum loudly and shamelessly as she lingers beside him, almost adjacent (quietly mindful of not blocking Derek and Cora's view of their mother) as she and Peter kept their left hands interlaced.

Stiles feels the corner of his mouth curl a little and she glances at him for a half of a second, like she just knows, and tosses him a wink with a flirty smirk that makes him color a bit at the blatant implications.

Derek pushes her, using enough force to almost throw her off balance but not completely, and both Cora and Laura snicker before they can help it.

Talia cuts her gaze to them and their laughter dies like a snuffed candle. She glances around and goes on to say, "Now don't be shy." She straightens to her full height, and the tension escalates. "Please. Speak freely. I’m not intolerant of opinions under the right circumstances." She waits, and when no one utters a word, she looks to Stiles suddenly.

Talia feels the familiar pull but its softer with Talia, not forced like it was with Laura; it’s curbed like a question, and the pull is undoubtedly wrapped up in the gold paper of questing consent. He takes a deep breath and lets her in — where ever in is exactly. He still doesn’t have this whole Virtue thing figured out, but he feels like she’s swimming in his mind like a steady compass guiding a ship through still waters.

Talia squints marginally, red eyes contemplating him with serious intent. Then, with a honeyed voice, she asks, “What do you think of all this?”
It’s strange for Stiles. Talia is the Alpha of a pretty impressive pack, and she’s looking to him for guidance and permission. He feels a little tongue-tied and he flushes under everyone’s curious and questioning gaze (and most of all his dad’s). He's barely able to choke out, “Peter’s not exactly wrong. Double — double agendas aren’t entirely — entirely out of the, um, question. We should, uh, hear what my dad has to say, most of all. First and…foremost.”

Talia shrugs her mouth, and it reminds him vaguely of Derek and how he does the same thing, and she cocks her head in what appears to be approval. “Very well.” Her eyes return to its original color. She turns to Stiles's father and says, “We will let the Sheriff continue with no interruptions. Let's hear what he has to say before we make snap judgments.” Her gaze flickers over to Peter pointedly.

Peter's face is devoid of all emotion but his mouth twitches into a frown for an eighth of a second. "Sheriff," Talia goes on to say, finally glancing away from her brother. "Please continue. I apologize. We are not usually so rude."
"Thank you, Talia," his dad says, gratefully. "And again, I'm not holding it against any of you if anything I'm saying rubs you all the wrong way. I understand, well, as best as I can. As best as I’m able to." He continues after a short pause, "There was an older woman among them. Araya, they called her. Said she was standing in place of her husband. And that she was trying to do right by all the families that her husband wronged when he was alive. I'm not going to say that she's the least bit polite. She speaks her mind, and she stands firm on a lot of her beliefs. But she doesn't let her people hunt anymore — says they are ambassadors for peace now. She said they have no business deciding who lives and who dies, no matter what or who they are. That it should be for a community of the same kind to pass a judgment that they see fit to adhere. Moral code and conduct will always be different among different tribes of species, just as the gods differ in every culture."

Peter snorts bitterly. "How diplomatic," he drawls and ignores when Kate rolls her eyes, muttering something that sounds like 'drama queen'. "Really quite avant-garde when you think about it." He crosses his arms with a thoughtful face that shifts into an expression that is mockingly sympathetic. "I’m just a little curious, and bear with me for a minute, but where exactly was this logic when her husband was gutting open half the supernatural community like fish from navel to nose?"

"Peter, I will ask you to leave if you cannot show at least an ounce of self-control," Talia remarks evenly. "I know all too well how much you enjoy hearing the sound of your own voice, but as there are more important things to be heard, I beg of you, as a one time courtesy to all of us, shut your mouth and bring it to a heel."

"Of course, dear sister," Peter icily replies as his eyes slowly bleed to gold. “My apologies.”

Laura sighs audibly.

Isaac quietly slips away, muttering something about being bored with this line of conversation before he disappears out the front door.

Talia gestures for the sheriff to continue with another apology.

"When I said I went to Mexico to follow a lead," his dad goes on to say, breaking the frigid silence. "What I soon discovered that Arya was my lead.” He takes a moment to pause. “She told me that not too long ago, immediately after her husband died, her small town had been plagued by the same gruesome circumstances. She said many good men, families, were lost. She believes it's the work of the same person who is also responsible for her husband's death. The Benefactor."

A break of murmurs floods the room, twisting around an uneasy and restless silence.
Talia lifts her left hand and the room quiets immediately. She does not break the intense eye contact she has with Stiles's father. And she waits almost three minutes before she says, "Arya is no spring chicken, Sheriff. She’s focused and very diligent, this I have come to understand through the rumors that often travel from pack to pack. I imagine the reason you're telling me all this is because she wants to, as they say, 'join forces'. You can tell me I'm wrong, if you wish."

Peter clenches his right hand until his knuckles pops audibly.

The sheriff sighs and says, "She recognizes you may have some reluctance in an alliance. She wants to help, but I know she isn't without her own agenda. She believes that working together means we'll be able to draw out this Benefactor, and by the way she made it sound, we'll need all the help we can get."

"How convenient that she would offer her aid," Peter comments with artificial cheer as he uncrosses his arms. "How exactly is she going to help?"

Talia glances at her brother, but then back to the sheriff as though she's curious to know as well. She let’s Peter’s impertinence slide charitably.

"Forgive me for saying this," his dad says, looking a little guilty as he gazes at Talia. "But she said the one thing that you both have in common, is the circumstances that surround your husband's untimely death. She said not only is it similar to her husband's death. But to my wife's as well."

Stiles tenses. He doesn't want to hope — wouldn't dare — now that he's just starting to move on. He hasn't let himself wonder over his mother's death in years because she was so young and healthy and none of the doctors could explain just what happened to her. He doesn’t want to go down that path again. That’s a disastrous road that causes him to swerve and crash every time, crushed by disappointment. It’s agony.

"She said, working together would help to put our mind at ease over wondering what happened to them," his dad acknowledges with a tight expression.

There's an absolute minor flicker of sorrow that passes so very quickly over Talia's face, but she shuts it down and clenches her jaw.

Stiles's heart is racing. He knows, knows that she will refuse this ill-timed peace offering.

Laura appears to detect it too because she looks at her mother with the same kind of desperate hope Stiles can feel bubbling under his skin.

Peter frowns and his blue eyes darken calculatingly.

Talia takes a deep breath before she says, "I do not trust her at her word."

"Neither do I," his dad responds, quite frankly. "But she was prepared for that it seems." He continues, "She figured that the word of a Virtue would settle our doubts. She knows above all, you and I would trust that. He looks to Stiles as he goes on to say, "Lucky for us, she explained that we happened to have one who resides in this very town. Not only is he potentially the most powerful Virtue of our lifetime, and a Seven at that, but he is one we both, apparently, happen to know very well."

Everyone turns to look at Stiles.

It's because his dad, with that one look, confirmed it all without confirming.
So it goes deathly silent…*because* of Stiles.

For the first time.

And Stiles? He freaks — like *really* freaks. All his secrets have just been laid bare for all of them to see. Most of all, he can’t take how everyone is looking at him. Like he’s some kind of — some kind of *unicorn* that shits rainbows and cupcakes and gold. You can honestly hear a pin drop in the wide-open space of the living room filled to the brim with Hales of all ages (his dad sitting in the center of them with an undecipherable expression that borders something that’s almost disappointment).

It takes just that one look and Stiles wants to cry, or explain, or bolt and live out the rest of his days in the forest; and really, why couldn’t he? He apparently has Faerie blood. He can survive off of the fruit of the land, and drink water from a stream, and sleep on a bed of leaves, and frolic in the nude with the antelopes, and the squirrels, and the rabbits, and maybe sing angelically while he plays the flute which in turn attracts all the birds and oh *god* he is having a nervous breakdown.

The main problem is clear. They all know now. They *know*.

Though, all feelings aside, deep down, there is a perceptive part of Stiles that realizes that most of them might have already suspected; this conversation must have confirmed it. And it makes him feel guilty. His track record must be spotty with how well he can keep a secret, simple or big.

It’s not that they know. No, if he really, *really* thinks about it. The main problem is that his dad knows. Stiles never got the chance to tell his dad himself.

His face grows hot; there’s a heartbeat in his hands and at the back of his throat. He's battling the fight or flight feeling that's overtaking him, because, he does have some pride left in him. He opens his mouth to say something, *anything*, but all those eyes, looking at him like that. He can't — he *can’t*.

Stiles stumbles as he turns to rush towards the front door and out of it. But even when the wind breaks over his body and offers some release to the blush clinging to his skin, he still feels the gazes of every Hale stuck to his skin like a thick adhesive. He slams the door shut behind him and sags back against it. But it's not enough.


It’s hard to do. So hard. The morning air is hot and sticky with the possibility of rain, even though there’s not a cloud in the sky; even though it *never* rains in Beacon Hills. His lungs feel too small, too tight. It’s like he’s trying to breathe through a coffee straw. It’s not enough. Not *enough*.

He finds himself going to the edge of the porch steps, down them, away to the edge of the forest before he does a complete 180. He marches back to the porch steps and then back up them again. It does nothing but makes him more frazzled, shakier, and unsteady. So he sits down on the top step and tries not to feel like he’s traveling through a lake of tar. His fingers twitch with his jitteriness.

He breathes and breathes and breathes. Breathe. Just breathe. Don’t panic. Don’t panic. *Breathe. God*, he can feel his heart bashing against his ribs like an angry beast throwing a fit in its cage.

Stiles isn’t sure how long he sits on that top step on the front porch, staring out and through the trees (beyond them mostly), and once or twice up at the powder blue sky before he tries so desperately to find his way back into himself. His sweaty palms are curled into tight fists as his stomach tries to go up into his chest with a sensation you only get when you go down a steep drop on a rollercoaster.
Fifteen minutes later, when he’s over it all and his anticipation washes cold, along with his anxiety, he realizes that Isaac is sitting in the rocking chair to his right, near a curtained window. He’s wearing no shoes like he’s been converted to the habit by one of the many miniature Hales roaming barefooted and half naked.

Stiles’s legs pour over the edge of the stairs while the heels of his sneakers touch the wooden boards as the front of his shoes point up towards the sky as though trying to reach.

Isaac says nothing, but he does gaze thoughtfully at the back of Stiles’s head, letting the chair under him rock with a noisy creak that shouldn’t be a comfort to Stiles but it is. A steady, predictable comfort.

Nevertheless, Stiles tries not to fidget under his brother’s gaze as the corners of his mouth dip further.

The sun is settled in the noon position but somehow hunched behind a minor thread of clouds, giving the impression that it is purposefully avoiding all things. The lack of direct sunlight makes things seem even more melancholy. It makes the trees hush as though in mourning, yearning for one gentle ray from the brightest star of the morning sky.

Stiles almost suspects that part of his dour mood is because he can feel it too, and like everything else, he grieves but keeps his peace.

Eventually Derek saunters out to join them, and he plops right down beside Stiles as though he has a right to it. He leans back on his elbows like he’s trying for a summer tan and he slaps on a pair of mirror shades as he cocks his head up to the sky.

Stiles vaguely wonders what he’s looking for — what he can see.

Derek furrows his brow thoughtfully and hums before he takes off his glasses and, without asking, puts his mirror shades onto Stiles. He settles them carefully, acting blissfully unaware of the growing flush spreading up the back of Stiles neck when he slides his fingers down the curve of his ears when he pulls away. “Figured you would need them more than I do.” He turns away and leans back on his elbows again. “Cora’s always going on about harmful UV rays and Humans with their innate incompatibly with all the leftover electromagnetic radiation that manages to break through the Earth’s atmosphere. She’s a glutton for Chemistry and Biology. I think she might become a doctor when she finally decides just what it is she wants to do.”

Stiles gnaws on his bottom lip as he soaks up the words and wonders why he feels even more calm in Derek’s presence. It’s unnerving in a way because he can’t really figure out what exactly this is — his emotions are tangled in a gob of confusion and denial.

Isaac wiggles to find a more comfortable position and the rocking chair creaks with his movement.

Stiles fingers twitch fitfully as he presses his lips together into a flat line. Despite the cluster of words surrounding him, the things he wants to say, things he wants to ask, the things he wishes he could ask — he just…doesn’t. He frowns while he bites down on his tongue as if not to break his vow of silence and pushes Derek’s sunglasses further up his nose. He thinks about thanking the older teen but he foregoes it in favor of fidgeting.

Derek says nothing else after that. He gazes up at the sky again, following some invisible object that Stiles can’t see. This goes on for ten minutes before Derek sits up, props his right arm on his thigh, and rests his chin on the knuckles of his fisted hand. Then he gazes at Stiles like he has all the
patience in the world.

It takes only a minute and a half of that gaze to break him, and that only annoys him further.

"I’m not talking about it," Stiles says when he can’t help but to say something.

"Okay," Derek replies. Like he doesn’t mind. Like he understands.

Stiles insists, “I’m not. I wont. I mean that. So don’t ask because there is nothing to ask, because even if you ask, I wouldn’t say, so you should not, as I’ve said before, when there is no point in even trying, which you should definitely not.” He takes a breath and then sighs in annoyance at himself when he realizes he said more than he had to, than he meant to.

Derek just gives him a lazy nod and that makes Stiles’s cheeks burn for god knows why.

Isaac snorts like he can detect it, and maybe he can which is all kinds of unfair, and Stiles tosses him a betrayed look. His brother shrugs with a smirk continuing his lazy rocking.

Stiles rolls his eyes away with another sigh and ignores both of them. He concentrates on listening to the chattering forest surrounding the Hale property. It's soothing in it’s own way.

The wind speaks to him mostly. It’s like a quiet whispering Stiles can’t shake. When it grows louder suddenly and with sharp definition, it makes him straighten, as his palms grow warm. This part is familiar — he knows what happens next. The world slows down.

The leaves in the trees wave like paper fans in slow motion; they echo with a sound that’s akin to a windmill. They glitter and glisten, turning a healthy shade of neon green. They continue to sway like a sea of green, and this time they sound like wind chimes, the kind you can find on someone’s porch. The slow blowing wind makes them clink together in unity like the last line of an unsung song.

The sun sends down rays that fall to Earth like a yellow light made of gold dust. Everything about the forest seems illuminated like intensified high definition, even with Derek’s sunglasses on, and it’s so beautiful that he feels like he can cry. He’s afraid to take off Derek’s shades since he can barely handle the elegant glory of the forest whilst behind them.

Stiles inhales suddenly and it all returns to normal. He rubs his shaky hands up and down his thighs. He really wants to know why he stops breathing when the world shifts and changes. And then he remembers that he’s not alone. He reluctantly looks over at Derek and Isaac.

Both of them are looking at him with equal amounts of concern and curiosity.

He flushes a little and mumbles something he hopes is reassuring of his current state of health (mental, emotional, and otherwise). He turns away to look into the trees and he stares with wariness. He senses something he can’t explain and he finally takes off Derek’s mirror shades with a concentrated frown, handing the glasses back to Derek absentmindedly.

There are fireflies edging out of the forest as if they were called, and they start to dance Stiles's way.

Stiles groans and his hands begin to vibrate without his permission. He brings his hands up and watches as they glow with that blue ethereal light and he thinks not now, not now. And he hates that he hasn't figured out how to control this. It's like a blush you can't force down before it reveals itself stubbornly. Only Stiles thinks this may be worse. His hands are glowing after all.

He stands and stares at his palms with a frown, desperately trying to find a way to make it all stop. It doesn’t, it just gets worse, god, why is it getting worse?
The glow starts winding up his arms like vines of ethereal light, like the branches of a tree, or no, more like an intricate henna tattoo that leaves a searing trail of heat in it’s wake as it spreads. This is the only way he really knows where its going without stripping down to follow it with his eyes.

It travels up his arms like a sleeve, curling over his shoulders before spreading across the expanse of his chest and stomach like armor. He feels it curl along his shoulder blades, and the heat there is more intense than the warmth of his hands. He feels a fluttering ache under the skin of his back. It’s almost painful, like something is trying to shift the bones of his back to get free and he gets this alarming thought of — of —

“Wings,” Stiles chokes out and flaps his arms wildly, as if that will prevent anything from happening. “No, no, no, no! Just no.”

Derek watches the fireflies for a short moment and then looks at Stiles like he suspects he might be the cause as his green eyes dip down to look at the flickering light of Stiles’s hands. He reaches out to touch like he’s entranced by it.

Stiles jerks away almost violently and he says, “Don’t!”

Derek blinks in surprise and frowns like he’s being denied of something wonderful.

Stiles makes an annoyed sound. “I just — I don’t want to hurt you. The last time I — there was — just don’t touch me, okay? It’s better if you don’t,” he swears. “I don’t want to hurt you.” He backs up until the banister hits the small of his back.

The fireflies seem to bristle and then there are whispers, tons and tons of whispers, and Stiles realizes with a growing sense of alarm that it’s them. The voices are coming from the fireflies, which should be absolutely impossible because bugs do not talk.

But apparently they can — they — they are.

Stiles can almost make out what their saying, almost, but there are hundreds and hundreds of voices because there is literally a swarm of them (a cloud of lights that go on and off like a lighthouse on the edge of a pier) and that makes it extremely hard to separate or single out one voice.

They sway before rushing at Derek like a freight train, his eyes widen, and before he can event react, he’s being shoved over the porch railing. He falls to the ground with an audible thump and a wheezing groan.

Stiles laughs before he can help it, and he slaps his hand over his mouth. He really doesn’t mean to but the face that Derek made is too hilarious to ignore. He swallows down the laughter as best as he can before he rushes over to the railing to peer down.

Derek is lying on the ground, limbs spread out like a starfish, and a prominent scowl. “So you think this is funny,” he states calmly.

Stiles means to answer him and apologize, but he finds that he’s so busy marveling at the way they begin swarm around him like a shield, bumping into him in what feels like an affectionate and protective manner. He then realizes that they are reacting to his emotions. He didn’t want Derek to touch him in fear of hurting him, and then just as quickly, he had gotten annoyed when the other teen became petulant.

So it only makes sense that the fireflies had gone the extra mile to see to it that Stiles’s wishes be granted. He lifts his glowing hands slowly and they sway around him as though he’s the conductor to their orchestra. They follow him as he makes his way down the steps and to the middle of the
driveway that winds around the house to end in the garage on the back of the house.

Of course this is the moment everyone in the house comes out to see what all the commotion is about. He sees his dad and Isaac at the front of an ever growing and crowded porch. Everyone is trying to look over everyone’s shoulder to see the spectacle that Stiles is creating.

Stiles cheeks go a bit rosy and all those eyes watching him like he’s some kind of circus show flutters him. That fight or flight feeling returns and settles low in his gut and the lines searing across his back wiggle and he’d almost forgotten about the goddamn wings he suspects is trapped under his skin. He’s terrified about how it might feel when they get free (he doesn’t have a high tolerance for pain) but underneath that fear is a dawning curiosity of what it would be like — what it would feel like to have wings. He also can’t pretend he doesn’t want to know what they might look like.

His tree, Nana, once told him that he’d been to Faerie, though he has no recollection of that visit or any that may have preceded it. He wonders if any of the Faeries there had wings, and he tries to remember what they might have looked like but he just — he can’t remember.

The fireflies swarm around his hands and bumps into his cheeks in rebuke, seeming a little miffed that his attention is divided. He wonders what he should do. He tries to ignore all those eyes watching him and calmly thinks. He watches Derek climb to his feet to dust himself off and stays stubbornly silent when Laura crowds into his space with an amused grin. She looks like she’s trying to ask him what happened while she throws her right arm over his shoulder.

Derek just shakes his head and meets Stiles gaze with an indecipherable expression.

Stiles looks away to think without distraction. He wonders idly what Nana would do in this situation, and he remembers how she would just talk to them. “I can’t believe I’m about to do this,” he mutters. He straightens and shakes out his glowing hands, the fireflies swaying with the motion. “Uh, so... hey guys.”

That seems to excite the fireflies, encouraging them to all speak at once, and in the symphony of it all, he can hear some familiar salutations. That pleases him for some unknown reason.

“Is there, like, any head — no, uh,” Stiles trails off. “You guys wouldn’t happen to have a, um, president or something? A spokesman? A PR agent? Is any of this making sense?”

There’s some laughter and Stiles thinks that a good portion of the Hale family are finding all this amusing.

Stiles ignores it as he waits for a response.

There’s a multitude of them.

Stiles is quick to say, “Hey, hey, whoa! I can’t — you guys are overwhelming me! I don’t understand — I can’t understand you all at once.”

They all go quiet at once like he’s given a command for it.

Stiles scratches the back of his head sheepishly, and takes a second to marvel at the fact that his glowing hand actually feels cool to the touch. He blinks away that line of thinking as he lowers his hand and says, “I wasn’t asking any of you to shut up. I just need one of you to say something.”

“Apologies,” one of them says, and a firefly floats just along the tip of his nose.
Stiles gets a little cross-eyed trying to look at the little thing. “It’s, um, cool, I guess. What’s your name?” he asks, happy that he remembers to ask because Nana once called one by it’s given name.

“I have given myself the name Glitter.”

“Oh. Hello, Glitter,” Stiles answers in kind. “My name is Stiles. Are you like the queen of the bunch?”

“We are called a Swarm,” Glitter explains. “And we have no queen to speak of. You are our King.”

“Oh,” Stiles says weakly, fumbling with his words a bit. “I — thank you?”

“If you wish,” Glitter responds in kind. “If His Majesty permits it, I will act as His Highness’s assigned Heir Apparent among my kind.”

“Yeah, I suppose there’s no downside to that,” Stiles supposes. “So you’ll be able to help me communicate better.”

“This I cannot confirm, but I am able to voice our shared opinion in a way that suits His Majesty,” Glitter replies in a dignified manner. “Though I am told that Virtues often have conduits that help them understand the language of all the wild things.”

“Yeah…okay. Thanks, Glitter,” Stiles says as politely as he can.

“Was there anything else His Majesty would like to express?”

“No, I pretty much think that covers it,” Stiles replies. He feels his glow start to fade and he is so very thankful of that. “I’m giving you all my leave to return back to your homes.”

“As you wish, Your Highness,” Glitter agrees and she leads the swarm back into the forest and out of sight.

Stiles relaxes the line of his shoulders as he peers into the trees, wondering at the restless feeling he has now. It’s like there’s an urgent need to wander into the forest at his leisure and just listen. He jumps when a hand claps over his shoulder and turns him.

His dad is giving him a look that says he’s bemused. “You do realize that we all watched what looked like a one-sided conversation?”

“Oh,” Stiles says faintly. It does make sense that he was the only one who could make heads or tails for what those insects were saying, or *trying* to say.

His dad hums thoughtfully as he observes his son.

“I’m grounded, aren’t I?” Stiles mutters gloomily.

“I already broke the news to Isaac at breakfast. I thought for sure he would’ve warned you beforehand,” his dad remarks, rubbing at the corners of his mouth. He looks like he’s suffering from a serious case of jetlag. “Say goodbye. I’ve already called a cab to take us home.”

“Dad —”

“It’s okay, Stiles,” his dad says gently. “Although I’m a little miffed you felt like this was a side of yourself you had to hide. I love you no matter what. You’re just really testing the integrity of my blood pressure, and there’s only so much hair dye that can hide all my grey hairs.”
Stiles snorts even though he colors with self-reproach. “I’m sorry,” he replies earnestly. “No more secrets.”

“No more secrets,” his father agrees. “Are you gonna explain the story behind that tree that suddenly appeared in our backyard?”

“That’s Nana. I kind grew a magical talking tree in under five minutes with forest magic?” Stiles explains as best as he can. “She’s one of the oldest woodland spirits, and apparently my adopted grandmother. Wait, can you adopt someone older than you?”

His dad huffs. “I get the gist of what you mean, son. I think I need a proper amount of sleep before you introduce me to your ‘grandmother’. Does Isaac know —”

“About the Virtue thing? Yes, sorry. Not about the tree though. I guess I can introduce both of you at the same time,” Stiles figures.

“Whatever works,” his dad replies with a yawn. “Go get your brother and say your goodbyes.”

Stiles nods and turns, realizing that the crowd of Hales has thinned out completely and the porch is entirely empty. He tucks his hands into the pockets of his borrowed jeans and climbs the porch steps to walk into the house. He starts in the living room where Cora and Nana Hale are playing bingo with the preteens of the family.

Nana Hale kisses the back of his right hand, as she always does, and pats the spot affectionately with a tender smile. “Stay out of trouble, little one. You shall find me sorely vexed if your presence with us is any further delayed by your discipline.”

Stiles chuckles sheepishly and nods his head. He reaches forward and returns the kiss by planting one on the back of her right hand.

“Go on,” Nana Hale says fondly.

Stiles gives her another parting smile before he takes his time making rounds to the rest of the occupants of the living room.

The preteens clutch different parts of him, leaving their impression on him with fervor and with a newfound excitement and possessiveness.

Stiles refuses to contemplate why that might be because he already has a good idea. He just makes his way over to Cora, who stands and yanks his right ear with a smirk before sticking her tongue in it before he can properly grasp the action. When he does, he colors and slaps a hand over his ear. “You — you violated my ear.”

Cora smirks. “Don’t be such a baby.”

“This is not acceptable behavior,” Stiles argues. “You can’t stick your tongue in your best friend’s ear.”

Cora’s smirk falters as a blush overtakes the bridge of her nose. “You little worm,” she mutters, fuming.

Stiles just frowns right back at her, hand still cupped over his ear. “The next time I see you, we are going to have a serious talk about boundaries.”

Cora rolls her eyes when her blush fades. “You’re practically one of the Pack. There is no such thing
“There are no boundaries, remember?”

“Then let me stick my tongue in your ear,” Stiles challenges.

“In your dreams. You — what are you doing? Stiles — Stiles, I swear to the Great Mother Moon, if you come any closer — stop, you idiot. Oh gross. You’re such a punk.”

“Shut up.”

Stiles leaves Cora to scrub at her left cheek in an attempt to rid herself of his saliva. He journeys over to the dining room where a gang of little Hale kiddies are finger-painting under the watchful gaze of Rosemary and her younger sister, Meredith.

The two older ladies receive him warmly, touching their hands to his shoulders and his elbows, before sending him on his way while warning him that if he says his goodbyes to the kids, he better be prepared to get messy.

Stiles decides to take his chances as he kneels so that the little ones can reach him, and he really doesn’t mind the tiny handprints left on his cheeks, forehead, neck, right hand, shirt and pants, and in his hair. The clothes aren’t even his anyway, so he’s not too worried about it. He salutes Rosemary and Meredith with easy pride, covered in finger-paint.

They just snicker and shake their head fondly.

Stiles head to the kitchen and finds Kate, Peter, and Laura speaking amongst themselves with mugs of hot chocolate.

“You don’t do things in halves, do you?” Peter comments as he lifts his eyebrow.

“Shut up and scent me. You know you want too. I am your favorite Human,” Stiles crows, spreading his arms out wide.

Peter smiles, white teeth gleaming in that scary way that suggests he might just eat Stiles and be done with him. “Not exactly Human, are we? You can’t convince me otherwise after that little display you put on.”


Peter’s mouth twists with displeasure. “Absolutely ridiculous,” he mutters.

Laura huffs out a laugh and slides off the bar stool to tug him into a three-minute hug before she pushes him away gently, satisfied with the prolonged contact.

Peter makes his way around the island and just ruffles his ever-growing hair before he grabs his nose between his index and middle finger.

Stiles makes a nasally offended sound as he slaps Peter’s hand away with a glare. “Why do you have to be so annoying?” he complains, trying to use his hands to flatten his disheveled hair.

“It keeps things lively,” Peter chimes, seeming pleased with Stiles’s irritation.

“You guys, I swear. Like siblings,” Kate notes as she uses a butcher knife to peel away at the skin of an orange with such skilled precision. “Laura, get me the caramel syrup.”
“I’m not your maid, Kathryn,” Laura replies with only a minimal amount of contempt.

Kate shrugs dismissively.

Laura waits a few seconds before she mutters under her breath and goes into the cabinets above the stove and microwave. “I’m an Alpha. Why am I fetching things for you? It’s bad enough you suckered me into helping you and Peter move all your crap from the mansion to your Aunt Victoria’s fancy duplex downtown.”

“You can’t say you’re not happy at the possibility of sharing an apartment with me after graduation,” Kate points out.

Laura sighs. “That’s not the point.”

Kate smiles secretly as Laura sets a bottle of caramel syrup before her. “You know what I’m going to say right?”

“No, Kate. I am not your bitch,” Laura denies, disgruntled.

Kate snorts as she pop open the caramel. “You are so my bitch. You and Peter.”

“Leave me out of it,” Peter says absently as he scrolls through his phone with a furrowed brow.

Laura shakes her head as she grabs a green apple from the fruit basket on the counter between the stove and the huge, silver fridge. She takes a juicy bite before she plucks a few grapes while she throws a few at the back of Kate’s head.

Kate skillfully dodges every single one of them.

“Would you like to give me a hug?” Stiles asks, mouth fidgeting as he resists the urge to laugh.

Kate gives him a flat look before she shoves an orange slice into her mouth and dodges another grape before she catches the last one like it’s no big deal, popping it in her mouth. She takes a moment to throw back her head to squeeze a disgusting amount of caramel in her mouth. She lifts her head, licks her lips and grabs the knife she used to peel her orange and throws it over her shoulder with an amazing amount of force.

Laura just glides to the right as she takes another bite of her apple. “Missed me.”

Kate slides out of her seats and retrieves the knife from where it’s embedded in the cabinet, yanking it free with a grunt. She looks at Laura and says, “No I didn’t. It went right where I wanted it to.”

Stiles notices that the tip of the knife is impaling a huge horsefly.

Kate looks at him and says, “Still want that hug, buttercup?”

Stiles doesn’t really sprint out of the kitchen, he just walks really, really fast. He climbs the stairs two at a time and goes to Derek’s room, but he finds it empty. He frowns thoughtfully and notices the double doors at the end of the hall are partially opened. He ventures over to the impressive library and happens to find the rest of the adults sitting in the armchairs or the study cubicles. He goes over to each of them one by one, shaking their hands as they share amused glances between them over his general appearance.

He finds Derek sitting in a corner on the floor, hidden a little by a few armchairs and tables with all the dogs surrounding him (Jordan resting in his lap). He pauses his soft reading to the dogs and
watches as Stiles maneuvers around the huge canines. They perk up and lick at his right hand when he’s in proximity. Even Jordan runs over to him excitedly.

In a fit of clumsiness, and in attempt not to step on a paw or a tail, he missteps and falls forward and completely expects to crash into a nearby bookshelf but Derek’s hand shoots out and yanks the front of his hoodie in an attempt to redirect his landing. He ends up in the older teen’s lap with a soft oomph, face smashing into Derek’s chest.

Derek just grunts, taking the impact without complaint before he sighs. “Clumsy,” he mutters, but the tone of his voice is colored with warm amusement.

Stiles goes scarlet and uses Derek’s thighs to pull away so he’s resting on his knees and tries not to think about how he’s between Derek’s long legs. But of course that’s the whole reason why he’s blushing. “Sorry — I —” he struggles a bit, extremely embarrassed. “Thanks,” he mumbles.

“Ohh huh,” Derek says (like he expects this behavior) and he spends a moment poking Stiles’s paint covered cheek. “What’s all this then?”

Stiles bats his hand away. “Don’t worry about it,” he grumbles as his blush recedes.

Derek hums thoughtfully before he stands and grabs Stiles’s left hand to pull him to his feet as well. “You’re grounded.”

“Am I? Who gave you the permission to dictate that?”

Derek gives him a flat look. “You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

Stiles snorts taking time to use his right hand to run his hand through his fringe. “You heard that, huh?”

Derek simply shrugs as he rubs his thumb across the back of Stiles’s left hand. “Figures you’d get yourself in trouble during the last week of school,” he supposes.

Stiles makes a face. “Don’t remind me. Finals Week.”

“If you come to school early tomorrow, we can study together,” Derek suggests as he reels Stiles into a hug. He keeps his hands flat against Stiles shoulder blades, chest pressed together in a way that Stiles has no choice but to wrap his arms around the older teen’s neck. Derek tucks his forehead in the space where shoulder meets neck and rumbles silently.

“Studying doesn’t really sound like my kind of fun,” Stiles remarks sarcastically after four beats of silence. “And I was thinking I could probably sleep in a bit. Get a good amount of sleep —”

“We’re studying, Stiles,” Derek mumbles. “I expect nothing short of an A- on your Algebra final.”

“What are you, my father?” Stiles snipes and jerks with a wounded sound when he feels the quick graze of blunt teeth on the curve neck. He extracts himself from the warmth of the hug, tampers down the feeling of loss, and glares. “Did you just bite me?”

“Nope,” Derek breezily denies. “Cab’s pulling up. Breaks are squeaking. You might want to mention to the driver he’s long overdue for some new brake pads. You’re dad’s probably waiting for you. Isaac is up in Olive’s nursery by the way.”

Stiles gets flustered and opens his mouth in outrage. “You are —”
“Let me help you out. Don’t want you tripping over thin air again and knocking yourself into a coma.”

Stiles grunts in annoyance. “I am not —”

“Sure, Stiles. If you say so,” Derek quickly interjects as he shoves him towards the double doors with pushy hands, not giving Stiles a chance to reply.

“Okay, okay. God, I’m going, I’m going. Just — you are — you are just — a Vampire!”

“Was that supposed to make sense? Because it didn’t. And anyway, that’s a little insulting,” Derek says, leaving him at the doorway before cocking his head with a grin while he walks backwards into the library, looking for all the world like he’s so very satisfied with himself. “Consider that payback for earlier. You should think twice before sicking your fireflies at me.”

Stiles resists the urge to throw a book at his head, and turns to go retrieve his brother instead.

If his heart is racing and his cheeks are red, well, he had to climb a lot of stairs to get to Olive’s room and it’s certainly not because of Derek’s stupidly attractive grin, or his unfairly perfect hugs.

Not that at all.

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They make it home around 4 pm and Stiles, against his better judgment, makes a comment to the driver about his brakes, just like Derek specified. The driver is extremely grateful and vows that he will get to the nearest auto repair center. He says he hadn’t even noticed or heard anything, and goes on to say that Stiles must have some very keen hearing.

Stiles tries to shrug casually as he slides out of the car to help his dad with his luggage, though Isaac has taken most of them.

His dad, with silent mirth, lets the preteen do as he pleases.

Stiles secretly thinks his brother is trying to suck up.

His dad climbs up the steps to follow Isaac to his room. They set all his luggage by his dresser. Stiles glances around his dad’s room. It’s very rare that he ever find himself in here. He walks over to his dad’s nightstand while his dad and Isaac push some of the bags in the closet. What he sees makes an ache pass through his chest. It’s a picture of his mom and his dad when they were younger, and Stiles is just a newborn, swaddled in a yellow blanket. His mother is looking at his father with an expression of adoration, and his dad is looking down at him in his mother’s arms like she’s holding his entire world. At the bottom of the frame are two wedding rings.

Stiles knows exactly who they both belong to. He turns away before he can cry and he exits the room. He finds his way to the bathroom so he can strip down and climbs into the shower. He idly wonders, as he rinses himself off for the last time, if this effects all the scenting the Hale Pack went to great lengths to implement. He figures he’ll ask one of them when he can or if he can manage to remember.

When he’s in his room and climbing into his own clothes again, he’s not really surprised to see that his room has been stripped bare of all his devices save his phone (his dad’s being generous most likely). He makes his way to his bed and flops onto his front before twisting to look at the ceiling. He stares and stares until his eyelids dip and fall shut. He’s more tired than he thought.
He wakes up on his back staring up at a lavender sky with a bright silver sun. The muscles in his body feel relaxed, and the grass underneath him feels as soft as a bed of cotton. He sits up slowly and realizes that he’s in field of glittering flowers (and they’re humming). There are rose petals made of diamonds floating everywhere, along with ladybugs and dragonflies made of glass. There are lightening bugs dancing around dandelions and petunias as a group of swans made of aquamarine sequins fly high in the lavender sky in a lovely dance comprised of loops and dives.

There are children running in the fields, naked as they day they were born, skin covered in a sheen of glitter. They have lovely rosy red cheeks, glimmering eyes, and short curly hair with pointed ears. They’re being chased by elderly people with long translucent wings the color of soap bubbles caught in a ray of sunlight and there are some elders holding flutes and harps as baby antelopes, deer, and lambs trail behind them as though they’re enamored. All of the elders have veins of glowing tattoos that are similar to henna tattoos.

There are a pride of lionesses lying lazily as their cubs wrestle each other. Meanwhile, a group of gorillas are swinging to and fro, climbing, and circling a red beanstalk that reaches into the lavender sky. There are more sheep and lambs frolicking in the fields with the smallest of children, who are eating slices of peaches.

The wind sings to his heart as it caresses his skin gently. He watches all the beautiful people sweep and run through the fields, picking flowers, singing songs, while others eat on fruits like plums and cherries and grapes (sometimes even feeding each other) or dote over their animal companions.

Stiles sits up and looks down at his bare chest and the white baggy pants he’s wearing. He’s got markings too, much like the Elders, but his aren’t glowing and it makes him wonder.

A rabbit with burgundy fur hops over, nose twitching fitfully and when Stiles cups his hands together, the little creature climbs willingly onto his hands. He clutches it to his chest and strokes it. He smiles when the little thing climbs up his arm and springs to the top of his head and settles. His body vibrates with joyful energy and his heart sings with a certainty he’s never experienced before.

This is home.

A babe, no more than three or four, appears from the field of flowers. He has hazel eyes that are deep and searching. His blond hair is adorned with a crown made entirely of gardenias. He has on little white baggy pants too but his stops at the knees. He stares for a long moment, like he’s gauging Stiles’s character before he says, “Curious.”

Stiles looks at him in question.

"This feeling I have about you. It's curious."

Stiles lifts both brows at that.

"It's as if...I know you."

“Do you?” Stiles replies, humoring the child. But he can’t help but to feel the same way. Something about his features really stands out in his mind.

The little babe starts picking gold roses, taking his time about it, inspecting each one until he approves. The ones he deems no good, he throws them down and crushes them with his heel before he continues his search.

Stiles watches him openly and the rabbit on his head bounces to the ground, following after the little boy like a faithful companion. He straightens when the babe returns to him and places a crown of
gold roses onto his head. He places his chubby hands on either side of Stiles’s cheeks. His gaze is searching, but inquisitive.

“What is your name?”

“Stiles.”

“No. What is your name?”

“Stiles.”

The little boy frowns. “That’s the name you belonged to in the World of Man. You have a different name here. Your real name.”

“How would I know what name I belong to here?” Stiles wonders aloud. “Is this not the World of Man?”

“This is Faerie. We are the veil between the realm of paradise and the realm of Man,” the boy explains. “Maybe the Lady of the Garden hasn’t given you one yet.”

Stiles hums thoughtfully and smiles when the burgundy rabbit climbs the boy and settles on his right shoulder. “And what is your name?” he asks.

“The Lady of the Garden has blessed me with the name of Heinrich,” he says. “It is my duty to learn what it means while I can.”

“What do you mean?”

“I won’t be here much longer. She will send me away.” Heinrich does not clarify. “I’ll get a new name, on the World of Man.”

Stiles frowns and says, “The Lady of the Garden sends people away? Like death?”

“Of course not like death, but life. She sent you away once, when it was your time. After all, we must carry out Her work,” Heinrich explains. “She sent you to the World of Man. And maybe that’s why you don’t remember your name, and so you do not know who you are. She always says that when She sends us away, we cannot remember.”

Stiles rolls that over in his mind. “You said She sends us to do Her work. Are we servants?”

“More than just a servant,” Heinrich corrects. “Servants don’t know what the Master is doing. But we understand that we have purpose. I will have purpose, and you are taking up the mantle of your purpose.”

“I wish I could understand all of this as easily as you seem to,” Stiles remarks with a slight grin.

Heinrich’s eyes suddenly swell with tears until they spill over and slide down his rosy cheeks. “I do know you,” he says shakily.

Stiles is both startled and worried.

Heinrich’s tears never stop flowing, and wherever they land, a bed of gardenias springs to life. He climbs onto Stiles’s lap and sobs quietly. He’s shaking like a leaf when he grabs Stiles’s right hand and hugs it to his chest with a desperate grip, like he’s afraid Stiles will leave him at any moment.

Stiles can feel how Heinrich’s heart is hammering fitfully in his chest.
“What’s the matter, Heinrich?” A tall, stately woman in the loveliest robes the color of rubies. Her eyes burn like golden embers and her cherry red hair (which reaches to her waist) is interwoven with all kinds of runestones and beads and flowers. Her pointed ears are pierced with different bands of gold. Her smile pierces Stile’s stomach and makes him tremble.

“Welcome back, love,” she says in a voice so clear and lovely like the tinkling of bells. “I am the Lady of the Garden.”

Stiles feels a quiver of acknowledgement shake into his bones.

The Lady of the Garden lowers herself to the ground and sits as close as she can to him. “You need not be afraid,” she goes on to say, touching his cheek with a soft hand. “We are your people.”

Stiles suddenly feels weak and he’s trembling like a leaf. He watches as she pulls a piece of black fruit out from the folds of her sleeves and offers it to him. He accepts it with his free hand, as Heinrich is holding his other hand captive, and he stares at it for a long time before he takes a bite. He feels himself strengthen with every bite, and it’s the sweetest thing he’s ever eaten, but it’s hard for him to remember what food tasted like in the World of Man.

“Our fruit edifies the spirit. It strengthens you against my glory,” the Lady of the Garden explains. “My glory is why you tremble so. Your flesh cannot withstand it. You must edify your spirit so that you can stand in my presence.”

Stiles eats the blackened fruit until there is nothing left. His body still quivers, but he doesn’t feel quite as weak.

The Lady of the Garden smiles at him before she looks at the little babe in his lap, who is still crying. “Oh, Heinrich,” she sighs. “You cannot keep him here, sweetling. You will see him again. When it is your time.”

“But he is mine and I am his,” Heinrich hiccups. “Must he leave me yet while our paths are destined to cross anyway? I will be lonely until then.”

“You will see him again, sweetling, but now is not the right time. We must send him back,” the Lady of the Garden explains with a soothing tone. “The drums will sound and he will have to go back.”

“Henry,” Heinrich croaks desperately as he looks at Stiles. “My name will be Henry. Keep my name and remember!”

“Heinrich, no,” the Lady of the Garden rebukes. “That is too much.”

“But he is mine, and I will be his. He must remember me,” Heinrich begs and he clings to Stiles’s hand as the Lady of Garden plucks him out of Stiles’s lap.

“Sleep now, sweetling,” the Lady of the Garden whispers. Then she blows gently on his face and he’s out like a light. “You will have your hands full one day. He is defiant, much like his parents.”

Stiles stands to his feet. “I don’t understand.”

“No, I suppose not, but you will one day, and you must make a better world for him. Prepare the way.” The Lady of the Garden lets go of Heinrich, and he doesn’t drop like a stone. Instead he floats with the wind and away to another part of the garden. “Each cycle I ask of them all ‘Who can I send? Who will go?’ And Heinrich is always the first to grab my hand and says ‘Send me! Send me! I will go!’ And I have to remind him it’s not his time yet. He holds so much love for you. You’re all he ever likes to talk about. I should have known that when he finally met you, he would not want to
let you go. You are in his dreams and in his heart. He will fight me even harder now, I suspect.”

Stiles does not even know what to say, but before he can even help it, tears spill over and down his cheeks.

The sound of drums overtakes the land.

“Time for you to return,” the Lady of the Garden says as she removes a runestone from her hair.

“Accept who you are. Build yourself a garden so that you may have the answers you seek. You have a Conduit — you need only to find and foster them. Close your eyes.”

Stiles has more questions but he does as she asks. He feels her lips touch his forehead and she murmurs a sacred prayer (“May you have all that you desire, and never want for anything.”) before she slips the runestone in his palm.

Then there is nothing but darkness.

Stiles eyes snaps open in the next moment and he’s staring up at his own ceiling. His right hand twitches around something and he looks down and sees the runestone from his dreams. He swallows and picks himself up before he touches his hand to his head, where he plucks a crown made of gold roses. He stares at it in amazement as the dream from before starts slipping from his memory like sand until he can hardly remember much of anything but just one thing. A name. Henry. But even with that, he can’t really make sense of it.

He climbs out of his bed, tucking the flower crown in his bottom drawer when he keeps the journal of Virtues, and he puts the runestone on his work desk, glancing out the window sharply when he thinks the outline of a cat, of his uncle. He walks over to open his window, and sticks his head out — the air is heavy with heat and moisture, and is rich with the smell of earth.

There’s nothing but dark skies, the moon and the stars, and Nana’s branches spreading out beautifully under the moonlight. There’s one particularly thick branch settling right at the bottom edge of his window. It looks steady enough that he could probably climb down it. He doesn’t, not this time, but he might one day. He pulls away to slide his window shut and locks it for good measure before he makes his way out of his room with bare feet. He pauses in front of Isaac’s door (takes note of the new doorknob) and peers inside to see Isaac on the floor at the edge, sketching.

“You’re supposed to knock,” Isaac remarks absentmindedly and he never pauses his charcoal stick. "Dad once spent an hour making sure I understood that I was allowed to set boundaries and have privacy before I moved in. Maybe I should tell him to give you that talk too."

“Nah, I’m good. Listen. Why didn’t you tell me that dad had already decided to ground us?” Stiles grumbles as he closes the door behind before treading across the floor to loom over his brother.

Isaac snorts unapologetically. “I thought it would be funny,” he explains. “And it was.”

Stiles scowls and tugs one of Isaac’s curls.

“Ow,” Isaac complains before he glares up at him. “If you came in here to bother me, you can just stay and I’ll leave.”

“Empty threat. You have come to appreciate my presence —”

“Not as much as you think,” Isaac mutters under his breath as he continues to sketch an owl with handsome feathers.
“— and I am your whole world. A gift really,” Stiles continues regardless.

“Do you ever hear what you say sometimes?” Isaac questions without ceasing his work. "I mean, sure, you're decent."

Stiles makes an offended sound. “I’m your older brother. You are supposed to idolize me.”

Isaac just shrugs.

“Keep that up and I won’t introduce you to Nana,” Stiles warns nonchalantly.

Isaac pauses, and then looks up at him. His mouth sags and he looks upset. The look he gives is absolutely soulful.

“Oh that is just unfair, Isaac,” Stiles complains, feeling his heart melt like wax. “Spoiled. I have spoiled you.”

“Oh huh. Take me to your magical talking tree,” Isaac says as he closes his sketchbook with a tiny smirk he thinks Stiles can't see. “Dad has to see too, though. You said you would show us both.”

“See that? That whole super hearing is quickly becoming my least favorite thing,” Stiles mutters.

Isaac snorts. “But you kinda have it too, but in a weird on and off way.”

Stiles figures he has a point but he doesn’t say this out loud. They both walk to their dad’s room and Stiles knocks on the door before waiting.

“I see you suddenly remember how to knock,” Isaac comments unnecessarily.

Stiles replies, “You know, I kind of miss the days when you never said more than two words.”

“Lie,” Isaac responds easily and taps the side of his nose before smirking.

Stiles rolls his eyes just as the door opens.

His dad comes out rubbing the heels of his hands into his eyes, hair tousled by sleep, and his sleepwear rumpled with different creases. “’time is it?’ he asks, voice still gravelly.

“Dad you sound like the Dark Knight,” Stiles comments instead.

His dad drops his hands and glares weakly at his oldest son with bloodshot eyes.

“Yup, now you’ve really got it into full effect,” Stiles says solemnly.

Isaac huffs and uses his elbow to throw his brother a little off balance, ignoring the answering indignant squawk. “It’s almost nine o'clock,” he supplies when Stiles won't.

Their dad nods graciously with another sigh that turns into a long yawn and a noisy stretch. When he’s a little more awake, he says, “Take me to the tree.”

Stiles gives a firm nod, all business, and strides across the floor, bare feet chilled by the cold floorboards and the steps, which creak nosily under their combined weight running down them. He leads them through the kitchen, past the basement door to the right and the food pantry to the left until they finally make it to the back door. He unlocks it and pushes past the screen.

His dad and Isaac take a moment to slip on their shoes.
Stiles doesn’t bother. He actually sighs in relief when he makes contact with the wet ground (a cool mist from the mountains up north had spread over Beacon Hills only hours before). He still carefully walks down the porch steps, over the uncomfortable gravel, past the garbage bins and out onto soft grass. He walks up to his tree, using the thick veins of roots to push up closer to the large triquetra carved in the middle. He presses his palms to it and his hands glow hot with blue before it fades completely.

Nana’s face appears. “You’ve changed,” is the first thing she says. “You’re a little more certain than you were before,” she decides before her eyes swing over. “Oh, how lovely. Is this you’re family, dearie?”

“Yes,” Stiles responds and takes a breath before he lets it out. He’s a little nervous. “I give them permission to see.”

“Hello there! Good evening,” Nana greets, ever cheerful and polite. “Or does good night better suit the circumstances? Though I suppose there was, at one point today, a good evening. Not to dismiss the morning, as I suppose that was good as well. My intention is to wish that your night be just as good, whether you choose it to, or even rather to say that it is quite a night to be good on.”

“Nana,” Stiles gently interjects. “This is my father, and my brother.”

“Well I rather think I know who they are,” Nana says, displeased when he merely shrugs in respond. “What a lovely little Werecat. I should think I’d be better off calling you a Werecub as you have not come into your inheritance yet,” she idly chatters, referring to Isaac before she looks to his dad. “How do you do, Sheriff?”

“Healthy, happy, and whole,” his dad replies with a quick nod. “I hope you are too.”

“Over six thousand years strong,” Nana boasts and chuckles at the way his dad and Isaac marvel at that. “Many of us are called but only the few allow themselves to be chosen. I am one of the oldest woodland spirits, and Stiles had the good sense to call upon me and the good fortune of having me answer it.”

“You don’t look a day over a thousand,” his dad notes with gentle humor.

Nana laughs and it kind of shakes the ground.

“Very impressive,” his dad goes on to say, looking between Nana and his son.

Stiles smiles sheepishly.

“You needn’t worry, Sheriff. I will mind your son for you when you can’t and guide him in areas you are not able to,” Nana presses on. “And how about you, little one? Are you well?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Isaac responds, sounding a little shy. “Thank you very much for asking. Stiles once — he gave me some fruit from the stem of your branches and it was really sweet. I’ve never had fruit that tasted like that.”

“Ah, what a polite, young man,” Nana chuckles. “You both flatter me so. Oh, I could come to love you all very easily.”

His dad and Isaac both blink in surprise and look a little at a loss for words.

Stiles tries to smother a grin.
“I have a gift. Both of you cup your hands together,” Nana instructs, and when they do, she shakes out her gorgeous purple-blue leaves until two large, juicy peaches fall right into their hands. “Go on and eat them. They will give you good dreams and sufficient rest.”

“Thank you,” his dad says, and then Isaac’s response comes shortly after. “Well, I think I’ll leave you to it. Thank you again, Nana, for minding my son.”

“He’s really a pleasure when he isn’t being stubborn or dull,” Nana supposes brightly.

“Hey that’s not —”

“Oh hush, dearie. I did not say anything that was not true. I’m sure your father is very familiar,” Nana interjects.

“That I am,” his father confirms, voice colored with humor.

Isaac is quietly eating his peach with the kind of vigor he only uses when he eats fish or anything coconut flavored.

“Oh, before it slips my aged mind, I must really mention that your boy requires a mentor, as I am only his spirit guide,” Nana remarks.

His dad considers it for a long moment and nods. “Did you have anyone in mind?”

“There was that one fellow.” Nana ponders it deeply before the name comes to her. “Ah, the Druid called Deaton.”

“Okay. This is a little out of my depth, so I’m not exactly sure what needs to be done to make that happen,” his dad confesses, never one to be too prideful to admit if he doesn’t understand something.

“All the more reason, I think, that you and I should talk from time to time,” Nana states. Then she goes on to explain, “As for Deaton, it is customary for the father or mother of the Virtue to call upon the Druid. Once he passes over your doorstep, you must make tea for the both of you and discuss what you believe to be in your son’s best interest. Once you have agreed to a verbal contract, he must be lead out here where Stiles can summon me and I can bless him with the final grace of approval. And when things progress from there, he’ll become Deaton’s apprentice, and his formal education of forest magic will commence, as it does for Faerie kind.”

“Faerie,” his dad repeats with raised brow. “Stiles is — did you say Faerie kind?”

“Quite. That runs deep in not only his mother’s bloodline, but yours as well. Though by no greater measure than his mother’s side. She was a Blue Witch, correct?”

His dad doesn’t even know how to respond to that. “I think I need to go lie down again.”

“Oh dear, I apologize. I have not been mindful at all,” Nana remarks sadly. “We may discuss that when you are ready to, Sheriff.”

His dad nods, already lost in his own thoughts. “I’ll just go and make that phone call. Goodnight.”

“I bid you the same,” Nana says as both she and Stiles watches as his father disappears into the house with equal concern.

Isaac follows shortly, licking the juices from his fingers.

Stiles sighs and turns to face Nana.
“You’ve been to Faerie again,” Nana notes without hesitation.

“Yes,” Stiles recognizes, though he can’t remember anything outside of that name, Henry.

“It explains why your touch was more sure.”

Stiles doesn’t doubt that. “I have another runestone. I don’t know what to do with this one.”

“I have a good idea, but that is something for your mentor to teach you, as it is not my place,” Nana admits. “And something else happened. Are you suppressing your magic, you ridiculous child?”

Stiles flushes and sits down on an exposed root. “Nana…” An apple falls on his head and he gives a quick cry of pain. “Nana!”

“The more you try to suppress it and to bottle it up, the more it will fight to get out, and quite violently might I add,” Nana warns severely. “Faerie magic is not meant for confinement. You will cause yourself great pain, as well as those around you if you act carelessly. Please promise me you will curb that habit. If you stop fighting it, you will be able to properly guide it. Right now it has no respect of your wishes since you treat it so coldly.”

Stiles honestly hadn’t thought about it that way, too busy trying to find ways to hide and contain his magic, or the glow, as he likes to call it.

“Pick up that apple and eat it. Nothing from me can go to waste, am I understood?” Nana questions, and gives a pleased hum when he nods.

Stiles picks up the red apple obediently and it’s so shiny and pretty that his mouth waters automatically. He takes an audible bite and his tongue trembles at the sweetness. He chews and swallows. “Do I have wings?” he asks suddenly before he can even think about it.

“Hard to say to say at this point, really,” Nana supposes. “You keep everything so confined. We’ll find out eventually, now won’t we?”

Stiles wrinkles his nose but continues to munch away on his apple. He licks his lips after a few bites. “I have a name in my mind. I think it came from Faerie, but it’s one I knew before then.”

“Do not speak it. I fear it is not time to do such a thing. You must not voice names you bring back from Faerie with you,” Nana cautions.

“But it’s a name I heard before. One that already belonged to someone,” Stiles insists as he thinks of Peter and his little brother.

“We do not own the names that are freely given to us by Man or the gods alike. Only the Faceless know,” Nana explains, not unkindly. “Let it rest, dearie.”

Stiles frowns and continues to eat his apple. At the very last bite, he realizes he ate the whole thing, the seeds and the stem, and he hadn’t even noticed. He licks his lips again before he asks, “Do you know who the Benefactor is?”

“I suspect it will be a lovely day at the park tomorrow,” Nana suddenly remarks. “You should go there after school with the golden haired girl.”

“Kate?” Stiles says, a little confused.

“Ah, yes. That is the one. I rather like her tenacity, or what little I was able to see of it when she
came to visit and mind your brother.”

“But Nana what’s that got to do with —”

“Get plenty of shade while your there. Maybe even take a walk. Let the Hale boy, as I suspect he will follow, buy some ice cream. Send your brother home with your father before you go,” Nana pushes on, despite his confused gaze. “Trust me, dearie.”


“Off to bed. You’ve a long day ahead of you tomorrow. Goodnight, sweetling.” Nana’s face disappears before he can even return the sentiment.

Stiles sighs and spends a moment tracing the loops and curves of the triquetra etched into the face of his elm tree. He feels a little like he’s floating complacently and he grows drowsy unpredictably. He frowns as he sways and stumbles towards the house. He locks the backdoor behind him and circles back to his to his room in the deathly silent house.

When he manages to make it to his room by some unknown miracle, he grabs Derek’s wolves from off the top of his dresser without even thinking about it, thoughts too hazy and muddled with exhaustion. He climbs under his covers with them and hugs them close, humming softly at the smell of vanilla.

He gets this vague thought of when he fed Isaac a piece of fruit from his tree two days ago, and how he had taken a nap as soon as he’d finished it immediately after.

His last thought is tinged in amusement and future plans to feed the fruit to Derek, if only to watch him pass out as soon as he’s done; at which point he will not hesitate to draw over his face with a permanent marker.

Stiles may be a Seven, but he’s still a teenaged boy.

He falls asleep and doesn’t see his phone light up with messages on his nightstand.

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Stiles jerks from out of the warmth of his covers and falls over the edge and onto the floor with a winded sound of pain. He stares up at his ceiling, tangled up in his covers as his phone screams at him from where it’s vibrating on his nightstand before it stops.

“Stiles, it’s time to —” His dad pauses in his doorway after he opens the door. “Good, you’re up. Well, in a sense. I’m not going to ask. You and Isaac are to come straight home after school.”

“Nana told me to go to the park,” Stiles mumbles as he blinks at him, still a little tired, but well-rested nonetheless. “It’s important.”

His dad’s mouth thins a little and he squints his eyes. He sighs. “You have one hour,” he relents. “One.”

Stiles nods fervently. He winces when his phone starts to scream again.

“I’ll pick up Isaac myself then. I’m not due to come into work until Monday, and I intend to take advantage of that,” his dad reports, still in his pajamas. “It’s six o’clock. Isaac’s climbing out of the shower now. You should get dressed too. Isaac says he wants to leave early.”
“’kay,” Stiles mumbles and sighs when his phone starts screaming again.

“You better answer that. I made breakfast, so you might want to get ready and come down before it gets cold. I’m going back to bed.” His dad closes the door behind him when he leaves.

Stiles takes his time sitting up, and shifts until he can extract himself from his bedding, and he shoves it back onto his bed before he stands. He lets his phone ring and ring until it stops, and he takes Derek’s wolves to his dresser again, only to set them on top.

His phones starts screaming again.

Stiles makes an annoyed sound as he swipes it off his nightstand and glares at the screen before he accepts the call. “This is ungodly,” he complains.

Derek huffs. “Well you’re awake now. My persistence paid off.”

“I should have turned off my phone,” Stiles swears.

“You weren’t answering my texts. Drastic times call for drastic measures,” Derek supposes, voice colored with pleased humor.

Stiles mumbles with incoherent exasperation.

Derek laughs softly. “I can hear that, you know.”

“Good, you deserve to,” Stiles fumes. “And also, sometimes you never answer my texts. Why should you get any special treatment?”

Derek hums thoughtfully before he responds, “That’s not exactly true is it?” he says quietly. “Think about it, Stiles. Those few times when you text me and I didn’t respond. Do you remember why?”

Stiles gets a little flustered with guilt because he does. “I — I didn’t mean —”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not like I’m going to hold it against you,” Derek interjects, not unkindly. “Its fine. Look, I promise to respond to your texts whenever I can.”

“You don’t have to promise me that, Derek,” Stiles says softly. “It’s not about that at all. I shouldn’t have made it into a big deal. I’m just cranky. It was stupid.”

“Nothing you say is stupid,” Derek insists. “Well, most of the time.”

“That is the most backhanded compliment.”

Derek makes a dismissive sound.

“Well,” Stiles says as he fiddles with the knob of his dresser drawer, staring absentmindedly at Derek’s varsity jacket. “We can just be, I don’t know, mindful of each other from now on.”

“I thought we already were,” Derek teases.

Stiles snorts and smiles a little.

“Come study with me,” Derek says.

Stiles pushes away from his dresser to walk to his closet. “Can’t do that if I’m talking to you on the phone.”
“Who says?”

“Shut up. Goodbye,” Stiles ends the call and gets to work with finding a suitable outfit for the day. While he’s in the middle of getting dressed, his phone chimes with a text from Derek that says:

**You hung on me. }:(**

*I sure did! -->*

**That's not very mindful of you.**

*You either want me to come study with you, or you want me to stand around responding to every single text.*

**You can’t do both?**

*That's just greedy.*

**Not at all. Hurry up.**

*That's what I'm trying to do!*

¯\_(ツ)_/¯

Stiles pockets his phone, grabbing his backpack on the way out and jogs down the steps into the kitchen.

Isaac is eating what is probably his fourth plate of eggs and oatmeal with a ridiculously tall glass filled to the brim with that special brand of coconut milk. Their dad always go out of his way to travel across the other side of town to that organic store that sells the brand Isaac prefers.

Stiles fixes himself a plate before popping it into the microwave to warm up. When the microwave dings, he extracts the steaming plate, grabs a spoon, and settles across from the preteen. “Spoiled.”

“Late,” Isaac retorts just as quickly. “You realize we have to leave in the next three minutes, right?”

Stiles mixes his eggs and his oatmeal together, catches the box of brown sugar when Isaac shoves it his way when he makes a silent signal for it, and mutters, “We leave when I say we leave.”

“Dad! Stiles is trying to make us late!” Isaac yells as he takes his plate to the sink to rinse it off before stashing it in the dishwasher. He shoulders on his backpack with a taunting grin.

“Stiles, you have three minutes!” his dad calls back.

Stiles makes an exasperated sound around he shoves the food into his mouth quickly while he glares at his brother.

Isaac pretends like he doesn’t notice as he texts away on his smartphone.

Stiles rinses his plate off and barely has time to dump it into the dishwasher and grab his backpack before Isaac is trying to shove him out the front door.

“Bye, dad!” they yell simultaneously before the door slams shut in their wake. They sprint over to their bikes and climb onto them.

“Race you,” Stiles challenges and he peddles like he’s running from a lake of lava.
Isaac wins, of course, but it’s a close call.

Stiles figures that there’s no way that victory should count. “Why were you in a rush anyway?” he asks as he follows his brother while he rolls his bike over to the ramps to lock it there.

“Talent Show auditions,” Isaac says as he wipes his hands down his Green Lantern graphic tee.

“You’re auditioning!” Stiles exclaims.

Isaac hushes him. “You’re so unnecessary loud,” he complains. “And no. You’d know if I were. Boyd is. He’s got this band. He’s the drummer.”

“Oh, well.” Stiles doesn’t have much to say about that. “Tell him I said good luck.”

“Sure,” Isaac mumbles as he studies his brother’s face for a long awkward moment. Then he smiles and says, “Well you should get going. You don’t want to miss your private study date.”

Stiles gapes as his brother strolls away with a self-satisfied smirk.

“That’s for calling me spoiled!” Isaac says over his shoulder before he disappears into the building of his school.

Stiles vows to make the little punk a pie filled with apples from his tree so he sleeps for weeks.

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Derek’s sitting in a quiet and hidden corner of the library, doodling idly in his notebook, long legs stretched out underneath the table when Stiles finally makes it to his school. The other teen seems to sense him because he sits up and follows him with his green eyes.

Stiles walks over and sits across from him, dumping his backpack next to Derek’s on the floor. He says, “Kate once said you wanted to be a rocket scientist.”

Derek’s brow furrowed for just a second before he shifts them once, seemingly unsurprised by Stiles’s randomness. “Astrophysicist,” he lightly corrects.

“Wow, okay that’s a little intimidating,” Stiles mumbles and leans forward to rest on his elbows against the table. “What do you exactly do in that field?”

Derek shrugs, leaning back in his chair, and he appears to be slightly self-conscious. “It’s…” he trails off, and it’s obvious his collecting the right words.

“I promise I’m not completely dumb. You can say it however you need to,” Stiles jokingly encourages.

Derek sends him a displeased frown. “Don’t say that, Stiles. You are far from dumb,” he complains.

Stiles feels a thrill of pleasure at that, and there’s an answering flush that follows closely after. He’s glad that Derek is too busy glaring the table into submission to even notice. A few seconds of awkward silence passes between them. “I was joking,” he mumbles ruefully when he can’t take the silence anymore.

“Don’t joke like that,” Derek sighs as he sits up and rests his chin on his right hand. He gazes at Stiles likes he’s some kind of equation he’s trying his hardest to figure out. Then he reaches across the table with his left hand to grab Stiles’s. “Why do you want to know about it? About the astrophysics, I mean.”
Stiles squeezes his fingers just out of reflex and tries not to feel like this may not be normal platonic behavior for friendships. But how can he know yet, even still at this point? He’s only spent so much time with the Hales to understand exactly how pack dynamics work. For all he knows, Derek is trying to scent him in the least conspicuous way possible. He blinks out of his inner musings to say, “It’s — it’s like you said before,” he mumbles. “Up on the tower.” It’s a miracle that he doesn’t blush (which he does an absurd amount around the other teen). “We just need to get to know each other better. And I want —” He stops.

Derek waits him to finish as he raises both eyebrows. He rubs his thumb along the inner crease of his palm. “What do you want?”

Stiles falters for a moment as heat pools into his gut and the tips of his ears before he gathers himself again. “I want to — well, I’d like to know you better,” he says quietly and gnaws on his bottom lip; nerves get the best of him. His heart quickens in anticipation as he waits for the other teen to say something.

Derek ducks his gaze with a smile and Stiles lets out a quiet sigh of relief. “Same here,” he assures before he takes his hand back to reach into his backpack and pulls out all his notebooks, folders, and schoolbooks. “Astrophysics is complicated. It’s space and life and everything in between. My job would be to basically try and understand the universe and our place in it.”

“Cool,” Stiles says faintly, and he really does mean it. His fingers twitch with the loss of warmth and he has to quickly hide his hands under the table as they glow with a thin sheen of ethereal blue. It’s almost as worse as a blush. He inhales as he closes his eyes and exhales just as slowly. He doesn’t fight it. He lets it be. When he opens his eyes, Derek has his backpack in his lap and is unzipping it to slide Stiles’s notebooks, folders, and schoolbooks over to his side of the table.

Derek catches his questioning gaze and shrugs the corners of his mouth. “You look like you needed a minute,” he remarks casually. “Didn’t want to interrupt your meditation.”

“I wasn’t meditating,” Stiles denies, feeling affronted.

“What else would you call it then?”

Stiles opens his mouth to retort. Then he closes it when no response comes to mind.

“Exactly.”

“Whatever. Share your index cards with me.”

“Say please,” Derek drawls, wiggling his eyebrows teasingly.

“Absolutely not.”

Derek huffs and divides his notecards between them equally. “Stop frowning. You’ll get wrinkles.” He also tosses a candy bar at him.

Stiles barely manages to catch it, but he does. “What’s this for?”

“You’re not you when you’re hungry.”

“Oh shut up.”

Derek just shushes him with a grin and begins to starts looking over his notes to scribble out the most vital information onto some index cards with his left hand. He then pauses to dump a few more pens
and highlighters onto the table in the space between all their textual items.

Stiles snags an orange highlighter quickly as he cracks open his AP Biology book. He highlights a few passages before sticks the body highlighter between his teeth and bites down as he scribbles out a few notes onto some pink index cards.

“Don’t bite down too hard. It’ll explode in your mouth,” Derek advises without even looking at him, lazily flipping through his Geology book.

Stiles spits out the highlighter and twists his tongue at each corner of his mouth. “Sorry.”

Derek keeps taking notes as he says, “Really not a big deal. I’ve seen you do that a lot.” He waits a minute before he adds, “Eat your candy bar. I paid a lot money for it.”

“Lies,” Stiles accuses, but he does take his time stripping the candy of it’s sleeve in the most noisy, obnoxious way possible, just to spite the other teen.

Derek sighs.

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Stiles coasts through the rest of the day not really saying much. He's too busy thinking about what might happen at the park today. He’s not nervous per say — just anxious. There’s obviously something there that he is meant to find. He’s just obsessing over what that might be. He’s probably chewed through like fifteen pen and highlighter caps.

Dentists around the world must be crying without knowing why.

Cora makes him eat when they go out onto the quad for lunch, calling him a complete space cadet because of how zoned out he’s been for most of the school day.

Laura grabs him just as he moves to sit down and she puts him between her and Kate.

Stiles just hands Kate his blue jello, because he knows the drill.

Kate pats him on the head, and coos, “That’ll do, Tenderfoot. That’ll do.”

Stiles snorts. “I’m not some prize pig at a county fair.”

“Of course not,” Kate says like she’s the one who’s offended. “I’m a bitch but I’m not heartless.”

“Here, here,” Peter crows, appearing out of nowhere, settling in beside Kate, who curls up to him as he puts his arm around her. “So, what’s going on? Did I miss the part where you all burst out into song about how summer is just around the corner and all the cute little summer things you’re going to do? Like get a job, or fall in love, or maybe even follow your dreams. Why not do all three?”

“I made him watch Teen Beach Movie with me last night because no one else wanted to,” Cora announces and she pulls apart her corndog, taking off the breading to dip it in a blotch of ketchup on the corner of her plate. “He’s determined to make me suffer for it,” she goes on to say as she gives him a sarcastic smile.

“Cora, don’t be silly,” Peter says with mock innocence. “Why ever would I do something so trivial and petty?”

Cora makes a face at him. “I don’t know, Uncle Peter. Please, do tell.”
Peter smirks, maintaining eye contact with Cora as he says, “Laura. Still campaigning for that plastic crown?”

“Prom Queen,” Laura corrects. “Why? Come to lend a hand?”

Peter finally looks away from Cora, who is eating the impaled hotdog on the wooden stick with a scowl. “I think not. It’s not exactly fair for all the other candidates.”

“Oh yeah?” Laura snorts as pops her grilled cheese in her sandwich in her mouth, piece by piece. “And just why is that?”

Peter makes a gesture to his face. “I’m too good-looking,” he explains with a smirk, like it should be obvious. “Let’s face it. I am the face that launched a thousand ships.”

“Gag me,” Derek complains as he sits down without a tray but with arms full of books. “It’s amazing you haven’t gotten caught yet, skulking across campus with that overinflated ego of yours.”

Peter just lifts his eyebrow with a grin. “Which brings me back to my original point.” He slaps on some expensive shades. “I’m too good-looking.”

“And humble,” Stiles mutters as he finishes up the remains of his breaded fish sticks. He’s been a silent observer so far. “Let’s not forget humble.”

“Oh I have humility for days, Stiles,” Peter boasts as he uses his long, slender fingers to shake out his blond hair, and he does it so well that he ends up looking like a model for GQ.

Everyone sighs and rolls their eyes.

Laura stands and urges Cora to follow, and they go to make their rounds with box full of plastic wristbands in a variety of colors, and all of them say ‘Vote for Laura!’ on them in beautiful, white cursive.

Stiles knows this because Laura slipped one on him while he wasn’t looking and without him even knowing. Mainly because he was to busy texting Isaac to let him know that their dad would be the one pick him up (Isaac replied an affirmative without asking too many questions).

Kate shoves about three sticks of gum in her mouth before she begins to pop the gob of gum obnoxiously loud.

Derek continues highlighting passages in his AP Physics book.

Stiles pushes his tray away and says, “It’s nice out today. Very warm and mild. Perfect day to do anything like, I don’t know, go to the park?”

Peter, Derek, and Kate swing their gazes to him.

“What?” Stiles says defensively as he pulls his tray close again so he can fiddle with it. “I’m just saying.”

“Stiles, you’re about as subtle as a brick to the face,” Kate remarks pointedly. “Covert is not exactly your strongest trait.”

“I resent that!” Stiles exclaims. He waits for two beats of silence before he says, “Actually, while we’re on the subject, I was thinking maybe you might want to come with me?”

Kate stares, assessing him with her hazel eyes and she must find what she’s looking for because she
grins unexpectedly. “Sure. Why not? We always seem to have fun with each other.” She winks before she steals Peter’s shades.

“Why are we going to the park?” Peter invasively questions.

“Yes, why?” Derek echoes.

“We’re —” Stiles makes a circular motion of indication between them. “— not going anywhere. Kate and I are going to the park. You guys do understand how that works, right? Kate and I are going to the park.”

“What’s at the park, Stiles?” Peter demands, his blue eyes darkening artfully.

“Swings. Trees. Kids. Dogs. Senior citizens.” Stiles shrugs sarcastically. “How long has it been since you’ve been to a park? I don’t think much has changed.”

“How would I know? Maybe things are different from what I remember. It’s probably fitting that I join you,” Peter responds insistently. Then his phone chimes and he frowns, fishing the expensive device. “Hello.” He gets up and walks away before he begins to mutter furiously.

“I won’t force an invite, unlike my uncle. But I would like to go,” Derek admits and he glances at Kate before he diverts his attention to Stiles. He raises his eyebrows as he waits for a response.

“Just don’t tell Peter. I’d never hear the end of it,” Stiles mutters, relenting.

Derek smirks and says, “I don’t think he’ll care. Mom’s asked him to come home right away. Some important Pack business that has to do with the Calaveras. I don’t know. Mom’s not saying much.”

“Stop eavesdropping,” Kate chides as she tosses a carrot at him.

Derek manages to catch it with his mouth. He chews and says, “Not exactly eavesdropping if it’s not something you can control.”

“Point taken,” Kate supposes. “So let’s all meet in the parking lot after school. I just got my baby out the shop.” She gives a lovelorn sigh. “I might cry while we drive. Reunited and it feels so good.”

Stiles and Derek snicker, tossing an amused look between them.

“What?” Kate frowns in confusion before she realizes what they’re both sniggering about with an expression of dawning. “Oh my god. Really? Fuck you both. That’s a good song.”

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Kate drives her Jaguar with the top down, blasting the Backstreet Boys’ greatest hits unapologetically while Derek and Stiles sit silently in the back.

Stiles gnaws on his bottom lip anxiously the whole ride, sneaking glances to Derek, who still has his nose firmly planted in his schoolbooks. It makes him a little envious, and tugs at some competitive urge deep within the recesses of his mind. He doesn’t usually mind being outdone when it comes to academics, but for some reason, he wants to prove that he can be as diligent as the other teen.

Kate swerves into a parking lot and whips the car into a handicapped spot like some kind of professional stunt driver.

“Jesus, Kate,” Stiles wheezes, clutching his heart. “Warn a guy.”
“Now where’s the fun in that?” the pixie-haired blonde quips as she slides out of her expensive car. Derek climbs out next to follow after Kate. “You realize your car will be towed if you leave it in this spot?”

Kate shrugs. “No one would dare. My dad’s the mayor. That’s the only reason I find him useful.”

“That’s messed up, Kate.”

“Cry me a river, Derek.”

Stiles manages to exit the car without injury. He jogs to catch up to Derek and Kate, who are shoving at each other in a friendly nature. He takes the time to appreciate his surroundings.

Beacon Hills Park District (#1) has beautifully maintained landscape. The entrance alone leads you up a walkway that curls around a glittering water fountain and separates into two different pathways. One of the pathways lead to the large building made of large cement blocks and huge windows. The entrance is a set of glass double doors that swing open and close with people of all types: families wearing the same color scheme of bathing suits, goggles, inflatable pool floats in the shape of animals, and sunburns; sweaty women in yoga pants dabbing their foreheads with hand towels as they power down their grass wheat smoothies; camp counselors escorting a line of kids with neon purple shirts on, who follow behind them like ducks; senior citizens with bingo cards, or crotchet doilies; young boys and girls adorned with karate or boxing gear.

They take the other pathway, which coils around the right side of the building, past the basketball and tennis courts (which are fully occupied), past a park filled to the brim with a horde of children; they laugh as they run around with bare feet on the red sand that acts like a cushion, or a bed that is the foundation of the jungle gym themed after the style of Toy Story. Opposite to that, there is a food stand settled under a pavilion (it looks like they sell things like popcorn, cotton candy, loaded nachos, hotdogs and ice cream). The concession stand has a large dining area with tables that have umbrellas in the middle of them, acting as artificial shade.

Stiles wonders why he hasn’t taken the time to come here before. He’s only been to the park next to the library, which is in the district that Stiles lives in. It’s also where the Hale family resides, though they could afford to live in one of these upscale neighborhoods, but he also understands why they would prefer not to. Their privately own preserve affords them privacy, freedom, and silence. That’s certainly not something they would get around here; it’s as busy as the cities he remembers in Los Angeles, with also some of the kind of people there — selfish, snobby, and arrogant elitists.

This park happens to be at the epicenter of what is considered the downtown retail marketplace of Beacon Hills; a metropolis lined with a high concentration of restaurants, bars, cafes, and boutique shops. It’s obvious where all the funding is coming from. The neighborhood and real estate surrounding this area are meant solely for the upper class. He knows for a fact that Mayor Argent lives only minutes away in his intimidating manor; City Hall and the Municipal District Courthouse are literally within walking distance from here. He also knows that Allison and Malia happen to reside down the same street; a charming tree-lined cul-de-sac filled with examples of Victorian-era buildings, showcasing beautiful and diverse architectural styles, with townhouses, duplexes, single-family homes, and condominiums.

Stiles knows it’s nothing he could ever hope to afford, but he also has no want to. He’s perfectly fine with the house his father bought. It’s not much but it’s, without a doubt, home.

Derek pulls him closely, since he’s so lost in his thoughts, and out of the lane meant for bikers, joggers, skateboarders, and skaters. “Careful,” he says before letting go but sticking close.
“Thanks,” Stiles mumbles, embarrassed.

Derek nods, looking for all the world like he really doesn’t mind.

Stiles is absurdly warmed by that and tries to beat the feeling down and focuses on the path ahead of them.

Kate’s somehow wormed her way to the front and leads them past the picnic and barbeque area littered with a sea of birthday parties, family reunions, and graduation celebrations.

Stiles starts to break out into a sweat because the sun is unyielding above them, and he’s only slightly annoyed that Derek seems unaffected by it.

The three of them go further, past a fishing pond with a flat wooden bridge that cuts across the middle of it. It’s a pond full of lily pads and moss, ducks, and fisherman.

The path starts to wind down and curve around an expansive urban dog park next to the park’s second parking lot. There’s an active dog area where owners of all ages interact with their canines, whether that be by tossing Frisbees and balls, or playing tug of war with them. There’s a drinking water fountain where some dogs trek over to and drink out of with wagging tails.

Off to the side there is the passive dog area where canines roam amongst themselves while their owners occupy the benches on the looping pathway. About ten feet away from that, is another, very similar food stand settled under a pavilion, and it looks like it sells just the same kind of food the other does.

Kate stops, spins on her heel and faces them. “This is where we part ways. I see Kali over there. Peter made me swear that I’d talk to her since he couldn’t join us to do so himself.” She slips on Peter’s sunglasses with a cutting smile, runs her hand through her moist fringe (even she’s not immune to the heat). “You two feel free to do whatever.” And just like that, she’s gone.

Stiles shakes out his shirt, already sticky with heat, cheeks flushed as he uses the back of his right hand to wipe the sweat from his forehead.

Derek watches him for a short moment before he flicks his gaze to and fro like he’s searching for something. “Jordan would love this,” he comments whimsically, walking a little to Stiles left as his eyes flicker around again. “Maybe I’ll bring him here one day. I might even drag Cora and Ginger.”

It prompts Stiles to ask a question he always forgets to. “Why is it that — I mean everyone else has — but Peter doesn’t and — did he ever have a —”

“You want to know if he has a companion,” Derek states, knowing without knowing what Stiles is trying to ask, and that’s something Stiles is coming to appreciate. His gaze finally settles on something over Stiles shoulder, and he appears to contemplate it. “Remember when you asked me before,” he says, crowding into Stiles’s space until the other teen is forced to back up and this keeps going until Derek stops and crosses his arms with a look of satisfaction that Stiles does not understand. “You asked me what it all meant. About being brother-cousins with our dogs. About how it works.”

Stiles nods. Then he frowns and looks up. He realizes that Derek has purposefully corne him under the shade of a tree, and away from the oppression of the sun because he was hot and miserable. He looks at Derek but the other teen’s expression is nothing but nonchalant. He cuts the question he wants to ask out of his mind, and instead says, “Are they like familiars?”

“It’s hard to explain,” Derek says as he looks off towards the fishing pond as he uses his left had to
scrub his hair out. “I don’t mean that I can’t explain.” He turns his green eyes back on him. “It’s just that when we shift, fully and completely, it’s like another language. We have different words for things that can’t be translated in Human tongue. This is another instance.” He pauses, as if looking for the right words. Then he says, “I think, the closest thing would be…” he trails off as he thinks. “Do you know anything about Sentinels and Guides?”

“Not really,” Stiles admits as he leans back against the tree behind him. His body feels cooler already.

Derek explains, “In our world, we’re considered the Sentinels because we’re the ones that posses super-heightened senses, and more often than not, we can become over focused on the control of our own bodies. The downside is that when it overwhelms us, we don’t only shift, but transform into, what I guess you can consider, the wolf inside. Without the guidance, it’s easy to lose ourselves to that more primal side; the side that even Humans posses as well in their mind that can take one good person and turn them into a monster. It’s dangerous. Once upon a time it was that way for all of us, since we did not know any better, and that in turn brought about the age of Hunters.

“It’s a problem that plagues the whole spectrum of all species who are kin to the supernatural world. We require that balance, and so that’s where Guides come in. Their sole purpose is to not only to calm us, or to act like a compass for us when we go so deep that we lose sense of who we really are. But they’re also the strong connection we need to the spirit world —” Derek grabs Stiles’s left hand and clutches it with his own as he uses the index finger of his right hand to trace a triskelion onto Stiles’s palm. Then he points to each corner, saying, “The Sun, the Moon, the Stars.” He pulls his right hand away but he hangs on to Stiles’s left hand with his own. “Sentinels soulbond with their Guides — it’s the closest connection we can have that will work in the way we need. In the Were community, we call it bonded-pairs. And different creatures need different things. Vampires have crows. Leshies have ravens. Werewolves have our brother-cousins. So on and on.”

“And Peter?” Stiles asks as he tightens his hold on Derek’s hand, frightened of what the other teen may say.

Derek stares at him for a long moment before he presses his lips together as his eyes get a little watery and Stiles is too busy bracing for the worst that it takes him forever to realize that the other teen isn’t crying but trying hold back his laughter.

“Oh you are just —” Stiles tries to hit him but Derek bounces out of the way with a joyful laugh. “Were you lying the whole time?”

“No, that was all the truth,” Derek swears as he presses a hand to his stomach and he laughs hard enough that he draws some attention to them.

“But you did stand there and make me think something horrible happened to Peter!”

“I just couldn’t resist,” Derek chokes out between his cackling. “You looked so — you were so serious, I just couldn’t resist.”

Stiles shoves him. “So then what? Does Peter have a Guide or not?”

“He does,” Derek admits, face still red with his amusement and he scrubs his cheeks dry. “You wouldn’t know it, but she’s always there when you come. You just never see her because she hides whenever there are new people in the house she hasn’t gotten used to. Sometimes it takes her months before she’s comfortable enough to come out of her hiding spaces. My mom used to tell me that when my uncle bonded with her while she was still a pup, she would always climb into his bottom drawer and hide until she fell asleep, and she was only ever comfortable with my uncle. She’s
absurdly shy when I think about it, which is kind of poetic when you think about the kind of person my Uncle Peter is.”

Stiles thinks it’s amazingly poetic. He hopes he gets to see the canine sometime in the near future. “What’s her name?” he asks, setting his annoyance aside for a moment.

“You’ll never guess,” Derek replies. “Cinderella.”

“You’re lying,” Stiles says automatically because there is no way.

Derek snickers. “No, I’m actually telling the truth.” Then he adds, “You can ask Kate if you don’t believe me. You can ask anyone. They’ll confirm it. She’s an all white Mastiff, and she’s twice Jordan’s size. My uncle calls her Ella, though, and he only calls her Cinderella when she does something he doesn’t like.”

“That is possibly the greatest thing I have ever heard,” Stiles says with quiet awe. This information is just too valuable to put to waste. He will milk this until it is dry.

“You should buy me some ice cream,” Derek says as moves so they stand shoulder to shoulder.

Stiles snorts. “Oh yeah? And why is that?”

“I haven’t eaten since this morning. And I skipped lunch,” Derek reasons.

Stiles huffs in exasperation. “And so feeding you is suddenly my responsibility?”

“I didn’t say that,” Derek corrects. He waits for two beats before he adds, “But you did.”

Stiles tries to kick him but Derek seems to anticipate that kind of retaliation because he glides out of the way and starts a backwards walk toward the concession stand with a smirk. Stiles rolls his eyes and blows out a breath from the side of his mouth, and it makes the eyelashes of his right eye flutter. He scans the area for a moment before he attempts to locate Kate. It takes walking around the pathway where it loops towards the passive dog area before he can spot her.

Kate is standing with Kali, who’s clutching her puppy, Simba-Bhupal, to her chest.

Stiles contemplates walking over, but he thinks better of it. He just continues walking down the curve of the pathway. He watches dogs frolic while their owners point and titter amongst themselves about their canines for a moment before he goes in an earnest search for a bench that’s under some shade. He’s getting hot again. He’s practically on the other side of the Dog Park before he finds said bench. He sits down with a relived sigh, happy to escape the sun.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Stiles frowns and straightens looking around for the source of the sound.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Stiles stiffens when the sound of the world begins to fade away until it zeros down to the grating sound of, what seems like, knives sharpening knives.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Stiles winces. The sound magnifies in his ears, and it echoes like the horrible screech of silverware scrubbing against porcelain dishes.
Tap. Tap. Tap.

It gets closer and closer, making him nauseous, and he has to slap his hands over his ears.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Stiles begins to rock and rock and rock, silently begging it to stop.

TAP. TAP. TAP.

Stiles feels like his eardrums are being stabbed with a hundred white-hot needles and there’s only so much he can take before he has to suck in a breath to scream.

“Now, now. None of that,” a voice dripping with a British accent says to his immediate right.

Stiles exhales shakily, blinking away the tears that have gathered at the corner of his eyes. He trembles a little as he turns his head to see just who it is beside him.

A man who looks to be in his late thirties, wearing a tailor made, three-piece suit comprised of a mixture of blacks and dark greys. He has on expensive, gold-framed sunglasses. He smirks as he clutches a walking stick carved from some kind of dark wood, etched with special markings, and a metal tip at the bottom.

Stiles tries to swallow, but his mouth is suddenly dry and his mind is swimming with the aftershock of pain. He’s feels strung out and fatigued, like he’s just completed a marathon.

“You’ll have to forgive me,” he drawls as he continues to face forward. “And understand that when presented with the opportunity to be in the presence of a Seven, one such as myself must take certain precautions.”

Stiles licks his dry lips and breathes as he blinks slowly, exhausted and dazed.

“I do admit my methods are extreme. I don’t usually care for torture.” He takes a moment to chuckle. “But, where are my manners? May name is Deucalion.”

Stiles frowns and wonders why it feels so difficult to move his tongue.

“And this is the part where you say, ‘My name is Stiles Stilinski’,” Deucalion cheerfully supplies. “Though I imagine that’s not quite what you would say. After all, I always find that when you’ve killed as much as I have, and for as long as I have, it’s all sounds the same. You know, blending together and such.” He sighs as he lifts his walking stick and stabs the metal tip into the ground.

TAP.

Stiles winces.

TAP.

“Now what was it they say?”

TAP.

“Ah, I remember.”

TAP.
“Who are you?”

TAP.

“Why are you doing this?”

TAP.

“Whatever they’re paying you, I can double, even triple it.”

TAP.

“And let’s not forget my personal favorite!”

TAP.

“What do you want from me?”

TAP. TAP. TAP. TAP.

Stiles wheezes out a whine as his shoulders shake. He can feel blood dripping out of his ears, as his nose begins to bleed as well. His head hurts so much and he can barely breath, choking on his own blood while his lungs feel like they’ve been scraped raw by sandpaper.

Deucalion’s lips curl into an ugly grin. “That is the question, isn’t it, Stiles? What is it that I want?” He still doesn’t spare him a glance. “You’re too tense, love. You should really relax.” He hums. “The weather is quite brutal today, but no less lovely. It reminds me of my days as a toddler, living down in Rio de Janeiro with my mother and six brothers.” He sighs. “I was the youngest, of course. And my brothers never failed to remind me of this. But my mother, god rest her soul, always minded me just fine.”

Stiles wants to cry. He wants to scream. He wants to do something, but it honestly feels like he’s had a major stroke.

“She used to create these lovely little paintings of yellow roses. And sometimes, late at night, she’d let me sit with her as she worked silently and feed me roasted almonds. But long after she died from a sickness that even the most qualified doctor could not identify, and we were sent to live with our estranged relatives in Liverpool, I kept this one painting she created for me on my sixth birthday as a gift,” Deucalion goes on to say, voice cruelly jovial. “Of course, eventually my brothers burnt it in a fit of rage and jealousy. It seemed only fitting that I returned the favor by paying three Portuguese sailors to skin them alive. And skin them they did. It was almost a work of art.”

Stiles dry heaves.

Deucalion relaxes his hold on his walking staff and Stiles could just cry in relief if he could. The older man spends a long moment just staring out into the Dog Park. “Look at them. So blinded by their simple little lives. They have no idea how bad it can really get. No, not like you and I. We’re both very familiar with the land of monsters, aren’t we? Not to say that I’m not one myself.” He sighs again. “Sometimes I like to sit on this very bench and watch them all. It’s the only thing that makes me feel a little normal.” He smirks again. “It’s much like bird watching, don’t you think? Only you know for a fact that you could snap their necks with no trouble at all.”

Stiles has never been so terrified in his entire life.

“Well then,” Deucalion goes on to say. “You smell absolutely frightened. Which works perfectly for
me. I know you won’t try to do something stupid, or something you’ll regret. So let’s have a look at you.”

Stiles winces when the older man finally turns his way and takes off his sunglasses to reveal bloodshot eyes with milky grey irises. And it’s then that Stiles realizes that he’s a blind man. The blind man.

“You are very young,” Deucalion notes with a hint of humor. “It’s almost insulting.”

Stiles tries to move his mouth.

“Save your energy.” Deucalion advises as he slides his sunglasses back on before removes his pocket square and uses the handkerchief to mop up all the blood. “Let’s make you presentable, shall we? I do have other things I must see to, but I did enjoy this little tête-à-tête.” He pulls away when he finishes and tucks the blood-soaked cloth away in the inner pocket of his suit jacket.

Stiles realizes with a sick feeling, that the older man has removed every trace of blood like none of this happened.

Deucalion buttons up his suit jacket and he stands as he relaxes the line of his shoulders. He straightens his tie with a cheery whistle before he yanks down his sleeves. He turns to walk away but he pauses before turning back. “Ah, but there was one other thing.”

Before Stiles can blink he’s being yanked to his feet. He expects the worse to happen but the fatal blow never comes.

Deucalion’s teeth lengthen in a frightening, animalistic manner. “Tell your juvenile friends, your meddlesome father, and that adorable little pack of yours to stay out of my business.” He releases the younger boy and does nothing to stop his descent to the ground. “Send my regards to Deaton.”

Stiles falls onto his hands and knees and he barely blinks before the older man vanishes. “Oh god,” he says when he can finally find his voice and he vomits.

“Over there!” a voice cries.

Warm hands are pulling him up as he dry heaves, and he’s settled against the bench.

Derek and Kate are looking at him with alarm and concern.

“What happened?” Kate asks, looking ready to rip the world apart for him as she manages to materialize a napkin out of thin air. She wipes the vomit from his chin and mouth. “What happened?” she icily repeats.

Derek frowns and settles his hand onto her shoulder. “Kate, he’s in shock. Take it down a bit.”

Kate scowls and shakes off his hand as her eyes roam his face with a startling amount of intent.

“Can you bring the car around?” Derek says, breaking the uneasy silence. His voice is steady but he looks a little pale. “I’ll stay with him.”

Kate looks like she wants to object she forces herself away in a furious stride.

Stiles coughs, his throat feels raw.

“Here,” Derek says, handing him two scoops of vanilla ice cream packed into a waffle cone. “Laura says ice cream fixes everything.”
Stiles huffs a little shakily as the other teen sits down beside him. He brings the ice cream up to his lips, hands trembling, but the cool sweetness does help soothe the dry burn of his throat.

“I shouldn’t have left you,” Derek says and he looks upset. “If I hadn’t left you, this wouldn’t have happened.”

Stiles shakes his head vehemently. “Stop,” he croaks, voice hoarse and gravelly. “You — I was the one that walked off. Neither of us knew what would happen.”

“Yeah, well, that doesn’t make me feel better,” Derek admits grimly. “I should have —”

“Shut up, Derek,” Stiles pleads and scoots over so he can lean against him tiredly.

Derek’s jaw snaps shut and he makes a miffed sound, but that doesn’t stop him from putting his arm around Stiles’s shoulders so he can settle more comfortably against him. He lifts his right hand to help Stiles hold up the ice cream when his hands won’t stop shaking.

Stiles idly eats the ice cream, mind churning until his thoughts become wrathful and, before he knows it, the ice cream is gone and Derek is running his hand through Stiles’s hair in attempt to console him. Stiles licks his lips and exhales. “I think —” he falters for a moment. “I think I just met the Benefactor.”

Kate tries and fails to get an answer out of him after she forces him to sit in the front just for that purpose alone.

Derek remains silent in the back the whole ride as he sits behind Stiles.

Which really makes no difference because Stiles can still feel his questioning gaze burning holes in the back of his skull. He flexes his jaw and yawns over and over until it his ears pop. He sighs in relief when Kate pulls into his driveway.

Derek’s at his door before he can blink, and both he and Kate help him make his way across the lawn, up the porch steps and to the front door.

“You know,” Stiles says as he watches Kate forcefully shove his house keys into each slot. “It’s not like I went through some kind of major surgery.”

“For all we know, you did. Not that you’ll say if you did or not,” Kate grunts and she looks one second away from kicking down his door. “Why won’t any of these fucking keys work?”

That’s the moment his dad opens the door, and he lifts both brows.

Kate blows out a breath. “Sherriff,” she greets. Then, unapologetically, goes on to says, “No offense, sir, but your son is an ass and he gives me ulcers.” She turns sharply on her heel, muttering furiously to herself as she stomps to her Jaguar.

His dad turns his gaze onto Stiles before turning to look at Derek. He says, “You mind telling me what that was all about?”

“Sorry, Sherriff. I think that’s best left for Stiles to explain,” Derek replies with a wry smile. He swallows and quickly squeezes Stiles’s left hand before he turns away sharply and strides down the steps like he’s forcing himself to leave, even if it’s the last thing he wants to do.
Stiles swallows, suddenly thirsty. “You better come and sit down. You won't like what I have to say,” he admits as he slides past his father towards the kitchen. He pauses in surprise when he sees that Deaton is already at the table with a steaming mug of tea.

“Mr. Stilinski,” Deaton greets, formal as ever. “Please. Have a seat. Your father and I were just having a discussion about you.”

Stiles frowns but he sits down at the table.

His dad joins them a second later, and walks over to the stove to pour some tea into two mugs. He sets a cup in front of Stiles before he walks over to the other end of the table, placing him across from Deaton as Stiles sits between them with his back to the living room.

Stiles reaches for the honey and takes his time shaking the bottle before squirting it into his tea with a suction sound as he stirs his spoon noisily, the metal clinking around loud enough.

His dad sighs into his cup of tea.

Deaton’s mouth curls a little.

“I met the Benefactor today,” Stiles says with as little finesse as possible. He says it the same way someone would mention seeing their old grade school friend at the grocery store.

His dad chokes on his tea.

Deaton’s expression remains neutral as he carefully lowers his tea to the table. “Are you sure?” he asks.

Stiles takes a few moments to blow into his tea before taking a few cautious sips. After he swallows, he says, “I spent ten minutes in the worst pain I ever felt next to a guy who prattled on about how easy it was to kill people like he was discussing the weather. So, I’m pretty sure.”

“He hurt you? What happened?” his dad questions furiously.

Stiles tells them everything.

His dad’s expression is thunderous at the end of it all, and he keeps muttering about his gun.

Deaton doesn’t even twitch. “You’re awfully calm for someone who just went toe to toe with one of the most ruthless killers of our lifetime.”

“Oh I wanted to shit myself the whole time,” Stiles confesses candidly and he sends his dad an apologetic look. “I was pretty shaken up. I mean, I threw up my breakfast and...” He pauses to finish his tea and lowers the mug to the table. “But then I began to realize that the most ruthless killer of our lifetime had to incapacitate me just to make himself feel safe enough to just talk to me.”

“And that makes it all okay?” his dad fumes. “Stiles —”

“Dad, just listen. I’m not — I don’t think I’ll ever be okay with what happened today. But I can’t run and hide when I’m faced with something I don’t understand,” Stiles says, keeping his voice steady. “I understand that I’m not invincible. I cried, I shook, I threw up. I was Human. Underneath all of this, I am only Human. And I think that’s what separates me from the supernatural community. There is no me against them and them against me. I am them. I may be Faerie but I’m still Human in the way that counts. He could have killed me today but he didn’t. That only means he wants to use me
as a weapon to further his own agenda. I can’t let that happen.”

His dad eyes glisten and he shakes his head. “I can’t —” he chokes over the words. “I can’t lose you too.”

Stiles feels an answering wetness in his eyes. “Dad,” he says in kind. “You have to let me do this. Let me do what I have to,” he pleads. “Because if I don’t, I’m already dead.”

His dad quickly wipes away a tear that falls, and he looks like he’s trying so hard to trust that Stiles knows what he’s doing. He clears his throat and nods at Deaton.

It feels like a sacrifice on his part.

“I felt utterly powerless today,” Stiles goes on to say as he looks to Deaton. “I’m supposed be this all powerful Seven and I was compromised. I never want to feel like that ever again. No one should, not when I can do something about it.”

“You’re angry,” Deaton notes as he stands and carries his cup to the sink. “Good,” he says before he turns back to them. “It means you’re taking your power back.”

Stiles looks at him as he finishes the rest of his tea.

“You’re father has agreed to let me mentor you. You’ll be working in my shop this summer as a guise. Staying near to me so I can teach you all you need to know will do you some good,” Deaton supposes. “And I’m ready to meet your spirit guide. But, Stiles.” He looks grave as he continues, “Once we start, there will be no stopping. You have to want this for yourself. It means no more running, no more avoiding, no more depending on the luck of the universe to work in your favor without you actually understanding what favors are already owed to you.”

Stiles swallows and nods.

“Also, keep in mind that no one is all powerful,” Deaton remarks as he makes his way to the back door.

Stiles looks to his dad.

His dad seems tired and sad, but he just waves him along with a weak half smile. “Go,” he says. “I’ll be here.”

It sounds like a promise.

Stiles gets up and walks to the back door before he thinks better of it and runs to give his dad a crushing hug. “I love you,” he mumbles.

“No more than I love you,” his dad swears and, squeezing him one more time, he lets him go.

“Where’s Isaac?” Stiles ask as he walks backwards to the back door.

“Upstairs with his friend, Boyd,” his dad answers, rising from the table to make himself a glass of white wine from the box his keeps in his fridge but almost never uses.

Stiles spins on his heel and exits the house.

Deaton is circling his elm tree with a great deal of concentration until he comes back around to the face. He climbs up to trace his hands over the large triquetra carved into the wood like a face with eyes closed.
Stiles takes off his shoes, because he prefers to be bare foot when he approaches his tree. The ground surrounding it always hums pleasantly against the bottom of his feet, and coasts up the rest of his body. He watches Deaton for as long as it takes for a light sheen of sweat to build on his forehead and temple.

The sun is nearing the horizon, but not so close that it’s any less hot against his skin.

Deaton opens his eyes and steps down and away. “If you would please, Mr. Stilinski.”

Stiles says, “Right,” and rubs his sweaty palms against his jeans. He sighs in relief as his bare feet hits cool, moist grass. The purple-blue leaves cast shadows of purple and blues, and offers restful shade. He uses Nana’s thickest exposed root to make his way up to her face. He presses his palms to the triquetra as his hands light up for a fraction of a second, and he feels that familiar sensation of a silvery touch skating along the edge of his mind. He moves away when Nana’s face appears.

“Hello, dearie,” Nana says, her voice gentle and apologetic. “You’re upset with me, I suspect.”

“At first,” Stiles admits. “But I think I can understand why you sent me to see for myself. I didn’t think — I didn’t realize it was that bad.” He exhales. “And now I think I know what I have to do.”

“And what is that, dearie?” Nana prods.

Stiles waits a moment before he says, “Uphold the balance.”

Nana gives a wooden smile of approval before swinging her gaze to Deaton. “Your mentor and I have already touched minds, and I trust him. He has my consent. Now introduce us.”

“I give him permission to see,” Stiles allows.

“I salute you, Dr. Deaton,” Nana acknowledges.

“As do I, Mother Queen of the Elder Forest,” Deaton says and gives a slight bow.

Stiles gapes. She’s a queen?

“Oh goodness me,” Nana chuckles. “Do straighten, Doctor. No need for such formalities. Why, I haven’t heard that title since the foundations of the earth were laid by the Faceless.”

“You’re a queen?” Stiles exclaims. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It hardly seemed important at the time,” Nana says dismissively. “And I also did not want you to feel obligated to treat me as my station requires. My purpose is to serve your needs, for through you, all things are possible.”

Stiles has heard that before, from his uncle, but he hadn’t known exactly what that meant.

“Well, I’ll leave you to it. I am sure there is much to do,” Nana declares. “You will start him on the garden, won’t you? I am feeling quite lonely out here on my own.”

“If you wish it,” Deaton responds with respect. “Under your watchful eye, I suspect he’ll do what needs to be done.”

“As well as under yours,” Nana replies, returning the compliment. “Rest well, Doctor.” Then she turns her gaze over to him. “Cup your hands together, sweetling,” she instructs.

Stiles does and knows what comes next.
Nana drops a rather small, juicy peach into his hands. “Eat that before you go to bed, so that your mind will be settled, and your thoughts clear when you rise again.”

“Thank you, Nana,” Stiles replies and watches as her face melts into a triquetra again. He holds the peach in his left hand and looks to Deaton. “Can I ask why she called you Doctor?”

“As tradition to Druids, my culture dictates at birth what we shall be. Among my tribe I became recognized as a doctor. I grew to understand the physiology of each supernatural creature, and the things of the Earth that could either save or kill them,” Deaton explains. “I practice healing-magic. I follow the doctrines of restoration.”

Stiles nods and says, “So what kind of garden do I have to build? Should I go to the local florist shop and get some seeds to plant?”

“Oh no, Mr. Stilinski,” Deaton says. “You’re not ready for that.”

“What? But you told Nana that we would —”

“And we will,” Deaton smoothly interjects. “But there other things you must learn first.”

“Like what?” Stiles asks, curious.

“Patience,” Deaton replies. “Everyday, when you wake up, you are to walk the length of your backyard, and you must count every step. And before you go to bed, you are to do the same thing. Then you will give me the estimation in centimeters every day you come to my store after school, and in the mornings on the weekend.”

“But how am I supposed to know if I’m doing it right without a ruler or some measuring tap?” Stiles complains. “How would you know? How could you know?”

Deaton says nothing for a long while. Then he says, “You’re 5 feet and 11 inches tall. That’s 180.34 centimeters. This tree —” he points to Nana. “— is 30 feet tall and 2.032 meters wide. That’s about 360 by 80 inches, which in turn is 914.4 by 203.2 centimeters. The tongue in your mouth is 3.3 inches long, and 1.14173 wide. That’s 8.382 centimeters long, and 2.8999942 centimeters wide.”

Stiles silently gapes.

“Trust me, Mr. Stilinski,” Deaton says calmly. “I will know.” Then he gives him a parting nod and disappears up the side of the house.

Once Stiles gets over the initial shock of Deaton’s stealth intelligence, he takes a moment to study his backyard. Then he sighs and walks to the left corner of the wooden fence, turns and begins to count each step he takes.

No time like the present.
Stiles paces the length of his backyard (up and down, side to side, zigzag) until the sun dips into the horizon like a golden star sinking into an abyss of blues and oranges and pinks and purples. The clouds are scattered aimlessly, and the creatures of nature scramble to their homes as the sun makes it’s last call before surrendering to the moon. Stiles stops and appreciates the sight, as the ground beneath his feet seem to hum with complacency.

The air is thick with moisture; humid and dry like the inside of a dryer after the removal of clothes. It’s a side effect of the blistering heat earlier in the day. The fireflies dance around him, as if they are sharing in the scenery with him as he thinks over the weather. He reaches up an amused grin and holds up his right hand to let each on of them bump and glide across his hands like a strange handshake; their bottoms flickering like lamps.

With a sigh he turns towards the house, and the fireflies disperse as he swipes his apple off the ground. He rubs it against his chest until the vibrant red shines through and he does not bite it, but rather saves it for when he is ready to settle in for bed. He grabs his shoes from where he took them off, carefully moves across the gravel that separates the house from the backyard, walks up the steps and enters through the back door. He locks it behind him as he slips on his shoes.

Boyd and Isaac are sitting at the table playing a game of monopoly with his dad.

His dad is complaining loudly and theatrically that Boyd and Isaac are cheating by acting as a united front.

Stiles almost smiles, but he notices that the box of white wine that is rarely touched placed besides the garbage bin. Which would mean that it’s empty, and that his dad is drunk. Something that hasn’t happened in years, not since his mom died. So he walks over and smiles apologetically at Boyd, while Isaac avoids all of their gazes (playing with a few houses nervously) and it just hurts his heart. He begins to feel guilty as he carefully pries the glass of wine from his father’s fingers and pours it down the drain as he exhales shakily.

Stiles feels a panic attack come on and he closes his eyes for a moment before he straightens the line of his shoulders, spins on his heel, and puts his hand on his father’s shoulder as he starts to nod off. “Come on, dad,” he says softly. “Let’s go sleep it off.”

“’m not done,” his dad mumbles and he grabs the dice, laughing aimlessly as they slip from his unsteady fingers.

“You won,” Stiles says and lifts his dad up to the best of his ability. His dad is not light in the slightest so he kind of stumbles when he tries to get his dad’s right arm over his shoulders.

Boyd shoots to his feet to help wordlessly, his face twisted with concern but not with judgment or wry amusement.

Isaac refuses to move or look anywhere but the game board.

Stiles doesn’t blame him in the slightest. This probably triggering in some way, but how could he know? Isaac never says, and Stiles never pushes.

Boyd helps him carry his dad up the stairs and to his room and on the bed. He leaves when he understands that Stiles can deal with the rest.
Stiles helps his dad remove his shoes as he mumbles incomprehensibly, dozing in and out as he watches his son with bloodshot eyes. Stiles yanks the covers out from under his dad as he gently pushes his dad back to settle into bed comfortably. He tucks him in and goes to his dad’s private bathroom to grab the small garbage bin, a glass of water, and two capsules of pain medication. He takes it all to his dad’s nightstand, putting the garbage bin within reaching distance as he puts the glass of water next to the framed picture and wedding rings before laying the pain medicine by it as well.

Years ago, this became a depressing norm until his dad shook himself out of the depression when Stiles almost burned the house down trying to make himself some macaroni because he was so hungry and his dad had been passed out when he came home from school. He shakes himself out of the thought quickly, straightens, and sobers up.

Stiles never held it against his dad. He hadn’t dealt with his mother’s death gracefully either. His teacher always had to pull him aside to talk him through his sporadic panic attacks.

Stiles chews on his fingernails, watching his dad as he sits on the edge of the bed. He watches as his dad falls into sleep with a frown, a ghost of his mother’s name slipping from his lips. That’s all Stiles can take before he quickly exits his dad’s room to tuck away into his own so he can hide in his closet on the side opposite from the bulletin/whiteboard he always keeps in here and weeps into the sweaty palms of his hands. Sometime in the midst of it, he pulls out his phone as he gulps for air, throat tight and cheeks flush.

“Stiles?” Derek waits a moment before he softly continues, “What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I just — god I didn’t mean to bother you with this but I — I didn’t know who else to —” Stiles breaks off, shoving a fist into his mouth to stifle sob. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. It’s my fault. My dad, he — and Isaac — god I just — I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” He repeats this as he continues to weep.

Derek says nothing. He waits patiently and lets Stiles ride it out until he’s quieted down, sniffing in hiccups. Then he says, very gently, “It’s okay, Stiles. I’m actually glad you called me. You shouldn’t have to suffer it by yourself. You can talk to me. I want to help, okay? You always help me and I — I’m going to — I’m going to come over, okay? I’m on my way.”

Stiles just pulls up his knees and presses his forehead to his knees as his skin begins to glow by slow increments until it chases the shadows away in the darkness of the closet.

“I’m going to keep talking to you, okay? And you don’t have to say anything. I’ll keep talking and I’ll be there soon. Focus on my voice, Stiles. You sound like you’re choking, just breathe and listen to my voice. Did I tell you I’m supposed to go to the DMV tomorrow to try for a license? I have a permit right now, but I’ve been practicing with mom, and sometimes Peter. Peter was insufferable, unsurprisingly. He kept making me nervous and swerve by pointing out all my mistakes, and lying about seeing some kind of deer or a person. But if I get this right, dad will let me have one of his cars if I do well. It’d be nice, wouldn’t it? I’d get to drive whenever I wanted. To practice, or to games, or for ice cream, or to the beach five miles outside of town with my friends. I wouldn’t even mind if Cora nagged me for a ride because of course I would make her work for it first. Just imagine. I could come to you, you know. I could pick you and Isaac up for school. We could have breakfast before or go to the arcade after. Maybe even the movies. And sometimes, only if you wanted, you and I could go somewhere on the weekends. We could go wherever we wanted, Stiles. Wherever you wanted…”

Stiles holds onto every word Derek says to him and doesn’t let himself think of anything else. He hates that he can’t hold it together. He hates feeling powerless. He hates that he can’t hold it together.
enough to check on his brother to see if he’s okay, but he just can’t. He does not have the will or the energy to. So he greedily soaks up all the words Derek says because if he doesn’t focus on that he’ll probably pass out.

His glow dims down before completely fading away until the dark shadows swallow him up again. The roar in his ears dulls down as his breathing normalizes, and his chest feels slightly less like it’s trying to collapse in on itself, as if his heart has become a black hole. He shudders in the aftermath, shivering from the cold sweat that’s broken out across his body in a thin sheen of moisture. His throat feels soar and achy, and no matter how much he swallows he can’t overcome the thirst. He sucks on his bottom lip as his lashes stick together wetly.

His closet door opens slowly and Derek comes in, closing the door behind him when Stiles flinches against the light.

Stiles drops his phone and sniffs, sighing when Derek sits with their sides flushed, throwing his left arm over his shoulder.

Derek turns his head until his lips are pressed against the curve of his ear and quietly, he says, “I brought you a bowl of ice. Eat it. You’ll feel better.” Then he presses a cool ceramic bowl into Stiles’s hands. “You’ll feel better. Just focus on how it makes your mouth feels, okay? I’m right here.”

Stiles is still sniffing in hiccups as he fiddles with the bowl before reaching in to grab an ice cube. He presses it to his chapped lips, rubbing it over his mouth like chapstick. He pays attention to how cool it feels as it melts against his lips before he pushes it in his mouth and lets it settle on his tongue. They’re ice chips so it’s not long before they soften enough that he can crunch on them like hard pretzels.

Derek keeps his peace all the while, keeping the close proximity between them until his heat begins to soak into Stiles’s side. He has his left hand pressed to the curve of Stiles’s neck and suddenly the ache of his anxiety starts washing cold.

Stiles realizes that Derek is taking his pain. He recognizes it from when Laura had first showed it to him. He feels a little embarrassed that the other teen is being so diligent about his feelings. He thinks about how Derek had to travel across town to get here. How he had to stop whatever he was doing to see to his needs.

“You know,” Derek murmurs and there’s some underlying amusement. “You’re projecting.”

Stiles flushes and is grateful that he’s protected by the cover of darkness. He shoves some more ice chips in his mouth and pretends not to know exactly what Derek is talking about.

Of course, this doesn’t work because Derek is blunt when it comes to talking about emotions and feelings (something Stiles is secretly impressed with) and he says, “I don’t mind coming. It’s not a — you don’t have to worry about that. It’s not like I was doing anything super important, or, well anything that matters more than knowing you’re okay. Anyway, I’m being mindful, remember? It comes with the territory. Though, you can’t say you wouldn’t do the same for me if I needed it.”

Stiles knows that he’s right because he would put whatever he needed to on hold to make sure Derek was okay. Then he jolts as he realizes something. “Isaac —”

“Laura’s downstairs with him,” Derek says, answering the unasked question. “She was concerned. So we did the run together.”
Stiles turns his head, and he squints his eyes trying to make out Derek’s face but he can only see the outline of his head. “You guys…ran here?” he asks. “Did you shift or something?”

“Or something,” Derek vaguely replies. “Laura doesn’t like driving since her dad —” He cuts the sentence short and Stiles knows there’s more to that story, but he’s not going to press. “She, uh…she doesn’t like driving.”

Stiles realizes that yes, he has never seen her drive anywhere. She’s usually either with Peter or Kate and he never thought about contemplating it or asking why. He shoves some more ice chips in his mouth as he thinks that over. Then he says, “Your mom won’t —”

“She okayed it, my being here,” Derek carefully interjects. “She didn’t mind. It’s you, so she didn’t mind. You matter to her too.”

Stiles flushes at the implications and he gets a little annoyed with both the reaction and that Derek keeps cutting him off. “At least let me get the question out,” he grumbles and tries to elbow Derek. “Makes me feel like you’re reading my mind.”

Derek huffs. “At this point, I’m kind of accustomed to your body language. Like I said, you project.”


“Like a lighthouse.”

Stiles tries to elbow him again and the other teen just laughs, grabbing his arm before the hit can land, squeezing gently before letting go. He sighs and rolls his eyes.

Derek pulls him closer. “Better?” he asks after a moment of comfortable silence.

“Better,” Stiles responds shortly. There’s no ice left, and the little there was has already melted at this point. “How did you know the ice would help? Or, how did Laura know?”

“Cora once fell down the stairs when we were really little. We were still young enough that our instincts didn’t quite kick in the moments we really needed them to. Mom had to teach us that,” Derek explains. “Well anyway, Cora fell down the stairs during a game of freeze tag, and so it was kind of traumatic for her. Every time she had to go up or down, she would have a panic attack, scared she was going to hurt herself again. So Laura would give her ice cubes, and told her to focus on the way they felt, not climbing the stairs or how the steps felt under her feet. To just focus on the sensations happening in her mouth. Cora did it every time she was scared until she wasn’t scared any more.”

“Oh,” Stiles simply says.

“Don’t tell Cora I told you,” Derek says, and Stiles can hear the indulgent grin. “She likes to keep up the tough exterior.”

Stiles snorts.

“Are we ready to leave the sanctuary of your closet?” Derek teases but Stiles gets warm at the fact that he says ‘we’ and not ‘you’. It’s sort of personalizing the experience in a way that Derek is implying that they are in this together, and it isn’t something Stiles is ready to deal with right now. “From what I hear, Laura is ordering some pizza. Which is good because your stomach is growling and it’s a little distracting.”

“You can hear my internal organs?” Stiles questions as his face twists with skeptical displeasure.
Derek laughs and says, “Well yeah. Werewolf. There are some sounds you just can't ignore sometimes.” He stands as he grabs the empty bowl from Stiles’s hand.

“You know, Peter once said that he could hear my unmistakable heartbeat, which at the time was creepy. It makes sense now,” Stiles supposes. “Nah, it’s still creepy.”

Derek is grinning when he opens the closet door to step out into the light. “You do have an unmistakable heartbeat. Of course everyone does in their own way. But yours is…” he trails off like he’s thinking of the right word as he uses his left hand to shake out his hair. “It’s unique. Sometimes it’s steady with no lulls when you’re comfortable and happy. Sometimes it can thump wildly when you’re anxious or nervous or scared.” The he shakes his eyebrows as he add, “And mostly when I’m involved, it flutters quickly with an extra tick when you’re embarrassed or flustered — ah, there it goes now.”

Stiles curses the color that floods his cheeks. “Don’t sound so — you confuse me,” he swears. Then he goes on to complain, “That makes me grossly self conscious now. Why would you tell me that?”

Derek shrugs his mouth before he smiles crookedly. “You sounded like you wanted to know. I’m just sating your curiosity.”

“Curiosity sated,” Stiles mutters as he wanders aimlessly around his room, picking up things here and there because he knows that if he doesn’t then Derek most certainly will.

Derek just watches him with a smug smirk, like he totally knows the reasoning behind Stiles’s actions, and he says nothing while he crosses his arms and leans against the doorframe of the closet.

“Shut up,” Stiles grumbles.

Derek shrugs his mouth again, and goes for the innocent look as he says, “I didn’t say anything.”

“You don’t have to,” Stiles complains. “You just project loudly,” he says, throwing the other teen’s words back at him.

Derek just laughs.

“And don’t stand like that. You are not cool.”

"What does me standing this way have to do with me being cool?"

“Like you don't know,” Stiles replies. "It's like a cool person's go-to pose or something. Being all attractive and effortless at a slanted incline.”

"So you don't think I'm cool, but you do think I'm attractive?” Derek counters and grins when Stiles shoots him a withering look.

"Stop volleying my words back at me like that. You know I didn't — I mean it's — you have some —" Stiles just cuts himself off with an annoyed sound. "It's not like you need me to tell you."

"You give yourself too little credit," Derek mutters, amused at how befuddled Stiles is by him and his cryptic comments.

"Whatever," Stiles mumbles and goes back to his cleaning. He's never felt so flustered and bemused.

Derek snickers and straightens before he starts helping, ignoring when Stiles complains. “You know,” he says as he folds some clothes and put them in their proper place. “Your heartbeat sounds
like restless drumming when you’re annoyed or angry.”

Stiles throws a comic at him.

Derek lets it hit his chest diplomatically.

That just annoys Stiles further.

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The doorbell chimes by the time Stiles musters up the courage to trot down the steps with Derek in tow. Laura is sitting at the table with Isaac and Boyd playing Jenga. She is obviously cheating because each time it’s Boyd or Isaac’s turn, she coughs and ‘accidently’ knocks an elbow and/or a foot or her knee into the table, making it shake with the threat of tipping over.

Isaac glares at her but the corner of Boyd’s mouth curls in amusement because he’s easygoing like that.

The doorbell chimes again.

Laura doesn’t even twitch.

“Don’t get up, Laura. Really. Obviously I’ll get the door,” Derek snidely comments as he makes his way over to sign for everything.

“Thanks, Der,” Laura responds sweetly as she fakes a yawn during Isaac’s turn, arms stretching before her right hand makes the tower of blocks fall. “Oops. Looks like we have to start over again.”

Boyd laughs and starts collecting the pieces to put them away so they can make room for the pizza.

Isaac sighs and pushes away from the table before he stumps towards Stiles, grabbing him by the wrist and dragging him up the stairs to his own room. He slams the door behind him before he gives Stiles a stern look. “Don’t do that again. You know that wasn’t fair, and if I’d known, I would have fought harder about it.”

Stiles rushes to explain before his throat tightens, and his eyes get wet. “I didn’t mean — I’m sorry. It’s my fault. Dad hasn’t had an episode like that in a very long while. I swear he’s not like that all the time. He’s got a lot — a lot to think about. It’s because of me —”

“I’m not talking about that,” Isaac interjects with an even tone, looking at Stiles with this strange look. “You went to the park to look for the Benefactor, and when you found him, he hurt you and you kept me out of it. You promised me you wouldn’t leave me behind anymore.”

Stiles releases a weary sigh he didn’t even know he was clinging to. “You — you’re mad I left you behind? That’s why you’re upset?”

Isaac rolls his eyes but his voice goes really gentle. “You’re such an idiot sometimes, I swear.”

Stiles starts to protest. “Hey —”

“I get it with dad, okay? I was a little — it brought up some memories. But it’s nothing I can’t handle. I know he wouldn’t hurt you or me. We all have our bad days, Stiles. Dad’s allowed them as much as you and I are. I’m not making any excuses for his behavior by any means. I just understand that there’s some things that get the better of us,” Isaac remarks assertively. “What bothers me is when you and dad leave me out of it all. I don’t need to be protected. I’m strong and it makes me feel
like I’m weak. I need you both to respect that, and what I do actually need, you both have the sense
to do everything you can to make sure I get it, as well as providing for me in ways I appreciate. Even
when I don’t ask for it.”

“Spoiled,” Stiles faintly accuses.

Isaac sighs in annoyance. “Stop saying that. I’m not,” he insists. “I’ve learned it’s okay to ask for
what I want. It’s you guys that always give it to me without question or say no.”

“That is the exact definition of spoiled,” Stiles argues but he finds himself grinning. “Are you mad at
me?”

“Probably about as much as you’re mad at me,” Isaac reasons. “Which means not at all. I’m just
annoyed, but I’m allowed to be. You’re my brother. I’m entitled to that privilege.”

“I will not forgive you for neglecting to tell me about dad’s intent to punish us,” Stiles swears.

Isaac snorts. “We both know you already have because you were well aware of what would
happen.”

“You don’t know that,” Stiles insists and sighs when Isaac just taps the side of his nose. “So is Boyd
staying over?”

Isaac shrugs in that way he used to. Then he says, “We’re on punishment, remember? I didn’t bother
to ask because I knew dad would say no. But we’re going to the movies tomorrow. Dad did okay
that at least. But I have to come home straight after to mow the lawn. I think you’re supposed to
clean out the gutters. He said he’d leave cleaning the inside of the house for all of Sunday.”

Stiles makes a face that speaks to what he thinks about that. “So, uh…” He pauses to think of what
he wants to say. “You know about Deaton and all of that stuff?”

“Stuff,” Isaac mumbles to himself like he’s judging Stiles. “If you’re talking about the apprenticeship,
well, yeah. It’s kind of hard not to. Boyd kept asking me why I was so distracted when we did our
homework together.”

“Oh,” Stiles simply says. “Does Boyd know that you —”

“I haven’t talked about it,” Isaac interjects. “I don’t — I’m not ready to bring it up.”

“Okay,” Stiles responds and doesn’t push. “Whatever you want.”

“I want you to give me a hug because by the way you made it sound, someone tried to hurt you and I
wasn’t there to do anything about it because I didn’t know. You owe me at least 500 hugs,” Isaac
demands adorably. “I’m not adorable.”

Stiles blinks when he realizes he said that out loud. “You’re not really going to count them are you?”

Isaac is already pulling him close and wrapping his arms around him. This lasts for five minutes
before he grumbles, “You reek of Derek.”

“Okay. Okay. Hug so over,” Stiles replies grumpily, gently pushing his little brother away as the
curly-haired blond laughs quietly.

“I’m just speaking my mind,” Isaac says as he fiddles with the doorknob behind him. “I’m getting
taller than you by the way.”
“That’s only because dad laces all your food with the kind of steroids that are only meant for horses,” Stiles jokes before Isaac starts shoving him out of his room.

“That’s only because dad laces all your food with the kind of steroids that are only meant for horses,” Stiles jokes before Isaac starts shoving him out of his room.

“Banned. You are banned from my room until further notice,” Isaac complains, as he continues to bulldoze Stiles down the steps.

“It’s about time,” Laura crows from where she’s settled at the end of the table as Isaac sits down beside Boyd across from Derek. “The pizza’s about to get cold, goobers. Sit down and eat it while it’s hot. We were just discussing Derek’s chances of becoming the captain of our lovely little basketball team.”

Derek scowls as he moves over to the next chair to make room for Stiles. “No we weren’t. Boyd was telling us about his band.”

“Well you were thinking about it,” Laura teases with a singsong voice.

Derek flushes. “No I wasn’t,” he lies weakly as he starts piling some more meat-loaded pizza on his plate. Then he begins to slide some slices of cheese onto Stiles’s plate courteously. He even goes as far by pouring them both a glass of orange soda like it’s second nature.

Isaac smirks at Stiles with a pointed look while he chows down on some anchovy pizza.

Stiles blushes and glares weakly at his brother as he fights down the growing ache of fixation that bubbles in his stomach. He’s a little too grateful for Derek’s consideration and it does nothing but curls something he can’t even name around his heart and he is definitely not ready to explore that.

Isaac gives him another pointed look as he taps the side of his nose as he wiggles his eyebrows suggestively.

Stiles hunches down into his seat as his flush spreads stubbornly.

Boyd elbows Isaac gently while sending Stiles a wink.

Isaac rolls his eyes as he lets up on his teasing and focuses on his food instead.

Laura continues as she goes in on her eighth piece of pizza, “Derek has been obsessed with being captain ever since he started high school.”

“I have not,” Derek protests around a mouthful of pizza. “And anyway, it’s not like I’m going to get it. I’ve never seen a sophomore get it.”

“Well you were thinking about it,” Laura teases with a singsong voice.

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“Yeah, but they don’t play how you do,” Laura gracefully points out as she pats Derek on the cheek with greasy fingers. “You’re a special cookie, Der.”

“Ugh gross, Laura.” Derek grabs a napkin and scrubs his cheek until it’s pink. “And stop calling me that.”

Laura just tosses him a cheery smile.

Boyd’s phone rings and he answers it, talking in short sentences (in a foreign language Stiles can’t pinpoint) but Stiles gets why he’s practically Isaac’s best friend. They’re alike in a lot of ways. He terminates the call as he stands, pocketing the device. “I have to get home since the curfew alarm will be sounding off in about two hours. Plus I promised my baby sister I’d participate in her unicorn princess tea party,” he states, unashamed. “Haven’t missed one yet, and I’m really close to finally earning my unicorn loyalty badge, according to my baby sister.”
"I would kill for a unicorn loyalty badge," Laura moans dramatically and Boyd laughs.

"I'll try to swing you an invitation for next time," Boyd promises.

Isaac stands to see him out.

"You didn’t need a ride, did you?" Laura inquires politely. "I can have my friend Kate swing by and drop you off."

"Nah. My dad’s outside waiting for me. Thanks though," Boyd says with a short nod. “Derek, it was nice meeting you and your sister. Stiles, I'll see you.” He gives an informal salute as he walks out the house with Isaac in tow.

"You know, he was pretty cool about us being Werewolves,” Laura comments thoughtfully. “Isaac should just tell him about his wild side.”

Derek almost chokes on his pizza not even a second later before laughing.

Laura merely hums. “Well that’s not very nice, Isaac. I was only stating the truth. Did you learn that word from Stiles?”

Stiles frowns and squints his eyes suspiciously. “Hey. How about some explanation for the vanilla Human?”

“Faerie,” Laura corrects gracefully.

Stiles just takes an annoyed bite from his pizza as Isaac wanders back in. He watches as his brother settles back into his seat.

Isaac waits a moment before he says, “Shouldn’t you guys be getting home too?”

“Isaac,” Stiles halfheartedly scolds.

Isaac doesn’t seem to care. “They’re overstayng their welcome. It always takes days before their smell clears out the house. Don’t get me started on your room.” He shoots Derek a mean look.

“Maybe you should be a little more subtle.”

Both of Derek eyebrows shoot up but he looks more impressed than he does offended.

Laura just cackles. “Out of the mouth of babes.”

Isaac nose scrunches as he takes the entire box of anchovy pizza, grabs his carton of coconut milk from the fridge and tucks away into the living room. He turns on the TV and doesn’t seem to care that he can’t watch anything but C-Span or a channel that’s nothing but reruns of old black and white films and TV shows.

Stiles tries hard not to think about how he’s getting bold like Kate. It forces him to think about the secret he’s been holding on to for Parrish (who he really needs to call or at least text about the information he has). He chews on his bottom lip until he feels the sting of biting it too hard.

Derek glances at him briefly with a look like he’s determining if Stiles is okay. When he’s sure he is, he reaches out to fight Laura for the last slice of pizza. He loses of course as he frowns resentfully, scowling when his older sister makes kissy faces at him.

Stiles grins a little to himself. They’re both beautiful like this. He quickly coughs as he blushes and stands quickly before they can see his face. “Do you guys want ice cream? We have more than we
know what to do with. My dad thinks I don’t know he’s been hording it behind the fish sticks and frozen peas.”

“Sure. I never turn down dessert. What are we working with?” Laura says as she stretches with her arms reaching up above her head towards the ceiling.

Stiles peers in as he shuffles it all around. Then he says, “Rocky road, vanilla bean, sherbet, chocolate mint —”

“No,” Isaac says immediately from the living room. “Mint’s mine. Off limits. I don’t share with unwanted house guests.”

“Hurry up and become legal so I can marry you,” Laura exclaims with a widely amused smile.

Isaac doesn’t even acknowledge the question and turns the TV up louder.

Stiles snorts and shoves his brother’s ice cream all the way in the back. He grabs all the other frozen containers, some spoons and dumps it all on the table. He pops off the tops and says, “How should we do this?”

“Rotation,” Derek and Laura reply at the same time.

Stiles grins. “Do this a lot?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe. Midnight snacks with Derek and Cora have taught me to be diplomatically generous,” Laura supposes.

Derek rolls his eyes. “Whatever. I’ll start with the sherbet.”

“Vanilla bean!” Laura exclaims as she makes grabby hands.

Stiles slides it over to her as he sits down across from Derek. He scoops out a spoonful and lets the cool flavors settle in his mouth before melting on his tongue.

This goes on for three minutes before Laura says, “Switch!” and she passes her ice cream to Derek and he passes his to Stiles and then Stiles passes his to Laura.

They keep this rotation up until Stiles has to tap out on the grounds of brain freeze. He does watch Derek and Laura yo-yo all of the cartons back and forth like it’s a game.

Again, if it is, Derek loses.

Stiles makes a move to start cleaning the kitchen but Derek and Laura beat him to it, shooing him until he relents with an annoyed sound and sits on the couch to watch his brother go to town on his ice cream from where he’s curled up on his favorite armchair. He takes a quick second to grab the empty pizza box and his brother’s half full carton of coconut milk.

“Be careful,” Isaac warns earnestly. “If we have to drive you to the hospital —”

“Settle down. I know what to do,” Stiles retorts as he trashes the pizza box after he breaks it down.

Derek takes the carton of coconut milk quickly. “You shouldn’t be handling this.”

“It’s not going to magically fall into my mouth!” Stiles protests as he watches the other teen tighten the cap and stash it in the fridge.
“With you, it's not so farfetched,” Derek replies as he closes the fridge door.

Laura and Isaac make a sound of agreement.

“Oh whatever. You all suck!” Stiles marches back into the living room and then he glances towards the TV.

Isaac is watching The Wizard of Oz.

Stiles sits on the end of the long couch that's closest to his brother.

Laura joins him by sitting on the other end of the couch with a bowl of green grapes. She pops a few in her mouth before she swings her legs over so she can put her feet in Stiles's lap. “This is Kate’s favorite movie,” she mentions.

“That —” Stiles takes a second to think about it. “— may actually be true.”

“Oh yeah. Don’t doubt me for a second. She used to force me to watch it with her during every sleepover we had. Of course she was never allowed to our house because Mayor Argent doesn’t exactly approve of our kind,” Laura states delicately. “Kate would throw tantrums like you wouldn’t believe. She was so goddamn spoiled. She made her nanny drive her, because otherwise she threatened to take the bus and walk the rest of the way. That’s something she’s actually done once or twice. She was only ten.”

Stiles laughs outright at that. “Do I even want to ask how she and Peter got together? Because this is something I always wondered.”

“Kate’s always been in love with Peter, no matter what she may tell you. I’m pretty sure it was the day he moved in after mom had finally convinced him to do so. It was some years after the fire. He was still so glum and furious. He would have these random outbursts of rage. He never took it out on us though, but the furniture and the kitchenware was never safe.” Laura goes on to say, “Around this time, we were both ten. Derek was eight and Cora was seven. One day, my mother said something to him. I can’t even remember what it was, but it made Peter so furious that he started stomping towards this beautiful dollhouse that belonged to Cora and Derek. He was going to wreck it and we all knew it. And Kate stepped right in his path and said ‘I wish you would, asshole.’ You should have seen the dumbfounded look on Peter’s face. It was priceless. I will never forget it. When he got over his initial shock, he shifted and snarled at her.

“But Kate stood her ground,” Laura continues. “She was not even afraid. Peter kept growling at her because he blamed Mayor Argent for what happened. There was just this look in his eye. You can see him contemplating shredding her to ribbons for revenge. Kate knew it too and she stared him down. She said, ‘Do it. I’d hate to hurt that pretty face of yours’. Then Peter lifted his clawed hand and Kate didn’t even bat an eyelash. In the end he just shoved her aside and demolished the dollhouse anyway, but what I realized is that he took his frustration out on the dollhouse to keep himself from taking it out on her. Cora cried for days and Derek always did have a soft spot for her; so every time she cried, he would too because they were so close. Thick as thieves and practically twins.

"And Kate’s more compassionate than she lets on, so every time she saw Derek and Cora crying she would glare at Peter for days, muttering insults under her breath about how he was a coward and how he was petty and that it was the ugliest thing she’d ever seen a stupid fourteen year old do to a family he wasn’t even appreciating because they were still alive and loved him anyway despite his horrible fits of rage and temper tantrums and all those other little things she knew he could hear and that would get under his skin. Until finally one day, the dollhouse was there again in the living room.
It looked like someone had fixed it up from scratch and even added to it. It was freshly painted with pink and gold, carved with fresh wood, and it was constructed to look like the house my uncle and my mother and my grandparents used to live in with Henry and some great aunts and uncles I never really got the chance to know.

“Kate had this look on her face. I just knew. I knew she loved him before she could even fully understand what it meant to love someone like that. And Peter? Well he was sitting on the couch with his nose in a book, pretending like he wasn’t responsible, and that he couldn’t care less. Cora and Derek were so happy. They started to play again and Kate stood at the bottom of the steps with me just staring at the house like she couldn’t believe it. And Peter kept sneaking these glances at her that he thought no one could see, but I did.” Laura takes a moment to smile whimsically. “The minute Kate grinned, he relaxed like the cloud of anger and grief had finally cleared and he seem relieved that he earned the respect he gave to her the minute she stepped into his path. Peter always tried to pretend that he didn’t notice the infatuated smile Kate would reward him with every time he did some good or corrected his character. Kate used to tell me all the time that she was going to marry my uncle and there was such an age gap and I thought it was gross and impossible. But he didn’t even really start to see her that way until she turned sixteen and she demanded they date because she’d waited long enough. And sure enough, Peter asked me if it was okay, and I just resigned myself to the fact that they will probably be together forever.”

“That was wild from start to finish,” Stiles quietly mutters with awe.

“Yep.” Laura wiggles her plum painted toes to say, “Foot rub?”

Stiles lifts an eyebrow.

Laura pouts theatrically and widens her eyes. She looks like Puss and Boots. “Please?”

Isaac scoffs as he licks his spoon clean.

“Stop looking at me like that,” Stiles complains as he gives in and starts to rub her feet.

Laura begins to make these pleased little sounds as her feet arch and fan out.

“You’re not his Alpha,” Derek says matter-of-factly. He rounds the couch, shaking out his wet hands with a frown.

Laura just smiles widely as she leans her head back on the arm of the couch to look at him upside down. “Braid my hair like you used to.”

“He can braid?” Stiles asks out of genuine curiosity, and not because he’s teasing the other teen.

Derek still blushes regardless and shoots Laura a mean look.

Laura ignores the look and responds, “Oh yeah. He’s really good at it too. But that’s because I taught Cora when they were still adorable little munchkins. Derek complained about how he wanted to learn too because he couldn’t stand Cora knowing more than he did about how to do something. So I taught him as well and he kept practicing on all the females in our family until he was sure he did it better than Cora did.”

Stiles continues to massage Laura’s foot with a smile.

Derek’s flush creeps up to his nose and to his ears. “You are the devil’s mistress.”

“I’m an angel,” Laura crows and wiggles her toes happily under Stiles hands. “What happened to my
sweet little brother who made these cute little glittered covered hearts for me everyday in preschool, saying how I was the best big sister in the world and how you would love me forever and ever and ever?”

“I take it back,” Derek hisses as he tugs her hair. “You are Satan.”

Laura just cackles.

“You’re taking up the couch,” Derek says, crossing his arms with a sour expression. His blush has faded into nothing.

Laura just shrugs as she lifts her head again and pops some more grapes in her mouth.

Derek makes and annoyed sound, looking like he may yank another lock of her hair again, but he thinks better of it and starts braiding her raven locks into a Greek goddess crown. It actually is amazingly beautiful. “You’re not my Alpha either, you know.”

“Sure. Whatever you say, Der,” Laura airily replies, chewing away on her grapes. “You gonna put some flowers in it?” She looks at Stiles with a grin. “He use to hand pick flowers and thread them into the braids he made.”

Derek yanks her hair as a blush fans across the bridge of his nose.

Laura winces and elbows him in his hip, grinning when he hisses.

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“Sure. Whatever you say, Der,” Laura airily replies, chewing away on her grapes. “You gonna put some flowers in it?” She looks at Stiles with a grin. “He use to hand pick flowers and thread them into the braids he made.”

Laura only snickers. “I’ll take some too.”

“Make your own!” Derek replies from the kitchen. Then the sound of the buttons of the microwave and it whirrs for the next two minutes.

Laura throws Stiles an amused look. “So kind, isn’t he?”

Stiles open his mouth to answer but Derek’s already shoving Laura’s feet away so he can place a bowl of freshly made popcorn in his lap instead. And — it’s absolutely perfect: not too burnt and not too light with kennels overpowering the number of the ones that have popped. He marvels at it and then looks at Derek, wanting ask him about what his secret is to making flawless popcorn.

“Do you need anything else?” Derek asks him, staring at him with that quiet intensity that never fails to make Stiles squirm.

Stiles just shakes his head no.

Derek gives a short nod before he sits down on the floor between Stiles’s knees, like this is something they always do.

Stiles quickly crams a handful of popcorn in his mouth, focusing on the soft crunch of salt and butter that explodes in small bursts of flavor on his tongue, if only to ignore the soft fireworks exploding in his stomach and up to the space of his ribcage, sizzling around his heart with pricks of warmth.
Derek just crosses his arms as he snorts at the Cowardly Lion’s antics.

Stiles spends the whole movie intensely aware of the heat pressing against the inside of his knees and calves. He stares at the crown of Derek’s head in silent wonder. He’s never focused on another person like this before. It’s a little overwhelming.

So he just keeps cramming more and more popcorn in his mouth in desperation until there is nothing left. Then he gets up to put the bowl into the dishwasher with the rest of the dishes, wiping his greasy fingers against his pants before giving the others a weak excuse about having to use the bathroom.

It’s not exactly a lie. He does go into the bathroom, but only to brush his teeth before ducking into his room to reevaluate his life. He sits in his desk chair, swinging from side to side as it creaks under his weight, fiddling with the runestone from his dreams. He thinks about visiting Lydia tomorrow because it feels like it’s been forever since the last time he saw her. He doesn’t like to go this long without seeing his troubled cousin.

This line of thinking only strays into the thought of video chatting with Scott, who accepts the invitation happily.

“Dude! It’s been years! I thought you forgot about me,” Scott explains, playing with a Nerf gun as he aims at random targets. “You want to go to the movies with Jackson and Allison?”

“I would never forget about you, Scotty. We are soul mates.”

There’s a mysterious thump downstairs, followed by Laura’s obnoxiously loud cackling.

“Uh…” Stiles frowns for a moment, sidetracked. “What were we talking about?”

Scott looks at him from under his eyelashes with a fond grin he tries to hide. “Movies? Jackson and Allison? Horror film?”

“Oh yeah!” Stiles exclaims, spreading his arms wide. He rarely does things with subtle gestures. “Sounds like buttery frightful fun, but I’m on punishment,” he admits with an apologetic shrug.

Scott’s eyebrows furrow with confusion. “Still, or is this for something different?”

“The latter,” Stiles replies. “I kind of attended Mayor Argent’s ball despite the fact that I knew it would be swarming with Vampires. Plus on top of that, I brought Isaac with me.” Then he takes a moment to consider that as he swings his chair from side to side thoughtfully. “Well ‘brought’ is not exactly the right term. No, what he did was — ‘forced’, maybe? Or ‘bamboozled’? How about ‘bulldozed’? ‘Guilt tripped’? ‘Coerced’?”

“Okay, Stiles,” Scott says, holding back one of his sunshiny smiles.


His phone buzzes.

Isaac texts him saying: I can hear you.

Stiles smiles. “Ah, see that?” He directs his phone. “My baby bro sends us his love.”

Scott perks up like Stiles has said his most favorite magical word. He ignores the way Stiles rolls his eyes. “How is he? I mean. I haven’t seen you two in a while,” he says, blushing with an awkward
cough. “Maybe he’d like to come to the movies with us?”

Stiles rolls his eyes. “Subtle is not your strongest suit.”

Isaac texts: **You’re one to talk.**

“Stop eavesdropping on my conversations,” Stiles mutters in reply.

Scott looks confused.

“Don’t ask,” Stiles sighs. “And Isaac is on punishment too, but dad gave him the green light to go to the movies with Boyd. Maybe you all can meet up.”

Scott perks up with a goofy smile. “I — yeah that’s — it’s good. Uh, I’ll call Allison and she can talk to Jackson.”

Stiles makes a face. “Yeah…um — so. Allison. Anything happening there?”

Scott blushes. “We — we’re still talking.”

“Uh huh,” Stiles merely says. “About Isaac?”

Scott groans and drops his forehead on his computer.

“Listen, for what it’s worth, I’d say you guys need to start…exploring other options? Jesus, you are too young for me to have to say this to you. I’m too young to be saying this to you,” Stiles complains and tries not to feel as flustered as Scott looks. “Please understand. Just — my brother — Isaac is — he’s not really the type to —”

Isaac texts: **You can tell him. I don’t care.**

Stiles flips his phone over so it’s face down because his little brother really needs to butt out of his conversations. “Look,” he simply says. “Isaac is asexual.”

“Nope. Nope. I’m not touching that. You can ask your almost girlfriend to explain to you what it means. This is as far as I’m willing to go with this subject. I’ve done my duty.” Stiles goes on to say, “So, in other news, I happen to be a Faerie. I’m not sure if I told you this already. Its hard for me to keep track of the small things these days. But I know what I haven’t told you, which is that I have a magical talking tree who I call Nana. She keeps telling me I have magic running through my veins, but I like to call it the glow. It appears whenever it wants to, meaning whenever it’s inconvenient for me.”

“Oh. Okay. Wow.” Scott looks both stumped and curious.

“A sexual what?” Scott echoes with a confused look.

“Nope. Nope. I’m not touching that. You can ask your almost girlfriend to explain to you what it means. This is as far as I’m willing to go with this subject. I’ve done my duty.” Stiles goes on to say, “So, in other news, I happen to be a Faerie. I’m not sure if I told you this already. Its hard for me to keep track of the small things these days. But I know what I haven’t told you, which is that I have a magical talking tree who I call Nana. She keeps telling me I have magic running through my veins, but I like to call it the glow. It appears whenever it wants to, meaning whenever it’s inconvenient for me.”

“Sorry, but I haven’t learned how to channel it,” Stiles says, scrubbing both hands through his ever growing hair. “When I get a hold on it, I promise I will show you. I have an apprenticeship with Deaton.”

“The very elusive guy who helped us by talking in circles and owns that antique store.”

Okay.” Scott frowns thoughtfully. “My mom once bought a porcelain set of plates from him, I think, which I don’t get because she never uses it. But she doesn’t do much for herself cause she’s
always so swamped with work.”

Stiles takes that into consideration. He glances at the water bottle on his desk that he doesn’t remember being there before. He wonders if Derek is responsible for that. He uncaps it and starts downing it.

“I think she’s dating your dad.”

Stiles chokes and turns his head so he doesn’t spray his computer with the water.

Scott just laughs like it’s the funniest thing in the world and it makes him wonder if his best friend had done it on purpose. All signs point to yes.

Stiles gasps and says, “Dude. Not cool at all.” He coughs and it almost feels like he’s trying to hack up a lung.

Scott keeps laughing until he stops abruptly and his eyes widen as he looks over Stiles’s shoulder.

“Scotty? Why are you looking like that?” Stiles questions before he turns in his chair, and then falls over with a shriek.

Derek is standing there with his arms crossed and a self-satisfied smirk.

“Not. Cool.” Stiles spend the next few seconds muttering complaints under his breath as he shakes out the hand he fell on. The wrist of his right hand starts to ache in slow degrees. “What are you even doing, weirdo?”

“I heard you coughing,” Derek replies, reaching out with his left hand to heave Stiles up like he weighs nothing at all. He then wraps his long fingers around his right wrist. “I came to make sure you weren’t choking on a feather,” he teases.

“Oh my god. What is it with you and feathers?” Stiles counters, exasperated. “You should think very highly of my Werewolf-like reflexives.”

Derek gives him a look for that jab but he leeches some of Stiles’s pain, which is not fair because he was winning that argument, but now he’s distracted by how warm Derek’s left hand feels.

“Um,” Scott waves awkwardly. “Should I — I mean if you two need a moment to —”

“This is Derek,” Stiles quickly interjects, absolutely flustered because he knows exactly where Scott’s train of thought was leading to. “He — uh. He’s my friend.”

Derek just grins and throws him an amused look. “Yeah. Friends.”

Stiles wiggles away from the other teen, not at all amused by being teased, ignoring the way his heart is racing.

Derek gives him this knowing look as he lifts both his eyebrows like he’s asking a silent question.

Stiles just turns his gaze away to look at his best friend with a faint blush dusting his cheeks. “So, yeah. This is Derek.”

Scott looks at him oddly. “Stiles, you do know — I mean I’ve met Derek. Remember? On my mom’s birthday.”

“Oh my god,” Stiles groans because he had completely forgot and glares at Derek when he snorts.
“So, anyway. I’ve decided that I’m going to go visit Lydia tomorrow after I do…whatever it is Deaton will have me doing.”

“Jackson and I visited her earlier today after we spent some time to sit with Danny. The doctors say that they are considering pulling the plug, but Jackson is discussing it with his dad, since he’s a legal consultant, about the whole situation because he refuses to believe that Danny might never wake up,” Scott explains.

Stiles lets the information swim around in his mind before he has this ambiguous feeling of instinct that he can’t explain. He’ll have to talk to Deaton about it. “I think I’ll sit with Danny too, when I go to see Lydia.”

Scott gives him an encouraging nod. “Jackson will be grateful for that. Not that he’d ever say, because, you know, it’s Jackson. But, yeah. He’s read books about coma patients and how to guide them back.”

Stiles is not surprised about that. Jackson is way smarter than what he leads people to believe. He gets the impression that the preteen is actually very gifted and intelligent. He reminds him a little of Peter, which is both a comical and scary thought.

“Well, I have to go. Mom’s making dinner. Can I see you tomorrow?” Scott asks and it breaks Stiles’s heart that his best friend would even think to ask.

“Yeah. Yes. Just — see if — maybe Melissa can make breakfast for us again? If she’s not busy,” Stiles suggests.

Scott just nods eagerly. “I will. She has tomorrow off.”

“Great, that works perfectly. See you then, Scotty,” Stiles says.

Scott just shoots him a sunshiny smile before waving at Derek. He terminates the session.

Stiles stretches with a sigh. “Are you ever going to take your wolves and jacket back?” he asks aimlessly.

Derek huffs like he’s not even surprised by this random train of thought. He sits down in Stiles’s desk chair and he looks up at Stiles and the other teen is struck by the thought of how very attractive Derek is. It hits him like a freight train and Derek says, “You might as well keep them. They’re more yours than mine now. I don’t mind.”

Stiles doesn’t know how to feel about that. Well, that’s a lie. He feels a little warm as his stomach froths a little with floating spectral bubbles that seem to pop in bursts of wonder and hope. It’s a frightening sensation and he kinds of panics a little as his brain scrambles to sort through it all and organize it. He tries to file it away in the mental file he has of Derek. He blinks and tries to get back on track by saying, “And the — the jacket. Will you — don’t you need to — um.” He goes quiet as he squirms under the other teen’s intensely focused gaze.

Derek’s hazel green eyes darken in thought. Then he says, “You don’t have school gear. I’m helping you show more school pride.”

“You sound like Cora,” Stiles mumbles. “And anyway, it has your name on the back of it. Well not your name name, but it says D. Hale, and I think anyone with enough sense knows who that is.”

“Uh huh,” is Derek’s response with this totally fake expression of bemusement. “What’s wrong with that?”
“Derek,” Stiles says, exasperated to the fullest extent. “Don’t you understand what that would imply to other people if I was walking around with — oh my god. You know what? Never mind. This is ridiculous. We are not having this conversation. I refuse to have this conversation. Just because there is no conversation to have.”

Derek stands and cocks his head. “What conversation?” he asks, and Stiles does not buy that stupid innocent tone at all.

“You — you are totally — just messing with me and —” Stiles stops short when the other teen steps closer. “Um.”

Derek doesn’t get any closer, but just close enough that he can stretch out his arms so he can put his hands on Stiles’s shoulders. “You seem a little nervous.”

"No," Stiles denies, but he is. "I'm not."

"Okay," Derek says, like he's indulging Stiles. His warm fingers twitch over Stiles's shoulder. "You overthink things. Did you know that?"

Stiles flushes and shoots him a glare. "I'm aware."

Derek drops his hands and steps back, shoving his hands into his pockets. "Don't be annoyed with me, okay? I'm not saying it's a bad thing," he clarifies with a slight smile.

Stiles squirms under his gaze. “Well I just — when you say certain things I can't help it. I don’t know.”

Derek snorts. “You have to be clear. I want to know if we’re on the same page. What do you not know?”

Stiles purses his lips defiantly.

Derek watches him for what feels like a lifetime, which in theory is probably just a full minute. “Okay. When you want to talk about whatever it is you think we’re talking about, you know where to find me.” He gives Stiles a meaningful look that the other teen doesn’t want to try and understand. “I’m leaving now. Mom will probably want us home before the curfew alarm rings.” He turns and starts walking to the door. “I’ll text you. Try to reply before you go to sleep.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Stiles mutters resentfully. He doesn’t get how the other teen can be so nonchalant about whatever this is.

“I wasn’t,” Derek replies easily as he opens the door. “Later.”

“Later,” Stiles parrots because apparently this is a thing that they do now. This is a thing they do whenever they part ways. He watches the other teen disappear and trot down the steps. He sighs and says, “Bye, Laura.”

“Bye, Stiles!” Laura shouts in response before the sound of the front door slamming shut follows.

Stiles quickly changes into some sleepwear before he grabs the apple on his desk. “Bring a knife up, Isaac. I’ll be in your room,” he says without raising his voice because he figures his little brother can hear him as clear as day. It’d basically be like they were side by side anyway.

Isaac comes up to his room with a short knife and some napkins just as Stiles is utilizing Isaac’s phone charger. “Use your own. Mine has to charge too.”
“So grab mine and bring it in here.”

“Well why would I go out of my way to accommodate you. This is my room.”

“Yes, it is your room. Gold star for observation.” Stiles ducks when Isaac throws a bottle of lotion at him. “This is horrible customer service. I’ve been to shoddier hotels but this by far is absolutely awful. I want to talk to your manager. I want a refund or I will chargeback. I will report this hotel to the BBB.”

Isaac is already making his exit to get Stiles’s charger, dutifully ignoring his older brother’s insufferable rant.

Stiles takes the time to grab the knife Isaac left on his dresser before cutting four big slices of the apple.

Isaac returns with the charger and a frown. “You left your light on. And your computer. Which you should thank me for because I convinced dad that you and I would need it for the last week of school.”

“We, huh?” Stiles snorts as Isaac climbs into his bed. “Are you trying to twist my arm so I have no choice but to let you use my computer for your own purposes.”

“If that’s the way you want to see it.” Isaac gives his trademark shrug. “You know you don’t have to stand there. You can come lay down.”

Stiles gives him a sheepish smile. “I — well I thought it may be a territorial thing.”

“That explains why you’ve never done it. Even before you found out,” Isaac supposes. “I always wondered about that.”

Stiles climbs in but lays over the covers because it’s too hot, even with the window being open.

Isaac makes an annoyed sound before he gets up and turns off the light before grabbing the knife still in Stiles’s hands and putting it on his nightstand between his digital clock and lamp. “You’re a terrible guest.”

“No, I am perfect in everything I do. Take some of this apple,” Stiles says as he hands it over. He can’t really see but he figures his brother will have no problem seeing in the dark.

Isaac takes the slices and eats them quietly, before shifting and lying on his back. He continues to chew quietly.

Stiles doesn’t really have the finesse to eat while lying down. He finishes quickly, rubbing the extra juice onto his pajama bottoms before settling down so he can face his brother. He can faintly make out the preteen’s outline.

“Stop staring at me,” Isaac softly insists. “It’s creepy.”

“You can’t see me,” Stiles denies with a grin.

Isaac sighs. “I can see you just fine. You’re staring at me with a grin like a weirdo.”

“Nope, I’m sleeping with my eyes shut.”

Isaac says nothing for a long while before he shifts so he’s facing Stiles with his right hand under the pillow he’s lying on. “Are you okay? Your heart was — I didn’t know how to help. Small panic
attacks I can fix. But that was more than I knew how to handle and I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to do something but I felt like I would only make it worse.”

Stiles sucks in some air. “I’m okay. Sometimes I remember things that overwhelms me for a moment.” He takes a second to choose his next words carefully. “You don’t have to feel like you can’t help. Just talk to me. That’s all I really need. Someone to talk to me.”

“Okay.” Isaac stays quiet for a long moment. “I — I —”

Stiles grabs him and pulls him close enough that his forehead is pressed into the place where his heart is. “It’s okay,” he says. “I know. Me too.”

Isaac shakes a little and he fists the hem of Stiles’s shirt with trembling hands. He seems afraid. Like he can’t believe any of this is real and that all the good things he has will be taken away from him any moment.

“I’ll never leave you. We won’t ever leave you, Isaac,” Stiles murmurs, stroking the back of his brothers head as he starts to tremble with quiet little whimpers he tries to keep in. “We won’t leave you behind. We’ll always be here for you. I’ll keep you close because you belong with us.”

Isaac sniffs and cries as his shoulders continue to shake. “Please don’t say — don’t s-say it if you d-don’t mean it. I can’t — I can’t t-take —”

“It’s different now,” Stiles swears. “We didn’t find you, Isaac. You found us. You were just what we needed and we didn’t even know.”

Isaac sobs and tries to stifle it.

Stiles scoots closer so he can hug his brother. He waits and waits and waits, letting his little brother ride it out until Isaac’s exhaustion catches up to him and he falls asleep like that, whimpering with his hands still fisted into the hem of Stiles’s shirt.

Stiles continues to stroke his hand through Isaac’s soft golden curls with a yawn. He just focuses on the rise and fall of his brother’s chest. He starts drifting himself but his phone vibrates on the nightstand. He quickly reaches out for it blindly so that it doesn’t disturb Isaac’s sleep, even though he’s the deepest sleeper in their small family.

Stiles answers the phone and whispers, “You said you would text.”

“I was but I changed my mind. Maybe I like the sound of your voice,” Derek quietly teases.

Stiles is way too tired to blush. He still mumbles an insult.

“Not nice, Stiles,” Derek says with a singsong voice. Then he pauses. “Who’s sleeping?”

Stiles is almost surprised by the other teen’s perception but then he remembers just who it is that he’s talking to. “My brother.”

Derek hums thoughtfully. “You’re about to fall asleep too.”

“You couldn’t possibly know that,” Stiles flippantly insists. “I’m wide awake. I can do about fifty backflips.”

Derek laughs softly before he says, “I know your heartbeat, Stiles. Don’t you think I can tell when you’re about to fall asleep? It’s slower than normal, like it wants to fall into a gentle pulse.”
“Shut up,” Stiles retorts, blinking tiredly. His eyelids are getting heavy. “That’s creepy. Shut up.”

“Sure. Whatever you want.”

Stiles is still too tired to get flustered luckily. “Don’t say that,” he mumbles.

“I’m not going to hold you. You’re definitely falling asleep on me,” Derek replies, completely over looking what Stiles has said. “Call me when you wake up. I want to know what you’re going to do for the day.”

Stiles just mumbles an affirmative.

“Good night,” Derek continues with a softly amused voice. “Don’t fall asleep with the phone pressed to your face.”

Stiles mumbles again in annoyance. He waits until the line goes dead before he puts his phone back on Isaac’s nightstand, but of course he misses and his smartphone falls to the floor with a solid thump. He does not even care as he drifts deeper into the grip of sleep.

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It’s Saturday morning, and Stiles awakens when his brother stands and starts jumping on the bed. His body jolts with each shake and he groans before slapping a pillow over his face.

“Wake up,” Isaac pants. “There’s food cooking. I can smell it. Well it’s kind of hard to over the smell of Derek all over you. You realize —” he pants. “— that I will have to wash all my sheets and covers twice. Also, your phone keeps vibrating and dinging. Get up. Get up. Get up. Get up.”

“Oh my god,” Stiles complains and throws the pillow at Isaac, who laughs and easily dodges it with an effortless backflip onto the floor, and exits his room. Stiles is not jealous. He grumbles as he slides out of bed.

“I can hear you!” Isaac calls out as he trots down the stairs.

“Good,” Stiles mutters resentfully as he stretches with a loud groan and yawn. He swipes his phone from off the floor and blinks away the blurry wetness of his eyes to see.

Deaton texted him saying: 9 am. No later. I will make you go home otherwise.

Stiles frowns and makes his way to his room upon noticing that it’s 7:30 am now. He quickly climbs into the shower before he climbs into his clothes and his sneakers. It’s 8:15 am by the time he pockets his phone, keys, and the runestone from his dreams. He glances at his father’s closed door before he follows the smell of food down the steps and into the kitchen.

“You are —” Melissa turns off the stove. “— right on time. Come have a seat. I was just about to serve.”

“Good morning,” is Stiles’s polite response and he sits besides Scott, who beams and elbows him playfully.

Stiles grins and elbows him back until they slap their hands at each other like a weak and horrible fight.

“Oh, okay,” Melissa says with a stern but fond look. She serves Isaac first, giving him chocolate waffles, brown rice, and an omelet made of cheese, turkey sausage, and green peppers.
“Thank you,” Isaac mumbles shyly and starts to eat.

Stiles smiles to himself at that before he watches her do the same for Scott and then to him. “Thank you for coming over, Ms. McCall. This looks great.”

“It is,” Isaac says softly enough that only Stiles can hear. He starts to drown his waffles in corn syrup because Stiles refuses to let them use anything other than what’s good for them

Stiles gives him a thumbs up before he digs in, knocking his feet against Scott, who, of course, responds with fervor.

“Boys,” Melissa says evenly with her back to them as she makes another plate.

Stiles and Scott straighten and sober immediately.

Melissa turns to them with a beautiful smile. “Where is your father?” she asks, directing the question to both Stiles and Isaac.

Stiles and Isaac share a glance, before Stiles looks at Melissa and replies, “He’s, um, still sleeping, I guess.”

“You guess? What a strange thing to have to guess about,” Melissa replies with a furrowed brow. “That man is usually such an early riser. Why would he —” She stops when she notices the stoic expressions on both Isaac’s and Stiles’s faces. Her mouth tightens at the corners. “I see,” she simply says. “You boys finish eating.” She grabs the plate of food and makes her way up the steps.

“Uh oh,” Scott remarks with a mouth full of food.

Isaac’s face twists with displeasure.

“Uh oh?” Stiles parrots. “Why uh oh?”

“I know that face, Stiles,” Scott explains after a swallow. “That’s her ‘You’re in trouble’ face.”

Stiles considers that as he continues to eat because he will have to leave soon.

Melissa reappears with a light look of satisfaction. She casually serves herself a plate of food before sitting down, overlooking the curious gazes the boys direct at each other. “So,” she begins as she mixes her rice with her omelet. “Tell me your plans for the weekend.”

The boys all pause before Stiles is the first to speak up, talking about his apprenticeship with Deaton, which leads him into explaining other things but Melissa easily shoulders the information. Then Isaac is next, but he chooses his words carefully like he’s uncertain about how he should communicate with her, and also like he doesn’t want to disappoint her, but she gives him an encouraging smile all the while as he talks about his plans with Boyd. Then finally Scott shrugs and makes a comment about how she already knows what he’s doing which only leads to say something sharp to him in Spanish before tugging his ear.

Stiles sneaks out into the backyard to count every step he can as quickly as he can so he can be sure the numbers match the amount he got last night. Then he returns to the kitchen and sits down as he pours himself a glass of orange juice.

The sheriff appears with an empty plate, looking disheveled. He puts his plate in the sink while everyone stays silent. He turns and Melissa gives him this look as she stands and gathers all their empty plates to put them in the sink before she whispers something to him.
Isaac’s face twists and his nose wrinkles with displeasure.

Stiles gives him a look that says ‘What?’.

Isaac gives him a look that says ‘Nope. I’m not saying anything about that’.

Stiles sighs and straightens when Melissa drops a kiss on the crown of Isaac’s head and his face explodes with a surprised blush.

“Have a good day, *mi tesoro,*” Melissa says sweetly before gently patting the area she kissed. She moves to Stiles and Scott to do and say the same thing.

Scott seems used to this but Stiles can’t help but to blush too and feel warm in the way he always did whenever his mother kissed his cheek or gave him a hug or said ‘I love you, sweetling’ in Polish.

Melissa points a finger at his dad with a look full of meaning before she taps Scott’s shoulder and they leave together.

The sheriff sits down at the table beside Isaac. He takes a few moments to gather himself. Then he says, “I apologize for my behavior yesterday. That was unacceptable and I will do everything that I can to be sure that it will never happen again. It’s not either of your fault. I take full responsibility for what I’ve done. There are better ways to cope with a situation and I will make an appointment with a therapist so that I can learn to vent in a healthy way. I hope I haven’t hurt or scared you. If I have, please know that you have a right to be upset with me.”

“You’re not perfect, dad,” Isaac says softly. “We know this and forgive you. And it’s good you’re being proactive. Ms. Morrell usually has group sessions free every Tuesday night. Also, we all have our bad days, but you’re right. It shouldn’t happen again.”

“Please don’t let it happen again,” Stiles adds. “It’s not safe for any of us.”

Their dad gives a short nod before tears begin to slide down his cheeks. He gives a watery laugh when his sons both hug him simultaneously with affection and acceptance. “You’re the best sons a man could ever hope to have.”

“Oh, geez,” Stiles complains as he pulls away to wipe the tears from his eyes. “Now I’m crying.”

Isaac looks like he might but he doesn’t, and that doesn’t mean he’s trying to push his feelings down. “Can we go fishing Sunday?”

“Yes, of course,” his dad agrees immediately. “Derek Sr. and his son will be coming too if you’re okay with that.”

Isaac just shrugs but his dad recognizes that as a sign that he can accommodate to those plans.

“You’re both still on punishment until stated otherwise. I’ll be checking your internet history to make sure you’re doing only school related browsing.”

Isaac and Stiles both nod.

“Okay, go on. I have things I have to do as well,” their father says as he rises from his chair.

Stiles waits until he’s pouring himself a cup of coffee Melissa made for him and says, “Like going on a date with Ms. McCall?”

The sheriff chokes and spills some coffee on himself before glaring at Stiles.
Isaac snickers before he grabs his brother and drags him out the front door. They both say “Bye, Dad!” at the same time.

“We are having a talk!” Their dad calls back before the door slams shut.

But both Stiles and Isaac pretend like they couldn’t hear him as they mount their bikes.

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Isaac and Stiles go their separate ways once they reach the library and Isaac meets up with Boyd there.

Stiles goes a little bit further before he parks his bike and locks it to the single bike rack planted next to a short and thin tree. He straightens and pauses when he sees Violet and Garrett watching him in a Chevrolet Tahoe he remembers seeing a long time ago when he first learned that the Hales were Werewolves and that his brother was a Werecat.

Stiles starts to realize that they’ve been watching him before they publicly allowed it to be known that Mayor Argent had adopted them. He glares at them and they just smirk back. So he marches across the street up to the driver’s side where Violet is situated behind the steering wheel. “We are not starting this again,” Stiles insists, agitated. “I will have my dad file a restraining order.”

“By all means, go ahead,” Violet retorts with a honeyed voice and doesn’t even bat an eyelash. “You think Mayor Argent doesn’t own the police in this town? The courts?” She smirks. “You have some delusions of grandeur, don’t you?”

Stiles purses his lips, displeased.

Violet’s eyes glow pink as she stares into his in a threatening way. “Let’s just say that Mayor Argent likes to be sure that his potential investment isn’t confiscated by someone else who may wish to capitalize on what a Seven can do. Which is anything.” She eyes him before she meets his annoyed gaze. “Now I’d say that’s worth protecting, wouldn’t you say?”

“Where were you when the Benefactor tried to paralyze me?” Stiles counters precisely. “Were you watching then?”

Garrett gives and ugly snort. “And you’re supposed to be a Seven?” He tosses Violet a skeptical look. “He’s an idiot, Dee.”

Violet ignores him as she cocks her head, her irises glowing brighter with pink all the more. She makes a fog of pink clouds swim around him as if she’s searching for something.

Stiles coughs and bats it away. He gets whiff of the overpowering smell of cotton candy. “If you could not, that would be great,” he remarks bitterly.

“If you think Deucalion is the Benefactor, then you haven’t been paying attention. Though I agree that his mistreatment of you did not please Mayor Argent in the least,” Violet comments as her eyes returns to it’s normal color. “You realize you have mistletoe on you. What are you putting on your skin, Stiles?”

“What do you mean that wasn’t the Benefactor?” Stiles demands. “And why do you know his name?”

“Let’s just say he’s a colleague of some sort to Mayor Argent,” is Garrett’s response.
“Why do you have mistletoe on you, Stiles?” Violet pushes.

“How should I know?” Stiles exclaims. “What does that even have to do with anything? And why is Mayor Argent working with an Alpha?”

Violet gives him a sharp look. “How do you know he’s an Alpha?”

“Because you just confirmed it. I was just guessing wildly, you know,” Stiles replies, crossing his arms. “Look, I don’t have time for this. You’re going to make me late.” He looks at the screen of his phone and notices it’s 8:55 am.

“What kind of soap do you use?” Violet continues, composure returning quickly.

“I don’t even know why I’m telling you this, but it’s black soap my uncle gave me,” Stiles replies pessimistically.

Garrett scoffs before he says, “You are such an idiot. Really. You need medical help, you’re so oblivious.”

Stiles glares at him so hard that his hand flickers with blue bioluminescent light.

Garrett goes a little pale.

“Black soap is made from black candle wax and the white berries of mistletoe,” Violet explains with a calculating gaze. “Someone is trying to keep track of your magic, and more importantly, the level it’s at in strength.”

“Okay, that’s not creepy at all,” Stiles croaks and squirms. “I can’t — I can’t think about this right now.”

“You’re going to have to eventually.” Violet cracks her neck. “I got most of it off of you but there’s still a thin layer there. Probably because you’ve been using it constantly.”

“My uncle told me it would make my scent quiet to those who wanted to harm me,” Stiles notes, but mostly to himself.

“Your uncle is a liar, obviously,” Garrett snidely remarks.

“Throw that soap out,” Violet stresses as she starts the car. “We have to make some runs. We’ll be back by the time you finish this.”

“You don’t have to. You really, really don’t,” Stiles insists.

“Someone’s gotta watch your back, Stilinski. Apparently you won’t,” Garrett supposes as they drive off.

Stiles has to quickly step back so they don’t run over his feet. He makes a face at the car before he crosses the street as fast as he can and barely makes it through the door when the time goes from 8:59 to 9 am.

“Close call, wouldn’t you say?” Deaton says from behind the glass counter at the other end of the store.

“Deucalion isn’t the Benefactor,” is Stiles’s response as he treks over, noticing that Deaton is flipping through a weathered book. “Did you know that already or — whoa!” he exclaims as he recognizes the book with excitement. “Is that a Grimoire?”
“The first of its kind. The oldest known to mankind and otherworldly kind.” Deaton glances up at him before he shuts the book with a resounding thwack. “You do not have permission to study from it.”

“But —”

“Make no mistake, Mr. Stilinski,” Deaton smoothly interjects. “My intent is to relinquish full ownership over to you so that you may memorize every detail of all the pages in this book. When you are certain you have, you will set it on fire so that no one else can acquire it and use the information to wreak havoc on this world, or any other world. But you are not ready yet.”

Stiles perks up at that. “Okay. What do I have to do? Am I supposed to go on some mystical journey? Do I shut away in my room to fast and pray until I’m in Faerie again? I counted every step and inch of my backyard.”

“And?”

Stiles gives him an estimate.

“Incorrect.” Deaton evaluates him for a moment. “Try again. This time, you will crawl.”

“What?” Stiles exclaims. “But you said —”

“You don’t have to remind me of my own words, Mr. Stilinski,” Deaton calmly cuts him off again. “How do you expect to build a garden if you do not have intimate knowledge of its foundation?”

Stiles frowns and rubs the back of his neck. “What happens if I get it wrong again?”

“Then I will make you roll,” Deaton merely replies. “We will save that conversation for a later date. Would you like to learn how to will your magic?”

Stiles nods eagerly.


Stiles does.

“Ball your hands into fists.”

Stiles does.

“Now press the knuckles of both hands against each other. Keep your elbows up. Your arms should be above your heart. Good. Now call for your magic. Wake it up.”

Stiles squirms, not really sure how to do it.

Deaton says, “It’s very simple, Mr. Stilinski. Your magic is your best friend, and vice versa. Now treat the relationship as such. You are not its master as it is not yours. You must work together in tandem. You are brothers-in-arms. You must rally with each other.”

Stiles gives a solemn nod.

“Now breathe until the world gets quiet and focus on the thing you want to until your body gives into it. And when you think you are ready, separate your hands and open them as your arms spread out as though you are making yourself a ‘t’. I will time how long you hold your breath.”
“Okay.”

“Good. Begin.”

Stiles closes his eyes, breathes in through in his nose and out through his mouth; it separates his lips for every moment he does this until his lungs are empty and hollow. This keeps happening over and over again until the motion becomes louder. He starts to hear the wall behind him, which is littered with clocks whose hands tick, tick, tick. And even that winds down before all he hears is the side-to-side tic tock of the pendulum swinging behind the glass for of the grandfather clock. Then there is the sound of the whirring and swish, swish, swish of the fans over his head. There’s the hum of electricity humming behind the walls. He can hear the steady thump of Deaton’s heart.

The world stops. Everything falls silent.

Stiles open his eyes and turns his head to the right to glance at Deaton, who’s frozen but looking down at his watch. He looks over his shoulders to see all the clocks have stopped dead. He turns his head to the left as he sees the sunlight sneaking into the shop window and the dust that usually would swim in rays of gold are frozen. He lifts head to look at the fans but they’re not moving either, like they’ve been turned off. He drops his head to look forward as his body begins to light up with a blue glow that overtake his fisted hands like bioluminescent gloves.

The glow starts winding up his arms like vines of ethereal light, like sweltering spiraling marks that leave a searing trail of heat in it’s wake as it spreads. It travels up his arms like a sleeve, curling over his shoulders before spreading across the expanse of his chest and stomach like armor. He feels it curl along his shoulder blades, and the heat there intensifies. He feels a fluttering ache under the skin of his back where the bones of his shoulder blades. It’s almost painful, like something is trying to shift his muscles and skin for something to get free. He tells his magic ‘no’ because he is not ready for that and it actually listens, retreating from his shoulder blades, up to each side of his neck but goes no further than that. It doesn’t fan out towards to his jaw or face just out of respect and he counters it with a wave of gratitude.

There is warmth in Stiles’s eyes, which is not quite how it feels when you are on the edge of crying, but it’s a lukewarm sensation that swirls around his irises. He knows without knowing that his eyes are glowing, but not with blue, rather a honeyed gold when he spies his reflection in an old full-length mirror. His magic sends him the thought so he can understand and he realizes that this helps him see the world in high definition. He almost cries at how beautifully vivid the shop looks, as if it isn’t dark or dusty, but rather the colors spring to life. There’s no human term he can use to describe it. He can — he can just see everything for what it is: natural, earthly splendor.

Stiles feels his gut churn at that. This is an immortal vision of an otherwise mortal world. His magic agrees complacently. It almost feels like it’s apologizing as he realizes that this will all fade with time into a history that may never be recorded.

This will all end, under the pressure of time, and no one will know this kind of beauty.

Humans like to record wars and bloodshed. They care of nothing else when there is everything else.

Stiles jerks in surprise when he realizes his magic is talking to him.

Why should it surprise you? Are you really frightened?

No, I just — I didn’t think you could talk. I didn’t expect it.
But I’m not talking. You are just listening. You never want to listen to me. This is the first time in your life you truly hear me.

I didn’t know I had something to listen to besides my own voice in my head. I’m sorry but it’s all new to me.

Apologies and explanations are unnecessary. You are as young as I am. We were born at the same time. I don’t know any more than you and yet I do at the same time. It is a conundrum. I only know of what I’ve seen through you and what you posses inside.

I never thought of it like that.

It is fine. You still have Human concepts that will have to change as the world gets older.

But I will get older too. Am I not Human in that way?

Your views and feelings are Human. Your body is alike to Humans but you are not. You are Faerie. And so you will continue to grow to a point. You’ll have to return to Faerie one day so you do not watch the world fade away and fade away with it as well.

Why does it have to? Fade, I mean. Why can’t I stay? This is my home. I never remember Faerie.

Earth is meant for the world of Man. And the world of Man is made only of dirt, dust, and starlight — and so this is the way it all returns. You know exactly what I mean. You and I are made of mystics that come from the fragments of heaven and stardust. These things do not fade, they are eternal. Earth is temporary.

Why would Faerie kind be any better than Humans. I cannot accept that we can’t live in peace together. Aren’t I supposed to advocate peace?

You can try. They will fade nonetheless. The end of humanity is quickly approaching. Who can say where Man goes when they pass from this life to heaven?

I’m a Seven. If I can do anything, and if nothing is impossible for me, then that means I can help Mankind. I can teach them how to do and be better. They can be better. We can all be better.

I must stress that they are unlike us. What if everything you try comes to nothing? Are you willing to risk it on Humans with their short lives and greed and evil? Humans condense the entire spark of their souls into one fleeting, glorious moment, like shooting stars. Even in knowledge of this, they still take everything for granted.

What does that even mean?

I do not know. I only know as much as you do. And you know of everything I have said. I have not said anything that is new to you.

Stiles doesn’t respond, simply because he is irritated. He knows they will only talk in circles so he does as Deaton asks him to. He pushes his fists apart and away from each other before opening his hands as his arms spread wide. His eyes widens as a wave of blue light whips at the bookshelves before him like a spectral tsunami and the books explodes out of the bookshelves before the rows of bookshelves themselves fall over like a line of dominoes.

The world resumes and Stiles gawks at the mess he made. He quickly turns to Deaton. “Oh my god.
I’m sorry. I didn’t — I didn’t know *that* would happen. It was an accident, I —”

“Mr. Stilinski, it is all right. I knew exactly what would happen,” Deaton says cryptically as he glances at his watch. “One minute.”

“What?” Stiles says, his face twisting with his confusion as his magic retreats completely. He has a feeling it’s just as irritated with him as he is with it. “One minute of what?”

“That’s how long it’s been,” Deaton answers nonchalantly as he picks up his mug with steaming coffee and takes a long sip.

Stiles fumbles with that information. “But — but that can’t be right!” he exclaims. “It didn’t feel like a minute.”

“You’re right,” Deaton responds as he lowers the porcelain mug. “It should have been close to five seconds. One minute is slow in reference to Faerie time. But you are undisciplined, so I will overlook it for the time being.”

Stiles just stares at him with wide eyes.

“You may leave at noon. No later, no earlier. Lock up the shop behind you when you finish. I made a copy of the key, please use it to your discretion.” Deaton grabs the Grimoire and puts it under his left arm, grabbing his coffee with the other hand. “Come back tomorrow, Mr. Stilinski. Same time, same rules. I should have a printed schedule for the rest of the month that I expect you to follow, or I will put off your studies for three days.”

“Oh come on! I was only doing what you told me to! How could I have known that would happen?” Deaton, unsurprisingly, does not respond.

Stiles grumbles as he gets to work setting everything right, *including* alphabetically arranging the books. He has to work quickly to meet the deadline Deaton set. He doesn’t finish and curses because he knows that he will have to finish this when he returns, which will only delay his studies further.

He bellyaches as he swipes the gold key left for him on the counter and puts it in his keychain with the rest of his keys. He exits the shop and locks it up behind him as instructed. He turns and stops dead when he sees Violet and Garrett waiting in their black truck. He gives them both a mean look as they respond with amused smirks. He ignores them completely, unlocks his bike before climbing it, and heads towards his next destination.

He pretends he doesn’t notice them following him.

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Beacon Hills Hospital isn’t the largest Stiles has ever seen. There are bigger ones in Los Angeles, but the staffs in them are very impersonal and stiff like robots. Which is why he doesn’t mind coming here, even under bad circumstances. The staff here treats all the patients like their close friends or distant relatives. He happily notes that Melissa is the one behind the u-shaped counter of the
reception area. She gives him a soft smile and it spreads warm feelings of affection in him.

“What can I help you with, Stiles?” Melissa asks, standing while she puts a stethoscope around her neck and over her shoulders. She’s wearing lime green scrubs with ducks on them while her curly hair is fixed into a single loose braid.

“I came to visit Danny and Lydia. If that’s okay,” Stiles explains as he leans on the counter.

Melissa smiles at him kindly as she logs something in her computer. Then she rips off a visitor’s sticker from a line of them, writes his name, the date, and time with her beautiful handwriting before she hands it over. “Okay, you’re all set. Just follow the directional plaques. Danny’s room is 300. You can find Lydia in the west wing at the psych ward. Visiting hours end at 3 pm for Danny, and 5 pm for Lydia. If you need anything just ask for me and someone will page me.”

“Yes, thank you,” Stiles says, returning her smile shyly before he ventures off to find the elevators. It takes him under 3 minutes to find Danny’s room, mostly from memory if anything. He observes the whirring machines around him that indicate if his vital signs are acceptable or not. He pulls up a chair with uncomfortable and poorly designed cushions. He sits to Danny’s right and watches the rise and fall of his chest.

A nurse wearing marigold scrubs and a hijab comes in once or twice to check his blood pressure and to replace his IV. She smiles at him both times and she has dark brown eyes and perfect eyebrows. It takes him a minute before he realizes that he recognizes her because she used to work at Eichen House; she manned the reception area.

Stiles waits until he’s alone with Danny before he says, “Pigs are alcoholics. Who would have thought, right? Me and Isaac were watching a documentary about it. Though I don’t remember why we were watching it. The whole time we kept arguing about who gets a turn with the TV. I wanted to watch Power Rangers: Megaforce, that’s my favorite storyline by the way, that one and the original. Anyway, I was fighting for the remote because there was a marathon going on, on the Nickelodeon channel. Well not Nickelodeon, Nickelodeon, but that other Nickelodeon. You know? Yeah that probably doesn’t even make sense. I mean the second one that plays old reruns and stuff. Anyway, Isaac wanted to watch the season finale of RuPaul’s Drag Race. I didn’t want to watch what he wanted to watch and he didn’t want to watch what I wanted to watch. Which led us to fighting over the remote for a solid ten minutes until it accidentally switches on the Discovery Channel and there was this documentary going on about one hundred things that people don’t know about the pigs…”

Stiles keeps on babbling mindlessly, jumping from one subject to the next before he realizes he has to move on because visiting time for Danny is over. He rises to make his exit. There is a whisper in the back of his mind that tells him that he’s missing something. He reaches for his magic for help but it stubbornly ignores him. He rolls his eyes because apparently it’s still annoyed from earlier. He leaves it be and moves on.

Lydia is curled up in an armchair hugging her legs with no shoes as she rocks back and forth, mumbling to herself in the visitor’s lounge while staring out the window to the hospital roof on the other side. She’s wearing a paper gown shirt and drawstring pants. At Eichen House it seemed to be that she had more freedom there with her fashion. Here she is disheveled, hair wild like she hasn’t brushed it in forever and bags under her eyes like she hasn’t slept in forever. She rocks and rocks and rocks, mumbling to herself all the while.

Stiles feels a strong pang of guilt that cuts into his heart. He feels like he hasn’t been there for her like he should. He sits in the chair across from her. “Hey, Lydia,” he says carefully.
Lydia doesn’t stop rocking and mumbling to herself as she stares across the way.

“I — I think I understand who we are. I have a talking magical tree now. Her name is Nana. I think you would really like her, and I know she’d adore you too. Deaton’s helping me with my magic. I wish — I wish I could show you what I can do. I wish you could show me what you can do because you’re Faerie, just like me. I wish I could take you away from this place. I have to believe you will get better some day.” Stiles pauses when a couple passes them, shooting him odd looks before they sit down with, who seems to be, their son.

Lydia doesn’t seem to care or notice, and so Stiles tries to do the same.

Stiles doesn’t see Ms. Morrell anywhere. He wonders what he can do or say. She always seems so defensive of how Lydia reacts. He thinks about what he wants to ask. “Lydia, you remember when you planted Ines Reyes in my head? I just want to know why.”

“You’re not wrong, you know,” Lydia says suddenly and Stiles jerks in awareness. This is the first time she’s spoken a complete sentence that wasn’t some kind of cryptic nursery rhyme. “You’re thinking, who is the Benefactor? What does our uncle have to do with all of this? Why does Ms. Morrell always try to stop you when you’re trying to get answers from me? I wasn’t here enough. I wish I had been here enough. Does she think about me as much as I think about her? She has no one now. I’m all she has left. I need to do something for you, Lydia. I want to fix you, Lydia. You need to get better, Lydia. Please get better, Lydia. I can fix you, Lydia.” She laughs cynically as she wiggles her toes and curls them into the edge of the chair cushion. “You want to fix me, Stiles? You want to make me whole again? You want to make me like I was before? But there is no fixing and I can’t go back. Neither of us can go back.” She turns and looks at him with hollow eyes. “I can hear them. At night. In the morning. In the afternoon. It never stops. I don’t know how to shut it off. I don’t know how to make it end. I can feel when something is wrong with you because I need to know. I can hear your thoughts, Stiles.” Her lips trembles and she looks so freaked by it. “You’re not wrong, you now. You are all I have left and I need to know you’re there. I need to know you’re okay. I opened myself up for you the night I came to you in your dreams. I created the link between us and triggered it. We’ll be tied together until the day we die. But that means I have to hear it all. I can hear them all. I can see what happens. They will fall because they’ll make you choose. You shouldn’t have to choose.”

“Lydia,” Stiles says sadly. “I’m sorry but I don’t understand.”

“You never understand,” Lydia replies and the world starts to shut down, slowing and slowing in increments and Stiles realizes with alarm that it isn’t him this time. It’s her. “He’ll never walk again. He’ll never hear again. But he will live.”

Stiles looks around quickly and notes that everyone is immobile while supernatural wind starts to swirl around the room like the breeze that comes before a thunderstorm.

Lydia continues like she couldn’t be bother by it. “You’re not listening. I can’t help you if you’re not listening. You won't know if I’m okay if you don’t listen. She’s always watching. Always waiting. Always listening. I can never say what I want to because she’s there. She knows.”

“Ms. Morrell? Do you mean Ms. Morrell?” Stiles questions as he turns back to her. “I know your parents filed a restraining order against her when you went to therapy after what happened to you during your hike with your dad.”

Lydia looks at him sharply. “Who told you that?”

“Erica,” Stiles says. “Why is Ms. Morrell so invested in you?”
“She feeds us pills laced with mistletoe. I couldn’t think there. She knows I couldn’t think because if I couldn’t think, I couldn’t say. She knows I can see. I can see everything. Death and pain and destruction. You let them lie to you. You never see.” Lydia starts to tremble as tears flow from her eyes. “I can’t help you if you don’t listen. I showed you Ines Reyes because where did that lead you?”

“To my dad. My dad was led to Mexico. But he didn’t find Ines Reyes in Mexico, but he did find the Calaveras. But I still don’t understand,” Stiles admits as he turns it all over his mind to trying to piece together the puzzle.

“What did he do, Stiles? What did Ines do?”

“He cut out his own tongue so he wouldn’t have to talk.”

“Talk about what?”

“Why he lied about the autopsies. What he was covering up. Who he was protecting. He didn’t want anyone to know the truth.”

“What’s the truth?”

“I don’t know.”

“What’s the truth?”

“I don’t know.”

“What’s the truth, Stiles? What’s the truth? What’s the truth? What’s the truth? What’s the truth? What’s the truth? What’s the truth? What’s the truth? What’s the truth? What’s the truth? What’s the truth?” Lydia goes on and on until her mouth moves so fast that it becomes unnatural, like a thousand voices suddenly sounding off as one.

Her voice hits his ears in piercing shockwaves. He cups his hands over his ears and says, “I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know.”

Lydia stops suddenly and she waits until he’s looking at her. “I am the only one that can make you bleed there. He used the tears and screams of a Banshee to incapacitate you, Stiles. He carved rune marks into the walking stick and waxed it with my screams and tears.” She points to his ears. “And you are the only one that can keep me quiet. We are different sides of the same coin. You see life. I see death. What did I tell you? What did I tell you?”

Stiles just stares at her as he drops his hands from his ears and notes the blood on them. He looks at her but the expression on her face is stoic.

“You’re bleeding because you’re not listening. What did I tell you?”

Stiles swallows and says, “They only come out during the New Moon.”

Lydia lets it all go and the world resumes its natural pace. “What’s the truth?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yes. You don’t,” Lydia turns away to stare out the window again. “But you will.”

Stiles doesn’t know what to say as he watches her rock again as her eyes search the roof across from her wildly.
“Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water,” Lydia recites. “Jack fell down and broke his crown. Jill came tumbling after.”

“Visiting time is over folks. Can you please head towards the exits? Again, visiting time is over. Please head towards the exit.”

“Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water,” Lydia repeats once more. “Jack fell down and broke his crown. Jill came tumbling after.”


“Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water,” Lydia chants. “Jack fell down and broke his crown. Jill came tumbling after.”

“I’ll come see you tomorrow, okay?” Stiles says as he stands but Lydia doesn’t acknowledge it but he knows she doesn’t need to.

She hears everything.

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Derek is sitting out on the porch steps with an excited grin when Stiles rolls up to the house on his mountain bike. “Why are you here?”

“Nice to see you too, Stiles,” Derek retorts as he stands and walks over. He nods to something behind him and Stiles turns to see a shiny, new lime green Camaro parked at the curb.

Stiles blinks and turns back to Derek. “No way.”

“Yup,” Derek replies proudly as he spins his keys around his index finger. “It’s all mine.”

“You’re such a loser, you picked green,” Stiles complains.

Derek gives him a flat look. “It’s my car, Stiles. I can pick whatever I want to pick. Don’t ruin my high.”

“Nope. This is unacceptable. I will not drive around in a green car,” Stiles maintains frivolously.

Derek gives him a gorgeous grin. “Well who said you’d be the one driving?” He wiggles his eyebrows suggestively.

Stiles blushes and it ruins the mean look he gives the other teen. “And anyway, I’m on punishment. So even if you wanted me to go somewhere with you, I couldn’t.”

“I already asked. Your dad’s fine with it,” Derek says as he shrugs easily and shoves his hands in his pockets. “We’re going to play some paintball.”

“No way,” Stiles marvels. “I refuse to believe he okayed that.”

“He didn’t,” Derek says with a smirk and jumps out of the way when Stiles attempts and fails to kick him. “You didn’t call me.”

“I have more important things to do than cater to your needs, Der,” Stiles flippantly replies.

Derek’s face scrunches with displeasure. “Please don’t call me that. Laura always calls me that and I’m not okay with it.”
“Laura has wisdom beyond her age,” Stiles airily rebuttals. “I genuinely forgot to call, okay? I would have done it otherwise. There’s been a lot on my mind today.”

“You smell anxious and sad. Your heartbeat is off too,” Derek notes as he crosses his arms. “Well don’t look at me like me like that. What’s wrong?”

Stiles starts to say, “Nothing is —”

“Don’t say nothing,” Derek quickly interjects. “I’d know if you were lying anyway.”


Derek sighs. “You’re such a dweeb.”

Stiles immediately bristles. “You’re a dweeb.”

“Agree to disagree,” Derek cheerfully retorts.

“You are so annoying. You should just —” Stiles starts a little when he feels Derek pull him close into a comfortable hug he stubbornly refuses to relax in. “Stop scenting me, I’m mad at you,” he complains and tugs Derek’s hair.

Derek just chuckles and presses his left cheek to Stiles’s, which starts to burn hotly at their proximity. He pulls away after three minutes and pokes at Stiles’s cheek teasingly. “Hey, what’s that? And where did it come from?”

Stiles slaps his hand away as his blush darkens. “You are the worst friend ever in all of history.”

“Tell me why you’re upset,” Derek cleverly deflects.

Stiles knows he won’t leave it alone, so he admits, “I visited my cousin Lydia today and she said some things that shook me. I can’t really make sense of it. My thoughts are all tangled up in this gooey, black gob of confusion. I mean it’s like bubblelicious that’s been chewed and then left to rot on the asphalt until it gets all black and disgusting that even worms and maggots and birds and rats and ants wouldn’t even touch. Do you know that there are literally about twenty-eight flavors of bubblelicious? Can you imagine just going on a gum spree and eating that? I once had a friend do that challenge and when he barfed it smelled like grape soda, which was really gross. But that was in third grade, and everyone does something dumb at that age. Like one time, I had this science project I had to do, and surprise, surprise, I did it on the volcano thing every elementary kid does for the science fair but I wanted to be different cause I knew about fifteen other kids were going to do it, so I thought that maybe I could put glitter and sequins in it because I figured it should be a festive occasion, and oh man did my dad have a fit when it backfired during one of my test runs, and he had to pay like a hundred bucks to get it all removed from the living room walls and the furniture but my mom thought it was the funniest thing in the world —”

“Stiles,” Derek calmly interrupts, amused. “You might want to consider breathing.”

Stiles sucks in a gust of air as his cheeks grow red and he rubs the back of his neck sheepishly.

“Sorry. That got away from me.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” Derek assures. “I just didn’t want you to pass out. I’m used to it by now. Everyone has their quirks.”

“Like you and basketball,” Stiles remarks, a bit defensively because he’s embarrassed and intrigued
that Derek is not bothered with his tendency to ramble from subject to subject. “What were we talking about again?”

“Well, you were upset. But you seem to be fine now,” Derek supposes as he cocks his head slightly. “I think you just needed to get it out of your system. How was your visit with Deaton?”

Stiles blinks and catches on to the change of subject because he’s familiar with it. “Oh, well that went kind of strangely. You know he’s very cryptic but he makes it look so cool. I kind of used my magic to knock a few rows of books over. Okay maybe it was a little more than a few. There were books everywhere and I had no idea that would happen. I mean it’s cool in theory but Deaton’s making me clean it all up, which is so not fair. Well maybe it is fair since I was the one responsible. My point still stands though. And guess what? He told me to pace around my backyard so I can know the exact inches of it, and I got it wrong. So now I have to crawl.”

Derek just nods patiently. “Last week of school. Summer’s just around the corner. I’m pretty excited about my job.”

“Good. You should be. You’re a great teacher, and that’s saying a lot coming from me,” Stiles admits. “I’m smart but I don’t know what to do with all my energy.”

“That’s not a bad thing. You just need to learn how to focus it without having to change who you are,” Derek supposes. “Why did you go to the hospital?”

Stiles considers the question. Before he answers, he asks, “Hey, why do you keep changing the subject?”

Derek’s mouth twists a little, like he’s fighting down a smile. He says, “Testing a theory.”

Stiles silently urges him to clarify.

“Tutoring you has given me firsthand knowledge about how scattered your attention can be sometimes,” Derek clarifies. “So I kind of developed an applicable tactic to keep you on one thought at a time so it doesn’t all come out into a jumble. I mean, it’s cute when you ramble, and I like that you’re comfortable enough with me to share every single thought you get, but I also want to be able to follow and understand what you’re saying.”

Stiles’s face grows hot at the way Derek just casually compliments him. “And how is that working for you?” he asks in a choked voice.

Derek just shrugs. “Why did you go to the hospital?”

Stiles clears his throat and wills his face to resume it's normal color. He says, “Yeah. Like I said, I went to visit Danny and my cousin Lydia. Danny’s still in a coma but I talked to him for a little while about whatever came out my mouth because my brain to mouth filter always switches on and off. Then I went to sit down with Lydia for fifteen minutes and she talked to me and not through me. I’m trying so hard to understand her and I feel bad that we’re not on the same page. She said something that stuck with me though. That she can make me bleed and I can make her quiet.”

Derek’s brow furrows with concern. “What does that mean?”

“I’m not sure. I’m a Virtue and she’s a Banshee. We’re two different sides to the same coin. I see life and she sees death,” Stiles rubs the back of his head. “It’s hard to explain.”

“It’s okay,” Derek pacifies. “Are you going to prom?”
“No way.”

“Laura will push,” Derek states matter-of-factly. “I’d like to see you there too. It’ll be Kate and Laura’s last dance.”

“Don’t you want to go with someone else?” Stiles asks out of curiosity, ignoring the part of him that’s apprehensive at the thought.

Derek gives him an incomprehensible look.

“What?” Stiles says, squirming self-consciously. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You know Laura’s birthday is the Saturday that follows that, right?” Derek deflects by changing the subject. “We’re supposed to fly up to Chicago that weekend to go to Six Flags as a surprise gift. Will you come?”

“I don’t know how long my punishment will last,” Stiles clarifies earnestly. “I would if I knew I could.”

“You can,” Derek confidently replies. “I asked your dad. He okayed you and Isaac going if you both are on your best behavior this week. Please be on your best behavior this week. Laura would love if you came and I’d like it too. Say yes.”

“Derek,” Stiles utters with fond exasperation. He can’t take the mock frown on the other teen’s face. “You’re annoying.”

Derek beams like Stiles just said what he wanted him to say. “Great, we’re agreed then. Mom’s borrowing a private plane from the airline she bought with some of the other Hale Alphas. It’s so we can all go together in one trip.”

“God, that is something only rich people say,” Stiles amusedly remarks.

Derek frowns like he doesn’t understand and Stiles earnestly overlooks how cute obliviousness looks on the other teen.

“This is ridiculous. You don’t have any idea how privileged you are,” Stiles says, shaking his head. “Most rich people aren’t as humble as you and your family are. I bet you’re generous too.”

“Well.” Derek looks a little self-conscious and shy like he’s finally catching on to what Stiles is saying. He’s blushing a little. “We have a few charities. It was maybe — one hundred and sixty-five the last time I checked?”

“Unbelievable.” Stiles shakes his head in amusement.

“What’s the point of having money if you can’t use it to better the world in some way?” Derek retorts defensively. “Can we talk about something else?”

“Nope, this is glorious. I get to poke fun at your expense. I have found you’re kryptonite, Richie Rich,” Stiles crows and laughs when Derek flushes completely. “This is the best thing. Look at God.”

Derek groans and hides his burning face behind his hands. “No one else bothers to bring this up.”

“That’s because they know what we all know. You guys are loaded. It’s almost inspiring,” Stiles declares. “I mean really. You guys have your own airline. Don’t you think that’s something worth
“Sure. If you say so,” Stiles continues cheerily. “I actually feel better.”
Derek huffs but he looks pleased when he drops his hands, his blush still slightly present.
The sheriff pokes his head out the front door. “I don’t mean to interrupt, but Stiles has chores to do, Derek. You’ll have to visit another time.”

“Sure thing, Sherriff. I’ll see you tomorrow,” Derek replies politely, moving to Stiles’s side.

“Bright and early,” his dad agrees before disappearing again.

“Peter’s upset about the Benefactor thing. You know he’s unreasonably protective of you,” Derek goes on to say. “He insists that it would have never happened had he been there. He’s upset with Kate for not telling him at the time. Kate doesn’t care of course.”

“That wasn’t the Benefactor,” Stiles states and Derek looks as confused as he feels. “Violet and Garrett confirmed it for me.”

"Violet and Garrett said? And you believed them?"
Stiles gets his point. "Yeah, I know, I know. But, like, despite everything, they've never lied to me. Sure they are...they way they are, but they are honest. Call it 'lawful evil' if you will."

Derek just makes a thoughtful, yet amused sound.

"So it’s back to square one with that situation. As for Mayor Argent, well, now we have to figure out what he’s up to."

“Yeah, I’ll leave it to you and my Uncle Peter to figure out. That’s not really my area of expertise. Not unless there’s math involved,” Derek admits with a small shrug. “I just hope you all are being as safe as you can about it.”

“You don’t have to worry. No, that’s not exactly true,” Stiles corrects. “I’m working on making it so we don’t have to worry about it.”

“Anything is possible,” Derek retorts but not without irony. “I’ll leave before your dad comes to reiterate that I should let you to your chores. Do you think you could text me before you go to bed, or will you forget again?”

Stiles just shoves his shoulder as Derek grins. “Would you get over yourself? Yes, okay? I will tattoo it on my forehead if that satisfies you.”

“That’s not what satisfies me, Stiles,” Derek merely says as he pushes Stiles’s forehead playfully with the long fingers of his left hand. “Don’t ever insult my car again. Later.”

“I make no promises.” Stiles watches the other teen slide into his car like he’s so effortlessly cool. He rolls his eyes when Derek gives him a pointed. “You’re such a needy jerk. Later.”

Derek just gives him a sarcastic grin that’s all teeth.

Stiles laughs even though he doesn’t mean to and watches as the other teen’s car roars to life and speeds off down the street tangent to his and disappears when it’s as far as he’s able to see. He turns
toward the house and his dad tells him he wants him to clean out the gutters.

Stiles hates doing that because it’s gross and scary being on the ladder that high. But he does not voice his complaints because he knows that his dad is probably aware of it already.

It’s a suitable punishment.

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Stiles immediately takes a shower when he’s done but not with the soap his uncle gave him. He trashes that right away and uses Isaac’s liquid banana smelling soap. His brother will totally complain about it but Stiles does not even care. He travels down to the kitchen once he’s situated in some sleepwear. He makes dinner just as Isaac strolls in. He decides to try a new recipe for all of them. He hasn’t been cooking like he normally does, and so he’s pretty sure his dad and Isaac have been gorging on deep-fried meat and sugary confections. He thought about it when he saw all those ice creams and steaks in the freezer. So he made a vow that they will only eat things that are good for them. Plus he misses cooking.

Out of the side of his eye he sees Isaac’s nose twitching as he puts a glass dish in the oven. He straightens and turns on the timer since the oven is already preheated. “Nope, don’t come in here until I’m done,” he says without looking. He knows Isaac is trying to investigate the source of the smell.

“I smell shrimp,” Isaac remarks but he does not step in the kitchen.

Stiles just hums as he washes his hands. “How was the movie?”

“Fine.”

Stiles snorts as he moves over to the living room and says, “I need a little more than that.” He sits down on the long couch on the side that’s closest to his brother’s favorite chair.

“We ran into Scott, Allison, and Jackson. Well maybe ‘ran into’ isn’t the right word,” Isaac says with a smug grin as he sits in his chair.

“Ha ha. I love it when you mock me,” Stiles dryly responds.

“We saw a Triple feature film. The Hunger Games. I really like the second one…Catching Fire, I think?”

Stiles nods.

“I didn’t like the third movie. It was a little boring. I ate all the popcorn and nachos before I fell asleep,” Isaac notes like he had a right to do it. “Boyd said I was snoring the whole time and everyone around us glared at me. But he likes to exaggerate and I know I don’t snore.”

Stiles gives him a dubious look.

“I do not.”

Stiles just chuckles and grabs the remote to watch an episode of I Love Lucy.

Their dad strolls down the steps just as Stiles rises to grab the food when the timer goes off. He says, “Dad, did you make that appointment with Ms. Morrell?”

“Not yet, but I’m getting to it,” he promises.
“Yeah, about that,” Stiles pulls the glass dish from the oven with some old oven mitts. He should really ask his dad to buy some new ones. “Turns out, Ms. Morrell isn’t so straight-laced. I hope I’m using the right term.”

“You are and what do you mean?” their dad questions, perplexed. He sits down at the head of table as Isaac walks over to join him. He looks just as confused. “Stiles, did she do something to you?”

“No me,” Stiles promises before their dad can get up in arms. “But Lydia says Ms. Morrell has been lacing the medicine she’s been giving her patients with mistletoe.”

“I’m not following, son,” the sheriff admits. “I’m guessing that’s a bad thing.”

“For supernatural beings. Eating it raw will damn near kill them,” Stiles explains and winces apologetically when their dad gives him a disapproving look at his language. “Sorry. But yeah. Lacing mistletoe with any kind of substance can incapacitate supernatural creatures or make their reasoning fuzzy as their abilities fly widely on their own. I’m not sure what or why she is doing this. I can’t figure out her agenda. Oh, by the way, Deucalion is not the Benefactor. He’s an Alpha working with Mayor Argent for god knows why.”

“Wait, wait, wait.” The sheriff shakes his head as he lifts his hand in a moving stop motion. “One thing at a time, son. Ms. Morrell was drugging Lydia?”

“Yes.”

“And Deucalion is not the Benefactor?”

“Yes.”

“Who is an Alpha working with Mayor Argent?”

“Correct.”

“I have a headache,” their dad says. He turns to look at Isaac, who’s looking at his older brother with an expression of consideration. “Did she ever do anything to you, Isaac?”

“No. Not really. Not anything I can remember,” is Isaac’s sincere answer. “All we ever talked about is how I wouldn’t feel lonely anymore someday. And she said my pain is going to end soon. She talked a lot about you and Stiles. Well, now that I think about it, she talked mostly about Stiles. Actually, most of my sessions with her was just her asking questions about Stiles. I used to think it was because she wanted to know how I was being treated but I’m starting to realize she was using me to spy on you.”

“Oh my — that explains everything,” Stiles exclaims as he begins serving everyone and he sits down when he's finished. “I looked her up after what she said about how I shouldn’t trust Peter. Did you know her parents mysteriously died when she was twelve? The police report said it was liked they were hacked to death by an axe.” He only knows this because it was on the drive Parrish gave him and it explains the nursery rhyme Lydia kept repeating to him about Lizzie Borden and her axe. He continues, “She later was adopted by a ‘guardian’ that I cant find record of. She married some guy when she was nineteen and he died the same way her parents had. She kept his last name though. But I touched her and she didn’t feel dishonest or like she — oh, oh! But she’s Deaton’s sister. Why didn’t he tell me?”

“That’s something you’ll have to ask Deaton,” the sheriff supposes, looking a little disgruntled. “I should have listened to my gut. She always felt a little off to me. I’ve never known anyone that was as apathetic as she was. Not any sane Human that is.”
“You’re going to look into this, aren’t you?” Stiles says, resigned to the fact. He watches their dad eat, noting that Isaac has already started.

“I have to,” the sheriff says between bites. “If there’s anyone messing with my family I have a right to it. If I find anything I’ll let you — good god, what is this?”

“A spicy shrimp, tomato with spinach sauce and orecchiette, or ‘little ears’ if we’re being specific, casserole.” Stiles gives him a self-indulgent grin. “I take it that means you approve.”

Their dad just gives him a fondly exasperated look.

“Can I have some more?” Isaac says, plate already clear.

Stiles laughs quietly. “Well I knew you would like it,” he playfully remarks.

“I want more than you gave me the first time,” Isaac self-importantly stresses.

“Right away, sir. Please, sir, don’t get up,” Stiles mock-seriously replies. He grabs Isaac’s plate and gives him two helpings this time.

“Well if I make it myself then I would take half of it,” Isaac retorts sullenly. “I’m actually being considerate. I know you and dad will want more.”

Their dad just looks amusedly fond over their antics but still says, “Settle down, boys.”

Stiles just sets Isaac’s plate down before him with a shrug.

Isaac starts eating immediately.

“Violet and Garrett won’t stop stalking me,” Stiles says when he and his dad finishes their first serving at the same time. “Mayor Argent told them to. You might want to look into that.”

“You want me to file a restraining order?” the sheriff questions with an immediate frown.

“It wouldn’t do any good. You want some more?” Stiles grabs both their plates when their dad nods. “From the way they made it sound,” he continues. “Mayor Argent has indescribable influence over the judicial system in this town. I think you should be cautious at work. I wouldn’t be surprised if a few dirty cops are spying on you for him.”

“Thank you,” their dad says when Stiles sets his plate in front of him. “I’ll take that into consideration, but none of my deputies have given me any reason to believe that their loyalty lies elsewhere.”

Stiles nods, relieved. “Do you think it’s far-fetched to think that Ms. Morrell could be working with the Benefactor?”

“At this point, I’m not surprised about anything any more,” the sheriff acknowledges. “You both stay safe and cautious when she’s around.”

Stiles and Isaac nod in understanding.

“We’re going grocery shopping tomorrow. I don’t care when. The things I found in this kitchen were unacceptable,” Stiles declares, watching as their dad and Isaac wince and share guilty looks. “Yeah. I hope you enjoyed whatever unhealthy food you had today, because it was your last.”

The sheriff sighs.
“Can I have some more?” Isaac says after a few seconds.

“Help yourself, buddy. I think me and dad are tapping out,” Stiles replies as his dad shakes his head in agreement.

Isaac is more than happy to take his word for it and clears out the rest of casserole.

Stiles shares an amused look with their father. “Well there goes the leftovers,” he mutters and makes an annoyed sound when Isaac purposefully bumps his elbow into the back of his head. “Did you see that, dad? I want to file a restraining order! I am taking him to court and you have to act as my witness. You need to go take some pictures of my bruises!” Stiles exclaims loudly as he pretends to sway like he’s dizzy.

“Sure, Stiles. I’ll get right on that,” the sheriff declares, humoring him.

Isaac rolls his eyes as he sits back down. “Dramatic.”

Stiles childishly sticks his tongue out at him.

“Now,” the sheriff says, sitting back as he pats his full stomach. “Tell me about your day.”

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Stiles goes up to his room when their dad makes Isaac clean the kitchen and the upstairs bathroom since he didn’t mow the lawn today. He texts Parrish and asks him what his email is. Parrish sends him three question marks before complying.

Stiles spends the next ten minutes compiling together all the information he has from his research of Dragon-kind.

Parrish responds right away with gratefulness in the form of emojis and that makes Stiles laugh. He texts back, giving him a serious reminder that he needs to talk to Isaac about what they have to talk about. Parrish takes a little longer to reply to that. When he does, he says that he will do it next weekend and he informs Parrish that they will be out of town that weekend; so Parrish promises to do it the weekend after.

Stiles unwillingly accepts before he boots up his computer to have another video chat with Scott to discuss his day in full as Scott listens kindly, interjecting to ask about the things he doesn’t understand. They go from that to talking about how their parents may be secretly dating and waiting for the right time to bring it up when its official, which they can understand.

They also talk about his times with the Hales and, to Stiles’s grief, his relationship with Derek. Scott just looks at him like he desperately wants to laugh while exclaiming how ignorant he is. Stiles pretends not to know what he means because he certainly doesn’t like to think about it. They end the conversation with a promise from Stiles he’ll introduce the gang to his magical talking tree.

Stiles stretches loudly as Isaac passes his door, purposefully complaining loudly about how someone has been using his soap. He calls Peter and patiently waits while Peter goes on a seething, discreet rant about how careless Stiles is being and threatens to lock him in his own room if he keeps jumping into things blindly.

Stiles grins quietly and shifts from side to side in his chair when he can hear Kate jumping into the lecture with Peter from a distance and Stiles realizes Peter has him on speaker and he rolls his eyes.

“Okay, mom and dad. I will not run towards the danger, even though the danger runs towards me,”
Stiles sarcastically replies and when it sounds like Kate will start her own lecture, he adds, “Deucalion isn’t the Benefactor.”

“What the fuck is a Deucalion?” Kate gracefully questions.

Peter hums disapprovingly.

Kate ignores him and says, “Seriously, Stiles. You better start talking.”

Stiles winces a little. If Kate is actually calling him by his first name, then he knows he’s in trouble. He placatingly responds, “He’s the blind guy you’ve been looking for. You know, the one that fed Kali’s puppy a piece of chocolate laced with distemper?”

Peter’s goes silent for a few seconds before he says, “He’s been skulking around a dog park this whole time?”

“Why don’t you talk like a normal twenty-two year old?” Stiles asks as he makes a face.

Kate snickers.

“Stiles…” Peter sounds like he’s speaking through gritted teeth. “Focus. The blind man?”

“Oh, that. Well,” Stiles continues thoughtfully. “His name is Deucalion and he’s very creepy and evil. Like next level evil. This guy is literally insane. He makes Hannibal Lector look like a kitten. He went on and on merrily about his mom and his brothers, who he paid to have skinned alive, while looking at the people playing with their dogs.”

“That’s not what’s important presently,” Peter implores with a sigh. “How is it that this Deucalion was able to incapacitate you? Virtues aren’t so easily subdued. Explain precisely what he did to you. Kate informed me that when you and my nephew found you, you were pale and shaken as you bled from your ears.”

“I was,” Stiles agrees and the thought of it makes him sick. “He apparently knows how to put a Virtue down. Well maybe that is an extreme term. Immobilize? He had this wooden walking stick that had intricate markings. It looked like some kind of rune symbols. My cousin Lydia said it was coated with her tears and screams. She didn’t seem like she wanted to tell him how he managed that either.” He suddenly remembers that he forgot to ask Deaton about the runestone from his dreams. He makes a promise to himself that he will remember tomorrow. “Anyway, that may be something you can look into for me. I’m a little swamped at the moment. I have an apprenticeship with Deaton. He’s teaching me how to hone my magic.”

“Wonderful,” Peter retorts placidly and Stiles can’t tell what he’s thinking. “Are you certain he can be trusted?”

“Well…”

“Stiles.”

“I am definitely slightly mostly sure,” Stiles quickly responds. “It’s his sister I don’t trust. Though I’m not sure she’s his actual sister. I once read that Druids consider their counterparts like siblings. Brothers and sisters without sharing blood, you know? I know Druid parents only restrict themselves to only having one child so they don’t overpopulate the masses.”

“Riveting,” Peter mutters cynically.
Kate snorts and Stiles totally knows she’s rolling her eyes at him as she pops her gum.

“Will you stop being grumpy with me? This is a good thing,” Stiles promises. “This way I can actually be useful.”

“Say that again and I will punch you,” Kate immediately says in a way that’s almost impressive. “Your worth surpasses things in ways you can’t imagine. You’re not useful, Stiles.”

“What you can do is useful,” Peter agrees. “Like you’ve said before. You’re not some mechanical toy with a string we pull when we want to amuse ourselves.”

“Seriously, were you born in the wrong time, Peter?” Stiles questions, heavily amused. “Also, why didn’t you tell me that Ms. Morrell was some kind of psychopath?”

“I didn’t have any evidence to prove it,” Peter merely replies. “Call it intuition. You’re familiar with that sensation, aren’t you?”

Stiles rolls his eyes because Peter has really dry humor.

“I’ll do some research on this Deucalion and get back to you,” Peter decides. “Perhaps I’ll even talk to Jordan to see if he can provide some answers.”

“First names! You must be speaking good terms with him,” Stiles supposes.

“It’s ‘on speaking terms’. That sentence was grammatically incorrect,” Peter cleverly deflects. “Goodbye, Stiles.”

“See you Monday, buttercup,” Kate adds before the line goes dead.

Stiles goes to the back of his closet to dig out the black drive given to him by Parrish. He pulls it from a shoebox and briefly wonders if he should leave it in his computer since he doesn’t have to worry about hiding everything from his dad and Isaac. But then he remembers his uncle must be working with Ms. Morrell and he decides against it. He browses through the articles Parrish compiled about Mayor Argent’s unclaimed children (most them are fully grown and some are even adults around the same age as Peter and Parrish) and he spends a full five three minutes scrolling through the repulsively long list with a nauseous feeling. He reaches the end of the list with Mayor Argent’s most recent offspring and he’s startled when he realizes that Jackson, Isaac, Erica, and Malia were fathered by him as well.

This means that Jackson, Erica, and Malia are siblings, and are adopted.

Stiles is dumbfounded. He wonders how this could even be possible. Well he knows how (and that is definitely not something he wants to think about) but he doesn’t get who they came from. He tears through as many articles he can to figure it out (aside from Isaac because he knows where he came from) and he has to stand to grab the bulletin/whiteboard from his closet and flips it so he’s on the bulletin side. He prints out all the articles dated before Isaac, Jackson, Malia, and Erica were born and tacks them to the board. It has to mean something that they were all born around the same time.

Somehow Erica and Isaac were born on the same day but they are by no means twins. Stiles can’t help but to think that maybe Erica wasn’t adopted because, as he looks closely, she has Ines Lahey’s features. From what he understands about the origins of Werecats, all genders can reproduce. The Reyes Twins, Ricky and Carter, were on that list as well, and the three of them all favor Ines, which could only mean — all of them are Mayor Argent and Ines’s kids.

Ines cut out his tongue before his dad could question him. Stiles has to think about why he would
have done that. He has to think about why he and his sons started the fire that almost killed Isaac, and took the only family he knew away from him.

“Come on, Stiles,” he mutters to himself. “You know this. You know this.”

Stiles tries to think really hard. Tries to put the pieces together.

The Laheys started the Hale fire, which kills all of Peter and Talia’s immediate family (all of the brothers and sisters they had, their parents, close cousins and so on), and the Reyes started the Lahey fire. But why?

Talia was starting her own Pack at this point. Her aunts and uncles, and cousins would have come from various states to join her brood, if she had offered. But Talia's mother still had her own Pack, her own family and Peter was younger then. Practically over the age of a preteen. He stops when he sees an article that’s dated around the same time Malia and Jackson were born. It was closely around the time when the Hale fire took place. Which probably means that their parents, or other parent, died shortly after Malia and Jackson were born.

Holy hell, they probably don’t even know that they’re adopted.

Stiles get shaky as he pins all the articles related to the Hale fire on the board. He steps back and stares at them without blinking.

So…that would mean that mean two of Talia’s younger sisters (who had to have been just a little older than Peter) fell prey to Mayor Argent’s repulsive fixations. But that would also mean Talia or Talia's mother helped her sisters give their children away because they were way too young to know what to do with them. But that might also mean that Talia’s mother and father might not have known who the father of those children were. Talia could have done it to protect her sisters and her niece and nephew. Maybe because her whole family probably despised the Argents. There may have always been animosity between the two families that could date back to the first origins of both bloodlines.

Someone might have killed those children without thinking twice. So it's only logical that Talia likely gave Malia and Jackson to the Tates and the Whittemores to ensure that they would be well looked after. Though the timing was perfect and only by chance because she couldn’t have known what came after.

Jackson and Malia are only a month apart; with Jackson being older of the two, and god that explains why he looks so much like he could be Peter’s brother while Malia and Cora almost share similar features.

Jackson and Malia are Hales and are Talia and Peter's nephew and niece. That means they're Laura, Derek, and Cora's first cousins.

Stiles reaches blindly for the desk chair behind him and sits down, trying to swallow this truth.

Peter probably doesn’t even know, and he’ll be furious once he finds out because outside of Talia, he thinks he has no immediate family to speak of.

Stiles tries to shake the shock away before he turns to scroll through more articles as he bites on the fingernails of his left hand as his right leg bounces anxiously. He works on Erica, Ricky, and Carter’s derivation. There’s a nine-year gap between the siblings. From what he finds out about Ines’s age, it’s quite possible that these exchanges were mutual and Stiles get sick all over again. This just means that Mayor Argent prayed on the younger man’s infatuation.
It’s completely explains why he cut out his tongue, and why he and his sons started the Lahey fire. He would not be surprised if Ines did it out some misguided affection. But that does not explain why he was at the hospital. He pulls up the date he saw Ines signed in and he realizes it was the same time Meredith killed her roommate before hanging herself. But she’s not dead and he doesn’t know why she was turned into a Vampire.

He suddenly remembers that Mayor Argent showed Hannibal a picture of Ines, saying that the man frequently visited her for some reason. He said that Meredith keeps trying to target him. That she works closely with the Benefactor. It could be completely be possible that Ines was trying to get some answers out of the woman on the Benefactor’s behalf because the Benefactor may have known what Ines didn’t want anyone else to know, including his own children. Which would be that Mayor Argent was their father and that meant explaining to the rest of the world just what he was.

So that could also mean Ines was blackmailed into killing Lydia’s and Danny’s family. Danny helped by compiling and identifying all of Mayor Argent’s children in a list and Ines, Ricky, and Carter tried to claw them all to death ensuring that no would talk. But that would also mean that Lydia’s parents weren’t killed because they knew something about Mayor Argent, but because Ms. Morrell wanted solidify guardianship over Lydia because she’s a Banshee and Banshees sees everything.

It’s not Ms. Morrell that wants to use Lydia. It’s the Benefactor.

Ines Reyes fled town with his sons and he left Erica behind because the Benefactor has some purpose for all of Mayor Argent’s kids. He had to leave Erica behind because he couldn’t lose all of his kids. So he’s sacrificing Erica and that is just so wrong.

There are four recent children whose father is Mayor Argent. Then there’s Ms. Morrell, who’s quite possibly a Druid like Deaton. There’s something he’s missing and he can’t figure out what. Something that explains why the Benefactor is going through all this trouble to dig up Mayor Argent's most dangerous secrets. Which, in theory, means that the Benefactor has a vendetta against the older man - but why?

Stiles sighs and stands to pin the rest of the articles, tying some green, yellow, and red yarn to everything he’s able connect one to the other. Then he yawns tiredly before pushing it into the sanctuary of his closet. He also hides the black drive before he flips the light off and does the same with his room’s light switch. He closes the door and goes to his window to open it. He likes the feel and smell of the night air, especially after a blanket of mist (which usually comes from the mountains up north) settles over Beacon Hills. It’s usually rich with the earthy smell of grass and trees.

He grabs Derek’s wolves and settles into his bed with him. He grabs his phone, hooking it up to his charger (grateful that Isaac returned it) and he sets his alarm. He texts Derek saying:

*Sarcastically annoyed text message with spiteful insults*

**Cheerful response overlooking broody dramatic text message**

*Don’t start. I can keep this up all night.*

*I wasn’t the one that started it.*

*Believe whatever you want to. I did my part by texting.*

*I thank you for your sacrifice.*
Stiles snorts and rolls his eyes.

Are you anxious?

You couldn’t possibly know that.

You’re right but you just confirmed it.

I cannot BELIEVE you used my own trick on me

¯\_(°_°)_/¯

God I hate that emoji so much.

¯\_(°_°)_/¯

I swear I will end this conversation.

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OMG I am so upset I laughed at that stupid thing!

Well, my work here is done <(__ u __)> 

DEREK!!!!

Why are you anxious?

I just have a lot on my mind, and I wish I could tell you but I can’t right now, okay? I don’t think this is the right time.

Okay. (:

Stiles frowns mostly from surprise.

What do you mean ‘okay’? I thought you would be pushy about this.

No, Stiles. I respect your wishes. I only pry when I think it really matters to, and this supersedes that, so if you aren’t ready to talk about it, I’m not going to push the subject. I want to be considerate of your feelings because you’re always considerate of mine.

Not really always.

Yes. Always.

Stiles gets that warm fuzzy feeling again and he has to roll over for a moment to hide his red face. When he’s got himself together, he replies:

Thank you.

You’re welcome. (:

Since your in a cheerful mood, can I bargain for no more emojis?

Nope. I will not concede on that. This is who I am. Take it or leave it.
You're unbelievable.

¯\_(ツ)_/¯

Stiles sighs, resigned to the fact he won’t convince the other teen to give up the habit.

**Can I drive you and Isaac to school Monday? I'll drop you guys off at home too.**

Stiles can’t even say why he likes the fact that Derek would even ask that instead of telling him or be overbearing about it. He just ends feeling flustered again.

**Yeah, why not. Our bikes could use a break anyway.**

**Awesome. But I will make you walk if you say ANYTHING bad about my Camaro.**

*I make absolutely no promise.*

*I want you to know I'm sighing in annoyance.*

(:

**Touché. Later.**

You’re supposed to say ‘goodnight’.

**L A T E R.**


(: You have permission to sleep now.

*Go swallow some cinnamon.*

**Now that is just cruel and unusual. :)**

**L A T E R.**

Stiles is not even surprised when Derek doesn’t even respond to that. He’s probably brooding like a moody teenager. The thought makes him laugh a little as he settles into his covers and puts them over his head, hiding him from the rest of the world. He sighs as he snuggles Derek’s wolves close because the other teen wouldn’t know anyway. He probably already smells like Derek anyway.

Or so he’s been told.
It’s Sunday and Stiles regrets that he set his alarm for 6 am. He spends at least ten minutes of that time just blinking up at his ceiling with drowsiness as his lashes stick together wetly every time he blinks. He keeps yawning, and it’s the reason why his eyes are so damp as he thinks that this hour of the day is ungodly. It feels like the one time he snuck a few sips of whisky with his old friend Sebastian, who got it from his firefighter father’s private study, and they passed it back and forth between them as they sat on Sebastian’s roof. It made him choke every time and he stopped after the third sip because he realized that he was only twelve and that it was dumb that they were doing this. He knew his father would pitch a fit if he ever found out because he dealt with that demon four years ago. But the little he did have made him feel like he was dizzy, and he got so sick with a splitting headache and sloshing stomach the morning after. He promised he would never ever do that again.

Stiles scrubs his face and chants ‘get up’ over and over to himself until he actually does it. He totally does not take a shower first and change because he is only going to get his street clothes dirty. He trots down his steps and sees a note on the whiteboard magnetized to the fridge. It reads: Gone fishing. Back by dinner. No cellphone reception – do NOT do anything that is outside the limits of your punishment, and yes I will know. Have a good day. Clean the garage.

He gives a lazy stretch before he opens the fridge and grabs the orange juice (which is behind Isaac’s fancy organic coconut milk), twisting the top off to drink it because he’s sure no one will know he’d done it anyway; besides, everyone does it. He returns the cap and situates the orange juice back where it was as he yawns. He makes his way across the cold floor and out the back door. He shivers against the early morning air, which is damp and chilly with last night’s fog but he likes it, always kind of has. It makes more sense now since he knows he’s Fae. He watches the sea of fireflies already floating around like flickering lamps that hover and it almost feels like they have been waiting for him.

Stiles has always felt this strong pull towards nature, and he remembers how he used to beg his parents to take him camping or to the beach or the zoo. He almost craved those activities. Nature was his crutch in this world and it satisfied the aching loneliness in him that he never understood. When he would go on field trips to the zoo, the animals would always stop and stare at him before they tried to move closer; and when he went to aquariums, the underwater creatures would always follow him from behind their glass cages.

It feels weird thinking about that after all this time but he apparently came from Faerie, which must be practically flushed with all of nature’s finer assets. He thinks about how bees, butterflies, birds, fireflies, cats, dogs, and other animals and insects he can’t think to name would circle him when he was toddler. He was never afraid like most children are about these things because he was used to having different types of nature gravitate towards him like they were curious about who and what he was. His mother used to watch it all with this soft knowing smile that he never understood at the time.

Stiles shakes these thoughts away before he makes his way to Nana and climbs her, loving the way the moisture on the bark feels on his hands and feet. The fireflies continue to float around but circle him once in a while as though they want him to acknowledge him. He goes as high as he can on Nana, which is impressively high, and sits on the branch like a kid settled on the shoulder of their older relative. He takes in the sight of the early morning sun peeking from behind the veil of a dark curtain that’s bleeding into a powder blue. It looks like a bright yellow cookie being pulled out a sea of violets and oranges.
Stiles calls for his magic and it comes reluctantly, and he sends it a wave of apologies that only get’s volleyed back at him before they both come to an understanding. His magic begins rising up in him like a hot spring before covering him with an ethereal flush of spiraling symbols he still doesn’t understand. His eyes warm with honey gold and the colors of the sunrise intensifies into precious metal threads that spread out to the world to the houses he can see and the ones he can’t like a gilded spider web. He is startled when his magic sends him waves of knowledge that explains that these are the lines of Fate; the strings of life and all its connections between the creatures on the world of Man. Deaton once told him that he’d be ready to challenge the power of his magic when he was able to see this. Well he didn’t say that exactly but his magic seems to be taking creative liberty with those words.

He grabs a juicy peach hiding away behind a small curtain of purple-blue leaves. He realizes with a smile that roses with translucent petals are beginning to blossom among the branches. They have a beautiful shine to them that almost make them look like they’re made of glass. He reaches out to touch them and notes that they are way softer than they look. His smile turns into a grin of pride because he did this. He’s responsible for calling on Nana and the beauty that comes with her. He called for the best tree he could think of and it came. He turns the peach back and forth in his hands as his magic sends the impression of cutting the peach into two halves before grinding them both into two separate servings of paste. Then there’s another impression of grabbing a handful of dirt, chewing it and then spitting it into the paste so that it can be mixed with it.

Stiles wants to question it — he does question it (because the latter half of that was pretty gross) but his magic conveniently decides to retreat like it didn’t feel the wave of confusion he presses at it. He rolls his eyes but he can’t help but to be fond of his magic because it does feel like a close friend. Then he realizes, without even thinking about it, that his magic would probably die to save him. This affection surges through him like a lightening strike and his magic hesitates before it sends back an assuring touch that confirms his thoughts and what he’s feeling. He huffs and carefully climbs down before he faces Nana, putting his right hand to the middle of triquetra. His magic surges up suddenly sinking into the engravings of the triquetra and the ethereal blue of his glow lights up the symbol up.

Nana’s face appears and she chuckles. “My, you’ve got your hands full with your magic. Tried to reach into me to see what holds me together. That almost tickled. I politely told it no. Like a toddler trying to climb their way up to grab the cookie jar from where it’s settled atop of the refrigerator. And certainly enthusiastic isn’t it? You know, I got that impression every time you showed me your thoughts. Stubborn to boot as well. No wonder it kept rising up when you tried to fight it down.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to get that too. It’s a bit —” Stiles tries to think of the right words. “— snooty? But maybe it’s different word for that.”

“Pretentious?” Nana offers.

Stiles nods. “Yeah. I think that’s it.” His magic whips around him like angry storm controlling the direction of a raging sea. “Whoops, looks like I’ve made it mad.”

Nana gives another hearty chuckle. “Now, what was it you needed from me, dearie?”

“What does it mean to see the strings of Fate? Deaton called it a line but they look more like glimmering threads of gold. What does that mean?” Stiles questions. “Do you mind if I pace? Deaton asked me to estimate the length and width of my backyard.”

“I don’t mind,” Nana promises. “Now what was it? Ah, yes. You wanted to know about the meaning behind of the strings of Fate. I’ll tell you. Deaton was not wrong in his definition. Druids actually have their own tongue, their own language. That was probably the closest Human term he could translate it to. Fate and Peril are ambiguous beings that spend the duration of this existing era
of the universe Humans like to call the Milky Way. They determine what has and may happen. Now, before any of the realms were made, the Faceless took the heart of the brightest star and formed it into Fate and the darkest heart from the largest black hole and formed it into Peril thinking that this will keep balance. Fate was blessed with a spinning wheel made of stars and thin yarns made of gold to thread prosperity, peace, and love. To Peril they gave over black grains made from the crushed ice of dead stars turned into black grains so that Peril could sow seeds of temptation, strife, and death. They gave Peril and Fate charge over all the realms and the destinies of every living creature known. Peril and Fate fought with each other because each of them would try to rule over the other and become their master.

“This caused imbalance and destruction. So the Faceless took both of their eyes and planted them at the base of the Tree of Time. So since Fate and Peril did not have eyes to see, they created Virtues and Vices. They are the children of Fate and Peril. They continue the work of their parents by being diligent to keep balance. But sometimes Vices try to overtake Virtues, and sometimes Virtues try to overtake Vices. So Fate and Peril agreed amongst themselves that they would gift their children with the system of numbers to implement a hierarchy to ensure that there was not an overpopulation.”

Nana continues to say, “But as time went on, Men got greedy, Vices and Virtues started to wane thin, and because of this Man hid all the supernatural until their children forgot about it and turned it all into myth, bedtime stories, theories and skepticism. That is why the supernatural creatures must hide away in fear of death, for Man kills what they do not understand. Now this is where the system of One through Seven comes into play. Sevens are so rare and are only formed every millennia when there is a strong imbalance. But you must be warned, dearie. Where there is a Seven of Virtues, you can most definitely be sure there is a Seven of Vices.

“It is time now. Humans must understand and accept that the Old World of their ancestors must return,” Nana goes on to say. “It is the end of Man’s dominion in this world. All that is will fade away so that what was will return. You’ve been given the charge of being an ambassador of peace. You must understand that the Seven of Vices will work even harder to destroy the foundation you are trying to build because they are diplomats of oppression. You must not lose this battle. There is much that will be sacrificed but this is a truth of any war. Are you ready for that? Can you handle it? This battle can start tomorrow, or perhaps a week from now, a month, decades. Neither of knows for sure. Will you be ready?”

Stiles is just staring at her with wide eyes, face pale with fear and uncertainty.

“Hush your worries and quiet your fears, dearie,” Nana says in a soothing voice. “It is not my intention to frighten you. I speak wisdom and strength over your life. I just want you to be prepared, so that when you pass from this life onto the next, you will be greeted by the Faceless and Fate and they will all say ‘Well done’.”

Stiles swallows and his hands feel a little shaky.

“Oh dear. You are shaking.” Nana makes a thoughtful sound. “Do not tell anyone, not even Deaton about what I’m going to say to you. If you so wish it, if you want to put your mind and heart at ease, you must fast for one week. You must pray and pray to the Faceless until they supply you with the energy you need to go to the Nemeton. Then you must sit at the center and cry out with your mind, heart, voice, and magic. Fate will answer your cries because you are its child and it would never abandon its children. Fate formed you with stardust and love. Then you were given over to the Lady of the Garden so that you may be kin to Faerie because they are light and love.”

Stiles nods and shakes out his trembling hands.

“Go on then. I’m to understand that Deaton instructed you to crawl,” Nana supposes before she
disappears into the triquetra.

When Stiles gets over his initial shock, he sighs and gets on his hands and does as he was asked. He hopes to god he gets it right. He would very much like not to have to crawl again.

As soon as he’s finished, he swipes the peach he left by Nana and takes it in the house with him (along with a handful of dirt). He does as his magic had told him to, cutting it in to two halves, disposing of the core before grabbing two containers. He grabs and plugs in the electronic beater before dumping both halves into the mixing bowl.

“Okay, this is so weird,” Stiles says as he eyes the dirt in his hand. He had scooped up a patch of it near Nana’s largest exposed root because he figured everything around Nana must be organic in some way. Or so he is trying to convince himself as he picks all the pieces of grass from it. “God, I really cant believe I’m doing but — but I — I trust you. Please don’t send me on some wild goose chance.”

His magic sends him waves of benevolent wit.

“Glad you find this funny,” Stiles mutters before he throws his head back and takes all the dirt like he’s taking medicine and what the hell. It tastes like the best candy he’s ever had. He tries not to freak out or swallow it even though he really, really wants to. He resists the urge as his magic swirls a cloud of smugness in his head. He quickly spits the dirt in the mixing bowl with the peaches when it’s damp enough. “Shut up,” he says, sending waves of annoyance to his magic as he uses a napkin to scrub his mouth clean.

Mixing the peaches and the dirt into paste only takes five minutes. He grabs to plastic containers and divides the paste evenly before he pops the top on both of them. He checks the time and he happily notes that it’s 7:30 am. He makes his way to the stairs and up them to tuck away into the bathroom. The first thing he does is brush his teeth regardless of the fact that the dirt still tastes like sweet pudding or the leftovers of cake mix in the bowl it was stirred in.

It takes him twenty minutes to get clean and dressed. He pockets his phone and keys before trotting down the steps with his book bag stuffed with the runestone from his dreams, the journal of Virtues (that he’s quickly beginning to realize is not a journal, but rather a bible), and the fruit paste he made. He locks the door once he steps over the threshold and jogs over to his bike, straddling it before he peddles to the antique shop.

Stiles gets there at exactly 8:15 am, and stubbornly ignores when Violet and Garrett roll up across the street in that stupid black truck. He unlocks the door and quickly gets inside to lock it again in case Violet or Garrett get any ideas. He dumps his book bag in front of the glass case and spends the next forty-five minutes cleaning up the mess he made. He’s able to finish one shelf which means, if you add the two he did yesterday, that he’s done three so far. He tries not to think about how there are ten bookshelves all together. He keeps chanting ‘Only seven more to go. Eyes on the prize. Eyes on the prize’. His magic stays quiet through all of this and it makes him a little suspicious.

Deaton appears from what feels like thin air with a steaming cup of coffee at exactly 9:00 am and Stiles will deny he shrieks while hurling a book at the older man. Deaton gracefully avoids it by leaning slightly to the right and it slaps against the wall behind him. He flips lazily through the Grimoire and says, “Careful, Mr. Stilinski. I would hate to have to charge you for anything you break.”

“Sorry,” Stiles says with his heart still racing. “I have something I want to show you. I’m hoping you can explain to me what it is since, you know, you’re a well of knowledge.”
Deaton just raises a single eyebrow. “First things first,” he says and looks at him pointedly.

Stiles hesitates before he gives an estimate of his backyard.

Deaton says, “Roll, Mr. Stilinski.”

“What!” Stiles exclaims. “I thought that was you being funny. Like a dry sense of humor funny. You’re not really going to make me roll around like an idiot? Please.”

Deaton just calmly takes a long sip of his coffee.

Stiles grumbles before he leans down to empty the contents of his book bag. “So this journal you gave me. You said it was a journal, and the first time I read it, it didn’t read like a journal. There were just scriptures in it. It reads like a bible.”

“I’m happy you finally came to that conclusion,” Deaton responds and he slaps the Grimoire shut when he notices Stiles trying and failing to glance subtly at the contents. “Just as Humans have their bibles, each of the supernatural community have their own; some written and other verbally passed down.”

“Oh.” Stiles takes that into consideration. “So, should I start reading it like a bible? Where would I start?”

“As we do with all things. From the beginning,” Deaton answers. “In fact, I would like you to read the first thirty pages.”

Stiles makes a face. “Do I need to recite to you what I learned?”

“That is your choice. I am a Druid, not a Virtue. This is something that only the Mother Queen can educate you on. She is spirit, and so that makes her both Preacher and Prophet. I cannot teach you to pray or how to pray, but she can. She knows of what is required of Virtues, and in my understanding is that Virtues are the children of Fate.”

“Oh! That reminds me. I never mentioned that I’ve been seeing the threads of Fate. Well then again, I kind of didn’t want to at first because of what it would mean. But now I am ready to learn about it and become who I truly am. Maybe you can tell me more about that? Why I see those? What’s the purpose of them? I saw them when I was watching the sunrise and it looked like they were coming from the Sun. Is that special? I think it means something special. But how could I know, you know? Meanwhile my magic is telling me to grind up a peach into paste and chew on dirt and mix it together. Then I have to divide it evenly, but I’m like, well what exactly am I supposed to do with that? But my magic won’t tell me. Nana agreed with me that it’s kind of pretentious.”

His magic bristles.

Stiles laughs. “Yeah its pretty annoyed with me right now, um —” He fidgets sheepishly. “What were we talking about?”

“Your education on the religion of Virtues. The Mother Queen can instruct you on this matter,” Deaton responds, unruffled. He lifts his cup of coffee to his mouth and takes a quick sip. “Legend decrees that Fate sealed itself in the glory and fire of the Sun; while Peril sealed itself in the cold and isolation of the Moon. It’s also said that Peril is responsible for the ever-changing face of the moon, which dictates the will, power, and influence it has over nature. Vices are able to see glittering clouds of the black grain of Peril and again, Virtues can see the interwoven gold strings of Fate.”

“Yeah I wondered about that. I saw Paige, this girl I used to know, but I don’t mean that she’s dead,
just that she’s not here, in state.” Stiles shakes his head. “Anyway I saw her thread but it was connected to Kate, which was weird because they hated each other.”

“But they did interact,” Deaton states as a fact rather than a question.

Stiles nods.

“Whenever we talk to someone, glance at, pass on the street, we become connected. That’s the best I can translate from my native tongue. You will have to continue your studies with the bible and consult with the Mother Queen,” Deaton advises. “Again, I do not have much expertise in that subject.”

Stiles nods again.

“As for the fruit paste,” Deaton goes on to say. He purposefully lifts his mug of coffee and takes a slow sip as Stiles fidgets. He lowers it and says, “Obviously you are meant to feed it to someone who is unwell. Two people it would seem. Can you think of anyone who would need such an aid currently?”

Stiles immediately thinks of Danny and Lydia, likes it’s a vision and he gets breathless with hope he tries not to feel. Because if this comes to nothing he’ll be crushed. He hates that feeling because it’s the worst in the world.

Deaton takes another sip of his coffee and stares at him with this look of **knowing**. It’s kind of scary and cool.

“One last thing,” Stiles announces as he shakes himself out of his thoughts. “Do you know what this is?”

“It’s a runestone last time I checked,” Deaton says with a placid expression and yeah, he has a dry sense of humor. “You want to know the meaning behind it, I gather.”

“I’d appreciate it,” Stiles promises.

Deaton retrieves a monocle from his pocket and picks up the runestone and studies it quietly.

Stiles focuses on the sound of the clocks chiming on the walls so that he doesn’t fidget. “So…” He tries to be as delicate about this as possible. “Is Ms. Morrell really your sister? I’m guessing not because I know that Druids keep it to just having one child.”

Deaton just makes a thoughtful sound.

Stiles continues, “She was feeding pills to her patients that were laced with mistletoe. In my book, that’s really not a good thing. Especially since one of those patients was my cousin.”

Deaton just makes another thoughtful sound.

“Did you know? I know you can be all vague and mysterious like Batman, but I just feel like maybe you could have mentioned this. Possibly.” Stiles waits for his response. “Please say something.”

“She is not my sister by blood but my culture dictates that I am to acknowledge her as one since we are not in an intimate relationship,” Deaton eventually explains. “Therefore she is not mine and I am not hers. When two gather together to be of one flesh, they dictate what is best for the other and their bond. Mr. Stilinski, you must understand that I cannot impede on her plans, as she cannot with mine. It is against my culture’s law for a Druid to kill another. My judgment on the matter is not unbiased.
In times past, each Druid aligned their lives with either a Virtue or a Vice to teach them what would be required of them in this world. We choose our own paths as Druids, and there is one rule we cannot escape. We cannot kill any living creature. We will die otherwise.”

“But — but her parents!” Stiles exclaims.

“There are other ways of killing,” Deaton calmly remarks. “I believe most would call it assassination. As I am a doctor, she is a general; she follows the doctrines of war. Again, as I’ve stated, we choose our own path. She is walking the way of the gallows. It is my choice to travel down the road of morality. It’s very simple: one cannot serve two masters. There is no back and forth. Once you start the trail, there is no going back. There is no cheating. The road will not change but the scenery may.”

Stiles does his best to swallow that information and understand what it implies.

“Mr. Stilinski, what do you know about chess?” Deaton says suddenly as he sits the runestone on the cover of the Grimoire and pulls out a chessboard and sets it up.

“Not very much,” Stiles says as he watches the older man put the pieces in the right place. “I just look at it and just know. I win no matter what it is. I’ve always been that way.”

“Chess is a game,” Deaton says and uses his hands to lean against the edge of the glass case. “Why do you think Virtues are so good at them? Games are supposed to be a devices of chance, and of fortune, as it can go either way.”

“Instinct,” Stiles remarks as he lifts his right hand and begins to chew on his thumbnail. “I can feel what needs to happen and how to get there.”

“What is on the chessboard?” Deaton questions without looking down as he stares at the younger man. “Outside of the fact that there are 64 squares arranged in an eight-by-eight grid with sixteen pieces.


“There are rules,” Deaton says, interceding. “What does this game imitate?”


“Look at the board,” Deaton instructs and he watches as the younger man does. “What piece are you, Mr. Stilinski.”

“I don’t know.”

“Yes you do.”

“I don’t. I don’t know.”

“Which piece are you, Mr. Stilinski?” Deaton persists. “I know what piece I am. I am the Rook along with the Mother Queen.” He knocks those over. “I’ll ask you again. What piece are you?”

Stiles frowns stubbornly for a moment before he reaches out and knocks the King over. “There. That’s what you want me to pick, right?”

“You picked it, Mr. Stilinski. I had no influence on it. You could have picked any other piece. The Pawn. The Rook. The Knight. The Queen.” Deaton looks at him intuitively. “You picked the King.
What did I tell you?”

Stiles jerks at that and is reminded of Lydia’s words.

“We make our own choices,” Deaton goes on to say, smoothly overlooking his reaction. “Subconsciously you know that you are the King. Deny it all you wish, but you understand the truth.”

“That what? That I’m the most important piece since I’m a Virtue,” Stiles provides and sighs. “If you and Nana are my Rooks, and I’m the King. Who’s my Queen?”

Deaton gives him a knowing look. “Why do you ask questions you already know the answer to?”

Stiles flushes, caught. That is his worst habit. “Lydia. Lydia is my Queen.” He waits a moment after he knocks the piece over. He gets serious about it because there is an important message behind this. “My dad and Talia are my Bishops.” He knocks those pieces over. “Peter and Kate are my Knights.” He knocks those pieces over as well. “The Pawns are — are — I feel bad for saying it like that.”

“I understand. Society has warped the meaning behind being a Pawn,” Deaton comments. “It is not always negative. Think about it. Pawns do all they can to help the cause, which is to protect the King. Go on,” he encourages. “Continue.”

Stiles takes a deep breath through his nose and exhales through his mouth. He listens to his magic, which is curled up in his gut. “Mayor Argent. Violet and Garrett. They call it protecting an investment.” He knocks over three pieces. “Deucalion, in a weird creepy evil way. He didn’t try to kill me. He wanted to see what I could do because he’s working with Mayor Argent and he wanted to be sure that Mayor Argent wasn’t wasting his time.” He knocks over another. He has four left. “Kira, though I’m not really sure really at this point, so maybe Cora.” He knocks the piece over. “Laura.” He knocks over another piece. There are two left. “I can’t think of anyone else.”

“Yes you can,” Deaton emphasizes with a considering gaze.

Stiles inhales and exhales. He closes his eyes as his cheeks burn. “Derek.” He blindly knocks the piece over. “Isaac.” He knocks the last piece over.

Deaton nods once in approval.

“You know that was mortifying for me, right?” Stiles grumbles as he bites his fingernails.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand,” Deaton responds coolly. “Now focus on the other side.”

Stiles drops his hands and chews on his bottom lip.

“What stands out to you?” Deaton questions.

“Um.” Stiles tries to think. “It’s a mirror to the other side.”

“Which would mean?” Deaton presses.

“The King is the Benefactor,” Stiles says but frowns when the older doesn’t touch the piece. “What? What did I do wrong?”

“It’s a mirror, Mr. Stilinski,” Deaton stresses.

Stiles feels his heart skip a beat. “The King is a Vice,” he says faintly as he gets a little sick. “Oh my god. The Benefactor is a Vice.”
“Excellent deduction,” Deaton remarks dryly. “There are moves and countermoves. Life is the game and a Vice and Virtue are maneuvering through it.” He indicates to the board again. “If the Benefactor is a Vice and the King. Then the Rooks?”

“I don’t know. Well, I do. I know that Ms. Morrell is a Rook. That’s the only thing I’m sure of,” Stiles admits.

“Try again,” Deaton directs, straightening. “Gold coin.”

Stiles gets hit with a memory. “Jezebel. But I haven’t — I haven’t seen her in forever.”

“How would you know, Mr. Stilinski? Demons are known to take many forms, to posses any living creature. How would you know?” Deaton insists.

“I wouldn’t,” Stiles confesses. “I know one pawn is Meredith Walker, and another is probably my uncle.” He knocks two over. “But this is really all I know.”

“Then what is our goal?”

“To find out.”

“How do we do that?”

“Play the game well. You’re going to teach me how to play the game well, so I don’t lose anything.”

Deaton gives another short nod. “This runestone is meant for fertility.”

“Uh.” Stiles blushing at the implications.

“What ever you are thinking, it is wrong.” Deaton grabs the runestone and hands it over. “You must work on your garden first. Then you may give life to a Conduit of your choice.”

“You mean —” Stiles gets giddy with the feeling and his magic agrees with its own excitement, and there’s a little bit of longing there. “— I get to choose whoever I want. Whatever I want?”

Deaton gives a slow nod of meaning. Then he says, “Keep it safe. In the wrong hands it can create a doorway that can never be closed. Here’s a printed schedule for the month of May, which starts next Monday. Your father informed me of your driver’s education course. I have two copies. You may choose to continue our work after your class. Otherwise, if you would like to start earlier to have the rest of the day after class, you can choose to do so.” He waits until the younger man indicates to the schedule that starts earlier, and Deaton slides the schedule across the glass. “Same rules apply, only now we start at six in the morning, and we finish at nine. That gives you enough time to make it to your class by ten.”

Stiles nods rapidly and takes the schedule to file it away in his book bag. “And when can I — how long after — I couldn’t do it sooner? The Conduit?”

“Your garden comes first. After that, you’ll know when it is time.” Deaton grabs the Grimoire and his empty mug. “You may continue. Finish as much as you can by twelve.”

“Okay.” Stiles says, dejected. He squeezes the runestone in his hand before putting it away with his bible and the containers of fruit paste.

With a sigh, he makes his way to the mess of books and bookshelves to get to work.
Beacon Hills Hospital feels different than yesterday. Stiles notes with some curiosity that there oncoming storm clouds, which means he can’t stay too long, otherwise he’ll be caught in it. He wonders for a brief moment if he could be immune from getting struck by lightning if he were to peddle around during a storm. He’s not going to push his luck however. Deaton’s schedule shows how they will proceed with their sessions this week. It looks like he’ll be going there straight after school, at least for this last week of school.

Stiles approaches the reception area and is a little disappointed to see that Melissa is not manning the u-shaped desk. It’s the nurse with the white hijab. She’s wearing some cotton candy pink scrubs and her hijab is a soft duck yellow. She smiles at him as he walks over to the counter. He notices her nametag says ‘Ghaaliya’ and he wonders over how it’s pronounced because it looks pretty.

“Visiting?” Ghaaliya says with her lovely dark eyes and perfect eyebrows. She laughs suddenly. “Well I wouldn’t call them perfect. But I will take the compliment about my eyes.”

“Oh my god,” Stiles groans as his cheeks get rosy. “I said that out loud, didn’t I?”

“Yes.” Ghaaliya smirks. “They were really nice compliments. But I’m engaged to the prettiest woman in the world, and plus you’re too young for me. What’s your name, sweetheart?”

Stiles mumbles his name, blush still prominent across his face.

Ghaaliya just scribbles it out with an amused grin before handing it over. “Anyone in particular you’re visiting?”

“Yeah, my friend Danny and my cousin Lydia,” Stiles says, thankfully over his initial embarrassment. “I know where to go,” he promises.

“Great.” Ghaaliya perks up and her face brightens as she looks at something over his shoulder. Stiles turns to see Jennifer Blake, Isaac’s homeroom teacher, approach the counter. She looks a little flushed and out of breath. “Sorry. Sorry. I swear I have a good reason for being late. I was having this conference with Erica and Malia about how they’ve been fighting each other. Which I don’t understand because they used to be thick as thieves and now they just have it out for each other. It’s becoming a real problem. I constantly have to pull them aside and give them detention. And that just leads to more problems when —”

Ghaaliya leans over the counter to kiss her soundly on the mouth to stop her rambling and pulls back with a grin. “I’ll forgive you this time. You have one more strike,” she warns playfully.

“I’ll give you one more strike,” Jennifer says with a sultry voice. Then she turns to see Stiles standing there. “Holy hell. Hello, Stiles.” She indicates to him, still out of breath as her hand slaps down on her leg. She scrunches her nose with this really dorky but pretty expression. “I am so sorry. That was completely inappropriate. If I’d known you were standing there —”

“Oh. It’s okay,” Stiles squeaks, face burning with his blush. He will never look at his brother’s homeroom teacher the same way again.

“How’s Isaac?” Jennifer asks, trying her best to be casual. “He talks so much about you. You should just see the look in his eyes. I mean that is pure, genuine love. It’s heartbreaking. And oh you should have been there for the presentations they did on who were the greatest influences in their lives, and he made this cute like, um, god I can’t even think of what it’s called. Ugh I hate this cause now I’m going to obsess over it. But anyway, he brought this like board thingy, you know the kind. The one with the uh — the uh — you know.” She stops and closes her eyes like she’s waiting for a blow that
never comes as she points her fingers like she’s will her mind to remember. “The thing! The thing kids use to present their experiment at the science fair. It’s like this thing — well anyway, he had all your pictures and I got diabetes from all the uh —” She stops and starts snapping her finger trying to remember as she looks to Ghaaliya.

“Cuteness,” Ghaaliya calmly replies with this serene but fond look on her face. She seems very used to her fiancée’s rambling. “Honey. I think he got the point. He didn’t come here to hear you go on and on about his brother.”

“Right.” Jennifer scrunches her face and presses her hand to her temple before pulling it away like a weird salute. She opens her eyes and says, “I am so sorry. I’ve always been a motor mouth. Thank god I’m about to marry someone who can put up with that.”

“It’s still touch and go.” Ghaaliya laughs when Jennifer slaps the side of her arm playfully.

“I’ll just — yeah. I’m gonna go and walk in a direction.” Stiles slowly backs away before spinning on his heel to head towards the elevator.

“Sorry!” Jennifer calls out and she has the good graces to wait until he’s a little further away to laugh with her fiancée.

Yup. That’s — yeah. Stiles will make sure to avoid any of Isaac’s open houses unless his brother begs and he really hopes it doesn’t have to come down to it. He does take the time to text Isaac, even though he knows he’s out on a lake with no cell reception, saying:

Awwww. My baby bro did a presentation on me?? Why didn’t you tell me! I would have dropped everything to be there. :3

Stiles pockets his phone and carries his book bag with one strap on his right shoulder. He climbs into the elevator and pushes for the 3rd floor. He sighs and drums his fingers against the strap of his backpack. Horrible elevator music is playing and Stiles watching the numbers move slowly. The lights begin to flicker wildly and Stiles frowns as a chill rides up his spine. He jerks when he feels a light touch graze the back of his neck. When he looks at the silver double doors in front of him, he sees the reflection of Lydia’s smirking doppelgänger but it’s gone with the next flicker of lights.

His heart is still racing with confusion when goes to Danny’s room, trying to shake off his fear, and steps in his room, looking up and down the hallway before he shuts the door gently and makes this as swift as possible. He unzips his bag and fishes for one of the containers with fruit paste. He walks over and dumps his bag on a nearby chair.

“Okay. Time to stop…time. That was so lame, thank god no one was here to hear it. Well, besides you, Danny, but I trust you wont say anything so here we go.”

Stiles starts to breathe in through his nose and out of his mouth as he walks to the left side of Danny’s bed. He places his hand on Danny’s wrist, right on his pulse. He closes his eyes, breathes in through in his nose and out through his mouth; it separates his lips for every moment he does this until his lungs are empty and hollow. This keeps happening over and over again until the motion becomes louder. He starts to hear the beeps and whirs of the machines monitoring Danny’s vital sound. He can hear the static flickering of the lights over head. A voice through the hospital speakers that starts to slow down, lowering tenors more and more until it stops. The clock on the wall tick, tick, ticks until it becomes tick…tick…tick. Then one last tick.

He can hear the steady thump of Danny’s heart. The blood rushing through his veins, swirling around with the liquid of the IV, and the breathing tubes making his lungs expand and then deflate.
Then there’s quiet pulse of his muscles and the fine hairs on his body. The steady beat of electrical
currents zapping back and forth in the nerves of his brain. He pays attention to that and where these
different synapses go. He hones in on it. It’s like listening to fireworks from underwater. He counts
the pops, listens for the irregularity and when he finds what he’s looking for, the world stops. His
eyes grow warm as they bleed into honey gold and he lets the glow overtake him as he magic rises
up.

*There is only so much we can do. Do not waste me.*

*He’s my friend. It’s not a waste.*

*As you wish.*

Stiles sighs at his pretentious magic and pops the top open from the container and gently opens
Danny’s mouth, scoops it up with two glowing fingers and presses it to his tongue until he feels
muscle tremble. He uses his magic to guide the paste down as best as he can. He’s still new to this
and he waits a moment until his magic withdraws and he closes Danny’s jaw.

*If you were more educated, you would know what prayer to recite.*

*Luckily I have you to help my ignorance.*

*You’re mocking me. I wont allow it. Disrespectful Faerie.*

*Stuck up Ethereal.*

*I don’t have time for your manners. Are you done with me? I’d like to retreat seeing as I prefer
my own company.*

*Do what you wish. I don’t care.*

His magic sends him powerful waves of its irritation and it furls down deep within his stomach and
stays there. It’s a little uncomfortable and new. He wonders if this is what pregnancy feels like. His
magic seems amused by that thought and he’s forced to rolls his eyes and step back into time. He lets
it all go and his glow retreats as he glances at the clock. It’s been only a minute. Deaton would
disapprove, of course.

Stiles turns to look at Danny and is surprised to see tears leaking from the corners of his eyes down
to his temple and then to his ears. He smiles in amazement as Danny begins to twitch like he’s
becoming self-aware. But that’s all that happens for a moment. Then he gets the impression from his
magic that it will take over a week for the remedy to finish its work and he gets a little teary-eyed as
he thinks ‘I did that. I’ve done some good’ and his magic is entertained. He jerks in surprise when it
curls around his heart with the kind of affection that says ‘Well done’.

Stiles laughs wetly. “I thought you were annoyed with me.”

His magic doesn’t respond for a moment and when it does there’s this impression of annoyance
that’s still wrapped in the purple paper of love.

“I understand,” he says, mostly to himself. “Me too.”

Danny’s vital signs begin to change in slow increments and Stiles feels comfortable enough to walk
away. He runs right into Jackson, who scowls and quickly reaches out to grab Stiles by the front of
his shirt and yank him back up before he can fall.
“Clumsy as ever,” Jackson notes with an arrogant smirk.

“Hello, Jackson. It’s so good to see you too. Why yes. I am doing well. Okay, I’ll send your regards to my family. You take it easy,” Stiles sarcastically rambles.

Jackson’s eyebrow twitches in annoyance and he looks at Stiles with the same placid expression Peter wears when he refuses acknowledge that someone has gotten under his skin. “What are you doing here anyway, Stilinski?” he asks.

“He’s my friend too, Jackson. I visit as much as I can and I talk to him,” Stiles explains, not unkindly. “Scott says you think talking to him is what’s best. So I’m following your lead because I believe what you do. He’ll wake up.”

Jackson locks his jaw and his arrogance and pride gets the best of him. He doesn’t show any gratitude but Stiles knows its there. He keeps a grim frown and just nods shortly at Stiles before pushing past him.

Stiles begins to realize that Jackson is holding a weathered copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, and he knows without knowing that it’s both of their favorite book.

Allison appears a moment later with a beautifully dimpled smile and she instantly grabs Stiles into a hug. “It feels like it’s been forever. I’m so surprised to see you here. Are you here to see Danny?”

Stiles nods. “And Lydia.”

Allison brightens. “Oh! I was just on my way. I was going to say a quick hello to Danny and Jackson. Wait for me?”

“Sure,” Stiles says and watches her walk over to Danny and whisper something before she gives him a kiss on the cheek. Then she turns and rubs her knuckles into Jackson’s head, laughing as she hops away when he tries to bite her side.

Allison walks past and yelps when Jackson smacks her on the ass and she hits his shoulder over and over as he laughs. She smiles and rolls her eyes like there are no hard feelings. Then she walks up to Stiles and energetically says, “Okay. Ready.”

Together they walk to the psych ward and the agender receptionist makes a gesture to a sign that says their belongings will be confiscated for the safety of the patients.

So Stiles thinks long and hard before he says, “Hey Allison, just go on ahead of me. I need to put some more stuff away.”

“Okay, sure.” Allison looks uncertain but she walks through the door leading to the visitor’s lounge.

Stiles maintains his carefree smile until he’s sure she’s gone. Then it drops and looks at the ambiguous receptionist. “How much —” he leans in to look at the nametag. “— Pluto? That can’t be your real name.”

“So people say whenever I introduce myself,” Pluto says, looking grim. “How much what?”

“I have some food I want to give my cousin. How much does it cost to give it to her?” Stiles says with a meaningful look.

Pluto glances around before saying, “One hundred.”
“In this economy? Friend, let’s be realistic here,” Stiles scoffs.


“Try again. Forty.”

“Eighty.”

“Forty-five.”


“It’s a deal!” Stiles exclaims and slides a fifty dollar bill across the counter. It’s all of his allowance, but he can earn that back in no time.

“I’ll bring it too you. Get outta here, kid,” Pluto huffs, still vexed. “Go on.”

“Thanks, Pluto.” Stiles gives a sloppy salute with a sarcastic smile that’s all teeth. He continues on until he finds Lydia and Allison sitting across from each other at a table. As he gets closer, he wonders if he should even be surprised to find Lydia playing chess with Allison.

“Pull up a seat. Lydia is kicking my ass,” Allison chirps happily with one of her beautiful dimpled smiles.

Lydia is fiddling with the Queen, pulling it close so she can examine it before she turns her gaze on Stiles. “You understand now, don’t you?”

Stiles nods silently.

“You’ve got more to learn,” Lydia continues, turning away to knock over the King.

Allison looks between them with a confused frown.

“Brush my hair please,” Lydia asks, looking at neither one of them but the chessboard.

Allison takes the lead, standing up to walk past her best friend.

Lydia’s right hand shoots out and she wraps her fingers around the other girl’s left wrist. Her lips quiver as tears flow down her cheeks. Her shoulders are shaking.

“Lydia?” Allison sounds concerned and she faces the strawberry-blonde haired girl. She puts her hand over Lydia’s hand where she’s clutching her with a trembling hand.

Lydia tries to attempt a smile, but she makes it look like it’s painfully forced. “Do it how you used to, okay? And grab me some napkins. Please.”

The corner of Allison’s mouth slouches further with concern but she nods. “Sure, Lydia. Anything you want.”

Lydia’s hand goes slack and she pulls up her legs so she can hug her knees. She rocks and rocks while staring at the King on the opposite of the board.

Stiles watches as Allison walks over to the bookshelves full of product bins that are full of lipstick, nail polish, games, magazines, coloring books, crayons, markers, jars of glitter and sequins, different colored feathers and cotton balls, and etcetera.
“It’s gross, you know.” Lydia continues to rock, never lifting her eyes from the board as her body shakes like she’s freezing. She is wearing that paper gown shirt and drawstring pants with bare feet. “Making us eat your spit.”

Stiles frowns for a second in confusion before it hits him. He laughs without meaning to. “Don’t blame me. My magic told me.”

Lydia’s lips twitch with an almost smile and Stiles feels ready to dance around because he did that. She says, “Danny’s getting better.”

Stiles doesn’t overlook that she states it as a fact. “He is. It’ll take a week.”

Lydia drops her forehead to her knees and sobs quietly.

Allison is there before Stiles has the chance even to rise out of his seat. She glances at him. “Stiles, what did you say? She never cries like this unless…”

“No, I get it,” Stiles replies because he does but that doesn’t change the minor heartache at the implication. “We were talking about Danny.”

“Oh.” Allison relaxes the disapproving frown she has going. She takes a deep breath before she cheers up. “I have a soft bristle brush. I know you don’t like anything but that. I also got some yellow polish. Maybe I can paint all your nails. Toes and fingers.”

Stiles rises to grab a tissue box just as Allison put the napkins Lydia asked for on the table in front of her.

“He’ll never walk again. He’ll never hear again. But he will live.” Lydia mumbles this over and over before lifting her head. Her cheeks are flushed and wet from crying. She looks at him with hollow eyes as Allison softly brushes her hair. “You don’t know how to pray yet.”

“I don’t take Stiles as the religious type, Lyds,” Allison remarks with a bemused grin as she parts Lydia’s hair in sections to make untangling her hair easier.

“Deaton says Nana will teach me how to,” Stiles assures and tries to pretend not to notice the confused look Allison sends him. “She can — she can teach you too, I think.”

Lydia shakes her head. “Aunt Lorraine is the only one who can. She understands. She knows because we are alike.”

“Lyds, you haven’t seen your aunt since you were in third grade,” Allison points out, not unkindly.

“She’ll come back,” Lydia says, staring at him like she’s looking into him. “She’ll come if we call.”

Stiles wonders over that. “Does she have —”

Lydia nods twice with a firm surety. “Like me. Like you. Who we are, she is as well.”

“Ah.” Stiles suddenly recalls his mother’s old photos. There was an older woman in most of them, and she looked almost like the spitting image of Lydia. “You need to eat it.”

“I know,” Lydia replies. “I know what to do, Stiles. I saw it before you.”

Allison looks concerned. “Lydia, have you not been eating?”

“I’m disturbed, Ally. Not insane. The food here is passable,” Lydia remarks, and she sounds so
much like the old her. The person she was before all of this.

Allison beams like she’s thinking the same thing.

Pluto comes and throws a look at Stiles while the container of fruit paste is placed before Lydia. “I hope you know I’m risking my job over this.” Then makes a brisk exit.

Lydia picks it up and pops the top off, taking a deep inhale before she closes her eyes.

“That smells delicious,” Allis says as she finishes the last section of Lydia’s hair. “Do you think —”

“No.” Lydia doesn’t even open her eyes as she speaks over it in a quiet whisper as though she’s praying.

Stiles watches as she opens her eyes and scoops up the paste with her index and middle fingers to place it on her tongue.

Lydia does this over and over likes it’s the best thing she’s ever tasted. Silent tears slide down her face as she sucks her fingers clean when she finishes.

“Why is it that you make her cry in some kind of way?” Allison questions, but it’s in a teasing jovial manner. She starts braiding her best friend’s hair into a bun at the base of her neck.

“Talent of mine, I guess,” Stiles supposes quietly, mostly to himself as he watches his cousin close.

“They say I’m showing positive improvement since I’ve been here,” Lydia comments as she puts the lid back on the now empty container. “They want to put me on antidepressants and antipsychotics. If my improvement continues, they’ll let me go by the end of this week.”

“That’s great!” Allison exclaims with excitement. “We can do what I always talk to you about. You can come stay with my mom and me. She okayed it a long time ago, but I want to reiterate. My Aunt Kate will be staying in the two bedroom condo above us with her friend Laura, but we can share a room.” She says it like a promise.

Lydia nods like she’s not even all the way here mentally.

“What will you do?” Stiles asks. “What do you think about the medications?”

“Ally, go grab some of the glitter polish,” Lydia replies instead. “The black one.”

“Sure,” Allison and pins the bun. She walks away.

Lydia waits until she’s far enough to say, “They won’t work. You and I both know this. I agreed and said whatever gets me out of here faster. I’m supposed to start tomorrow.”

“Won’t they be watching to make sure you take it?” Stiles questions.

Lydia looks at him like he’s an idiot.

“What?” Stiles says as he squirms.

Lydia looks away from him. “What did you think the paste was for, Stiles?”

“Ah.” Stiles blushes in embarrassment and pride as his magic churns in his gut with impressions of certain faith. “Happy to be of service.”
“Stay humble or I will slap you,” Lydia retorts immediately and goes quiet when Allison returns. “Yes.”

“What?” Allison is shaking both bottles of nail polish. “Yes to what?”

“Staying with —” Lydia looks like she’s trying to push the words out. “— I want that too.”

Allison smiles like she’s got her Christmas and birthday gifts at the same time and she gives her best friend a hug.

Lydia stiffens but she doesn’t push the brunette away. When Allison pulls away Lydia starts to rock again and mumble to herself as she stares at the chessboard before she knocks over the pieces one by one.

Stiles doesn’t ask why. He’s too afraid of the answer.

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Isaac is mowing the lawn when Stiles rolls up to the house on his bike. For some reason the sky has cleared since he’s left the hospital.

“Did you get my text?” are the first words out of Stiles’s mouth.

Isaac makes this indication that he can’t hear Stiles and points to the lawnmower.

Stiles gives a breathy laugh. “You little shrub. I know you can totally hear me.”

Isaac shrugs and just continues to mow.

Stiles drags his bike over to the garage and drops it on the driveway in front of his dad’s squad car. He turns and notices this incredibly sleek looking dark blue mustang convertible parked at the curb. He frowns in wonder and walks around the lawn and up the walkway to the porch steps and through the already opened front door. His nose is immediately hit with the smell of fish, and there’s a fan pointed to the front door in an attempt to flush the smell out.

“Hey, dad. Why —” Stiles stops dead when he sees his dad sitting at the table with Derek Sr. cleaning and gutting the fish with their bare hands.

Derek is manning the stove, rolling the fish in flower and corn meal so he can carefully drop it in the boiling pot of oil.

Stiles gives them all a disapproving look. “Dad, I said no fried food. Don’t think that because we have company over you can just —”

“Cool your jets, son. Isaac has volunteered to make some kind of spinach and cauliflower thing, I don’t know, I stop listening as soon as he said spinach,” the sheriff answers with any easygoing attitude.

Derek Sr. laughs along with his son.

Stiles smiles a little. “No one says ‘cool your jets’ anymore, dad.”

“Well that’s not exactly true,” Derek Sr. voices. “As long as your father continues to say it, then it will never die.”

“Lame,” Stiles and Derek say at the exact same time before looking at each other with a grin and nod
like they approve of the other’s answer.

“Teenagers,” his dad mumbles and Derek Sr. makes a sound of agreement. “Start on that garage, Stiles. I’m sure you can get plenty done before dinner is ready.”

“It’s four in the afternoon! Who has dinner at that time?” Stiles complains.

“Technically this won’t be done until about six,” Derek remarks unhelpfully.

Stiles just shoots him a mean look.

Derek gives him a slow and lazy smile that is so goddamn gorgeous that it’s not even fair.

Stiles turns away quickly so they don’t see his flush.

Derek Sr. and his dad share a chuckle in the way adults do when they understand something better than their younger counterparts.

Stiles will deny to his last breath that he flees at that point.

Isaac appears from up the side of the house where the garage is, sweating heavily. “How is it that the backyard never needs to be mowed? It’s like it stops on both sides where the backyard starts.”

Stiles grins with pride. “I think that’s all me.”

“I don’t believe you. That started when Nana appeared. That’s got nothing to do with you,” Isaac scoffs as he takes off the thick garden gloves off before using his forearm to wipe the sweat from his forehead.

“Well who made Nana? I did!” Stiles points out.

Isaac gives him a look. “She said you called her. That’s not the same thing as making. If she’s the oldest woodland spirit that would mean that you were just as —”

“Yeah, yeah,” Stiles interjects, waving his hand like he’s trying to shoo away a fly. “My point still stands.”

“Whatever,” Isaac retorts. “I’m so thirsty.”

“Drink the water coming out of the showerhead,” Stiles suggest with a meaningful look.

Isaac gives him a dry look. “Maybe I’ll come hug you. You owe me 498 anyway.”

“Oh gross, don’t even — Isaac, I swear!” Stiles shrieks as he runs around their dad’s squad car.

Isaac laughs and gives up the chase as he makes his way to the house. “Shouldn’t you be cleaning the garage?”

Stiles pushes the button for the garage door to lift and he replies, “Shouldn’t you be writing a research paper about how you hero-worship me.”

Isaac stumbles and glares viciously when Stiles laughs loudly like he might choke. Isaac looks like he wishes Stiles would and he stomps up the porch steps to disappear into the house.

Stiles groans when he realizes how messy the garage is. This is like the antique shop all over (which he still hasn’t finished) and he sighs. He calls for his magic to see if he can do some levitation or
something.

His magic seems tickled but completely unwilling to aid him in this endeavor.

Stiles thinks of every insult he knows and directs it as his magic as he gets to work.

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Two hours later, Isaac is calling Stiles into the house by informing him that dinner is almost ready. He got that impression when he could smell the fish, even at this distance. He’s only gotten half of the garage organized. He scrubs his ever-growing hair with interlocked fingers before dropping them to his sides with a tired sigh. He’s extremely hungry too. Its only now that he realized that he hasn’t eaten all day.

He happily trots to the house and once he’s inside he runs up the stairs to take the fastest shower in the world to wash all the sweat, dust, and grime off of him. He changes into some clean clothes before he gallops down the steps and to the dinner table where his plate is waiting for him by Isaac.

Their dad and Derek Sr. are sitting at the heads of the table while Derek is sitting across from him, using a fork to poke at his salad.

Stiles snorts quietly and grabs the salad bowl to serve himself and dumping a little more on everyone’s plate.

His dad, Isaac, and Derek make annoyed sounds.

Derek Sr. just looks amused and happily takes the additional salad without complaint.

Isaac drowns his with ranch and hands it to Derek when he makes an indication he wants it too so he can drown his salad in ranch dressing with just as much desperate enthusiasm.

Stiles looks at his dad sternly when he tries to grab the ranch dressing and Stiles quickly swaps it out for balsamic vinegar dressing.

His dad sighs but pours it over salad with resignation.

Stiles just grins triumphantly and turns his gaze to Derek who’s looking at him with an expression he can’t even name. He chews on the side on his bottom and flushes when Derek tracks the movement with the concentrated intensity that Stiles has always found attractive. He squirms and tries not to feel the swirl of curiosity his magic sends in minor waves. He pushes is down with a resounding ‘no absolutely not’ but his magic ignores him and looks like it wants to find and figure Derek out.

“Can we eat some fish now?” Isaac asks aloud, fidgeting anxiously.

Stiles pulls his gaze from Derek to look at his little brother with a grin. “No fish until I finish eating.”

“Well eat and stop staring at Derek,” Isaac complains boldly.

Both Derek and Stiles flush.

“Settle down, son,” their dad says but he looks just as tickled as Derek Sr. is.

Derek Sr. says something under his breath and Derek makes a strangled sound as his face gets darker with his flush.

“Dad!” Derek hisses. “Please stop. I’m going to be sick.”
“Serves you right,” Derek Sr. counters with normal volume. “Why don’t you tend to the food? Stiles looks to be just about done.”

Stiles puts the last of his salad in his mouth. He likes to eat it with only water, just in case there’s some kind of coconut oil in any of the salad dressings. That’s not something he wants to repeat, especially since it made both his mom and dad freak. Well, that and the fact that they didn’t even know he was allergic to anything until that moment.

Isaac squirms in his seat as he tracks Derek’s every move like a cat with some yarn.

Stiles snorts and grabs the glass pitcher of lemonade to pour himself a cup, not minding when a few lemon slices fall in his cup.

Isaac kicks him without taking his eyes off of Derek (who serves their dad and Derek Sr. first out of respect) and tries to look like he didn’t even do it.

Stiles rubs his calf and glares at his brother, heavily considering issuing a complaint to their father but thinks better of it when his little brother makes these adorable pleased mewls when Derek sets his plate in front of him with an amused grin.

Isaac grabs his fork and mixes his fried fish with his macaroni and string beans into an almost casserole. He shoves the first forkful in his mouth and makes a surprised sound. “Okay,” he announces with a mouth full of food. “We can keep him.”

Derek chuckles and serves himself and Stiles last. “Glad I’ve finally won you over,” he cheerfully responds.

Isaac just shrugs and goes to town on his food.

“Isaac, at least come up for air sometimes,” Stiles remarks, slightly serious before he starts to eat his food. “Oh my god,” he says. “How?”

Derek just ducks his head trying to hide the pleased grin that Stiles can totally see. “Dad taught me some of his tricks. His fish is still definitely better than mine.”

“Ah, humble,” Derek Sr. supposes before he squints his eyes at his youngest son. “You’re after something.”

Derek lifts his head immediately with a scowl. “Can’t I say something nice about you without an ulterior motive?”

“No because you and Cora learned that skill from your mother. Not me,” Derek Sr. points out.

“I’m going to tell her you said that,” Derek replies glumly.

Derek Sr. just huffs. “You wont be telling her anything new. I’ve been telling her that ever since we got married.”

Derek just makes a face like he doesn’t want to know anything about his parent’s love life.

“Stiles and Isaac do the same thing,” their dad comments, overlooking the disagreeing expressions both his sons send him. “You know you do, and I wont hear anything different.”

Stiles and Isaac rolls their eyes simultaneously.

“I guess I’ll know what to expect,” Derek comments thoughtfully and grins at Stiles. “It should be
interesting to see both of us try to outdo each other.”

“You can try,” Stiles mutters. “Either way, I’ll win that conversation.”

“We’ll see,” Derek replies airily.

“Can I have some more?” Isaac stares at Derek meaningfully.

Derek just chuckles and grabs his plate. “Sure, buddy.”

“Don’t add yourself to the ever-growing list of people who spoil this little con artist,” Stiles warns and is not even surprised when his little brother sends him a flat look.

“Can I have extra fish and macaroni?” Isaac asks looking Stiles right in his eyes.

“Of course,” Derek responds easily and Stiles knows he can feel the glare aimed at him. “Anything for you, Isaac,” he adds purposefully. "Your happiness is my paradise."

“We can definitely keep him,” Isaac declares.

Everyone but Stiles laughs and, despite his annoyance, even he knows that everything seems right with the world in this moment.

---

Derek Sr. divides up the leftover fried fish equally before he makes Derek put it in his car while he joins the sheriff in the living to watch the Final Four.

Isaac cleans the kitchen with the kind of vigor that Stiles has never seen and when he’s done he mumbles something about calling Boyd and he disappears up to his room.

Stiles grabs his book bag and climbs up the stairs just as Derek enters the house again, locking the door behind him before joining the older men to watch the game. He keeps his door open, unlike Isaac, but his little brother rarely does close his door (only whenever he’s drawing) so he figures the preteen must be doing that.

He sits at his desk and tries to have a video chat with Scott but it fails since there is no response on the other side. He texts Scott instead and his best friend informs him that he’s out of town since his grandparents flew out from Florida to see him and his mom. He also goes on to say that the main goal had been attending the Latin Music Festival in San Diego for it’s last day. But he does say that he wishes Stiles were there with him. That makes Stiles smile and he responds that one day they will go together. Scott response is nothing but hearts and happy emojis.

He rises from his desk chair and hooks his phone up to the charger he has plugged in the outlet behind his nightstand. Then he quickly changes into some sleepwear before unzipping his book bag to grab the bible of Virtues and settles in his bed to start reading. He props himself against his headboard to read for the next fifteen minutes and makes it to page twenty-seven when his phone vibrates. He makes an annoyed sound and blindly reaches for it without taking his eyes off of the last paragraph on page twenty-eight before he glances at his phone. He rolls his eyes when he notices it’s from Derek saying:

**Stop being a lame hermit and come watch the game with us.**

*No thanks. I’d rather bang my head against a brick wall than force myself to endure torture from that level of boredom.*
Stiles reads about three paragraphs of page twenty-nine before his phone vibrates against his stomach where he put it. He thinks about ignoring it but he knows how persistent Derek can be when it comes to texting or talking over the phone.

_I am personally offended on behalf of basketball. Keep it up and I wont invite you to any of my games._

_**Oh thank god. I thought for sure I was going to have to come up with a plausible excuse.**_

): **Why do you want to hurt me?**

**DRAMATIC**

_Not at all. I just think it would be nice to see my *friend* sitting in the stands cheering me on._

Stiles rubs a hand over his face trying to rid himself of the ridiculous blush on his face.

_Heartbeat’s sounding kind of funny up there. Are you blushing?_

_Stop being creepy! And no. I just was thinking about cabbages._

_Cabbages. You were thinking about cabbages? We need to have a serious talk because no vegetable has ever made my heart sound like *that*. _

_You just haven’t found the right cabbage. You know, my friend Martha has this very nice cabbage. Real classy. Say the word and I’ll fix you up on a blind date._

_Sure, Stiles. As long as the cabbage puts out on the first date._

Stiles laughs as his head falls back towards the headboard gently. He shakes his head with a grin and replies:

_Derek that is unacceptable!!!! Cabbages are not like that. They are the type to settle down behind in a nice little cottage with a white picket fence and 2.5 kids with a dog called Reggie Williams._

_I will divorce that cabbage if our dog gets named Reggie Williams. And anyway how would YOU know that? I thought you don’t watch basketball to know who the small forward is on the Spurs???

_I’m not deaf. My dad does talk about it sometimes over the phone with some of his deputies._

_Don’t change the subject though. I demand you come to my games this week._

_Nope. You couldn’t pay me to go. Wait. I take that back. You can pay me 10 billion dollars after taxes. I take cash, check, and credit. Paypal too, if you’re desperate._

_Who told you about what my net worth is???

Stiles smiles and rolls his eyes with an amused sigh.

_I know for a fact your net worth is not higher then Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter._

_HEY. You do not get to call my best friend by her full name. We were just talking the other day during our weekly crochet classes about the nerve of some people calling us by our names_
like they know us.

Okay. Well invite HER to your basketball games. Or you can ask your best friend to spot you 10 billion dollars to pay for ONE appearance of 10 minutes at your game.

How completely pretentious of you. For that much money I expect a whole lot more than 10 minutes of your time.

Stiles tries so hard not to blush as he chews on his bottom lip because why would Derek flirt with him? He used to date Paige and she’s way more attractive than he is. And anyway, he’s seen Derek flirt with guys and girls alike all the time in the hallways at school and that was pretty harmless interactions. He’s sure that this is no different from that. So yeah. This is all this is. Harmless flirting that won’t turn into something serious. Plus Stiles never thinks of anyone this way. He’s probably just confused. Point blank.

Still with me?

You want more than 10 minutes? I mean sure. If you want me to sign your basketball I can do that too. It’ll be a stamp of my signature that my bodyguard Mr. Breaker will do. If you want the real deal, then that’s going to cost you another 10 billion.

Stiles... -_- 

You’re right, that is too steep. Make it 5 billion because I can be generous.

You’re so oblivious sometimes that it’s painful. I was hoping you’d caught on by now. You realize I’m flirting with you right? Or do you have no concept of that at all?

Stiles face goes up in flames.

You are NOT flirting with me. I mean you are but I would know. You just do that with everyone.

????

You know what I mean. I’ve seen you do it plenty of times in the hallways at school.

Ah. I understand. You think this isn’t serious. Tell me, Stiles. How much do you watch me? This sounds like jealousy to me.

Stiles wishes he could throw his phone out the window.

Your heart’s doing that uptick thing when you’re annoyed. Why? You don’t like the truth?

I hope you trip and miss the final shot during you final basketball game. I hope that when you trip the ball goes flying and slams into our principal’s face and he expels you.

That’s a bit extreme don’t you think?

Don’t you have a basketball game you should be watching?

I can multitask. I can show you if you don’t believe me. (;

Oh my GOD. This conversation is so over.

If you say so. Just know that I don’t *flirt* with everyone. I don’t know what you think you
see, but that’s not what that is at all. Now I *am* flirting with *you*. That's what you do when you like someone, right?

I need you to wait about 30 years before I’m ready to talk to you. I’ll meet on the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean while I figure out how I lost control of this friendship.

): ): ):

Stiles puts his phone facedown and tries to quiet his racing heart. He exhales and bumps the back of his head against the headboard over and over and over and over and over and over. He tries to finish the last page of studying, chewing on his nails as his stomach tries to float out of his body and into space way past the Milky Way. He reads the same lines repeatedly and he just can’t — he can’t think. Derek has stubbornly invaded his thoughts and he doesn’t need this distraction right now.

His magic sends him the impression that it thinks he’s an idiot and that it would be more than happy to curl around Derek’s inner wolf.

“Shut up,” Stiles mutters and shuts his magic down before it can respond. His pulse quickens when he hears Derek Sr. and Derek make their final goodbyes. He expects Derek to climb up the stairs and just — just — he doesn’t even know. He doesn’t have experience with this type of stuff. He bitterly thinks about how Derek probably has a well of knowledge on this. But Derek never comes up the stairs and Stiles hears the front door close and the rumble of Derek Sr.’s car starting before zooming off.

Stiles releases a breath of air he didn’t realize he was holding. He grabs his pillow and smashes it against his face to smother his frustrated scream.

It only hits him a moment later like a freight train that Derek has been grabbing his left hand constantly since the days when their interactions were not limited to five minutes.

“Oh my god.”

---

Monday morning comes way too early and way too fast. It also feels really off. He has to wake up extra early to roll across his backyard to get a correct estimate. He accidently swallows a worm. That shouldn’t even be possible but this is Stiles so where there’s a will there’s a way. He accidently hits his toes against the edge of the back door and that hurts for a whole minute before he feels comfortable enough to limp his way to the bathroom. Isaac is already in there and he takes his precious, precious time before he finally exits with a cloud of steam at his back that makes it seem as though he’s performing on some concert stage.

Stiles makes his way into the bathroom and slips on the wet floor, landing on his back with a wet thud and his elbow slams painfully in the cabinet to his right. His dad checks in on him and Stiles just gives his dad a weak thumbs-up. His dad walks away with a sigh and Stiles lets go of his pride and whimpers in pain. He climbs out of his clothes and rips his pajama bottoms right down the left leg, which is ridiculous because this is his favorite pair. He gets in the tub to take a shower and screeches because the water is goddamn cold.

He yells Isaac’s name with passionate annoyance and does not get a response back. He shivers and tries to make this ordeal as quick as possible. He washes his hair last and gets shampoo in his eyes before he slips and falls. Isaac asks him if he is okay behind the door and Stiles just whimpers. He limps to his room naked because he forgot that his towel is in his dirty clothes hamper. Luckily his dad and Isaac are already downstairs. He bumps his head against the edge of his dresser while
attempting to put his underwear and pants on. That smarts.

And if that isn’t enough, when Stiles grabs his phone it short circuits and shuts down. He stares at it for a minute not understanding why — why — how could that even happen? His dad has warranty on all of their phones but the damn phone company takes two weeks to ship out the new one. He takes out the sim card and it actually breaks off in his attempt, half of it still in his phone and the other half in his hand. He stares at it and his right eye twitches. He presses his lips together and grabs his book bag and stuffs it with all his schoolbooks. He picks it up and he is so glad that this at least is still functioning.

Well. Until he gets to the stairs. The bottom gives and all the contents go rolling down the steps. He takes a deep breath and glides down the steps like a ghost until he happens to trip on the last step where his red folder is. He groans as Isaac and his dad stare at him incredulously. He stands and removes the blue pen from his shoe and is not even surprised when it explodes, but luckily it’s not in his direction. Though it does squirt all over his father, who was in the process of walking over to lend a hand. He stops dead and gives this look.

Stiles laughs weakly and gives a sheepish apology. He jumps out of his dad’s way and goes to the toaster to pop in a waffle as he watches his dad march up the steps to swap out his uniform for a cleaner one.

His dad does tell Isaac to pick up Stiles’s belongings because he’s afraid of what might happen if Stiles tries to.

Isaac gives a long and dramatic sigh but does what their dad says, placing all of Stiles’s possessions on the kitchen table so neatly that it looks like art.

Stiles makes a thoughtful sound as his nose twitches before he smells smoke and he jumps back with a shriek when the toaster sparks wildly before catching on fire. He knocks it into the sink (which, thankfully, is dry as a bone) and grabs some whip cream from the fridge and uses that to put the fire out. It works but all the smoke detectors go off at the same time.

Their dad reappears in bewilderment and Stiles smiles sheepishly. “Out!” he says. “Whatever this is — take it outside and away from this house.”

“Good idea!” Stiles quickly agrees and grabs all his books, folders, notebooks, and pencil case (bumping his knee into the leg of the table) before fleeing outside. He’s surprised to see Derek parked on the curb with his windows down as he puts on a pair of mirror shades, to complete his ‘cool guy’ look (which includes a leather jacket, and a grin).

“Please let Derek drive you,” Isaac says, walking gracefully down the steps just as Boyd rolls up on his bike. “Seriously. You might kill yourself if you ride your bike.”

Stiles looks at his little brother sharply with a look of betrayal.

Isaac just waves at Derek before hopping on his bike and peddling after Boyd.

Stiles purses his lips and stomps to Derek’s car, wrenching it open and throwing all his stuff in before sliding onto the passenger seat, yanking his seatbelt on with short, jerky motions. He closes the door and crosses his arms.

“Okay…” Derek looks at him over the top of his glasses. “What was that all about?”

“Why are you wearing a leather jacket? It’s like a million degrees,” Stiles deflects, annoyed.
“Heat doesn’t bother me,” Derek replies patiently but he does crank his AC up while closing the windows.

Stiles sighs and scrubs his hands over his face. “Sorry,” is his muffled reply. “I don’t mean to be so testy. I’ve been having the worst luck today.”

"Today? It's not even noon yet."

"Fine. The worst luck this morning."

Derek makes a thoughtful sound, shifting gears before pulling off in a U-turn. “Broke any mirrors lately? Knocked over some salt? Ran under some ladders? Pissed off a black cat? Opened thirteen umbrellas inside a building?”

“Shut up. You’re making fun of pain!” Stiles accuses but he’s already laughing with Derek. “You’re annoying.”

“Lie,” Derek says automatically. “And I don’t need to listen to your heart to come to that conclusion.”

“Stop the car. I’m walking,” Stiles flatly demands. “I would very much like to walk.”

“Fine. I’ll park the car and walk with you,” Derek counters. “I’ll stand at a distance though. Don’t want to be struck by lightening, caught in the gravity of your bad luck.”

Stiles turns his face away so Derek can’t see his grin. They drive in comfortable silence for ten minutes before they come to the last stoplight near the school.

“Um.” Derek takes off his glasses with a furrowed brow. “I think you may have been right about the bad luck.”

Stiles sits up instantly. “What? What? Why would you say that?”

“No big deal, but...” Derek looks over at him. “…I think one of my tires popped.”

“Shut up. You’re making fun of pain!” Stiles accuses but he’s already laughing with Derek. “You’re annoying.”

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“No big deal, but...” Derek looks over at him. “…I think one of my tires popped.”

“Okay. The. Hell.” Stiles groans and drops his head onto the dashboard.

Derek chuckles and slides out of the car. “Look on the bright side. There’s a tire station right on that corner over there.” He climbs out and closes his door before the other teen can reply.

Stiles jerks upright when he feels the car rolling forward and he twists his body to peer through the rear window to see Derek pushing the car effortlessly with this easygoing attitude. Stiles sighs and drops his head back on the headrest and leans his temple against his fist with his elbow cradled on the ledge of where window meets door. He watches as Derek rounds the car and shakes hands with the mechanic as he smiles before indicating to his car and the front left wheel. The mechanic nods and then points to his colleagues and they come over.

Derek opens the driver side door and leans in. “I’m totally fine with you camping out in my car. I actually like that thought,” he says candidly before dodging a pen with a laugh. “I’m just speaking my mind. Anyway, they need to push the car to the garage so they can fix the tire.” Then he adds, “I have an extra book bag in the trunk if you need. I keep it for emergencies.”

“Oh. Yeah, thanks.” Stiles starts to climb out the car and gets tangled in the seatbelt and is so on his way to face planting on the cement. But Derek grabs him before the impact can happen and pulls him upright. “Thanks,” he mumbles with an embarrassed flush.
Derek just plucks a broken pencil out of his hair with a soft smile and says, “Clumsy.”

Stiles feels his blush expand because the older teen says it with such blatant fondness. “Go get that book bag, Derek. I can’t deal with whatever it is you’re doing.”

“That’s okay!” Derek explains cheerfully before wiggling his eyebrows suggestively. “I can be patient.” He walks away and adds, “I’ve been patient all this time anyway.”

Stiles stumbles at that and snatches the backup book bag from him.

“Let me get your things. Wouldn’t want you to get a paper cut or poke your eye out with a crayon,” Derek comments, strolling over to his backseat.

“I don’t even have —” Stiles pauses when he sees Derek laughing silently. “Oh. Okay. You already knew that. Yup. I see what you did there. Very funny.” He unzips the bag as Derek meticulously fills the bag up with Stiles’s possessions. He zips it back up and flushes when the older teen slides the fingers of his left hand across the pulse of Stiles’s. “You’re not slick anymore. I know what that means now.”

“Good. I was wondering how long it would take for you to catch up.” Derek places his hand on Stiles’s lower back and pushes him forward. “We’re gonna be late if we don’t get a move on.”

Stiles is distracted by that warm hand the whole walk to school.

---

Stiles misses his first class because he somehow gets the sleeve of his shirt stuck in the door of his locker. So he’s standing in the hall looking like a dope for the next hour. This goes on until Cora finds him (probably to complain that he wasn’t in class) and she realizes what kept him before laughing a full thirty seconds while she pries open the door, which backfires and hits her in the face.

Stiles smothers a laugh when Cora looks at him sharply. “I didn’t say anything,” he swears, holding his hands up in surrender. “I’ve been having bad luck all morning.

Cora just pulls him to their second class by the front of his shirt. “That’s ridiculous,” she swears. “Bad luck is a preconceived notion for society to blame all their problems on.”

“If you say so, Professor Cora,” Stiles jokes.

“I’ve taken college courses about American Mythology. You can laugh but I know what I’m talking about,” Cora insists as she yanks him up the stairs. “See that? If you had bad luck, we both would have fallen down.”

“Wait for it.”

“Don’t be —” Cora pulls him over the threshold of their AP English class and the ceiling lights shut off when they do. “— stupid.”

Stiles pries her fingers from his shirt and goes to his seat in the back.

Cora stares at him the whole time like she’s trying to figure him out.

Their teacher has a random asthma attack in the middle of a lecture about The Iliad and the Odyssey. Stiles is calmly doodling triquetras and triskelions in his notebook right when the paramedics burst in.
They give the teacher the wrong type of epinephrine auto-injector, the one he’s allergic too, and they totally freak out when he faints.

Cora just continues to stare at him, just flummoxed.

Stiles gives her a light wave.

---

The rest of Stiles’s classes run with the same theme:

One of his teacher’s gets food poisoning and throws up all over their desk.

One of his teacher’s has a desk thrown at them from the student they were having an affair with.

One of the teachers gets escorted out by the FBI for being the drug lord for some random cocaine empire in Argentina.

But Stiles’s favorite has to be the teacher who stops dead in the middle of a lecture, talks about how they wanted to be a referee for the puppy bowl, points at each student and explains why they hate them (Stiles is the only they actually like) and then mic drops their clipboard before exiting with two middle fingers in the air to head towards the office to resign.

Stiles takes his time as he head towards the lunchroom, grabs the soup they’re offering, and dumps it in the trash when a cockroach floats to the top. He takes a passing freshmen’s orange soda, ignoring the complaint and pops it open as the guy collides with the cafeteria doorframe. He walks further out onto the quad where he sits beside Cora, across from Laura and Derek, and says, “So. How was your day?”

“Derek and Cora keep telling me you’re having bad luck today,” Laura says and she sounds skeptical. “I’m sure it’s not as bad as they’re making it sound.”

“Five of our teachers are no longer with us,” Cora points out.

Laura waves off her concerns. “Mere coincidence.”

“I popped my tire on my way here. I’ve had the car for two days, Laura,” Derek adds, spinning his basketball on his pointer finger. He smiles at Stiles. “Is this the part where I walk around and flirt?”

Stiles get’s a little pink and he throws the older teen a ruthless glare. “I’m taking your nachos,” he declares.

"Stiles, you can have anything of mine," Derek says slyly.

Stiles sends him a mean look as he flushes at the implications.

Laura and Cora raise their eyebrows at each other.

Laura’s the first to speak. “What’s all this now?”

“Yeah. What’s going on?” Cora questions.


Stiles scowls at his presumptuousness. “Nothing ever.”
“Whatever you say,” Derek retorts airily with a smirk.

Cora wrinkles her nose. “Oh gross. They’re flirting. You really are spreading your bad luck.”

Laura cackles. “I think it’s adorable. I’ve been rooting for them since the day Stiles rolled around in Derek’s plushie toys. He was frowning but I smelt his grudging attraction.”

“Shut up,” Derek mutters, blushing a little.

“You know you liked it,” Laura says with a sing-song voice.

Stiles takes a moment to consider that. “You were…attracted to me?”

“She’s making it sound like — but that — it wasn’t even a big — look, I was dating Paige,” Derek explains quickly.

Cora snorts. “That doesn’t clarify anything.”

“I agree,” Laura says and hisses when a squirrel randomly drops dead on her food. She tosses the tray in disgust and it smacks a freshmen walking by. “What the hell? Sorry, Jasmine!”

Jasmine yells, “Are you serious?”

“Sorry,” Laura repeats as the younger girl stomps off. "That's definitely one less vote," she sighs.

“Bad luck,” Stiles chimes, still staring at Derek. “But back to you. I thought you hated me. You cornered me in the locker room.”

“He did what?” Cora exclaims and starts howling with laughter. “Oh that is priceless! Please tell me more.”

“Please don’t,” Derek demands and Stiles has never seen him so red. This feels like a victory.

"Yeah, I think he might have been watching my lacrosse tryouts or something," Stiles continues.

Derek makes a frustrated sound. “Okay, I might have overreacted. It’s Peter’s fault. He kept giving away my stuff!”

"What does that have to do with the fact you found, and still find him, attractive?" Laura probes.

“So you were flirting with me when I accidently texted you those pictures!” Stiles accuses as he thinks on it. “I wasn’t even sure. You even told me to keep your number. You acted like you couldn’t stand to be around me. But you kept flirting with me. Mixed signals, dude.”

“He was swimming in denial I bet,” Laura reasons.

Derek looks absolutely outraged by these accusations.

“My perfect brother was committing emotional adultery,” Cora teases. “You were still with Paige and you flirted with Stiles? You are such a slut, Derek.”

Derek splutters contritely and he looks like he’s going to faint from mortification.

Laura cackles again.

Stiles soaks it up because this is the only thing good about today. It’s like Derek is getting all the
payback of his constant and relentless teasing. He takes another calm sip of his soda and continues to eat Derek’s nachos.

“I’m disowning all of you,” Derek declares and straightens when there’s a sharp whistle.

“Everyone listen up. I need all of my teammates over here!” Brett Talbot, a handsome senior and captain of the basketball/lacrosse/swim team (Jesus where does get all this time to balance this with school), makes a gesture for everyone to come closer as he stands on top of one of the quad tables. All the sports players (including Derek) gravitate towards him. “First, I want to say that it’s been a hell of a year! I couldn’t have done it without you and we’re all going to state finals this week!”

There’s a roar of cheers from all the students.

“Secondly, I know it’s my duty to pass on the mantle of each team I’ve lead for the past two years!” Brett explains and there are some more cheers and someone even shouts ‘I love you, Brett!’ and he laughs. “For the lacrosse team, I relinquish my crown to Sean Walcott!”

Everyone cheers and bang on the tables as Sean climbs up and accepts Brett’s senior varsity jacket with newly made yellow letterman that has his initials ‘S. Walcott’.

“For our illustrious swim team, I relinquish my crown to the lovely, ultra-sexy, Ms. Hayden Romero!”

Everyone cheers and bang on the tables as Hayden climbs up and accepts Brett’s senior varsity jacket with newly made yellow letterman that has her initials ‘H. Romero’ on the back before punching him for his earlier comment.

“Now, lastly. My pride and joy. The basketball team.” Brett holds up the senior varsity jacket, purposefully hiding the back. “I thought long and hard. It was difficult to choose since we have a lot of good players.” Then he chuckles. “Who the fuck am I kidding? There was only one choice in my mind. The unstoppable, unparalleled, most gorgeous person you have ever seen, aside from myself of course. Mr. Hotshot Derek Hale!”

Everyone screams, stomp their feet, clapping their hands and banging on the tables.

Derek looks so surprised as his teammates lift him up with a cheer and set him on the table.

Stiles laughs at the stumped look on his face as the older teen takes the senior varsity jacket with newly made yellow letterman that has his initials ‘D. Hale’ from Brett with awe.

Cora and Laura are on their feet, cupping their hands around their mouth as they cheer and shout Derek’s name.

Stiles claps and gives Derek the thumps-up when the older teen looks over at them with a million dollar smile.

“Thank you, Beacon Hills! And goodnight.” Brett pretends to do a mic drop before he claps and starts the high school cheer and the ground shakes with everyone’s participation.

A freaky swarm of birds start flying around and drops poop after poop like their trying to take siege. Everyone yells and runs towards the double doors of the cafeteria, but for some reason, they wont open.

Stiles takes shelter under the tree with Laura, Cora, and Derek before they get pelted with the acorns in the tree. “Still think I don’t have bad luck, Laura?”
“I will never doubt a word you say ever again,” Laura swears. “But I’d take acorns over bird poop any day. Thank Mother Moon we got out of there in time.”

They all laugh, lucky enough to be untouched by the bird disaster, and they all watch in amusement as their fellow classmates get hit with a rain of white poop (holding lunch trays over their heads like a shield); and they all agree to call it the Great Bird Fiasco circa 2014.

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Stiles is walking to his locker at the end of the day, highly annoyed that he’s lost three of his schoolbooks in one sitting. He almost bumps into Derek, who apparently was waiting for him with that gorgeous grin of his, which he keeps aiming at passing ‘pedestrians’ but now Stiles understands that it’s him being friendly and not flirtation. He’s leaning against the lockers next to Stiles’s with his arms crossed like he’s so cool.

“Congratulations. I forgot to say it while we were under attack,” Stiles says and tries to pry open his locker once again. “It’s pretty wild that you’re the first sophomore to get the position.”

“Which means you have to come to my games,” Derek supposes.

Stiles snorts and points out, “You’re not captaining anything yet, Derek. That wont kick into effect until the start of the next semester.”

“I need you to be supportive of my dreams,” Derek remarks with a mock serious tone. “I’m supportive of your dreams.”

“You don’t even know what my dreams are,” Stiles retorts. “I don’t even know what my dreams — are you kidding me? This stupid locker won’t open. Well I guess I won’t be doing any homework tonight.”

Derek knocks the side of his fist on the edge of the locker at three different points, and like that, it pops open. “You’re welcome.”

“I am. I am very, very welcome,” Stiles counters and ignores the eye roll he gets. “So are we gonna talk about how you were into me while you were still dating Paige?”

Derek makes a choked sound, flushing quickly before he retaliates, “Are we gonna talk about the fact that we want to date each other but won’t.”

Stiles knocks his elbow against his locker door and hisses. “Can you not do that without warning?”

Derek’s flush dies as he scoffs. “That’s what I’ve been doing for weeks now. We’re going to have to talk about it at some point.”

“Just — would you —” Stiles cuts himself off with frustrated sound and slams his locker shut after he stuffs his books into the borrowed backpack. “Come on.” He grabs the sleeve of Derek’s new senior varsity jacket and drags him until they’re off campus grounds. He feels comfortable enough to slow down so they’re walking side by side and says, “Look, I think you’re —” He fumbles with his words as he flushes.

“Yes?” Derek encourages as he puts his large hands in his jacket pocket with a slow smirk and cocks his head like he’s trying to catch Stiles’s gaze “I’m listening. Very intently.”

Stiles chews anxiously on the corner of bottom lip and musters up the courage to say, “I really do think you’re attractive.”
"I knew it!" Derek exclaims happily.

Stiles rolls his eyes but he can't stop the grin that forms on his face. "Then again, I think everyone is beautiful in their own way. Some part of a person is attractive and I always actively picked out what that is."

"No, go back to just focusing on me," Derek protests.

"Shut up, I was getting to that!" Stiles laughs. "Yes, I do find different things attractive about different people. But you're different, okay? I get that, but I'm not — I don't —"

"Don't say you're not attractive," Derek quickly interjects with a serious frown that Stiles almost finds cute. "Because you are, and I have million ways I can prove it."

"Jesus, Derek," Stiles squeaks, as his face burns hotly. "That is totally not where I was going with that. I was trying to say I'm not used to this because I've never — you know? I haven't had it be an option for me, like with, reciprocation and all that. I don't always look at people like that. Like how I look at you. It's just been — it's you. You make me — this is so mortifying."

Derek laughs and walks backwards in front of him. "No, keep talking. I like where this is going."

"Shut up, would you? I can't think when you tease me like this," Stiles complains and rolls his eyes in annoyance when Derek’s grin gets cockier. "Anyway. The point is that you'll have to work with me, okay? I can't just dive into it because I'd like to work out what this is and how I feel about it or if it's something I want to even put effort into."

"I'm patient," Derek promises in a heartbeat. "I'd wait forever if you asked me to."

Stiles stumbles and shoves Derek when snorts. "Stop saying things like that. It's — that is really intense."

"That's just who I am." Derek shrugs but his smile never wavers. "You should know by now that I'm always open about my feelings."

"Yeah I've noticed already," Stiles mutters as they stop at the crosswalk and wait for the signal to change so they can cross the street to go to the tire shop. "The key point here is that I have a lot of things I’m juggling with and you don’t have to wait forever because that’s not what I meant at all. We can see — just to — um. Let’s just slowly see how it goes. I’m not talking about dating because I’m not ready for that yet. Friends first. I’d like for us to go on like we have been."

"Except you’re not oblivious to the fact that I like you and you won’t pretend that I don't make your heart go crazy," Derek teases.

"I wonder if a Werewolf can survive being shoved into ongoing traffic," Stiles thinks aloud. "Mind being my test subject?"

Derek just wiggles his eyebrows suggestively.

"Oh my god, Derek. Not like that," Stiles frowns but he does feel a little lighter now that they put everything out in the open and laid the situation bare. He feels like a weight has been lifted and the clouds of confusion have dissipated. "Look, it’s safe for us to walk now. Take me to the antique shop. I have magic stuff I need to do."

"Whatever you want, Stiles."
“I want you to pay the taxes you owe me for putting up with you.”

“Does it have to be in money? Because I could —”

“I swear to god, Derek.”

“— bake something,” Derek finishes and looks at him with this innocent face that Stiles does not buy. “Well what did you think I was going to say, Stiles?”

“That you’re going to pay for your car fixing stuff and that we’re leaving and you’re taking me to a drive through and paying for all the curly fries, chicken nuggets, and all the blizzards I want before you drop me off.”

Derek lifts both eyebrows.

“It’s not a date.”

“Sure, Stiles,” Derek replies as he glides away to retrieve his car with a cheerful whistle.

Stiles gives some serious thought into throwing a pebble at the back of his head.

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“I don’t think Deaton will let you in,” Stiles comments as they sit in Derek’s car, parked on the curb in front of the antique store. “I’m serious. I don’t know what that thing he has on the door is but it definitely will not let you in. Give me some of your fries. The girl at the drive-thru kept dropping my food on the ground because my bad luck never ends.”

“Which is why I bought you two to make up for that,” Derek points out with a frown but still hands his cup of fries over. “It’s mountain ash by the way.”

Stiles shoves some curly fries in his mouth. “Tastes like fries to me,” he mumbles around a mouth full of food.

Derek makes the face he does at Laura when she’s being vulgar with her food. “Please don’t talk with your mouth full. That’s one of my pet peeves. And I’m talking about the barrier on the door. It’s mountain ash and — would you quit it! That’s disgusting.”

Stiles purposefully opens his mouth wide to expose his mushy, wet food.

“Ugh, gross. I think I saw your stomach,” Derek complains and grabs his strawberry cheesecake blizzard from his cup holder. “You could at least give me the rest of your chicken nuggets if you’re going to commandeer my fries.”

“Fancy word,” Stiles compliments. “And no.”

Derek reaches for the bag anyway and Stiles pulls it out of reach.

“I said no way. You get no dibs on my food. You’ve already taken too many liberties in the past,” Stiles lectures and laughs when Derek makes another reach. “I said you get none.”

“I’m taking your banana cream pie blizzard.”

“That’s just cruel and unusual. Here you neath — nedera — nena —”

Derek laughs. “Neanderthal, Stiles.” He shakes his head in amused fondness.
“I said that.”

“You attempted to say it.” Derek counters as he leans back against the driver’s side door and accepts the bag of chicken nuggets when the younger teen hands it over. “Do we have any —”

Stiles tosses the packets of barbeque sauce at his chest carelessly. He starts eating his blizzard before dipping his spoon into Derek’s, ignoring when the other makes a protesting sound around the food already in his mouth. “Shut up. You don’t have germs and I don’t either. Get over it.”

“You are the rudest passenger I’ve ever had,” Derek declares after he swallows and steals some of Stiles’s curly fries.

Stiles snorts. “So far, I’m your only.”

“My point still stands. It’s only uphill from here.”

Stiles quickly finishes half of his blizzard before he swaps it with Derek’s and finishes his and the other teen does the same. He wipes his greasy and sticky fingers with a napkin before climbing out the car. He grabs his borrowed book bag from the back as Derek cleans up the mess and climbs out with the garbage to throw it away in the nearest street garbage bin.

Derek waits until Stiles retrieves his things before he takes it and tosses it back into his backseat and wirelessly locks his door before the other teen can do anything about it.

Stiles sends him a sharp look. “I said Deaton’s not going to let you in.”

“No harm in asking.” Derek shrugs his mouth and stuffs his hands in the pockets of his varsity jacket.

Stiles gives him a considering look before he says, “Fine. Wait here and I’ll ask.” He enters the shop as the bell chimes predictably overhead as it does every time. “Um. So Derek Hale would like to come in. Would that be — uh, okay maybe I should have thought this through. Never mind!”

Deaton’s standing behind the glass counter, flipping through the Grimoire lazily and says, “If you can figure out how to remove the seal, then he may come and go as he pleases. It will no longer keep him out. However, this will be not be the exception for any and everyone. That is something I have to give the okay.”

Stiles brow furrows and replies, “Okay…” He turns to the door, wrenches it open, and puts the doorstopper down so it can keep the door propped open.

Derek is staring across the street with a slight frown. “Do they always follow you? I’ve seen them a few times.”

Stiles glances over to see that he’s referring to the black truck that always trails him. “They’re Mayor Argent’s minions. He’s assigned them with the job of keeping a close eye on me so that I don’t fall into the wrong hands, which, when you think about it, is in and of itself a contradiction.”

Derek makes a thoughtful sound before he turns to Stiles. “I have no problem talking to them, you know.”

“Settle down, Der,” Stiles says, tugging a lock of his hair. “This is an issue I have to deal with. I talked to my dad about it. I’ll have to wait it out until I can do something.”

“Still don’t like it,” Derek mutters and bats Stiles’s hand away when the other teen tries to yank his
hair again. “And stop calling me Der.”

Stiles shrugs.

Violet and Garrett smirk as they watch them.

Derek turns away and flexes his hands while taking a deep breath. “So what did Deaton say? I was kind of distracted by the people across the street.”

Stiles puts his hands to the sides of the doorframe. “Apparently you can come and go whenever you want, but I have to be able to remove the barrier, which I’m assuming is where the mountain ash is implanted in the door.”

Derek hides away his hands in the pockets of his varsity jacket as he lifts his eyebrows and shrugs his mouth like he’s waiting to see what the other teen will do.

“Bear with me a little. I’m not even sure I’ll get this right,” Stiles warns as he thinks about what Deaton had done some time ago when Peter and Laura appeared in concern over Kate. He gnaws on his bottom lip enough to feel the sting of it. He calls his magic for help and is relieved when his hands begin to burn brightly.

His magic gives him the impression that it would do anything for Derek; a feeling wrapped in silk rosy paper of curiosity and intrigue.

Stiles blushes and sends back waves of annoyance that his magic ignores as it spreads his body in a quick flush before dimming. The barrier glows before giving and he exhales triumphantly before stepping back.

Derek slowly walks up and through the door, tense shoulders relaxing when there is no backlash from the barrier. “Good job,” he says with a grin made of starlight.

Stiles gets distracted from putting the barrier back up for a moment but he does it quickly to say, “Thanks. It was easier than I thought. I’m gonna walk over there. Introduce yourself because that’s the polite thing to do.” He walks over to the older man. “I think I’m cursed with bad luck.”

Deaton raises his eyebrow. “Clarify.”

Stiles babbles on and on about his day.

Deaton holds up a hand to stop him mid-sentence when he’s at the ladder half of his description. He reaches down to fish something out and reveals a stick of incense with a lighter. “Don’t move,” he instructs as he lights the top of the incense. The tip gets red and orange like the coals of a manmade fire. The older man rounds the glass and begins swirling the incense around Stiles and it smells like sweet cherry wood. “Someone’s put a hex on you.”

“Makes sense,” Stiles supposes and internally freaks out. “So, uh. What’s all this?”

“It’s a counter spell, it will cleanse the natural flow of your energy. It’s blocking Fate’s protection over you and leaving you vulnerable to the wiles of Peril.” Deaton covers the whole proximity of Stiles’s body before he shakes the stick to extinguish it. “I gather you were in the presence of a Demon. Be careful, Stiles. You need to harness your magic to discern the countenance of every individual you come in contact with and protect yourself. I cannot determine the source, so I suspect this Demon has to be one of the oldest and very good at concealing the traces of their hexes.”

Stiles is still internally freaking out. “Oh. Okay. Thank you.”
Deaton just wordlessly trashes the charred incense before standing behind the glass counter. It's quiet for a few moments (enough time for Stiles to calm down), then he asks, “Did you read the thirty pages I asked you to?”

Stiles nods.

“Read thirty more. I believe you’ll come across the narratives in regards to Demons and their dark magic, as it pertains to blood and death rituals,” Deaton suggests.

Stiles nods again before saying, “Hey, Deaton, I believe I got the right estimates this time.”

Deaton expression never wavers. “Let’s hear it then.”

Stiles slowly sounds out the numbers.

“Incorrect. You will lie on your right side and find a way to move around so you can calculate,” Deaton counters effortlessly.

Stiles groans and jumps up and down like a toddler ready to throw a temper tantrum. “You’re asking me to wiggle! Can’t I get a free pass this time? What if I never figure it out?”

“Never say never,” Derek remarks unhelpfully from where he’s fiddling with a large telescope made of gold metal in fascination.

Stiles throws him a betrayed look, not that Derek sees because he’s too busy mooning over that telescope. “I should have never let you in.”

“He does have a point, Mr. Stilinski,” Deaton agrees. “Hello, Derek. It’s been a while since we met. I believe you were three at the time, and I was consulting with Mr. Ravenhill. You were running around with your younger sister I believe.”

Derek rubs the back of his neck. “Sorry. I don’t remember that. But it’s nice to meet you again.” He walks over to shake the older man’s hand swiftly and lets go just as quickly.

Stiles really wants to ask about what that kind of contact means, especially since Derek takes him time releasing Stiles’s hands like it’s never any rush to do so. He wonders if he’s even ready for the answer.

Derek puts his hands in his pockets again like he’s trying to reassure himself that the jacket’s still there and it wasn’t a dream.

Stiles is a little amused by that.

“Can you tell me how much that telescope costs, please?” Derek questions a little self-consciously and sneaks glances at Stiles.

Stiles wonders why.

“It’s one of a kind. It was once owned by James E. Webb, so I’m sure you can understand it’s worth,” Deaton replies.

Derek perks up like he’s hit the jackpot. “I’d pay anything,” he swears and flushes when Stiles’s snickers (and he gets why Derek was trying to be subtle a moment ago). “It’s not funny.”

“Whatever you say, Richie Rich,” Stiles says and makes his way over to the leftover mess of books and bookshelves.
“I do not need money, Derek,” Deaton assures. “Only that you treat it with the care it deserves.”

“Yes,” Derek replies immediately. “I can — I will — I do appreciate the —”

“Then it is yours from this point forward,” Deaton reasons and turns with the Grimoire in hand. “Excuse me, I believe I hear my teapot hissing. Make yourself comfortable. I will be upstairs if either of you need my assistance. Derek, I advise you not to help Stiles, however.”

Stiles makes an indignant sound from the other side of the room at the corner.

Derek snickers.

“It’s a mess he made, and he must take personal responsibility for setting everything right.” Deaton disappears behind the veil of beads.

Stiles grumbles as he maneuvers around scattered books.

“Stiles, I’m going to put this telescope in my car!” Derek calls and the ding of the bell residing over the front door.

Stiles doesn’t acknowledge it, too engrossed into lifting a wooden bookshelf upright with some effort. He tries to subtly pull his magic up and his magic retreats even further in amusement. “You suck. You suck. You are the worst magic in history.”

Derek appears not a moment later with one hand in the pocket of his jacket, thumb poking out. “Do I even want to know?” he questions with a small smile, playing with an old light up yo-yo like he’s some kind of pro at it.

“I don’t even know how to explain,” Stiles responds, bending to swipe an armful of books up. “I have magic, but it’s like — I don’t know how to explain. Right now it’s annoying but we have an understanding. It would risk anything to keep me safe.” He starts filing books away as he rambles, Derek following quietly wherever he goes. “Me and my magic have this love/hate relationship. We’re not exactly friends but like I said, we have an understanding. So, frenemies? Its kind of like I’m the AU Kirk to it’s Spock. They didn’t get along at first, but eventually they set aside their differences.” His magic curls up in his chest, humored. Stiles keeps going anyway, “Or I’m the C. C. Babcock to it’s Niles from the Nanny, you know? You probably don’t know. Maybe it’s more like I’m the Dennis the Menace to its Mr. George Wilson. Man, I should really watch that movie again cause it’s been forever. Ha, I love the part near the end where he’s trying to make s’mores and he — he like — he sets it on fire and starts shaking it up and down and it goes flying towards Mr. Wilson’s forehead. Classic. Of course after I watched that movie when I was little, I was petrified of s’mores for a very long time because I thought I was going to set myself on fire if I did. I prefer bananas anyway. My mom used to make me these honeyed banana and peanut butter sandwiches. She’d never cut off the crust because she knew that was my favorite part. Hey, did you know that bread was so important to the Egyptian way of life that it was used as a type of currency. I mean imagine that, buying a camel, or a house, or some rubies with bread. That is just wild. I would have —”

Derek does the walk-the-dog trick and says, “Breathe, Stiles.”

Stiles sucks in some air, face red by the never-ending babble. “That got away from me again,” he mumbles sheepishly.

“The part about the bread was interesting,” Derek admits as he does the around-the-world trick. “And yes, Stiles. I’ve seen the Nanny. That’s Aunt Rosemary, Aunt Meredith, and my mom’s favorite TV show.” He does the side-winder trick. “Haven’t seen Dennis the Menace though. I did
see *Problem Child* a million times with Cora before she fell in love with *Ghostbusters."

“Why are you so good at that? The yoyo should not be easy. Why are you not having trouble?” Stiles asks, not unkindly. He turns the last two books he has from the pile of books he had in his arms over in his hands and grabs the ladder. “Walk-the-dog is the only one I know.”

“Cora and I used to have competitions. But that was before we learned about the cup game,” Derek explains as he tracks Stiles’s movements very closely.

“The cup game?”

“Yeah. You know. Speed Stacks? The old school multicolored competition cups with holes at the bottom of them?”

“Oh yeah!” Stiles exclaims and wavers on one of the ladder’s steps a bit, nothing too serious. “I remember seeing those commercials on Nickelodeon. Or was it Cartoon Network? Maybe Disney or PBS.” He scans the rows of shelves to determine where he should be placing the two books in his hands. “Who won?”

“Cora would say she did, but she had nothing on me.”

“She had nothing on you,” Stiles echoes dryly. “Why do I feel like you’re misinterpreting the whole event?”

“It’s hurts me to think that you don’t believe me,” Derek retorts as he does walk-the-dog, making the yoyo light up again.

“Cry me a river.” Stiles sways a little harder on the ladder trying to reach up and situate the book in between a line of already planted books while also trying to catch his balance. He makes the whole ladder shake with a tremor.

Derek mutters a quick curse and his left hand shoots out to grip the ladder before it can tip over.

“Stiles, be careful.”

“I am,” Stiles protests and wobbles again.

Derek sighs and clutches the ladder tighter.

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They roll up to Stiles’s house about a quarter to eight. On the drive to his house, Stiles had insisted that Derek take his spare backpack back but the older teen refused and threatened to just buy him a new one if he kept it up. Stiles pressed his lips together in a frown and crossed his arms, not saying a word until they pulled up to the curb. He fishes and yanks his new book bag from out of the backseat.

Derek waits until he slams the door shut, wincing and complains, “Hey! Careful with my baby. She’s been through enough today.”

“You’re such a dweeb,” Stiles retorts, throwing the book bag onto one shoulder. “Are we good with — um, what we talked about earlier?”

“Very clear,” Derek replies with a grin. “Same time tomorrow?”

“No thanks. I’ll just ride my bike,” Stiles supposes.
“If you say so,” Derek replies easily, and he doesn’t look upset or like he’s going to push the issue. “Come to my practice after school then.”

“Can’t. Deaton.” Stiles shrugs, trying to smother his smirk.

Derek gives him a flat look. “Yeah, you look really torn up about it.”

Stiles laughs a little.

“Then come to the game later,” Derek asks. “Please.”

Stiles waits a full sixty seconds before he says, “My schedule won’t allow it. You’ll have to talk to my receptionist if you really — ha, okay, I’m totally kidding. Stop looking like you’re about to have a temper tantrum.”

“I do not look like I’m about to have a temper tantrum, and the game is at 7:30.”

“Fine,” Stiles merely says and looks towards his house. “I need to go do my homework.”

Derek nods in solidarity as his car rumbles. “Call me, maybe?”

Stiles look at him sharply. “You totally did that on purpose.”

“Maybe I did, and maybe I didn’t. You need hard evidence to prove it,” Derek teases with a grin.

“Good night, oh wait. I’m mean, later.”

“Later, dork.” Derek speeds off before Stiles can pitch a fit.

Stiles is so not going to call him.

Except he does, but only to complain and he has to do it from Isaac’s phone because his is broken. Derek just snickers the whole time.

Stiles is annoyed that the other teen can get under his skin like this.

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Tuesday finds Stiles waking up with a jerk, slapping the paper stuck to his cheek and wiping the drool from his mouth. He yawns and stretches as he tries to remember what he’d been doing before. Well he knows he was talking to Derek for fifteen minutes while he did some of his homework. After they hung up, he handed the smartphone back to his little brother, and then he tried to finish the rest of his assignments. He remembers flipping through the bible of Virtues after he set his alarm for six in the morning. He must have tried to take some notes on his findings and blacked out in the midst of that.

Stiles is so tired. He gets mad at himself for setting that alarm as early as he did. He rises from his desk chair and stretches again, groaning when all his bones crack back into place. Then he rubs the moisture from his eyes and tries to shake off his exhaustion like he’s getting ready to hype himself up to skydiving.

He’s a bit sluggish when he exits his room, down the steps and out the back door. When he makes it to the damp grass of his backyard, he sighs happily and wiggles his toes. He stands there a moment, swaying a bit, as his eyelids grow heavier. The sun is rising, he can feel it rather than see it. He stops for a moment and tries to think as his eyes grow warm.
Stiles decides he wants to try something. He’s not sure if it will work, but better to try then to not try at all. He reaches in for his magic, which is curled up in his gut, docile in slumber. That makes him smile, the thought that his magic can sleep as much as he can. He gently pushes it up and politely urges it to focus only on his right hand like an ethereal glove. His magic complies, so spaced-out that it probably doesn’t even realize what’s going on.

Stiles lifts his hand and channels all the energy of his magic to the fingers of his right hand and pulls the energy of the sun into the mix of it. It burns hotter and hotter as he prays to Fate, begging for assistance before his hand twinkles like the brightest star in the sky. Then he drops to his knees and smacks the edge of the lawn before the ground shakes. His magic wakes up then, surging in him wildly before it pours into the dirt of the Earth, spreading like the bioluminescent roots of an otherworldly tree. It sinks deeper and deeper into the ground and spreads like phosphorescent veins.

He feels the pulse coming from the center of the Earth and his eyes get warmer and warmer as he stares down. He can see into it, through it, and he just knows as his heart races. And just like that, he knows everything he needs to know about his backyard. How deep it goes, how fertile it is, how far the moisture goes down, what animals and insects are in it, and Nana’s influence on the health and comfort of the surrounding area. He yanks his hand back as his hand flickers off and eyes washes cold; his magic isn’t even upset, just annoyed that he didn’t give it fair warning but even that is surpassed by its pride. He has to blink away his tears with a shaky exhale before he laughs. He laughs long and hard because this is probably what Deaton meant the whole time when he wanted him to learn — to understand the ground he has to work with. What he had to learn in order to build his garden.

Stiles knows. He knows. He can tell what will go where and how long it will take for it to grow, and how to avoid disruptive weather. He knows what purpose his garden has and that it will be a reflection of who he is and what he can do. It will be sanctified ground with peace and love. He pulls his legs up and hugs his knees as he laughs wetly. The Sun twinkles at him as though Fate is saying ‘Well done’. He trembles in triumph and he can’t wait to start. It will be his resting place, his place of comfort and thought. Somewhere he can contemplate the issues of the world and how to promote harmony. He is young and he has a long way to go, but he gets to start here and it’s the best feeling in the world.

He’ll have a little piece of Faerie here, a fraction of his heritage within reach and that gives him extraordinary bliss.

Home is coming.

It’s coming.

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Stiles spends the rest of the morning on cloud nine. Even Isaac looks at him with a curious thrill as they ride their bikes lazily to school. He goes out of his way to hug Stiles tightly like he’s afraid Stiles will disappear before he runs off with a grin. When he gets to his own school, everyone glances his way like that can’t help but to notice him. He doesn’t even care or notice; he’s just so content. He makes his way to his locker, humming happily to himself, and he hardly notices that every person he passes on either side of him perk up with a smile and starts laughing aimlessly. The hall just lights up with delight and wonder.

“Why are you all glow-y?” Cora asks, trying for a scowl but her lips keep twitching like she wants to grin. “And why do you smell like the sweetest part of the forest?”

“I don’t know,” Stile admits honestly. “And what do you mean glow-y? Shit, am I blue?” He panics.
“Calm down,” Cora hisses as her mouth twitches again. “I don’t mean like that. It’s just that your skin is — you look like moonshine. It’s — it’s pretty.”

“Are you saying I’m pretty, Cora?” Stiles rags and barely manages to avoid the light punch she’s trying to aim at his right arm. “I really don’t know. All I did was just a little forest-magic this morning. Kinda learned my backyard. It was awesome.”

“Well dial it back. Everyone looks all loopy like they’re drunk or high. Even I want to just curl up with Ginger along the riverbank where the sunflowers grow,” Cora admits, fidgeting with her discomfort.

“Is that your happy place?” Stiles questions, charmed. "Are you saying I remind you of your happy place? That's almost romantic.”

Cora gives him a sharp look but she also doesn’t deny it.

Stiles makes a mental note to grow some sunflowers for her. “Also, I don’t know how to ‘dial it back’. I haven’t got that far in my studies. I didn’t know this would happen, I swear. I think some of my Faerie energy is coming out.”

“Well figure how to push it back because no one will get anything done today with you around clouding all our thoughts like this,” Cora says through gritted teeth but her eyes are bright and pleased. “Seriously. It’s like someone’s passing a blunt around.”

Stiles throws his head back and laughs.

The sound spreads through the entire school and it’s like a mixture of flutes and tinkling of bells.


Cora drags him to their AP Biology class, snarling at anyone who tries to gravitate towards Stiles.

They all spring back in fear.

Stiles loves Cora.

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The rest of his classes follow with the same theme. He spends most of his time looking out the window, watching as the birds and butterflies tap against the glass like they’re trying to get to him. He kind of longs to be with them too.

Every teacher gives their lectures with passionate cheer. The students squirm like their resisting the urge to glance towards the back corner of the room where Stiles always resides. Some of the girls pull out their powder mirrors like they're trying to reapply some lip gloss but Stiles has to duck the glare of light when those mirrors get aimed at him.

It’s kind of ridiculous to be honest.

He remembers asking for a pen because his exploded and about fifteen pens of blues and reds and blacks get thrown at him immediately. He yelps and tries to dodge them while he pushes down his magic when it gets angry and defensive at the mistreatment of its host. He sends impressions of assurance as he sorts through the pile and grabs a blue pen. His magic just curls up in his mind, sullen.
Now that pattern continues because all his books seem to disappear somehow (though he has some idea who is responsible for that since certain people in his classes try to causally avoid his gaze) and he crosses his arms, refusing to accept the multitude of offers he gets to share books.

Thank god his teachers don’t moon over him. That would be awkward, but they do go out of their way to call on him more than anyone and that’s annoying enough that he kind of wishes they were infatuated so that he can beg off the questions. However, since it’s not like that, he purposefully gives wrong answers so that they can leave him alone but they just go with it saying ‘Well yes, that is one way to look at it. Thank you, Stiles’.

Stiles stuffs all the books pushed on him and takes one of each as to put in his locker and leaves the rest scattered on the floor because the janitor is more than happy to tidy up after him. He maneuvers his way to the lunch and around all the offers to sit with a new group of people. Even the lunch ladies refuse to accept his money and gives an extra serving of anything he asks for. He tries to carry it out into the quad without dropping it and makes an annoyed sound when a senior grabs it and carries it to his table for him.

“Thanks,” Stiles huffs and gives her a pointed look before she goes away.

Laura and Kate stare at him for a long time and Cora squirms beside him.

“Kate, trade places with me please,” Cora begs as she gets red.

“No way, I get a front view,” Kate retorts as she grins at Stiles from under her lashes. “When did you get so gorgeous, tenderfoot.”

“I’m gonna be sick,” Stiles complains and throws of all his jello at her.

Laura looks confused as she warms with her emotions. She gets a little pink as she tries to stop herself from staring at him with so much affection and emotion. “This is too weird. Cora, help me pass out some flyers.”

“Oh thank fuck,” Cora says in relief and scrambles off with Laura like there’s a lion chasing them.

Kate makes these happy little sounds as she eats his jello. “Seriously. Why do you look so good that I want to lick this jello off your body?”

Stiles chokes on the hotdog he’s eating and he goes pink when he realizes everyone has been staring at him the whole time with these crazed lustful looks.

“I’m going to have to go help Laura and Cora. I’m seconds away from cheating on Peter with you. See you around, buttercup. Fix whatever the fuck it is,” Kate advises before gliding away.

A few students edge closer to occupy the seats around Stiles.

Luckily that’s when Derek shows up and glares them all into submission and they retreat in fear. The older teen lowers his tray to the table and sits across from Stiles. “What’s up with the school? I hear everyone saying your name every thirty seconds with their hearts racing wildly. And it’s weird because — Stiles, why do you have so many slices of chocolate cake? Where the hell did all this food come from? That’s why we’re out of slushies! This is a bit much, even for you and why are you looking at me like that?”

Stiles is gawking at him. “You mean…you’re fine? I don’t make you want to —” His face colors. “— never mind. I messed around with some forest-magic before I came to school and I think some of my Fae energy is affecting everyone. Well everyone but you, which I do not get.”
“Ah, I get it now,” Derek says, stretching with a smirk before he grabs three plates of chocolate cake from the pile. “You’ve got some kind of Faerie allure going on. You’re a temptress.”

“Shut up,” Stiles complains as his flush spreads. “Not severely enough since you seem so immune to it. Why is that?”

Derek shrugs both his mouth and shoulders. “Maybe because I already find you attractive? Everyone’s just seeing what I’ve already noticed about you. Are you gonna finish that taco? Why don’t I just take these, and help you out a bit? You’ve been provided with a banquet it seems.”

Stiles just stares at him and shakes his head, trying to swallow and process the older teen’s casual attitude. He clears his throat as he watches Derek stuff the soft-shell taco in his mouth with no problem. “So, you’re saying that everyone who normally doesn’t have a deep attraction to me is affected by my aura?”

“Makes sense to me,” Derek supposes. “Do I need to follow you for the rest of your classes to make sure there’s no funny business? I’ve seen the way Greenberg looks at you. I don’t know, Stiles. He looks ready to seal the deal. I’ll be heartbroken but I’ll be the ring bearer if needed.”

“You are not amusing.”

“Yes I am. You love it. Finish that hotdog, everyone keeps looking at it hopefully like their praying that you put it in your mouth again.”

Stiles chokes on his spit but laughs. “You are absolutely ridiculous.”

Derek shrugs and takes two more slices of chocolate cake.

Stiles is grateful for this short moment of normality.

“Hey, do you think if I took you to the ice cream parlor, they’d give us all the ice cream we wanted free of charge?”

Stiles rolls his eyes as he eats soup instead, ignoring all the disappointed looks. “It is so like you to take advantage of this for your own gain.”

“That wasn’t a no.”

“Fine, yes, okay.” Then Stiles quickly, because Derek starts to give him a million watt smile, adds, “But only for ten minutes, Derek. I have to get to Deaton’s so he can help me fix this.”

“Awesome. Though, all I’m going to think about for the rest of school is how I’m going to gorge myself on some zebra cake ice cream until I need medical help.”

“That is the most obnoxious thing I’ve heard anyone say.”

Derek just beams excitedly at him and reaches the last of piece of cake.

Stiles has to fight him for it because he did actually want some of it.

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There’s a strange older man standing across from Deaton when Derek and Stiles walk through the shop door, bumping shoulders playfully after inhaling an obscene amount of ice cream in such a short amount of time.
Derek straightens in awareness and his eyes flash gold as his mouth twists into a severe frown.

Stiles touches his elbow, ready to ask him what’s wrong but he never gets the chance to. The man turns to look at them and Stiles freezes instantly.

He’d know that face anywhere.

It’s Chris Argent.
chastity

Chris Argent has hard lines in his face. His mouth is set in a grim frown like he hasn't smiled for years, and blue eyes are dark with an intensity that could probably make even a ferocious lion quiver fear. His clothes are simple, not quite street clothes but not quite professional; a mixture of both maybe, but he pulls it off well enough. He looks just like Kate, and he can see the vague traces of the features that Allison possesses too. Chris's eyes sweep over Derek with a stoic expression and Derek stiffens before balling his fists.

Stiles does not like that at all, and even his magic bristles, which forces him to push it down with an impression of complacency and an urging feeling of gentle consolation.

Chris's eyes flicker to him next, and he straightens, the line of shoulders falling in slow degrees, and he gives the younger teen a considering look. Then he takes a careful stride to them like he's being both cautious and ready before he stands before them. "Derek," he says with a voice that sounds both like a greeting and a warning. "And you would be…" He's looking at Stiles.

"Stiles. Stilinski." Stiles doesn't say much more than that.

Chris’s face has this constipated look of recognition before he shuts it down as quickly as it appeared. "The sheriff's son," is all he says, but there's something there that indicates he knows more of Stiles than he's willing to let on.

Stiles would not be surprised, considering that this is Mayor Argent's oldest son (in meaning that this is the only child he's seen fit to claim, outside of Kate of course). His eyes, as well as the look in them, echo the kind of ruthless cunning that Mayor Argent has about him unfailingly.

Chris holds out his hand, completely disregarding Derek (who just jams his hands in his pockets like he wouldn't want to touch Chris even if he offered) and the older man just stares Stiles down.

Stiles doesn't feel intimidated, remarkably enough, and it might be because his magic furls around in his rib cage like a serpent posed to strike. He gets over his hesitation and he shakes the older man's hand. He inhales quietly as waves of emotions sink into his nerves to travel up to his brain to form into a cloud of guilt, sadness, anger, determination and Stiles slams down any expression that clues the older man of what he's seen before he let's go.

Chris sweeps his gaze over the younger man once again before he looks over his shoulder at Deaton. "Right again, it seems. I'll be in touch."

Deaton gives a short nod.

Chris returns it and pushes his way between Derek and Stiles to hustle out the door.

Stiles walks over to Deaton and says, "Why was Chris Argent here? What were you guys talking about? Why did he look at me like he knows who and what I am? I felt him, you know. Like felt him. I didn't see anything but I just — you know? Like I got an impression. Is that normal? How —"

Deaton puts his hand up. "One question at a time, Mr. Stilinski," he says before he looks over at Derek. "Are you stable?"

Stiles feels bad immediately as he whips his gaze over at the older teen. He didn't even think to ask or check — too wrapped up in his own confusion. He's such a bad friend.
Derek has an angry flush spread like freckles on his cheeks. His large hands aren't in his pockets anymore and he flexes them as his eye color flickers back and forth from hazel green to bright gold. His shoulders are shaking with the effort to keep it together. "I — don't think I can — I'm sorry — I can't —" he's practically choking on the words and he sounds so painfully miserable and ashamed.

"Talk him down," Deaton unflappably instructs.

Stiles's magic surges in him as predictable warmth floods his eyes and he almost whimpers when his whole body flushes with a white-hot spark crashing into his system like a searing tsunami. His skin glows brighter than he has ever seen and he feels like a cup spilling over with sweltering wine. It makes him feel desperate to get rid of the extra energy. He's afraid to touch Derek because the last time he felt like this, Parrish went flying back.

"Talk him down," Deaton urges, turning away from the marvelous radiance of Stiles's bioluminescent glow and braces himself against the edge of the glass case. His shoulders look like their trembling. "Quickly, Mr. Stilinski, before I drop to my knees."

Stiles doesn't know what to do because even Derek has his eyes closed like he's trying to hide from the sunlight. So he reaches out and grabs Derek's left hand and his magic furls up Derek's arm like thick vapor before sinking into his chest and Stiles can feel his magic seeking for the older teen's heart with glee, and when it finds what it's looking for, it envelops it like wrapping paper. Stiles has no words for what he feels, but it's like his magic is speaking with ethereal sentiment.

Derek gasps and when his eyes fly open, his gold eyes shine with the kind of brilliance that would make the stars in the upper heavens jealous.

Stiles feels a little breathless at the sight, and he has to viciously strike at his magic, putting up a force field because it wants to create a tether between the two of them without their consent and he says 'no absolutely not, you will not'. His magic withdraws quickly in a hostile retreat and settles in his mind, hiding away in the quiet places of the receptors that control motor functions. He lets go of Derek's hand with an annoyed sound as his glow washes cold.

Derek is trembling but he's not about to lose control and give over to the shift. He does look exhausted and he has to blindly reach out for this old, black rocking chair behind him. He also seems a little dazed like he's drunk.

Stiles blushes and tries not to think about why that is, still miffed at his magic for trying to have its way with Derek. In it's enthusiasm, it tried to seek out the older teen’s spirit so it could follow the threads that would lead it to Derek's inner wolf with the intention of binding them together. His magic bristles in his mind like a spoiled, petulant child before going still, and retreats further until Stiles can barely feel it at all.

Deaton straightens with some effort, but he's still shaking, which makes Stiles's attention shift. "That was a little extreme, even for a Seven," he supposes, his voice has a slight tremor to it and that astonishes Stiles so much because the older man usually always has such rigid composure. "I'm afraid the scale I measured the limit of your power is now null and void."

"I don't — I didn't mean to — hang on, what do you mean?" Stiles questions desperately, afraid of the answer.

"It means there is a question of whether or not you have a set limit," Deaton replies before he takes a moment to inhale/exhale for several beats of silence. "I need a moment." He takes about five minutes until his self-control returns. "Your forest-magic appears to have more exuberance than I anticipated. Mr. Stilinski, this power almost compares to the Lady of the Garden. Do you understand the
implications of that?"

Stiles is freaking out. He's freaking out so hard that he's well on his way to having a panic attack and it doesn't help that every electrical appliance is flickering on and off. "Please don't say that," he pleads desperately. "I just got used to being a Seven and now you're telling me that I could very well be — I don't — I can't —"

"Settle your emotions, Mr. Stilinski, or your magic will start to manifest and you'll demolish everything in the radius of this store."

Stiles throat begins to tighten and his lungs fill constricted. He will pass out — he will pass out — he will — he —

"Focus on me, Stiles," Derek says quietly, still sounding slightly drowsy. "It's okay. We'll make it okay. Just listen to me breathe, all right? You're safe. You have the ground under your feet and the ceiling over your head. Listen to the clocks and listen to me breathe. We can make this okay. Focus on me for a moment."

Stiles lets out a shuddering breath before he swallows dryly and gives a short nod. He presses his lips together so hard that it almost hurts. They feel like they might go numb soon if he keeps this up. He shakes out his hands, focusing on the *tick tock* of the clocks and the relaxed rhythm of Derek's breathing. The beating heart in Stiles's chest slows down as he clings to these things and there's only half of a portion of anxiety there, but it's nothing he can't handle, although the worst of it will hit him hard later, which probably means he'll do a quick stress cry in Derek’s car on the drive home. But for now, he can keep it together.

"Your backyard," Deaton starts when he's sure the younger man is calm enough to speak. "The measurements?"

"You gave me a trick question, you know. Sent me on a wild goose chase. The measurements aren't what’s important, are they?" Stiles says vaguely, still listening to Derek breathe. "It's more than that. The ground goes deep and it's good soil. It’s healthy and there's potential there, but I don't know how to sow the seeds. I know where to put everything and the order it goes in or how to make it grow. But I don’t know what to sow."

"Amethyst stones," Deaton clarifies. "They have spiritual healing properties but a Virtue's purpose for them is to spread the stones when they've been crushed to beads, so as to plant them like seeds. You command them. You speak over it because your voice gives life, not death. You feed it with your tears, your energy, your spit, and drops of your blood. The maximum being three drops when required, you do not need to look so fearful. You won't be slicing open your wrists."

"That's comforting in a major way," Stiles mumbles and smiles a little when Derek snorts. "How do I get these stones?"

"You leave that to me. My purpose is to stand in the gap when you are unable to divide your attention," Deaton answers. "Virtues do not settle. The toiling is constant. They understand that forgiveness and reconciliation and favor are given for reason, and for purpose. You are an ambassador of peace with grace unsurpassed, and so there is much required of you. You hear the hearts that cry out by the masses. I know you feel the restlessness of your magic. It does not want to find a comfortable position and put up a tent there and tell Fate 'I am happy with you blessing me and mine'.

"Virtues do not want a life that looks good, but they want it to be good." He goes on to say, “Fate wants to hear its children look to the Sun and say 'Use us, pick us, choose us'. When Virtues decide
to leave this realm, and stand for judgment in front the Faceless, they want to show that they spent their time here with a life poured out; that your love was seen and carved out on the foundations of the Earth. Virtues will never ever take for granted the time they are given. You understand pain, loneliness, anger, fear, distress and every negative state because you were in that state. Yet Fate bothered to take the time and present the gifts of nature and love to you, so that you can replicate it."

Stiles's cheeks are red and wet with awe and a yearning to own the responsibility of his purpose. He always gets emotional over these truths and he can’t figure out why. Maybe its because he wants to pave the way for harmony like he’s supposed to. His magic has even emerged and has expanded in his chest with a craving unlike anything he's ever felt. "I — I do want to —" he's choking on the words he can't even get them out.

Deaton understands perfectly. "I know. The Mother Queen will teach you how to pray and the ethics of deliverance, and I will teach you how to collaborate and hone your magic. Together, we will get you there."

Stiles nods and scrubs his face clean using his hands and sleeves. "Where do we start?"

"Softening the energy of your magic," Deaton reasons as he reaches down to grab something that Stiles can’t see. "When you came in your aura was bright."

“Like moonshine,” Derek offers. He gives a lazy smile that never fails to give Stiles butterflies. The smile lengthens when Stiles gives him a sharp look with a blush dusting his cheeks. “Don’t look at me. Cora’s the one that put that way. Though I don’t disagree.”

Stiles sighs. “Derek —”

“Regardless,” Deaton cursorily interjects. He's smart to interrupt. “Your countenance equates almost to the brilliance of the sun. Something so bright, beyond what’s considered normal, masters the heart of the many and sways the spirit of the few. The radiance your magic affords you, the biological vitality of Faerie elegance is what, within it’s own right, can be considered a weapon.”

“I understand,” Stiles promises, but he makes an indication to Derek. “He wasn’t affected.”

The corner of Deaton’s mouth twitch with an almost crooked smile before it straightens into the grim line he always holds. “I believe this is something you and Derek must discuss.” He glances over to Derek with an assessing gaze. “This is a matter I have no say in.”

Derek flushes and squirms with this guilty look that Stiles can’t even begin to understand.

“Um…okay,” Stiles says, completely lost. “How do I stop, you know, glowing?”

“This will last three days, until the next cycle of the moon begins. However, it is not influenced by the moon, but by three series of a sunrise, as you are under the banner of Fate,” Deaton announces. “It would appear this is what we will have to work on alongside the building of your garden. I assumed you already knew how to maintain balance. You should know how to do basic forest-magic without expelling so much Fae dynamism. This is only acceptable to do in the small kingdom.”

“Kingdom?”

“Your garden. For Faeries, their resting place is considered a small kingdom,” Deaton patiently explains. “You’re a Prince among all sentient beings, though in some cultures you are considered more. However, there is no doubt that you are the Boy King among nature. The Lady of the Garden is the Queen of all Faeries, and whatever you conquer is considered an expansion of Her kingdom. Thus, your garden is considered a small kingdom.”
“Ah,” is all Stiles says. He doesn’t say anything else because he doesn’t know what to say. He’s taken in so much today. It’s a little baffling and overwhelming but no less intriguing; he wonders when he’ll get to that part in the bible of Virtues.

“Tea,” Deaton says suddenly.

Stiles blinks as he turns his attention back to the older man. “Tea?”

“How,” Deaton reveals a small, dark mahogany bowl with a matching grinder that looks like a miniature baseball bat with a fat head. He even sits a glass jar (which looks like a see-through cookie jar) that’s almost filled to the rim with clear water. There’s a jar of honey and brown sugar. Then he reveals a flowerpot full of thick, black dirt, and a measuring cup full of white sand. “Tea.”

“Uh —” Stiles cocks his head as he rubs the back of his neck. “— the water I get. The mixing bowl. The honey. The sugar. That I get too. But…why the dirt and sand?”

“Mr. Stilinski, that bad habit of yours is manifesting again,” Deaton calmly states and says nothing when Stiles blushes in embarrassment. “Tea.”

“Got it,” Stiles mumbles and begins to chew on his thumbnail. “Is there a timeline on this?”

“No timeline. All you simply have to do is make tea when you are ready to do so,” Deaton explains and turns to walk away. “I’ll work on obtaining those amethyst stones for you. I’ll have a sack full of beads for you to plant by Monday. Lock up when it is time for you to leave.” He nods at Derek before he disappears behind that veil of beads.

Stiles sighs and twists his body left to right while rolling his head.

Derek snorts. “Getting ready to run a marathon, huh?”

“Funny,” Stiles replies sarcastically. “Are you — I just noticed — I mean you had to know who that — did he ever do anything —”

“Yes, I’m fine,” Derek carefully interjects, already three steps ahead, expertly making sense of Stiles's half-completed sentences. “I know who Chris Argent is, but I don’t personally know him. It’s mostly instinct. Were can sense Hunters, only if they’ve killed one of our kind. It’s like a biological response — or maybe deeper that. Maybe even something selective, like a chemical reaction on a neurological level. So my initial response is to be proactively defensive to protect myself. Kate is — she’s different. She’s never done anything like that. Kill one of our kind, that is. We’ve accepted her a long time ago. Even mom recognized that she wasn’t like them, like her father or her brother. Like Hunters as a whole.” He sighs and rubs his left hand all over his face before running it through his neatly cut hair. “I don’t know him like that. I’ve never met him until today. And Kate doesn’t talk about it, though I can take a stab at why. He left when she was like ten, and she never forgave him for that. And I think it was also after the fire that killed a good portion of my family. His presence in this town has always been spotty ever since.” He finishes with a shrug.

Stiles takes that in consideration and puts it in his mental back pocket. He’ll have to call Allison about this, if she doesn’t already know that her father is in town. Then he gets this sudden thought and says, “Why does Deaton call you by your first name and not me?”

Derek leans back in the rocking chair, lacing his long fingers together over his stomach with an amused smirk. He shrugs. “I’m tired. Whatever you did, or, at least whatever your magic was —”

“It’s very assertive,” Stiles interjects quickly. He's uncomfortable by this topic because he feels guilty, like he let his magic get out of control in an invasive way. He'll have to talk to his magic about
the importance of consent. “It just really, you know, likes you. Oh, come on. Don’t look like that. It makes me want to kick you. Derek, I swear—”

Derek gives a colorful laugh that makes Stiles’s heart quicken in wonder. “It’s hard not to take that as a compliment. You already know how I feel about you, or I hope you have a good idea. Ah, see. You’re blushing again. Positive response of affirmation.”

“I feel like I opened up the floodgates,” Stiles mutters resentfully as his blush spreads down to his neck. “You’re such a cocky moron.”

“I am an intelligent contribution to the world,” Derek retorts cheerfully as he starts to rock. “But maybe this is why we’re right for each other. You keep me humble.”

Stiles rolls his eyes.

"Don’t you have tea to make?"

“Don’t you have a mouth to shut?” Stiles mumbles and hides a grin when Derek laughs delightedly at that. Stiles walks right up to the edge of the glass counter and drums his fingers on the surface. He gnaws on his bottom lip thoughtfully. He’s not sure how long he does this for. He presses at his magic over and over, like a toddler poking at their older sibling for attention. “Could you at least tell me what I’m supposed to do here?” he whines and flicks the glass jar of water. This is weird. This is unbelievably confusing. “You want help me out here, buddy?”

His magic has quieted, but there are impressions of contemplation there. This goes on for several beats of silence, and Stiles drums his fingers against the glass all the while. He then is distracted by the thought that Derek’s been really quiet, and when he looks over, the older teen is sound asleep in the rocking chair.

Stiles rolls his eyes when his magic pours into his gut in tendrils of arrogant satisfaction. “You’re a menace.”

His magic doesn’t bother to respond.

Stiles scrunches the corners of his mouth as he grins before letting himself relax in it. There’s a moment where he wishes he could keep the chair rocking, and it makes him breathless when he feels strong adoration washing over him as he watches Derek sleep peacefully. Before he knows what’s happening, his hand lifts towards Derek and a flash of blue light shoot out from the tips his fingers to coil around the body of the rocking chair like bioluminescent vines spreading with a purpose and a never-ending glow. The chair begins to rock gently over and over like it’s never going to stop until Stiles wants otherwise.

Would you stop doing these things without my permission!

But why should I? Was it not this morning when you gathered me while I was docile and combined me with the energy of Fate before pushing me into the soft places of the earth so that we can learn our garden?

Oh, so it’s our garden now?

This is an unacceptable apology, Faerie.

Who said I was trying to apologize, Ethereal?

Ill-mannered child. You have no tact. I adore him, don’t you see? His wolf calls to me. He is what
I desire: free spirit, wild heart.

I don’t want to talk about this now. Are you going to help me with this?

I have no answers to give. I only know as much as you do and I have stated this before. You do not know how to pray, so you do not understand the gifts you’ve been given by Fate, our Mother-Father.

I’ll reread the first sixty pages of the bible of Virtues, and then I’ll come to Nana with our questions.

Stiles suddenly feels the impression of surprise wrapped in the yellow paper of mortification. It takes him a moment to realize why and he laughs.

Well, look at that. You like when I say ‘we’ and not just ‘I’. You have a thing about me acknowledging you like that, don’t you?

You know nothing. Go wander the bookshelves, I’ll let you know what books you should pay attention to and collect.

We are definitely going to talk about this later. You want me to belong to you and you want to belong to me. Admit it.

Uncouth Faerie.

Stuck up Ethereal.

His magic, unsurprisingly, doesn’t reply, but there are hints of annoyance and embarrassment there. He hums pleasantly as he walks away from the counter, taking a moment to check on Derek, but he’s still sleeping deeply as remnants of Stiles’s magic lulls him with the gentle rock of the chair. He grins and shakes his head, and doesn’t know why that pleases him to see his magic taking care of the older teen.

Stiles does as his magic asks. He wanders through the bookshelves, taking his time to drag his fingers against the different spines of the books. He waits until his magic leads him where he’s supposed to go. He takes a moment to listen to the clocks that are on the wall to the far right of him. The ceiling fans over his head, which puts the wind chimes in motion, and the almost quiet sound of the creak of a rocking chair.

His magic urges him to stop and his hand pauses on the spine of a very thin book. He pulls it free and turns it over in his hands. The title reads ‘The Garden of Hesperides’. He pulls out his phone as he sits on the floor with his back leaning against the bookshelf behind him, and he sets a timer for five o’clock. Then he dives in.

It’s basically the tale of an all female family of nymphs who inhabit and tends to a garden of trees riddled with golden apples that promises a life of bliss and immortality. Without fail, day and night, these daughters of the evening who are trapped between the will of Fate and Peril (the golden light of where Sun meets Moon). Their only purpose was to ensnare and to prophesy life or death as well as to tempt those with impure hearts.

They are Nymphs.

Stiles straightens almost immediately as he pays close attention of the detailed account of a female child, no more than seven years old, who stumbled upon the garden by accident. She explains, in her later years as a married wife and mother, how beautiful the women were. How gorgeous and lush
and alive the garden was. How long their hair was, and that it looked like it was floating around them
while they danced, playing flutes and strumming harps. How butterflies would morph into flowers.
She really is careful to explain that most of the women would swim along the surface of a river that
looked like it was made of silver and silk. The ones sitting on the edge would lazily wag their tail
fins, which looked like a bunch of glittering gems carefully knitted together.

She goes on to explain that the mother of the garden walked over to her, pressing her cold hands to
her chest before she said, “Alloweth all who has't ears, pray and giveth thy purpose of Fate and Peril,
grant you mercy from the heavens for a heart so pure. Wouldst thou come and rest with us, little
lamb?” She continues to say she cried with silent joy as they all dotted on her, feeding her wild
berries and sweet bread, and praise dancing before her while they cried out to the sky so that she may
be anointed with blessings until the bitter end. But of course she did not stay, because she knew she
would miss her family so dearly. And the world passes by in a blink of an eye if you linger in the
garden for more than a day. She knew this to be true when she returned home and everyone was at
least seven years older from when she last left; they had all thought she’d died and was surprised to
see her appear, looking the same way she did when she went missing.

Stiles has such good timing that his alarm sounds off just when he closes the book and puts it back
where it belongs. He stretches with a groan and swipes his phone from the aged floorboards before
he wanders over to Derek, who is still sound asleep as the chair continuously rocks.

Stiles huffs and says, “All right. That’s enough. Retreat. Come on. Show’s over.”

The magic fades away into an ethereal mist and dissipates into nothing.

Stiles grabs the arm of the rocking chair to stop it completely with his left hand and of course this is
the moment Derek’s eyes open and he frowns a little in confusion. He looks a little drowsy but well-
rested.

Derek looks over to Stiles with bright hazel-green eyes and he smiles lazily while he slides his
fingers over the pulse of Stiles’s left hand with his own and makes his way to the palm.

Stiles flushes and pulls away. “Oh no, don’t start feeling me up. I told you I understand what you’re
doing. Well not completely because I’m not sure how this works in Werewolf culture. I mean I get it
but I don’t. Talia said that the right hand was for friendship and family. Then she said the — the left
was — it was for —” His cheeks turn a little pink as Derek stands and stretches calmly before
walking forward to corner Stiles against the glass case. “Derek — you shouldn’t — shouldn’t kiss
__”

“I won’t. Not until I’m sure you want it,” Derek replies cheerily before he pulls Stiles into a warm
hug. He hides his face on the curve where shoulder meets neck and rumbles quietly.

Stiles feels the vibrations and tries not to relax just out of spite when the older teen slides his hands
up the length of his spine before spanning out on his shoulder blades and goddamn it, why does
Derek always know how to hug him the way he likes? No matter how hard he tries he still ends up
becoming docile under Derek’s touch and rolls his eyes when the other teen huffs in triumph.

Derek is definitely grinning and was apparently waiting very patiently until he could get the younger
teen to become slack in his hands.

“Stop scenting me, you dork,” Stiles complains, tugging on Derek’s dark hair. “First, you try to grab
my left hand which, hello, means inti — intima — I can’t even say it. You’re being very forward,
you know. This is some next level courtship.”
Derek laughs and pulls away, but his cheeks are flushed contently. He looks a little inebriated with it. “I have to get to practice,” he deflects. “Come on, you said you would watch.”

“I said the game!” Stiles whines as the older teen pushes him out the door. “I didn’t say anything about practice. Bye, Deaton!” he calls out and Derek echoes it. “I didn’t do the tea thing but see you tomorrow!”

“We rode here together,” Derek points out after he pushes Stiles over the threshold, bell-chiming overhead, and then he watches Stiles lock up. "You have to see the logic in this."

Stiles pockets the keys and gives him a look. “Yeah, how convenient. Now I have no choice but to attend.”

Derek wirelessly unlocks the door with a snort. “So I guess we’re going to completely overlook the fact that you willingly climbed into the car so that we could go to the ice cream parlor and pig out on every sugary, frozen confections they had before coming here?”

“That was you who pigged out!” Stiles laughs but he does climb into the car because the older teen does have a point, as annoying as that may be. “I really did think you would need to seek medical attention. You were inhaling that zebra cake ice cream, and the strawberry cheesecake, and the cookie dough, and the rocky road. Meanwhile, I just had a simple waffle cone of banana-twinkie ice cream, and that was just three scoops.”

Derek just shrugs and starts the car. “No regrets.”

Stiles hits his arm but he still laughs anyway.

It’s probably three minutes before the stress from earlier finally gets to him. He ends up crying for a few minutes after the wall holding his anxiety at bay cracks and opens up the floodgates. He hides his face in his hands, and he can’t stop the tears even if he wanted to. He feels a little mortified that he’s falling apart from what probably looks like out of nowhere to Derek.

But Derek lets him ride it out like he understands and he doesn’t question it or make any judgmental comments.

Stiles sniffs and gives a watery laugh of embarrassment when Derek hands him a tissue box. “You keep a tissue box stashed in your car?”

“I like to be prepared for anything,” Derek admits as he stops at the last light before school when it turns red. “You’re not the only who can cry at the drop of a hat. I get my spells here and there.”

“I’m sorry,” Stiles mumbles nasally before he blows his nose, even though he feels better because of Derek’s confession. “I hope I didn’t make — were you — did you feel uncomfortable with all my blubbering? I’m sorry.”

“Well that’s a stupid thing to apologize for,” Derek counters, but not unkindly. “Like I said, you’re not the only one who gets emotional once and a while. At this point, we’ve cried in front of each other plenty of times that we shouldn’t really feel ashamed when it happens randomly."

Stiles supposes he does have a point. "Yeah, guess you're right. Although, you make it sound like it's gonna continue to be a norm from now on."

“It might, and I wouldn't mind honestly. What about you? Are you okay with that?” Derek asks as he looks over at him.
Stiles meets his gaze. “No complaints here,” he replies softly.

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Basketball practice is exactly what Stiles thought it would be as he watches it all unfold, posted up on the highest bench closest to the courtside where the school’s team will be shooting.

The players do a series of stretches and go through a round of free throw shots and the like. Laura and Kate are among their fellow cheerleaders. Kate is being ruthless with them, snapping her fingers for them to do their drills, barking cattily when there’s even the slightest mistake.

Laura is more of a soft touch, which is probably why she makes an ideal captain. She’s understanding and patient. But Kate does her duty as co-captain and stays on them about their slip-ups when Laura won’t. However, Stiles can’t help but to notice that Kate only does it when one of the girls or guys do something that almost hurts them or could cause a devastating injury.

No shocker that under Kate’s ironclad exterior lies a beautiful soul.

Stiles overlooks the glances the cheerleaders sneak towards him as they go through routines, which is probably why Kate snaps at them because they’re not all the way there with their focus.

Cora is among her bandmates and she scowls very deeply at them all when they run through their plays in a lackadaisical manner as they stare dreamily at Stiles. She tosses him an accusing glare, but it’s ruined by the flush she’s sporting. She looks like she’s fighting the same urge.

Stiles gives an apologetic shrug because, hey, he does feel bad. This is partially his fault. Partially. Like maybe 30%. Or 19%. Oh what the hell. Let’s make it an even 10%.

Brett Talbot, temporary captain of the basketball team, fusses at his team too. They’re being unnecessarily showy and it makes them sloppy. But Brett only tries to get them under control in some weird show of peacocking, and Stiles only knows this because after every order he barks out, he stares at Stiles for an uncomfortable five seconds like he’s looking for any sign of approval.

Derek climbs the stands to get to him as he gives Stiles a considering look, then he glances over his shoulder at all their peers before turning back to him. “Maybe this was a bad idea,” he supposes. “If you make me lose the last game of the year because of your subtle seduction —”

“Shut up!” Stiles hisses and is overtaken by a helpless flush. “You’re the one that insisted I come.”

"I distinctly remember that you begged me to tag along."

"What?"

"Oh yeah. There were tears and everything."

"That wasn't — ugh, I can't even —" Stiles just waves his arms wildly in frustration. "You were the one so dead set on me being here! So if anything, you only have yourself to blame!"

Derek just hums before cocking his head thoughtfully. “Pay attention to me tonight, okay? I’m going to be pulling all the weight, and the other team is going to try twice as hard to win this game for you.”

Stiles’s blush dies down but he's still a little red while he nods quickly.

“Keep your heart steady. I need an anchor. It’ll help me win this for you. I should be the only one
that gets that privilege anyway,” Derek decides before he turns to climb down the stands and jog back over to his team.

Stiles exhales because his insides feel warm and it’s got nothing to do with his magic, which is, weirdly enough, asleep. He bounces his leg anxiously and quietly says, “Good luck.”

Derek hears him anyway and he flashes him a smile made of stunning brilliance. Then he smirks because he can probably hear how it makes Stiles’s heart unsteady for that brief moment.

Stiles rolls his eyes and watches as people start to filter in. His brow furrows in wonder as he watches Derek accept hugs from Peter, Derek Sr., and Talia.

Derek scowls a little when Peter scrubs his hair, smirking when the young man pushes his hand away. But Derek smiles again when his older cousins and aunts and uncles make their way over with their well wishes. The older teen then makes an indication to the direction of the stands, they swing their gazes over and Stiles waves at them shyly, not startled when they give him considering looks.

Derek rolls his eyes at his family and fusses at them all, shooing them to the bleachers and to the space he’s reserved for them.

Peter squints his eyes for a moment at Stiles and easily accepts the hug and kisses Kate gives to him. He says something to her without taking his eyes off of Stiles. Kate smirks with a quick reply and they both laugh before they let each other go and walk their separate ways.

Stiles does not even know what that means or if he wants to know what was said. He figures that if it matters, either Kate or Peter will fill him in.

The marching band plays a lazy song to usher in the multitudes of families and friends.

Stiles becomes both glad and confused when his dad and Isaac climb the stands to sit on either side of him because people were beginning to scramble towards the empty seats around him. “Not that I’m not happy you’re here or anything, but why are you here?”

“You look different,” is the first thing his dad says. “Why do I want to hug and give you anything you ask for? Not that I don’t want to on some occasions, but I feel like I wouldn’t be able to say no, no matter what it was.”

Stiles rubs the back of his neck sheepishly. “Uh — it’s this — you see I — well…can I explain later? I promise not to ask you for anything in the meantime.”

His dad looks grateful for that and relaxes only a fraction because he has to toss a glare around at all the people staring at his son in awe and desire. They’re smart enough to avert their gaze. “As to why we’re here, well, Derek invited us out before he left the night he and his dad came over. He was pretty sure you’d be here too,” he explains.

“You loser,” Stiles mutters quietly under the fuss of the band warming up, and the excited chatter, because he is absolutely sure the older teen can hear. “You’re a presumptuous asshole.”

Derek chokes on the purple Gatorade he’s downing in surprise and he sprays his teammate with it. He looks like he’s apologizing through his laughter but he’s not doing it very well because he’s being chewed out about it.

Stiles crosses his arms in satisfaction, only to uncross them when Isaac offers up some of his popcorn, half of his nachos, and a third of his cinnamon pretzel. It makes him feel special because Isaac refuses to share his food with anyone, but he cares enough to sacrifice some of it to feed his
older brother.

Isaac scoots closer until their sides are flushed and he smiles widely as he eats with absolute delight.

The gymnasium vibrates with glee, influenced by Stiles’s Faerie energy and he tries to damper it as best as he can because, in all honesty, there’s nothing he wants more than to not feel all those eyes seeking him out among the crowds.

Stiles eats his portion of food as the JROTC take the floor to do the usual march of presenting the flag before they urge everyone to stand for the presentation of the National Anthem. He’s surprised but pleased to see Laura trot over to take the mic to sing. The band plays and she closes her eyes as she spins the words into an elegant, powerful, and heartfelt hymn.

When Laura ends it amazingly, the gymnasium thunders in shouts and handclaps. She shoulders it modestly, giving a mock-bow before she jogs back over to her team and the JROTC clears the floor.

The referee takes center court and motions for both teams to meet him there.

Brett stands across from the other team’s captain, both hunching down as the referee holds out the ball with one hand, the other poising the whistle between his lips at the ready.

Stiles gnaws on his bottom lip and squirms with indecision before he mutters a very quick, “Good luck, Derek.”

Derek’s head cocks as his ears twitch a little but he keeps his eyes on the referee with a grin.

The referee throws up the ball as he whistles and quickly moves out of the way as both captains make a reach for it. The opposing team gets it first and thus begins the game.

Stiles goes through his portion of nachos before graciously accepting the rest of what’s left in the bag of popcorn. He’s a little disappointed by the taste of it because it doesn’t compare to Derek’s popcorn and he frowns in annoyance because the older teen has ruined him for something so small and simple.

All the players hop and run and skid across the shiny floor as the crowd buzzes with anticipation. It’s just like Derek said it would be. All of them just stumble over each other as they seek him out, trying to show their worth like some weird archaic courting ritual. It’s embarrassing for everyone involved really.

“Stiles…” His dad glances around. He opens his mouth before shaking his head with a sigh. “I don’t think I want to know the answer to what I’m about to ask.”

“Yeah, I’m definitely an advocate of ignoring a problem,” Stiles agrees.

Isaac snorts but he does glare at the woman that tries to gift his older brother with a bag of cotton candy.

“Am I going to have to get my gun?” the sheriff half-jokes but he says it loud enough that everyone in their radius can hear it very well. They all inch away and fasten their eyes to the court again. “My cruiser is not that far.”

“Dad,” Stiles whines in exasperation. “I think I’m pretty safe. My magic won’t let anyone touch me unless I give it the okay.”

“Good. I already like your magic,” his dad decides and snatches up the rest of his popcorn, ignoring
when his son starts fussing immediately. “Pay attention. Derek’s making a shot. Be a shame to miss it, wouldn’t it, son?”

Stiles almost chokes on a piece of his cinnamon pretzel. “Dad! That’s attempted murder,” he complains but his dad pretends not to hear him while he indicates to the court.

Derek is dribbling the ball at the other end of the court as he holds the opposing player on his back at bay. He makes an indication to Brett who nods and catches the ball passed to him. Derek jogs sideways as most of the attention is focused on his captain. When he’s on the right side of court he catches the ball easily when it’s tossed to him. He quickly hunches down before straightening to make the shot. He lands a perfect three pointer.

The people in the stands go wild.

Derek pumps his fists as he runs backward with a wide smile. He takes a moment to wink at Stiles before he clears the court for the halftime show.

Laura and Kate flood the floor with the rest of the cheerleaders and the lights dim before they’re washed in a spectrum of colors.

Cora and her marching band cover both sidelines to play a mash up of Sir Mix-A-Lot’s *Baby Got Back* and Kelis’s *Milkshake* and PSY’s *Gangman Style*. It’s a very tasteful and impressive.

Laura, Kate, and their team do an impressive but family friendly routine. They also do the kind of backflips gymnasts and circus acrobats would be jealous of. And of course, Cora does a solo of Jason Derulo’s *Talk Dirty to Me* that blows all other tuba routines out of the water, even though she’s doing it playfully, just to get a laugh out of the crowd.

Finally the horn sounds for the commencement of the game. It’s neck and neck at this point. For every shot their team makes, the opposing team matches.

It kind of makes Stiles anxious. He bounces his leg and gnaws on the corner of his bottom lip.

Derek turns his gaze to him as he tries to play defense and lifts both brows at him in wordless communication.

“Sorry,” Stiles mumbles before he does a series of inhale/exhale for a solid minute, focusing on calming his own heartbeat.

Isaac snorts as he chews on some chocolate covered coconut bites he must have snagged during the halftime show.

Stiles elbows him and tries to keep his heart steady for Derek’s sake, and with the unasked aid of his magic, it wraps around his heart with serenity wrapped in the fuchsia paper of tranquility. He tries not to let indulgent pride overtake him when the older teen actually begins to play as well as he has been. He really is using Stiles’s heart as an anchor and, well, he’ll have to ask about what that means when he gets the chance.

The countdown begins with only thirteen seconds left on the clock before the game ends.

Derek has the ball and the opposing team just will not let up.

Stiles exhales slowly and time stops for a quick tick before picking up just as quickly, and before the clock can hit the three second mark, Derek goes for the half court shot and it lands.
The thunderous clapping, stomping, and yelling reaches the point of becoming uncomfortably unbearable.

Isaac winces and slaps his hands over his ears, and out of concern his dad leads him over to the steps so they can climb down them to get a comfortable distance from all the commotion.

Stiles climbs down a moment after they disappear out of sight, and he has to be swift about it because people are trying to throw him off balance so they can conveniently catch him with wandering hands. He makes his way over to Talia as she smiles with pride while watching her son being hefted up on the shoulders of his teammates, holding the championship trophy.

The Beacon Hills High School chant rings loud and clear in the gymnasium while paper confetti and balloons rain down on them all.

Laura and Kate jump around, waving their pompoms wildly as they join in on the chanting.

Talia pulls Stiles close so he can press into the warmth of her long side while she wraps her right arm around him and kisses his temple before cupping the back of his neck with her long warm fingers as if to mark him with her scent. Then, in his ear, against all the commotion, she says, very gently, “You’re very good to him, and also for him. But this I’ve always known since the moment you stepped on our land.”

Stiles practically chokes on his spit as a defiant flush overtakes him and his face is absolutely scarlet. His magic happily agrees with Talia, but it's heavily layered with trivial amusement.

Talia chuckles as she runs her hand through his hair as if to groom him before she pulls away completely, and is it absolutely crazy that he already misses the contact? He watches as she happily communes with her pack and they’re very receptive to her attention.

Derek jogs over after he relinquishes the trophy to his captain and lets his family pull him in like they’re doing a vertical puppy pile.

Stiles snorts at his own analogy and his magic sends him thoughts of how it thinks he’s being very childish. He ignores it and takes a stab at boxing his magic in the confines of his rib cage out of spite. He’s surprised he can actually do this, as it is the first time he’s ever even tried, but apparently he can. His magic bristles before giving him the cold shoulder. He’s not worried about that because his magic will eventually forgive him, as it always does.

Derek manages to somehow extract himself from his family, happily letting Laura and Cora be the next ones to be engulfed by the welcoming arms of their pack. He shakes out his hair as he wanders over to Stiles with a devastating grin that’s nothing but pure elation, and it makes Stiles breathless and weak-kneed at the same time. The older teen trots over with a look of pure determination and Stiles has to battle that fight or flight feeling.

“I, uh — you did really — that was incredibly — you —” Stiles stammers and Derek doesn’t even care because he’s hauling the younger teen in for a hug that leaves no space in-between. It’s so full of meaning and Stiles scrambles to hug him back before he thinks better of it. He shivers slightly when the older teen presses his cheek against Stiles’s very flushed one with a chuckle. “I was trying to — stop laughing! Fine, I won’t say congratulations, you jerk.” He smiles a little when Derek huffs and hugs him tighter.

“Thanks,” Derek says after a while. “My senses go wild sometimes with adrenaline and at the end my uncle has to corner me and talk me down because Jordan’s too far so I can’t — I — but it’s different with you. Your heart. It’s so perfect, Stiles. Ever since I laid eyes on you, it’s all I can ever
“Derek — Derek, you’re — you’re saying too much — I —” Stiles struggles with the words because he’s frightened at the fact he feels so light headed with the confession and it’s more than he’s prepared to handle. He feels Derek open his mouth again to say more and he flushes as he quickly presses three fingers of his left hand to the older teen’s mouth. His flush deepens as he thinks about how soft and firm Derek’s mouth is. “For the love of god, Derek. That’s too much.”

Derek hums and waits until Stiles is comfortable enough to remove his fingers before he playfully nips at them.

Stiles squawks indignantly and tugs on the older teen’s hair before pushing him away, annoyed that Derek doesn’t move until he makes sure that Stiles understands he’s only doing it by choice. “You suck. You suck so much.”

Derek just flashes him a content grin before he grabs the younger teen’s left hand and gives him something. He curls Stiles’s fingers around whatever it is he’s been holding until Stiles has it fisted. “Don’t look until you get home, okay? Knowing you, you’ll try to fuss at me and insist I take it back, but I won’t because I won it for you. It’s our victory, Stiles and — it’s just instinct. You should get used to things like this. Well, no, that doesn’t sound right.” He takes a moment to reconsider his words. “What I’m trying to say is that you can expect some peculiar mannerisms that are attributed to Werewolf culture. I’ll explain if you really want me to, but I’m guessing you’d feel more comfortable talking to Laura about it if anything.”

Stiles clenches left hand around the hard object with a furrowed brow. “Are you — are you courting me, Derek?”

Derek flushes and looks defensive. “It’s instinct, I just said —” He stops to let out an exasperated sound. “Anyway, it's not like it was a secret or anything. And I’m not trying to make you feel, you know, pressured or anything. It’s instinct.”

“Yeah,” Stiles says faintly as he tries to absorb the information. “You said that already.”

Derek fidgets as he rubs the back of his reddening neck. “Is that…okay?” He glances over his shoulder a few times with this expression…it's hard to describe.

Stiles feels his eyebrows climb his face as he starts to notice that Derek's family is watching them with these amused and knowing smirks. “Oh.” He really takes a look at Derek's face. "Oh." He laughs a little because he gets it. "Was this a...are you confessing your undying love within earshot of your family?"

"No! It's not a —"

"That's why you’re embarrassed!” Stiles continues gleefully, ignoring him.

Derek shushes him as his flush darkens and spreads to the tips of his ears. “Why are you so theatrical?”

“Get used to it,” Stiles retorts and mentally kicks himself for that slip. He sighs as his magic vibrates around his heart with glee over the older teen’s attention. He waits a moment so Derek can compose himself before he asks, “Any after party plans?”

“Our coach always takes the team to the pizzeria that’s across from that indoor ice-skating rink. You know, the one Boyd’s family owns? Yeah, so we usually go to town on every pizza we can think of,” Derek explains as he crosses his arms, nodding at the passing ‘pedestrians’ with a gorgeous grin.
before it turns into a smirk. “Don’t worry, Stiles. I’m not flirting.”

“I should have *never* told you that,” Stiles complains with a frown. “My dad must be waiting for me. I’ll leave you to your celebrations.”

Derek nods and walks backwards. “I’ll text you.”

“You don’t have to,” Stiles mumbles shyly.

Derek responds by sticking his tongue out. “Later, dork.”

Stiles sticks his tongue out in response, as childish as this is, and replies, “Later, jerk.” He watches the older teen disappear in a group of his teammates. Stiles wanders off in search of his dad and his brother. He has to avoid the people who want him to stop and talk to them, while once or twice declining their tokens of favors before he can manage to escape.

His dad is waiting out front in his cruiser, and so he climbs in and sits in the back with his brother, who is already asleep.

Stiles’s heart melts at the sight because Isaac looks absolutely knackered.

“Was a pretty good game tonight,” his dad comments as he turns on his blinker so he can merge into the beginnings of, what looks to be, a small bout of traffic. “Derek is a very good basketball player.”

Stiles rest his elbow on the edge of where door meets window and props his chin on his hand. He stares at the red glow of tail lights, groups of teenagers, adults, and even small children, worming their way around the cars to reach there own vehicles, only to add to the traffic.

“He was very focused,” his dad goes on to say, giving Stiles this look through the rearview mirror, but Stiles keeps his gaze out the window (despite the fact he can feel it). “Yeah, the other players were sloppy. It might have something to do with the fact that they were peacocking all up and down the court.”

“*Dad*...” Stiles whines. “You’re getting at something,” he mumbles because his dad always does this before he outright says what he’s thinking.

“You know I accept you no matter what, right? I mean that should go without saying,” the sheriff supposes. “If you wanted to be with a girl or a boy or whoever, as long as it’s legal, I’m not going to judge. So don’t feel ashamed if you and Derek are —”

“We’re *talking* about it,” Stiles is quick to say as he tries not to shrivel up in mortification. Now he understands what Scott means whenever they talk about his relationship with Allison. “There’s nothing to — well that’s not true because there is and I just — we haven’t really decided if we want — nothing is official and someday we might — oh god. Do we have to talk about this right now?”

“No, I suppose we don’t. But I won’t be surprised when Derek comes to ask me for permission to date you.”

“This is not my life. This cannot be my life. I refuse to believe this is reality.”

“When should we have the ‘safe sex’ talk? Because I need you to know that it’s important to wrap —”

“*La la la la, can’t hear you,*” Stiles chants childishly. “I’m going to be sick, dad. I’d feel more comfortable if Ms. McCall was the one to have that talk with me.”
“I’m a little hurt, son,” his dad says but he sounds too amused for that to be true. “Speaking of Melissa, well, I think a talk is long overdue.”

“You’re dating. Isaac and I already figured that out,” Stiles states and takes pleasure in the fact that his dad hits his knee against the bottom end of the steering wheel. He laughs.

“Very funny, Stiles,” his dad mutters sardonically. “So, you two are okay with everything?”

“I think we both just want you to be happy. Ms. McCall is —” He thinks of the right words. “I like her. We like her. She’s wonderful.”

“Yeah.” His dad smiles in a way he hasn’t in a long time. “I think so too.”

Stiles turns his gaze out the window before his hand twitches around the hard object in his hand, which reminds him that it’s there. He glances down and opens his left hand as he squints his eyes, trying to use the light of street lamps overhead that flicker by.

It’s Derek’s championship ring.

Stiles texts Derek immediately to complain and the older teen definitely anticipated it.

They spend the majority of an hour going back and forth, until they end the conversation like this:

Whatever. I can’t believe you sometimes. Whatever.

Whatever to your whatever.

Real mature.

Yes. I am.

Honestly, we’re just going in circles.

*You’re* going in circles. I made up my mind already. I’m kind of offended you won’t keep the ring. I don’t expect for you to wear it. I just like knowing you have it.

Derek…

I’m not sorry. It’s instinct like I’ve said maybe a million times at this point.

Yeah, I’m going to talk to Laura about this for sure.

Anyway you should be enjoying your night out because you earned it

You shouldn’t waste it by texting me.

I don’t care much about all of this to be truthful.

It’s like a force of habit anyway.

I mean I’m happy we ended the year on good terms. That’s always a plus.

But I’m starting to think that maybe this isn’t what matters the most to me.

I don’t know what you mean by that.
Stiles rolls his eyes and settles into bed so he can reread the first sixty pages from the bible of Virtues. He sets it aside when he’s finished and starts working on his school assignments (studying for his upcoming remainder of his finals) before he goes to bed. It’s a little hard to concentrate because he has Derek wrapped up in his thoughts.

“Oh.” Stiles blinks as he suddenly realizes something. “Oh my god. Oh my god.”

Stiles hasn’t been taking his Adderall for weeks now.

And he hadn’t even noticed.

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It’s the crack of dawn on Wednesday when Stiles drags himself out of bed. He grabs the bible of Virtues so as to greet the sunrise with it and accost Nana for her wisdom and guidance. He yawns as he walks up the largest exposed root to press his hands to the triquetra carved like a face and lets his magic gather at the tips of his fingers.

Nana appears not a moment later. “Good morning, sweetling. You’re ready to learn, I gather. Where should we start?”

“I’m at the first book in the bible. Uh, Chastity.”

“Ah, yes, good place to start. Tell me, what do you think?” Nana quiets as she waits for his reply. “In four words, dearie. Consider my question carefully. Be slow to speak and quick to think.”

Stiles steps back and sits down on the largest exposed root. He takes a moment to think before he gives a slightly certain answer. “The book of Chastity embodies four key factors I think. Purity, knowledge, honesty, and wisdom.”

“This is an acceptable answer,” Nana praises. “Now which scripture speaks to prayers of morality and what situation is best suited for them?”

“I don’t know,” Stiles replies truthfully. “The first known Virtue of Chastity was King Jedidiah. He built temples for the sake of the spread of wisdom. He equalled ignorance to evil, and withholding knowledge from those who seek it out as sin. He wrote proverbs that raise questions of values, moral behavior, the meaning of human life, and the right conduct. He wrote about the order of creation and the value of intellect.”

“Jedidiah once settled a quarrel between two women,” Nana remarks. “Do you know of the story I speak?”

“Two women came to him quarreling over a baby. Both of them insisted that they were the true mother. One woman accused the other of smothering their child to death in sleep, and the other insisted that this was not the case and that it was the other woman who lost her child to such a fate.” Stiles lets the memory swell in his mind as his magic vibrates with anxious curiosity. “Jedidiah thought carefully of what he should do and decided that this required heavy consideration. He dismissed the court and had the child looked after by one of his lady servants. He told the women he would call upon them when it was time. Then he shut himself away in his chambers and prayed to
Fate for wise judgments for three days. When he got the answer he was seeking, he sent his guards to collect the women. They stood before him in his court and he said that since they could not decide among themselves the origin of the child, he declared that the child should be cut right down the middle so that both of them could have equal parts. One woman agreed that this was fair but the other woman fell to her knees, clutching the hem of his robe as she soaked it with her tears, begging for mercy. She swore she would relinquish the child to the other woman because she could not bear to see the babe split into two. Jedidiah knew this was the real mother.”

“And if neither woman spoke? What then? What if the babe had been split into two?” Nana watches him carefully. “To gamble a life is a very dangerous game. Why would he take such a chance?”

“Virtues can discern the true nature of the hearts of both man and creatures alike, and make fair judgments,” Stiles supposes, thinking aloud. “Virtues of Chastity can judge because they rely on the strength of purity, knowledge, honesty, and wisdom.”

“He prayed for days. This was the only option, don’t you think?” Nana says with a knowing glimmer in her eyes. “How do you pray under the banner of Chastity?”

“I don’t know,” Stiles admits. “This is why I came to you. Deaton says he has no knowledge of such matters. Well, I think he meant it’s not his area of expertise.”

“Druids aren’t responsible for knowing how to intercede for the greater good. What they do is for physical intellect. What you and I do is strictly spiritual. How do you pray under the banner of Chastity? I will tell you. You hold what is that you seek in your heart and gather your magic to your mind. You create a link between the two and you utter with your tongue, silent or loud, giving thanks for what is needed in the situation and speak of things that are not but as if they were. Faith, sweetling. Your prayers must be of faith. You must say ‘I shall speak those things that are not as if they were.’ Repeat this to me.”

“I shall speak those things that are not as if they were,” Stiles recites. “Meaning whatever I ask for, with faith, I am to act as if it has already been done for me. That Fate has already given me the desires of my heart.”

“For a Virtue of Chastity,” Nana goes on to say. “What do you suppose the desires of their hearts are?”

“Being pure in all things. To study and have knowledge of all things,” Stiles acknowledges. “Restraining from the urge to lie or mislead. To discern all situations with wisdom and understanding.”

“Excellent, darling,” Nana praises and chuckles when her young prodigy goes a little pink. “But remember, you must have faith. Not just for the first level of your abilities, which begins with Chastity. But faith must be present in all fields and all that you set your mind to do.”

“I shall speak those things that are not as if they were,” Stiles acknowledges with a tiny grin.

Nana gives a pleased sound. “Now, as for your studies,” she begins. “I want you to focus on the first book of the bible. Especially on the proverbs Jedidiah wrote during his frequent times of fasting and prayer. This is something you will do when it is needed. I want you to fast and pray for today. When you fast, be merry and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting unless you say so, because it is only for Fate to see. And it is Fate, who sees in secret, that will reward you. But be warned, you will be tested today. Be it by any form or circumstance. You must be diligent so that you do not fall prey to the wiles of Peril.”
“What should I pray about?” Stiles questions curiously. “Being pure in all things? To study and have knowledge of all things? Restraining from the urge to lie or mislead? To discern all situations with wisdom and understanding? Which one?”

“All of them,” Nana responds. “This is why it will take a day. Now, open your bible and recite to me the fourth proverb, scriptures 5-27.”

Stiles nods and straightens from where he’s sitting and opens the bible of Virtues. He flips through the paper-thin pages before he stops on what he’s looking for. “Get wisdom, get understanding; do not forget my words or turn away from them. Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you,” he reads. “The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom. Though it may cost all you have. Get understanding. Cherish her, and she will exalt you; embrace her, and she will honor you. She will give you a garland to grace your head and present you with a glorious crown…”

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Stiles retreats to the sanctuary of the upstairs bathroom to take a shower before his father and little brother rise to begin their day. It’s actually comfortable standing under the jets of water, letting the water pour over him with a heat he’s all too familiar with. He lets the water pour down his hair onto his face and ears. He tries not to inhale through his nose but he opens his mouth, letting the water rush in before he spits it back out. His magic finally awakens as he’s shampooing his hair. He’s in the midst of praying for a day of peace, that he has favor with his teachers, that he has no difficulties in his studies, and that honesty comes to him as a pleasure (or an opportunity) and not a burden.

His magic surfs the circuits of his nerve-endings, seeking out all that needs restoration and it reminds him of the night before.

*I haven’t been taking my medicine. Is that you’re doing?*

>You speak of those disgusting, synthetic remedies. It’s taken me weeks to cleanse your body of it. I was incapacitated for the longest time because of them, so I made you forget while I uprooted it.

*In simpler terms, it’s no good for either you or I.*

>This is a truth. You claim to have no focus, but I am your focus. I will stand in the gap of your wandering thoughts and I will gather them together again and sort them as they should be.

*But I still ramble on and on, switching subjects and losing my train of thought as I prattle on.*

>That has nothing to do with focus or concentration. You have a lot to say. Your mind wanders aimlessly because you shoulder all fields of Virtue, and sometimes these gifts muddle together. Speaking your mind is expected of a Seven.

*That was almost a compliment.*

>Certainly not. Now allow me to complete my work in peace and quiet.*

Stiles rolls his eyes and leaves his magic be for the moment as he washes himself for one last time. He climbs out and grabs a towel to wrap around his waist, aware of the pins and needles peppering his entire body because his magic won’t let up on its mending. He gets dressed and never ceases his praying. He gathers all his books, and puts it in his backpack before exiting his room.

Isaac is in the shower and his dad is making his way down the stairs with his phone pressed to his
ear.

Stiles follows and watches as his dad goes to the front door to get the morning paper. He drops his backpack in one of the chairs and begins to make breakfast: organic eggs mixed with black beans, multigrain blueberry waffles, and sautéed mushrooms. He turns to set down the plates he made and almost has a heart attack when he sees both Derek and Isaac patiently waiting.

“Who let you in?” Stiles complains, but he still sets a plate before the older teen and his little brother. “Seriously.”

“They’re short reply before he focuses on eating.

Isaac makes these pleased little mewling sounds.

Stiles snorts and watches as his dad returns with the paper, shaking it out before he sits. He goes to the coffee pot and pours his dad a cup before serving him as well.

“Thank you,” his dad says before he peers over the newspaper in his hands to look at his son. “You’re being awfully generous today. I had planned on making breakfast this morning, because once again, I have this inexplicable urge to see to your happiness. When will this whole —” He makes a sloppy gesture to the line of Stiles’s body. “— bewitchment wear off?”

“Tomorrow, according to Deaton. It usually lasts for three days, but he’s going to teach me how to avoid all the side effects that comes with practicing forest-magic,” Stiles explains as he sits down with nothing but a cup of water. He fishes out the bible of Virtues and lays it on the table so he can study scriptures of Chastity (proverbs written by King Jedidiah mostly). His leg bounces as gnaws on the corner of his bottom lip.

“You’re not going to eat?” Derek questions, turning his eyes away from Stiles’s mouth to pour himself a cup of orange juice.

“Can I have some more?” Isaac asks, drumming his fingers on either side of his empty plate.

“No,” Stiles says to Derek. “Yes,” he says to Isaac. “Help yourself. There is plenty.”

Those are the magic words for Isaac and he quickly stands so he can serve himself. “Why aren’t you eating?” Derek presses as he wipes his mouth clean with a napkin. It's obvious he could eat more, but he must be trying to be polite for everyone else's sake. Or, he could have already ate at home and this was considered seconds or thirds for him.

Either way, Isaac is not so considerate once he's given the greenlight.

Stiles drifts his attention back to Derek’s question and shrugs while he drinks about half of his glass of water. “I’m fasting.”

“Fasting,” His father and Derek say flatly in simultaneous manner.

“What’s fasting?” Isaac inquires as he stuffs his mouth.

“Slow down,” Stiles warns in concern. “And that whole synchronized thing you just did was creepy,” he says to his dad and Derek. “Isaac, fasting is when you abstain from indulging in food, drink, and daily recreational pleasures.”

Isaac wrinkles his nose. “Sounds gross, and illegal.”
Stiles laughs and looks at his little brother fondly.

“Stiles,” his dad patiently states in that tone of voice that says he’s about six seconds away from adding on to his current punishment.

“I’m reviewing the book of Chastity,” Stiles quickly replies. “It’s not indefinite. It’s just for a day. Nana says I need to gain a true, deeply transcendent connection to the first level of the Seven Virtues. They are advocates for fasting.”

His dad looks uncertain. “We’ve never been much for religion in this house, so you have to understand my concern.”

“It’s like learning about your spiritual ancestries, Mr. Stilinski,” Derek explains when he understands exactly what it is Stiles is doing. He’s quick and clever like that, something Stiles always appreciates because he has an uncanny ability to read the room. “My father and I, well and Cora too, we observe the Jewish holidays, and it’s much like that. Studying our birthrights and remembering our origins. I know it’s not for everyone, but I’ve learned that spirituality provides a sense of continuity and a reliable foundation stone. Rites and rituals provide comfort and structure for people as they ride the rollercoaster of life.”

His dad doesn’t look any less uncomfortable, but he nods in understanding. He turns to Stiles, and after thinking with a bit of circumspect, says, “Be careful please. That’s all I can ask. Don’t wear yourself too thin. Pun slightly intended.”

Stiles smiles and nods solemnly. He turns his attention back to his bible as Derek and Isaac rise together to polish off the rest of breakfast.

When it’s time to leave for school, his dad sees them all out, locking the door and making his way over to his cruiser with a promise to be back in time for dinner.

Isaac grabs his bike just as Boyd rolls up on his own, and they peddle off to school together.

Stiles and Derek climb in the lime green Camaro parked at the curb, and Stiles waits until he’s buckled in as Derek makes a u-turn to say, “So is this going to be a daily thing or…”

“Only if you want it to be,” Derek supposes. “I like spending time with you.”

Stiles feels his magic curl around his heart and becomes docile over his quickening beat. He squirms and clears his throat. “Yeah, I — I like spending time with you too.”

Derek grins at that without taking his eyes off of the road. “Was that painful for you to say?”

“Oh shut up,” Stiles retort wryly and thumps the back of his hand against Derek’s arm. “You’re such a jerk.”

“Only because you’re a dork. Maybe you make it too easy,” Derek points out and stops at a red light. “You realize people are going to swarm around you today, right?”

“Yes,” Stiles says with a weary sigh. “I don’t think it’ll be as bad as yesterday. I was at my peak then, so it should be declining at this point.”

“Fair enough,” Derek agrees. “Read to me.”

“Read what?”
“You said you’re reading about the Virtue of Chastity,” Derek explains. “I want to understand some of the things you’re learning about.”

“Oh.” Stiles mentally fumbles at that. “Okay.” He contorts his body so he can grab his book bag to fish out the bible of Virtues. “There’s this one particular section I like.”

“I’m all ears,” Derek promises. “Side note, we’re gonna get to school pretty early. We should use some of that time preparing you for your Algebra Final.”

Stiles groans dramatically.

“Read the story to me,” Derek remarks, ignoring the younger teen’s theatrics.

Stiles grumbles a little more but he starts to read.

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Stiles prays every time he feels hungry. He prays by reciting scripture and he overlooks the few glances of interest and curiosity sent to him by his classmates.

Cora is a little harder to ignore, seeing as how she probably can hear his internal organs gurgle and cry out for food. He tries to quiet it as best as he can by drinking water like a dehydrated man left to die in the desert. He finishes his classwork in a timely manner and uses the leftover time to glance through as many proverbs he can study.

He gets no time to do so during Algebra. He uses most of his energy dividing his attention between praying for wisdom, contemplating the things Derek has taught him, and taking his time to work smarter and not harder. He keeps half of his magic in his mind and the other half around his heart.

Derek is polite enough to text him about how he thinks he did on the test the second before class ends at the chime of the bell.

Stiles responds with positive affirmatives and heads to Astronomy (his last class before lunch). His teacher puts on a few episodes of *Through the Wormhole* with Morgan Freeman, and because he’s fasting, he takes a seat all the way in the back and turns away, focusing on some proverbs. He runs his fingers through his hair and reads and reads and reads until the bell rings, signaling the next period.

The teacher says there is no homework while everyone packs up and moves on.

Stiles carries all his books on his own, despite all the generous offers. He trudges to his locker and crams all his books in it (with the expectation of the bible). He turns to make his way to the cafeteria but springs back when Violet and Garrett stand in his line of path.

“My. You’ve certainly grown, haven’t you?” Violet purrs as her eyes flicker to pink for a briefly. “You reek of magic, Virtue. You’re practically *soaking* in it.”

“I hope you’re not coming on to me because absolutely not,” Stiles firmly states, inching away.

Garrett huffs. “Still an idiot as always.” He lifts his wrist at the same time she does and there’s a white ink tattoo in the form of a rune sigil on both of them.

*Shield of protection.*

*What does it do?*
“I don’t know whether to be relieved or concerned,” Stiles says, not even a second later. His magic had spoken to him very quickly so not to arouse any suspicion, making any pause he gives seem natural. “That’s the rune sigil of protection.”

For once Garrett looks impressed. “Maybe you do have half a brain up there,” he supposes with a smirk. "It's the least you could have since your face isn't much to look at."

Stiles gives him a withering look as the second bell indicates the official beginning of the next period. “Was there something you wanted, or can I go to lunch?”

“Just doing our usual check,” Violet murmurs as she gives him a once over with pink irises. “Your magic’s showing, Virtue. It sticks to you like chest-plate armor, and spans out into the massive wings behind you.”

Stiles stiffens and pushes down his magic when it bristles defensively. He sends it soothing impressions of pacification. “I don't know what you mean,” he says cooly.

"I have eyes," Violett replies sharply. "You do yourself no favors by lying. I see you."

"Well, look away,” Stiles warns. "I don't have the hang of all this yet, but something is telling me it's disrespectful. You're upsetting my magic."

Garrett has the good grace to go pale at that.

Violet on the other hand just smirks like she’s fascinated with the idea. It’s as if she wants to witness it. “You’re still no match for me, Stiles. I could cripple you, but well,” she eyes him condescendingly. “We wouldn’t want to damage Mayor Argent’s favorite prodigy.”

“Yeah, you’ve said that like ten million times,” Stiles mutters in annoyance. “Now that I think about it, I’d be more than happy to test the theory of how much more powerful you are. My magic is eager to get involved. Since I have no fealty to your adoptive father, I see no reason why I shouldn’t.”

Garrett fidgets and steals glances at Violet.

Violet’s expression remains placid, giving away nothing. She has an amazing poker face. “How’s your little brother?” she asks with a serene tone that’s dripping with menace. “He’s the youngest of them, you know. The baby of the family.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Stiles replies flatly, switching on his best poker face as well. “That’s obvious with him being my little brother.”

Violet cocks her head. “September 22nd, right? We want to be sure Mayor Argent signs a birthday card for the right day. Speaking of which, how is Deputy Parrish? Being gone for so long, well,” she inhales with mock thoughtfulness. “I’m guessing he must have missed so much. But Mayor Argent keeps track of all those important little milestones.”

Stiles feels his eyes grow warm. His magic is beginning to leak because his anger is getting to the tipping point. His eyesight sharpens and he can see her synthetic magic coiled around her body in the shape of a pink anaconda that hisses at his own magic defensively.

Violet looks unimpressed as her own irises switch back to pink. “You’ve got honey-gold sight. What a pretty threat. It’s darling, really. Unique, I must admit. Usually a Virtue’s eyes color must match the color of their magic. Oh, but you. You never do anything in halves, do you? Would you like to
know what it means? I’ll tell you, Stiles. Honey-gold represents the kisses of Fate. It means you’re pure, blessed, and highly favored.” Her smile turns wicked. "Doesn’t mean the rest of your family and friends are, however.”

The lockers begin to vibrate as Stiles clenches his fists, the blue light of his magic starts glowing like a signaling beacon from the palms of his hands while the hallway lamps hanging over head flicker on and off.

Violet looks around and her jaw clenches. There’s a brief moment where she looks worried, but it doesn’t crack the deadpan façade that’s placed firmly on her face like a beautifully twisted mask. “Come on, Garrett. I’m over this conversation,” she decides with no emotion whatsoever.

Garrett sighs weakly with relief. “Thank fuck,” he swears and quickly trails off behind her.

Stiles inhales before exhaling with a quick prayer of purity so that he can divulge himself of all the anger and negativity. His magic settles, but not without difficulty, and curls around his heart with annoyance wrapped in the teal paper of acquisitiveness. His magic seems to prowl back and forth in his ribcage, restless like an agitated dragon trying to protect its gold.

He smiles with exasperation and leaves his magic to its fuming. He’s missed about ten minutes of lunch, annoyingly, and he grabs a large bottle of water and takes it out to the quad with him. He finds a tree with acceptable shade and sits at the base to lean back against it before propping his knees up so he can rest his bible against his thighs.

In five minutes, he gets engrossed in his studies, taking languid but distracted sips as his magic curls up in the soft spaces of his mind between the groves of old memories and lays to rest there. He barely notices when four people surround him and he jumps when a carrot bounces off his forehead. He whips his gaze up from the text and shoots Cora a look since she’s sitting across from him with her lunch tray propped on her crossed legs.

Derek is leaning into her side and they fight over some chicken fries but there’s a friendly and affectionate nature to it.

Kate and Laura are sitting to his immediate right and left, tossing apples and oranges over Stiles, and other things that they want to switch because they’d prefer what the other has.

“How rude of you to completely bypass our company to sit under this shitty tree. It’s like you’re some emotional loser,” Kate complains as she peels the skin of her orange with her French manicured nails. She does the gouging so gracefully that it almost looks like an art. “I’m really offended, buttercup. Heartbroken, really.”

“Yeah, what’s that all about?” Laura chimes and switches pudding cups with Cora. “Do you not like us anymore?”

“He’s shunning us,” Cora supposes as she trades slushies with Derek. “He’s been acting weird all day, starving himself and being weirdly deep in his own thoughts.”

“Ease up on him, guys,” Derek says as he trades soups with Kate. “He’s got important Faerie business.”

“Oh, excuse me,” Cora gripes with a scowl. “Clearly we’re the less important focus.”

“Don’t be so sour,” Stiles finally interjects absentmindedly as he returns his gaze to the scriptures. “Can everyone stop being so offended? I didn’t think it’d bother you guys if I didn’t join you. I mean, it’s not like I’m eating or anything. I’d just be sitting there with my nose in a book. Figured
you wouldn’t even notice if — ow! Stop throwing carrots at me, Cora!”

“Well why shouldn’t I?” Cora snaps. “You’re being absolutely stupid. We enjoy your company. I enjoy —” She stops dead as she goes a little pink with this emotionally constipated face. “You’re a pest. I don’t know why I bother with you.”

“Best friend,” Stiles retorts calmly.

Cora’s blush spreads and she gives him a ruthless glare. “I’m going to start looking for other candidates, you little worm. Someone less mouthy and more obedient.”

“Lie!” Derek, Laura, and Kate exclaim simultaneously.

"Yeah, if anything, that's your favorite part about me," Stiles adds.

Cora gives them all the middle finger before she tosses the rest of her carrots at all of them.

Stiles is a little tempted to pluck the few in his lap and pop them in his mouth but he restrains from doing so because that would only deter him from his goals. He just downs the rest of his water before wiping the back of his hand against his mouth in a sloppy attempt to dry it.

“What are you starving yourself for anyway?” Kate asks, breaking a three minute long silence. “Are you bulimic now? That stuff’s no joke, Stilinski. Laura, do you remember Rachel? She went banana balls and tried to shrink down to like a size two because Anthony called her a fat ass during our routines when Kelsey was captain. She took it way too seriously. Fucked her up something awful.”

“Oh yeah,” Laura remarks thoughtfully. “She moved to Ohio, last I heard. She’s some kind of famous dietician psychologist now, while Anthony sells worms and bait for a living in South Carolina.”

“Karma. Gotta love it.” Kate shrugs and steals Derek’s jello with a frown. “You’ve ruined me, you know,” she says to Stiles. “All other jello pale in comparison to the ones I’ve stolen from you.”

“I don’t know if that was a compliment,” Stiles replies truthfully. “Your brother is back in town. Did you know?” He bookmarks the page he’s on because it’s clear he won’t be able to concentrate with all of this conversation. He doesn’t mind. He’s in the company of some of his favorite people.

“Fuck him,” is Kate’s simple reply. It’s not unanticipated. “He tried to call me. Left a voicemail asking for a little of my time if I could spare it. Said he wanted to talk. To mend things. Yeah, okay. I’ll hop right on that horse, wont I?”

Cora snorts as she stands and disappears with Derek’s tray stacked on top of hers.

Derek peels open a bag of pretzel sticks and eats them leisurely.

Stiles refrains from looking because he’s almost at the halfway mark of the day. He quietly chants a prayer of a resistance to temptation, and the betterment of his gifts. His magic sends impressions of amused fondness before generously sinking into the receptors of his brain that fuel his body’s desires for nourishment, massaging them gently until his hunger quiets into nothing.

Thank you.

Gratitude is unnecessary.

You’re so nice to me. I think I might cry.
Ridiculous Faerie.

Snobbish Ethereal.

The conversation ends at that point, and it’s as quick as it always is.

Cora returns with a new bottle of water and swaps it with Stiles’s empty one. She glares at him with a gleam in her eye that says she dares him to make a comment.

Stiles raises both hands with silent surrender before he uncaps it and drinks it down.

Cora seems pleased by that and she elbows Derek when he says something under his breath.

Laura cackles.

“What do you think?” Kate remarks suddenly as she tosses the empty container of jello onto Laura’s tray and ignores the dark-haired girl’s objections. “About Chris. What do you think? You’re a Seven. Convince me why I should hear him out.”

Stiles says nothing as she presses into the line of his side and watches him with this intense look in her eye. He takes a moment to pray for a little wisdom because he feels like this is a test. He refrains from answering too quickly and when he’s ready, he says, “Love is suppose to be steadfast in all things.”

“Is it?” Kate counters. “So that means what? Welcome him with open arms? He comes back with a broken spirit and a contrite heart, slinking around to fix the damage he left behind. He made his fucking bed years ago, and now he wants to get out of it? He left Allison and Victoria to do who the fuck knows what. I barely even knew him to be honest. I don’t think I care much to, anyway. Convince me, Stiles. I don’t feel persuaded yet.”

“You’re fishing for answers,” Stiles replies calmly because she’s letting her spite get the best of her. “You already know what you will and won’t do. Why ask me for my advice? What exactly do you need me to confirm?”

“I’m not going to forgive him,” Kate maintains with a scowl. “He’s selfish. He packed up and left everyone behind. What kind of man is that?”

Stiles doesn’t say anything. He curls the fingers of his left hand over the elbow of her right arm. He doesn’t hold her hand because he knows that Derek would be uncomfortable with that, giving its significant meaning. He tightens his fingers, but not enough to hurt or bruise and he lets his magic seep.

Gently now.

I know what to do, child.

Kate starts swearing under her breath heatedly as his magic seeks out the source of her anger and begins to uproot it. “I don’t know what your doing, Stiles, but I —”

"Trust me," Stiles says and she clenches her jaw.

Pain has taken up residence here in the form of black tar. It’s festering like an infection.

What can you do? What can be done?
Confession. It is required but it will be unpleasant. She will be stronger.

Do it. I’ll deal with the rest.

As you wish.

“Kate we need to go inside. We’ve got fifteen minutes left of lunch,” Stiles reports and stands without letting go. “We need a moment alone.”

Laura nods, looking a little concerned.

Cora looks vaguely curious.

Derek just shrugs his mouth but he lifts his eyebrows and it’s so stupid that Stiles can interpret that as encouragement if anything else.

Kate lets him lead the way with tense shoulders and she stubbornly refuses to say anything.

Stiles conceals them in the music room and over to the row of saxophones where they first spoke. He lets her go but he can see his magic already curling over her skin like vines.

“You suck,” Kate says shakily. “Whatever witchy magic you’re using —”

“It's not like that and you know it,” Stiles interjects steadily.

"I don't know anything anymore!” Kate snaps. "Better to pretend anyway."

"Maybe, but it's not helping you," Stiles says calmly. "You asked me what I thought about Chris for a reason. Why?"

“I — I —” Kate looks so angry and broken.

“Trust me, Kate. Tell me the truth. It's okay.”

“Stop being so pushy!”

“Tell me,” Stiles presses.

“This isn’t what I was asking for!”

“Kate.”

Kate curls her fingers into fists. “I didn’t have anyone. He was already married by the time I could walk or fucking speak, and I didn’t have anyone else,” she says through gritted teeth and it sounds like she’s trying not to cry. His magic is uprooting the weeds of pain she’s been harboring all this time. “All I had was that stupid fucking painting beside my door with three people I didn’t even fucking know. I can’t tell you how many times I wanted to burn it to the ground because that would be a lot less painful than having to suffer with the reminder that I didn’t have anyone else. My dad isolated himself and I was always pushed on to nannies and butlers, and I didn’t have anyone real until I met Laura, but even then I was so lonely. Did she tell you about when we were younger? How I defied my father by going to the Hale Manor? Because it felt like the family I never got to have. I found everything I ever wanted with them and I wasn’t going to give it up for anything. Still wouldn’t. I’d rather fucking die.”

“Keep talking,” Stiles encourages. “Get it out. I can feel it, Kate. It’s crushing your heart and rotting there.”
“I used to write letters to him,” Kate continues as she blinks her red eyes rapidly. Her shoulders are shaking and she’s clenching her fists so tightly. Her eyes are glimmering but she refuses to let the tears slip. “I wrote letters begging for him to come back and to take me away. I always pretended I didn’t care. Like it was my father’s money keeping me here. But that’s because he never replied. He never even — god, I hate him so much. How could I not? I don’t even know him. I just know the stupid face I see in the painting on the wall beside my door. He has a wife and a daughter. He has a family. Well maybe once upon a time he did, but he doesn’t even deserve them. He took that for granted. He deserves to be alone.”

“It’s not up to us to decide what people deserve,” Stiles points out. “In the end, we don’t stand in front of each other to give the final judgment. It’s for the creators that made us to decide.”

“Creators? I’m not religious, but I know your talking about the Faceless,” Kate sniffs and curses when a few tears slide down her red cheeks. She scrubs her face dry viciously. “They really fucked me over with the life I was given, so excuse me if I’m not too fond of the concept of their existence.”

“You gain what you lose. You lose so that you can gain,” Stiles supposes and it’s so strange that he knows what to say, how to counter her arguments, how to offer a new view of the situation. His senses seem as sharp and clear as his thoughts. He feels warmth pool into his gut with a sense of knowing. “You can't stand there and tell me you haven't established yourself on your own. You might have family by blood but you found a family by choice. I don't know if you want to give credit to the Faceless for that, but it's no less true.”

Kate sniffs.

"Forgive him, don't forgive him. What will it matter? You have a family now. People who do love you in the way you might have wanted your father and brother to," Stiles points out. "I'm not going to tell you how to handle Chris. But just know...the weak can never forgive. Forgiveness belongs to the strong.”

Kate presses the heels against her eyes and lets out a watery laugh. “I hate you,” she complains.

“I don’t think you do,” Stiles retorts but smiles a little. “You pushed me. I just gave you what you were pushing for. The rest is up to you, you know.”

“Yeah, okay,” Kate huffs and drops her hands, looking off to the side and then up as she crosses her arms. She sniffs again. “I hope you realize that only Laura and Peter have ever seen me cry.”

“I don’t take this for granted at all,” Stiles lightheartedly promises.

“Altruistic,” Kate mumbles and rakes her fingers through her golden pixie-cut hair. “You have to come with me. If I’m going to sit down with him and waste my time, you have to be there, because in all honesty, I may try to punch the fuck out of him. Or stab him with a fork. Whichever is the closest or most convenient.”

“Jesus, Kate. Yeah, yes. I will come with you,” Stiles swears because she’s like an unrivaled monsoon. “How do you feel?”

“Exhausted but freed,” Kate admits as she shakes out her fingers and blinks away any leftover tears before rolling her eyes around to clear her vision. “Your magic is tickling my heart. It’s a little strange. Like warm syrup pouring over it.”

“Sorry?”

Kate just hums thoughtfully. “You’re going to do great things, aren’t you?”
Stiles shrugs as he laces his fingers behind his neck. “I’m well on my way, but I still can’t predict the future with that much detail.”

“Fair enough,” Kate supposes with another sigh. “I like it. Your magic. It’s — not too intrusive, but I don’t know. Very polite?”

“It’s pretentious if anything, but its becoming more mindful when it comes to boundaries,” Stiles explains because he has been trying to teach it the difference between good touch and bad touch. “Except when it comes to Derek, oddly enough. I’ve had to tell it multiple times not to jump the gun.”

“Oh, is that so?” Kate tilts her head with a smirk and a gleam in her eyes. “Have you and Derek had the ‘special talk’?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Stiles replies with a frown, because he really doesn’t.

“If that’s the case, Talia will probably sit you two down to mediate the situation, as well as laying down some ground rules,” Kate figures with a thoughtful look that is not as innocent as she tries to make it out to be. “I remember when she gave Peter and I the ‘special talk’. Peter didn’t speak to her for a month after that. I thought it was funny but I wasn’t the least bit flabbergasted. I’d known since the first time I met him.”

“Known what?” Stiles pushes, a little annoyed she keeps dancing around the subject.

Kate just calmly shrugs. “We better get to class. I think I’ll sleep through my AP Physics class. I’m so over it anyway. Is your magic wrapping it up? I’d like to not walk around glowing like the girl from the Rage of Carrie.”

Stiles snorts. “One second.”

Are we all good? Is she taken care of?

It is done. But please be advised, there is still much work left, but this she can mend on her own.

Fair enough. Thank you.

If you wish.

Stiles shakes his head, not even surprised by the lack of ‘you’re welcome’. He calls his magic back to him and it releases itself from the confines of Kate’s chest and her skin, swirling like a bioluminescent ribbon. He opens his mouth when his magic urges him to, and he swallows it; it feels like hot chocolate slipping down and it tastes just as sweet.

“You are just full of wonders, aren’t you?” Kate smirks and pulls him close to throw her arm over his shoulder. “You realize this makes us family, right? If anything ever happened to you, I’d kill everyone and then myself.”

“Joy,” Stiles responds weakly as Kate snorts. "But please don't do that. I'm actively avoiding trouble."

"Good to know," Kate decides. "But I mean what I say. You're family."

Stiles can’t help but to think of Isaac when she says that.

Stiles would not be shocked if this was hindering his pursuit of honesty if not rendering it null and
void.

He recites a prayer of cleansing, asking Fate to throw all his deceptions into the sea of forgetfulness.

The guilt still remains.

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Stiles feels a little weak by the time school ends. He’s scrubbing a hand through his short hair (it’s getting even longer, he’ll need a grooming cut soon) with his books tucked under his other arm. He’s getting used to the fact that Derek will be propped against the lockers beside his, waiting for him. He enters in the combination so his locker door can pop open.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“Kate?”

“Better than before, I think.”

“Good. And what about you?”

“I’m okay, I guess. I just feel a little weak but — Derek, you don’t have to grab my stuff. I’m fine,” Stiles promises and watches helplessly as the older teen fishes through his locker for the books he needs before carefully arranging them like the meticulous person he is. “You know, you remind me of Isaac when you do things like that.”

Derek zips up the backpack and lifts both eyebrows in question.

“He’s a neat freak too.”

Derek huffs and throws the backpack over his left shoulder. “Maybe you’re just a slob.”

“Doubtful,” Stiles counters as they walk out together, and he laces his fingers behind his head. “Slandering my character isn’t very charming.”

"Not really trying to be charming. Your room is always a mess," Derek points out as they walk towards the exit. "I'm nicer than Isaac though. I actually try and help."

"Nah," Stiles denies as he thinks about it. "If anything, I'm starting to think that you cleaning my room was just an excuse to mark your 'territory'. You touch everything."

Derek flushes with guilt.

“Oh. I was just kidding but...that is what that is, isn't it? Wow. You're such a weirdo,” Stiles laughs.

“It’s instinct.”

Stiles snorts before dropping his hands. “You might have wanted to ask me permission before you scented my entire room and everything in it.”

Derek rolls his shoulders. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“What’s done is done,” Stiles supposes. “I guess I — I don’t know. Um.”
Derek starts to grin a little as they walk out into the parking lot and he moves to walk backwards in front of the younger teen. “No, keep talking. I like where this is going.”

Stiles glares at him a faint blush. “Nothing. I was going to say *nothing*.”

“Nothing, huh.” Derek waits a second before he goes on to say, “You know what I think you were going to say?”

“You know nothing, Jon Snow.”

Derek frowns in confusion for a moment but he continues on regardless. “I think you were going to say that you don’t really *mind* that I scent you or your things.”

Stiles makes an annoyed sound at both Derek and his magic (who vibrates happily at the attention). “You shouldn’t walk like that,” he deflects with genuine concern. “You’re going to get hit by a car.”

“Nope, I’ve done this plenty of times, and you’re trying to change the subject,” Derek points out knowingly and he stops when they reach his car. He leans back against the passenger side door like the jerk he is and crosses his arms like he’s going to camp out there.

Stiles pokes him really hard in the stomach and Derek doesn’t even flinch. The whole motion is pointless because he just ends thinking about Derek’s abs and that makes him flustered. “Why don’t you ever have any of your work? Do you — do you *literally* complete all your homework by the end of the day?”

“We all do,” Derek says as he cocks his head, referring to his sisters and Kate. “Do you ever see any of us with our books?”

Stiles has to admit he has a point. “Wait, no. No, that’s not right because Cora!”

“Because Cora,” Derek echoes flatly, his eyebrows climb his forehead. “What about her?”

“She brought me my homework a few times and we did it together!”

Derek gives him a look. “You ever think that maybe she just wanted an excuse to come to your house and look after you? You had some serious bruises if memory serves me right. That’s also instinct. Cora thinks of you as pack. Why wouldn’t she try and take care of you?”

Stiles gets a little flustered at that. “Cora is such a poser. She comes off so Punk Rock, but she’s clearly Indie,” he babbles. “Look, you’re going to make me late. I just want to sit down. I’m tired and hungry and grumpy.”

“I think it’s adorable,” Derek admits cheerfully. “You’re going to stuff your face tomorrow, I bet.”

“I’ve been fantasizing about that all day,” Stiles confesses with a sigh. “Being truthful and wise has its perks. Even the pursuit of knowledge works beneficially. But I don’t feel like I’m pure, I guess. I mean, I’ve heard it a few times, but what does that even mean, right? Mostly I think there’s something more to it than the standard Oxford definition. I’ve done plenty of things that were not so pure, you know? But Violet said that I —”

Derek straightens immediately. “Are they harassing you again?” His eyes begin to change colors. “Stiles…”

“Whoa. Dude, time and place!” Stiles exclaims quickly, looking around. “Seriously, don’t have a meltdown in the middle of this parking lot. I thought we agreed before that this is strictly a ‘me’
“No,” Derek growls lowly. “It’s definitely an ‘us’ problem.” He takes a moment to breathe and relax. “I trust you, Stiles. I know who you are, and what you can do. I know it’s not the safest thing in the world. You trust your gut, and that’s fine, you’re right most of the time. But trust me about this, okay? I don’t know — I can’t put it into words. There’s no way to describe it. Just at least let me handle that sometimes, yeah? Handle them.”

Stiles gnaws on his bottom lip and weighs his options. “Yeah. Okay,” he relents but he quickly adds, “Don’t go looking for brawls, Derek. If you can keep an eye on my dad and my brother when I can’t, I’d really appreciate it. They’re trying to get a rise out of me, so that means they’ll do the same to you. They know things they shouldn’t. I want — I — you have to be safe too. That matters to me too. This works both ways.”

Derek nods slowly but he still looks bothered.

Stiles tries to reign in his magic as it writhes inside him with a desire to console the older teen. He thinks of a way to distract Derek from the problem at hand. “You’re right. About before. I don’t.”

Derek looks confused.

Stiles thinks that maybe he needs to try harder to be brave about this thing he has with Derek. “Earlier, you said — about the, you know. The scenting and I didn’t — I wasn’t trying to — god, this is like jumping over hurdles sometimes.” He exhales roughly and tries not to smile at the way Derek’s eyes light up. “You’re such a loser. I don’t mind, okay? That’s what you want me to say. I don’t. We — well maybe it’s instinct for me too. I’ve always felt, you know, calmer or something when — but it’s because you smell pretty good, or whatever. And...I like it. So I don’t mind.”

“Do you have some tissue on you, because I think I might cry,” Derek teases as he slaps a hand over his dark, little heart. “I don’t have a dark heart, Stiles.”

Stiles flushes. “I didn’t even say that out loud.”

“You totally did. But that’s beside the point. You gave me a full on compliment without backing out on it at the very last second,” Derek remarks merrily. “I think we need to stand here and take a second so it can sink in. This is definitely a pivotal moment in our not-relationship.”

Stiles rolls his eyes but unwillingly grins as he shakes his head. “You’re so annoying. Would you get over yourself? We’re going to be late. I just really want to sit down for as long as I can.”

Derek steps aside, even going as far as opening the door for him.

Stiles doesn’t comment over it as he slides inside to buckle his seatbelt. He sighs and practically melts against the cushion of the leather seats like a scoop of ice cream melting on a hot summer sidewalk. He’s totally going to fall asleep, he just knows it. He blinks tiredly as the car shakes slightly when Derek puts his backpack in his trunk before slamming it shut.

Derek climbs in to start the car and fiddles with his touch screen satellite radio. He stops on a blues/jazz station before he straightens and drums his fingers against his steering wheel, humming along with the melody like he’s listened to the song a hundred times before. He puts his arm around the back of Stiles as he twists his body to reverse out of where he’s parked. He turns forward when he completes this task and merges into outgoing traffic. After a while he snorts and says, “You’re totally falling asleep.”

“’m not,” Stiles mumbles as he props his chin on his fist. “I could tightrope blindfolded and juggle
four glasses of apple juice without spilling a drop right now. My adrenaline is at its peak.”

“Why apple juice? Of all the liquids to pick."

"Hey, I like apple juice. The point is that I'm not falling asleep."

"Whatever you say,” Derek replies, fondly amused. He ghosts his fingers over the pulse point of Stiles’s left hand and gently pushes down on the inside of his wrist. “Heartbeat’s slowing down into a lull.”

Stiles presses his burning cheek against the cool glass and slaps Derek’s hand away. “Stop trying to feel me up,” he complains tiredly.

Derek snickers.

Stiles feels his magic trap the sound like a cat would with a ball of yarn. It makes the sound echo in his mind over and over until he free-falls into the tranquil abyss of sleep as if it were a lullaby.

This is ridiculous. His magic is already so gone over Derek.

It’s honestly makes him wonder.

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Stiles kind of refuses to get up and exit the car. He resents the fact that Derek knows him well enough to threaten to carry him bridal style over the threshold of the antique store. At this point, Stiles is stumbling out of the car, cheeks streaked with the marks of the edge of the window he’d been sagging against. He shakes out his hair and tries to rub the sleep from his eyes. He does a quick stretch to get rid of all the kinks caused by the contortion in his sleep.

Derek stares at him openly before frowning and looking down the street.

Violet and Garrett ride up in that stupid black truck with the windows rolled down, and those stupid identical grins.

Derek’s shoulders tense when Violet says something under her breath and cocks her head to watch him with this intense gaze.

“Derek?” Stiles rubs the side of his face with a quiet yawn. “Is there something —”

“We should get inside,” Derek interjects and presses a warm palm to his lower back, guiding him in the direction of the shop door. He keeps it there as he watches the younger teen unlock the door.

Stiles licks his dry lips and eases Derek’s hand away when they reach the glass counter.

The small, dark mahogany bowl with a matching grinder that looks like a miniature baseball bat with a fat head; the glass jar (which looks like a see-through cookie jar) that’s almost filled to the rim with clear water; the jar of honey and brown sugar; the flowerpot full of thick, black dirt and a measuring cup full of white sand; it’s right where Stiles left it the other day.

Derek makes himself comfortable in the rocking chair made of dark wood to the far right of the glass counter.

Stiles picks up a note with neat letters that have sharp angles which reads: Mr. Stilinski – your father and I are joining Talia to welcome the Calaveras, as they have finally arrived. We will discuss this when both your father and I feel it’s the right time to. You may commence the instruction I gave to
you previously. As usual, lock up when it is time to leave.

Stiles crumbles the note before trashing it. He fiddles with the measuring cup of white sand before turning away to wind and weave his way through the rows of bookshelves. Just as he did the other day, he touches his right hand to the spines of the books and drags his fingertips over the grooves of them. He does this for a while until his magic leaps in his stomach and he twists to see just what he’s touching. He pulls it free and the title reads ‘Four Thieves Vinegar and Bottle Trees’.

He sits down as he flips through the pages, surprised to see that it’s nothing but illustrations with handwritten Latin text in the margins that strangely echoes Deaton’s handwriting. His brow furrows as he gnaws on his bottom lip while he studies the dark ink drawings. They’re filled with omens of terror, horrifying death, and the dark occult. Most of the pictures are of witches with twisted faces controlling the living dead and sacrificial rituals that involved children being fed to shadows with red eyes. These shadows are as big and as broad as willow trees.

“What are you reading?”

Stiles jumps and slaps a hand over his racing heart. “Don’t just pop up like that!”

Derek sinks to the floor to his right and situates himself so that they are as close as possible, sides flushed with no space left in-between. He hands over the half-finished bottle of water Stiles left in his car. “I took pretty heavy footsteps so that you knew I was coming. Mom always taught us to be mindful of making our presence known. In the wild, it’s natural to be as quiet as possible for the hunt. It doesn’t work that way when we emerge from it. Humans need security, so we have to mimic them.”

Stiles doesn’t understand why that makes him sad. “Was it — is there ever — do you ever wish you didn’t have to pretend?”

Derek gives a minor shrug. “We do do have to do to survive. Humans can be dangerous when they’re afraid of the unknown.” He combs the long fingers of his right hand through his perfectly styled hair. “Do you find it easy to pretend?”

Stiles has a little knee-jerk reaction at that. “I —” He’s not sure of what to say. “Maybe I’ve always believed that I was just like — that I was Human — it feels weird to even say it like that or admit that I’m something more. It’s still sinking in that I’m some otherworldly being.”

“That’s okay,” Derek assures. “To me, you’re just Stiles. Clumsy, clumsy, Stiles.”

Stiles gives him a flat look and retorts, “Same here. You’re just Derek. Sneaky, sneaky, Derek. Who apparently has been pining for me since day one.”

A prominent blush explodes over Derek’s face and he stammers over an objection.

“Anyway,” Stiles continues airily like he doesn’t even notice but he’s fighting down a smile. “I’m not so much reading anything, but he’s fighting down a smile. “I’m not so much reading anything, but I’m just looking at the illustrations because I can’t make heads or tails of the little footnotes Deaton’s got crammed in the margins.”

Derek clears his throat once his flush has died down. He holds out his left hand. “Hand it over.” He wiggles his long fingers expectantly.

“Say please,” Stiles childishly demands and jerks with a cry when he feels teeth nip at his ear and Derek pulls away with the book before he can even blink. “You — you bit me! Again!”

“Polish off the rest of your water. You smell dehydrated,” Derek deflects as his brow furrows in
concentration. “This is in Latin.”

“Well duh you nea — neth — nen —”

“Ne-ander-thal. Neanderthal.” Derek corrects with a chuckle. “What is it with you and that word?”

“What is it with you and biting?” Stiles retorts with an annoyed sound. He’s blushing all the way up to the tips of his ears. He can still feel the sting of it. His heart is beating ruthlessly against the teeth of his ribs like a wrathful beast trying to escape its cage.

“Instinct.”

“What kind? Jesus, it's like you're trying to put me in my place or something. I've read about that before in my Zoobooks.”

“Do you want me to translate?” Derek asks, gracefully sidestepping the accusation and leaning his head back against the book spines behind him. He lifts his eyebrows as he looks at Stiles and waits for a response.

Stiles tries to overlook the fact that Derek is so goddamn attractive that people in the old days would write sonnets about it. This is just cruel. He’s just so — and he’s into Stiles which is so weird. He blinks when he realizes he’s been staring. “Uh, what did you say?”

Derek gives him a slow and lazy grin. “The book, Stiles. Did you want me to translate?”

“Oh!” Stiles uncaps his bottle of water and tries not to fidget as Derek tracks every moment he makes. “Wait, you know Latin?”

Derek’s face sags and he looks so hurt that he might cry and oh god, are those tears?

“No! No! No! No, I mean, yes! Yes, please! Of course! You know Latin! Of course you do, Derek! I'm sorry. Please don’t cry. I didn’t mean to imply — well it did sound like I was trying to make you out to be a — because you're not! I just — you — if —”

Derek presses his lips together as his shoulders shake.

Stiles stops babbling long enough to realize that this asshole is fight back laughter. “Oh you —” He tries to choke him but Derek is grabbing his wrists with just one hand while he laughs.

Stiles tries to lunge at him but they end up rolling across the floor until he ends up flat on his back as Derek crowds his vision with a smirk. He finds it strange that Derek’s between his legs but their bodies don’t even make contact because the older teen is being mindful of his personal space in a weird way. “You are the worst Werewolf alive. I used to think it was Peter, but no, you swooped right on in and dethroned him. Oh my god, I just remembered! You totally haven’t seen Game of Thrones have you? You did not get my reference. That’s just obscene, Derek. What the hell do you watch? Are you just gazing up at stars as you dribble a basketball while reciting the Pythagorean Theorem? You do, don’t you? You’re such a loser, I swear to —what are you doing? Are you sniffing me?”

Derek just hums as he drags his nose down the length of Stiles’s throat on the left side. He wraps his long fingers carefully along the line of the opposite side, swiping his thumb over Stiles’s Adam’s apple.

Stiles shakes a little as his magic explodes in his chest like fireworks popping in happy bursts of pinks and reds; it’s trying to leak through in search of Derek’s inner wolf but he resists that
temptation because it’s way too soon. Even still, he’s never felt like this before. "Uh, Derek?"

Derek just continues to nose at his neck.

Stiles squirms and freezes when Derek growls softly, teething at his collarbone. Stiles stays very still because his magic is warning him to do so. It’s confusing and thrilling at the same time. He just — he doesn’t usually — doesn’t submit like this. He’s never wanted to. But then Derek’s teeth graze the underside of his jaw and he gets hot all over. He feels a slow whine trying to unearth from his throat and he’s almost boiling with the flush that overtakes him. Derek’s fingers are like hot bands coiled over his neck and he noses at him like he’s searching for something, rumbling in satisfaction when Stiles remains obediently still.

There’s a quick graze of teeth and tongue before Derek pulls away suddenly with a hazy expression like he just woke up from a dream and his eyes are gold but he’s not shifting in any other way.

“Mom’s going to kill me,” he murmurs, words almost slurring. He climbs off of Stiles before hauling the younger teen to his feet. “That got away from me. Did I make you uncomfortable? I didn’t mean to drag that out like that. I’m sorry.”

Stiles is still trying not to choke on his tongue. “I’m fine!” he squeaks and they push away from each other, both of them sporting a blush.

“Sorry,” Derek mumbles again as he rubs the back of his neck. “That was a little more intense than I expected.”

Stiles just backs up until he can feel the bookshelves behind and he chews on his fingernails anxiously, trying to placate his thudding heart. His magic is no help, its swirling inside his gut like a tornado of inexplicable joy. “So, uh,” he’s the first to speak because he’s never comfortable with an awkward silence. “Latin, huh?”

Derek licks his lips with a nod. “Uncle Peter taught me,” he explains. “Well taught is putting it mildly. Whenever Cora and I had temper tantrums together, mom would give us over to him and he made us sit in the study with him. The whole time he would make us write out the alphabet of old dead languages. He was pretty adamant about Latin though. He never told us why.” He shrugs. “The next thing we know is that we can speak and read Latin fluently. My uncle always kind of blindsides us with stuff like that. He teaches us the things he thinks really matters.”

“That sounds like Peter,” Stiles mutters thoughtfully. “To my benefit it seems. I don’t know a lick of Latin.” He returns to his spot and sits there.

Derek joins him after a moment, and there’s this awkward second of uncertainty before they become comfortable with each other again. He grabs the book, eyes running over the words before he holds the book between them. He points to the bottom corner margin of the page on the right. “Mors et vita in manu linguae qui diligunt eam comedent fructus,” he recites. Then he looks at Stiles and translates, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.”

Stiles gnaws on the fingernails of his right hand.

Derek pushes his hand away.


“I’ve no problem in that area,” Derek boasts with a gorgeous smile. “You get a knee-jerk reaction when I’m in your room, and you start to clean it.”

“Oh whatever,” Stiles huffs. “That’s me being proactive, and anyway, if I didn’t then you’d just put
your hands all over everything as an excuse to mark your —"

“So this refers to this,” Derek quickly interjects, pointing with his left hand to the illustration of a witch who has an abnormally long tongue that almost looks like a serpent. “According to the text, she’s bewitching the dead to do her bidding.” He moves his finger up the margin. “The dead then go to the local villages and steal every child under the age of three.” His uses his finger to tap the ink drawing of the four witches who are feeding the children to the shadows. “Sacrificium promittit potential,” he recites. Then he translates that to, “Sacrifice promises power.”

“So if I’m understanding this right,” Stiles starts as he drums his fingers on the bottom margin of the left page, slightly grazing Derek’s thumb. “Witches control the dead. The dead steal children. Children are sacrificed to the shadows because the witches are on a power trip.”

“Yes and no,” Derek supposes. “Latin can be difficult to translate in its entirety to English. The shadows are called Malorum Spirituum. In English that means ‘evil spirit’ but there’s an aggressive underlining to it.” He flips the page to the picture of a large tree with glass bottles hanging from it. “If you follow the thread…ah, there it is. It says here,” he makes an indication to the top left margin. “Vocatus a magistro tenebris. Which means Master of the Darkness, or something like that. It’s — I’m trying to think of the word. It’s like iniquity but with seven levels. I know there’s a word for it. I can’t think of what it is.”

“Vice,” Stiles says faintly, mind already tinkering away. “Vices. The witches are making sacrifices to feed the shadows. The shadows are Vices.”

“Yeah,” Derek agrees. “So this tree here is salutem et periculo which means ‘safety and danger’. But this is decades after that term was newly translated to ‘sacred groves’. So the tree is some kind of shrine. Or maybe a channel for good and bad, which would indicate the first term of ‘safety and danger’ mixed into the later translation of ‘sacred groves’. It’s kind of messy when you think about it. I guess the tree was where they did all their rituals.”

“Energy,” Stiles elaborates absentmindedly. “There’s a word for it in Druid speak. The Nemeton.”

“Isn’t that the tree trunk you were crawling all over months ago?” Derek asks.

“Yeah,” Stiles replies, still distracted. He has this intense ominous feeling in his gut and it makes his magic restless because it’s just aware of it as he is. “Map,” he says suddenly, springing to his feet. “I need a map.” He drums his fingers in the air as he searches for what he needs. He kind of flies around like this for five minutes, Derek following after him with bewildered concern. “I can’t find it.”

“What? Stiles, can you fill me in here because I am very confused,” Derek admits.

Stiles turns to face him, even though his skin is crawling with the pent up energy of his magic. It wants to lash out, surge through the city, all in search of the foreboding silhouette slowly flooding the town with the intent to engulf everything within radiance of the Beacon Hills in wicked shadows. How could he have been so blind? “The killings, Derek. They aren’t just random, or even serial killings from some whack job with a screw loose. It’s not about money, god I’m so stupid, I thought it was about the money or even blackmail or revenge but that’s not what this is at all. There’s a connection there. It’s chess. It’s positioning. It’s strategy.”

“Wait, wait,” Derek pleads, holding up his hands with an indication he wants Stiles to slow down. “You’re going a mile a minute and I can’t catch up. What are you talking about?”

“The Mahealanis: Doctors. The Martins: Lawyers. Both were slaughtered, not just for their
connection to Mayor Argent, but it’s about something bigger. Derek, they were killed on a New
Moon. Both of them.” Stiles goes on to say, “But it’s not about that either. There’s one thing they
have in common. They were paid silence. Paid silence is greed.”

Derek still looks confused.

“Sacrifice.” Stiles drops his hands to his side. “Sacrifice of greed.”

Derek starts to understand. “So there’s someone out there…sacrificing people.”


Derek looks like he’s letting that sink in, but he also looks concerned. “I think it’s time to call my
uncle.”

“We need a map,” Stiles adds. “Ask him if there’s some kind of map or a — or a book. Maybe some
— some kind of blueprint of the town. But it can’t be just the recent version. It has to be a map of the
Beacon Hills a little after it was formed. Tell him to compare the two, paying attention only the
points where the Mahealanis and Martins lived. There’s something about it that’s way more than
coincidence.”

Derek nods, pressing his smartphone to his ear as he mutters something very sharp and very quick
that even Stiles is unable to discern and before he knows it, Derek is already wrapping up. “Okay.
Okay.” He ends the connection and pockets his phone. “He says we have an atlas that contains all
the maps of Beacon Hills from start to recent. He’ll look into what you mean and then let you know
what he finds.”

Stiles nods, hands shaking.

“Are you okay?” Derek asks but he’s already dragging Stiles closer by the front of his t-shirt so he
I don’t exactly know what your goal was, but I think you reached it. You’ve become the epitome of
self-control.”

Stiles gives a watery laugh and hides his face in the crook of Derek’s neck. The older teen is way
warmer than the average person, but this is nothing new to Stiles. But it is something he decides to
focus on as he recites a small prayer of thanks, directing it at Fate as his magic rolls around in his
mind.

*Fate is pleased. We are now gifted with the mantle of Chastity.*

*Guess this means I can break my fast.*

*Greedy child. Is this the more important of the two?*

*Never.*

*Well met.*

Stiles sniffles as his magic prowls around his heart with a longing. He knows it wants to make contact
with Derek. He’s feeling generous, so he extracts himself from Derek and holds up his left hand.

Derek looks curious but he presses his large hand against Stiles’s slightly smaller one.

With their left hands making full on contact, Stiles releases his magic by slow degrees and it wraps
around both of their hands like ethereal ribbons of unexpected blue energy that feels cold to the touch but not so cold that it would be unbearable. It’s a happy medium.

“So are we being giftwrapped? Handcuffed? Shackled? Bound?” Derek quietly jokes but he tracks the movement with this look of delighted awe.

“Don’t even say that,” Stiles warns but he grins as he watches his magic loop over and over, through their fingers and over their wrists like a light show. Or maybe it can be described as a bioluminescent asteroid caught in the gravity of their hands and revolving around them endlessly. “You already know my magic really has a thing for you.”

Derek keeps his eyes on the magical display but his eyebrows still climb his forehead in intrigue. “Oh yeah?” He grins. “Maybe it knows something you don’t.”

Stiles snorts wryly at that. “Don’t get cocky.”

“I’m not,” Derek swears but he’s still grinning like he’s won the lottery or something as he laces their fingers together. “It’s not just you, you know. My wolf’s always prowling back and forth whenever I’m near you, or when I hear your heartbeat. It gets anxious. It wants to learn your magic too.”

His magic circles their wrists like a revolving bracelet before bouncing off their knuckles like a rock would if you tossed it onto some water to watch it skip.

“We are way too young to have an intense conversation like this,” Stiles acknowledges after a while. “Are you — is this okay? It’s not making you uncomfortable?”

“Stiles, I practically pinned you to the floor and almost put a claiming mark on you. I think I can handle a little hand contact with some magic thrown into the mix,” Derek dryly reports.

“I hate you a little bit,” Stiles swears as his face grows hot with a furious blush. “I’m tempted to call your mom and tell her what happened.”

Derek pales. “You wouldn’t.”

Stiles shrugs and mentally wills his blush to recede. “Kate says one day your mom will give us the ‘special talk’.”

It’s Derek’s turn to blush in mortification. “She talks too much,” he mutters, irritated. “You don’t have to worry about that right now. We need to have a talk first before we go to my mom.”

His magic winds down before hovering for a brief second and then falling over their intertwined fingers in a glowing, wet mist.

“What’s the ‘talk’?” Stiles asks as he unlocks their fingers but before his hand can fall back to his side, Derek catches it with his own and grips. “You’re being too forward again.”

“You started it,” Derek childishly points out. “I like holding your hand. And this is okay as long as we do it in private. We haven’t quite gotten to the point where we want to make a public declaration.”

“And yet you’re always trying to sneak touches. Isn’t that considered lewd behavior in Werewolf culture? Derek, are you an exhibitionist?”

Derek flushes with a groan. “Can you not say that? You’re making me out to be — just — yes, okay. I do have a thing for public displays of affection. Nothing lewd, just, you know. I don’t mind being
affectionate in public.”

“Oh.” Stiles did not see that backfiring this way. He’s unbelievably warmed by the confession and there’s this brief moment where he gets excited over the idea of letting the world know that they are meant for each other. But he squashes the feeling down for now. “You and I are going to sit down and have an elaborate talk about the hand thing because I only know of the little your mom told me,” he decides. “By the way, are all Werewolves left-handed?”

Derek snorts. “Yes. It’s actually a Were thing as a whole.” He then says, “Do you want me to take you home?”

Stiles fishes out his phone and looks at the time. “Yeah. It’s about time to go anyway,” he figures. He lets go of the older teen’s hand to reach over and scoop the book from off the floor to return it to its proper place. “I may need you to translate more of that tomorrow, if you don’t have anything else planned.”

“I am free now since we had our last game the other day,” Derek confirms and crosses his arms. “Three days.”

“Three days? What happens in three days?” Stiles asks as he wanders to the front door with Derek in tow.

“Six Flags in Chicago. Well not Chicago, but Gurnee,” Derek clarifies. “Are you still on punishment?”

“Maybe? I don’t know,” Stiles admits as he locks up. “I’ve been behaving though, so I don’t see why my dad will prolong it.”

“If you get in trouble before we can even —”

Stiles shoves Derek towards his car. “Settle down. I am a poster child for good behavior.”

Derek rolls his eyes and mutters something under his breath as he wirelessly unlock his door, ignoring Violet and Garrett, who are still parked across the street.

Stiles keeps his peace as Derek drives him home and even when Derek sees him to his front door. Under the soft yellow glow of the porchlight, he lets himself think, just for one quick moment, how handsome Derek is. There’s a look in his eye that’s almost gentle, and it makes Stiles’s cheeks get a little warm and his body becomes overrun with indescribable warm, fuzzy feelings.

Derek has an air of silent patience about him that shouldn’t give him a mysterious element because this is Derek but it does. There shouldn’t be any mystery left about Derek but for some reason, there is and only made worse by the fact that their feelings have been laid bare.

Stiles can’t put his finger on it. This simple moment of just standing on his porch with the other teen seems to draw out some inherent curiosity from inside of him. There’s this want to ask questions, to understand, to learn Derek in a way he doesn’t usually care to with other people.

Well, no one outside of his mother. His father always seemed simple to figure out because he never allowed himself to be a complicated man. Isaac is very much the same way. Even with Lydia and all her intricacies, there’s no element of mystery, merely layers upon layers one has to learn to be able to peel back and observe.

Derek is, to put it simply, different. There’s this very deep, deep, dark space in his mind, this private part of his brain, that is perpetually interested. He has no clue what that actually means but it’s
definitely not ignorable now, if it ever was.

Stiles spares a second to wonder what Derek must think of him. Like, maybe, if he thinks that Stiles is web of question marks he can’t find it in himself to give up on until he’s untangled it all. God, Stiles has always had a thing for knots ever since he learned how to tie his shoes. It’s one of his more willful hobbies he rarely indulges in but his interest in it has never died. He still has a box of red rope under his bed. Sometimes he’d tie up his wrists just so he can undo the knots with his mouth, and with his teeth, because he likes the struggle of it. He likes the way it feels, the required focus and energy. How all that expelled energy at the end of it would send him drifting.

Oh geez, he’s beginning to realize that Derek has become a knot in his life, and the chemicals firing off in his brain is demanding he figures out how to undo it until it’s a straight line. But that’s the thing. He’s not sure he could ever figure this one out. Or if he even wants to undo anything. He also starts thinking about Derek tying him up in red rope and whoa. Not the time nor the place to fantasize about such things.

"Any exciting plans tonight?"

Stiles snaps out of his thoughts, floundering a bit before he finds himself again. He clears his throat as his cheeks heat, trying to get his heartbeat under control and grateful Derek isn’t making any comments about it. "Hardly. Though, I’m going to have a hard time going to sleep. My mind is still tinkering away, and I’ll be anxiously waiting for Peter to call me back with his findings. Not to mention that my dad and Deaton are collaborating on something. Well not something, but they’reorchestrating some kind of talk with the Calaveras."

"Yeah, my mom's pretty involved with that too," Derek supposes.

"I think they're all trying to piece together who responsible for all the chaos here," Stiles says. "They know — well we all know who orchestrated it. Of course it wouldn’t be just about the sacrifices, but it is a key aspect. I keep forgetting to tell my dad about all the things I found out about Mayor Argent. That guy has some major dirt, like if you only knew — but I can’t tell you, and I just — now I remember why I can’t tell him yet. Hopefully if things clear up by next week, I can let him know about all of that. But at least I’m moving forward and actually gaining information without question marks floating over my head like a neon sign. Which reminds me, how is Mr. Ravenhill? I haven’t seen him in a long time. I really do mean to sit down with him and why are you looking at me like that?"

Derek rubs the back of his neck with his left hand as he puts his right hand in the front pocket of jeans. "I thought — I thought for sure Laura or Peter told you. But, well, then again maybe they didn’t know that you knew him like that. I didn’t even really know until you just mentioned him."

Stiles swallows as his magic grows strangely quiet. “Tell me what?”

Derek looks like he’s trying to find the right words.

“Derek. Tell me what?”

“He —” Derek struggles to get it out. “He died over a month ago. Mom wasn’t specific but she’s pretty sure it wasn’t a natural death.”

Stiles stands there, floored. He doesn’t even know what to say or think or feel. “That can’t be right,” he swears. His eyes get a little misty. “Mr. Ravenhill has been around for decades. How does — how does something like that even happen? Woodland spirits don’t just die.” He slaps his hands over his face and begins to sob.
Mr. Ravenhill was a Leshy, and Leshies are fragments of nature intertwined with otherworldly consciousness. Beings like this don’t just die. They’re rare souls and Mr. Ravenhill was the last of his kind and now there are none left.

Did I not say this to you before? All things in the realm of men eventually fade away.

Go away. Let me at least mourn in peace.

I meant no ill will. Sorrow has overtaken me as well. When a piece of nature dies, we too die with it. It is much the same as losing a limb.

Go away.

Stiles continues to sob because the loss hurts so much and he didn’t even know. He didn’t even get the chance to say his final goodbyes. He jerks away when Derek tries to rest a hand on his shoulder. “No,” he says shakily. “Please leave.”

Derek looks a little hurt.

Stiles can’t even bear that right now. He turns away and gallops down the steps quickly to hideaway in his backyard. He weeps as he stumbles up to reach Nana and he presses his hands to the triquetra and sags against Nana’s cheek when she appears.

“Oh, sweetling,” Nana coos. “Why do you weep so?”

“Mr. Ravenhill is — he is —” Stiles is choking back tears as the sorrow overtakes him. “It hurts, Nana. Why does it hurt so much?”

“Oh, precious,” Nana sighs and her purple-blue leaves shake with the wind. “Mr. Ravenhill was royalty in his own right.”

“How do — how do you know?” Stiles manages to ask between his bouts of crying.

“I met him once, a long time ago. He was still just a little wildling. So eager to grow. I’ve also seen what you’ve shown me. Come now, let me honor his memory.” Nana goes on to say, “He was tender and kind. His love for the forest was unparalleled, and he treated all manner of creature with respect. He was a protector. He was gentle. Remember him well, dearie. He will never die if you shelter his memory. We’ll plant some lovely little tulips for him. What do you think?”

Stiles curls up at the base of his tree and continues to cry until the sky darkens with stars punching holes through the sky in white light. The moon is unseen and Stiles doesn’t much care. He can’t see anything through his tears.

Nana begins to sing lamentations over him.

Stiles weeps for a long time, crying out to Fate with all his heart and mind and spirit. He’s sobbing so deeply that he can barely hear Nana singing or the rolling thunder overtaking the sky. Rain begins to pour down but Nana protects him from it.

“Look at that now, sweetling,” Nana ponders. “You’re making the sky cry. Try not to weep so deeply. We wouldn’t want this lovely little town of yours to be overtaken by a flood. They haven't seen rain for years, and yet here you are, ushering it in.”

Stiles doesn’t even have the strength to ask her what she means. He just hiccups when he has no more tears left and shivers in the aftermath.
Nana starts to sing again but it’s a lullaby this time.

Stiles curls himself tighter into a ball. His magic unfurls from inside of him and materializes so it can wrap around him like a blanket, protecting him from the cold.

The heavy rain lets up and shrinks into a light drizzle as a few weak tears escape from Stiles’s eyes.

Nana keeps singing and protecting him from the rain.

His magic coils around him with pulses of warmth.

Stiles finally succumbs to his exhaustion.

The minute he falls asleep, the rain stops completely.

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Stiles wakes up to the gentle touch of a breeze soaked in the smell of honeydew and rain. His eyelids flutter before he blinks away the moisture formed by sleep. He frowns in confusion as he uses his arms to lift himself up to glance around a forest full of glittering sunlight, whose rays resemble twinkling gold dust. He looks down to see he’s lying in the middle of an unpaved road littered with the autumn leaves. They rain down in yellows and oranges and reds and blues; they swirl with the wind and gently touch down like it’s an art form or a dance. The trees of the forest are slender and tall, with enough space in between to see in and through.

What he sees is frozen bits of white stars suspended in the air between them, even though the sun shines as bright as ever. He stands and they move around him and he touches a piece of a fractured star and it glows with glorious light before it pops with the sound of glass breaking, turning into white sand and swirling back up into the sky. He looks to his left into the moonlit shadows to see a line of Faeries wearing hooded robs of maroon silk with their heads bowed low. They’re weaving through the trees with simultaneous singing that they direct towards the bright morning star and pink candles in their hands.

Stiles can hear the singing, all of them, just singing in sync in these beautiful hymns that almost sound like the tinkling of bells, the strum of harps, the lazy whine of violins and before he knows it, he’s choking back tears. They speak in a tongue he’s never heard in the realm of Men. It still speaks to his heart and he just — he understands. He looks down at himself and through his tears he can see that he’s wearing dark gold calf-length pants while his chest remains bare, and his skin is littered with glittering silver lines in the shape of rune sigils. He feels the light weight of something on his head and he reaches up to remove a crown made of pearls and gems. His lips are trembling with the urge to join the song and his bare feet are anxious to fall in line with his kin. He’s not really sure what to do.

“We’ve been called for the Gathering,” a voice says from overhead.

Stiles looks up and blinks in surprise when he sees Lydia sitting in the crook of where branch meets tree, high up like she’s sitting on the shoulder of a tall relative.

Lydia’s not looking at him, but she looks as beautiful as Stiles feels. She’s wearing a flowing dress made of black diamonds. She’s wearing a crown too, but hers is made of peacock feathers and rubies. Her strawberry-blonde hair is situated with graceful restraint, fastened into a bun with the aid of butterfly pins. Her skin is decorated with silver rune sigils that are completely identical to his. She stands and walks off the branch, descending to the forest floor like she’s floating in water before she lands in front of him.
The stars act like tiny, white lamps, illuminating the features of their otherworldly beauty.

Lydia’s ears are pointed at the tip and pierced with all kinds of studs. She reaches out touches his own and he realizes his ears are pointed as well. She gives him a kiss on his cheek that makes his skin sing before she pulls away to grab the crown he’s clutching to return it to his head before stepping back. She holds out her hand and thick grey smoke rises from her palm before two slender, pink candles appear once the smoke has cleared.

“Go on,” Lydia says gently and her voice is so lovely. “We are already delayed. I’ve been waiting on you for hours.”

“Oh.” Stiles takes the pink candle and instinct tells him to blow on it. He cups a hand in front of it and blows. The flicker of a flame comes to life. He pokes at the flame but his skin does not burn. “Where are we going?”

“The Gathering,” Lydia repeats as she blows on her candle as well so that it ignites. “The Lady of the Garden calls us on behalf of Fate. She is to be the Mistress of Ceremony.”

Stiles walks alongside her as they venture down the unpaved road, brittle autumn leaves crunching wetly under their bare feet and raining down on them. “What is a Gathering?”

“It is a time when the Fae attend a ceremony of mourning,” Lydia explains as they glide over the leaf-riddled path. “These forests are called the Graveyard of Children, and it is to be our venue. It is normally where supernatural creatures that left the realm of Men before their time are laid to rest. If they should be found without blemish in their hearts and pardoned by the Faceless. These funerals are rare.”

“Who are we mourning?” Stiles asks as they approach the end of the path, Faeries weaving through the trees on either side of them, faces hid by their hoods. “No one small, I’m sure, since you say it is rare.”

Lydia says nothing as the light of day shifts into night, and the crushed debris of stars help to light the way while they stay suspended in the air. She tangles their fingers together as they reach the hilltop to an open field riddled with iron foldout chairs resting on either side of the aisle made of flower petals and jewels.

The chairs are facing a large and wide gazebo made of vines wound together with berries and sunflowers, resting on an alter made of twinkling glass. There’s a long casket made of, what looks like, frozen snow and sugar cubes intermingled and neatly cut into perfect angles. There are birds of all manners hovering, flying, and sitting over it.

Little by little, hordes of Faeries of all demeanors fill in each individual seat as they hold their pink candles. They wait as they whisper prayers quietly.

Stiles watches it all happen from the hilltop Lydia and he are on. He looks out further and sees the outline of mahogany mountains. “What are the pink candles for?” he asks, lowering his gaze to the field of Faeries: their kin.

“Healing. Love. Friendship. Emotion.” Lydia goes on to say, “These will help guide the spirit to the celestial planes so that it may become an everlasting constellation fixed in the painting of the Cosmos.”

Stiles is astonishingly moved by that. “Who is it that we mourn?”

“Come, cousin,” Lydia replies instead, linking their arms so they can hold their pink candles with
their free hands. “Come and see.”

Stiles lets her guide him down the hill and into the open field where they trudge through waist-high wheatgrass and dandelions and wild flowers.

Lydia stops and they stand at the end of the aisle so they can wait.

Stiles isn’t sure what they’re waiting for but he figures that they will have to find a seat soon because they are quickly becoming occupied by their clan. He wiggles his fingers between Lydia’s and gnaws on the corner of his bottom lip and blinks at how sweet his lip tastes (like peppermint raspberry).

There’s a hush that falls over the congregation of Fae.

Then a burst of light explodes in the sky in the shape of a galaxy molded in an almost humanoid form. This living vessel touches down on the altar and everyone rises from their seats.

Stiles feels himself shaking and is comforted by the fact that Lydia is too, meaning that he’s not alone. It feels like his flesh is crying out but his soul leaps inside him with hungry joy. He starts a little when he feels a light touch on his shoulder. He turns just as Lydia does and they are presented with a smile made of brilliance from the Lady of the Garden.

“Welcome back, little ones.” The Lady of the Garden kisses Lydia on the cheek first and then him.

Stiles begins to shake and he tightens his hold on Lydia’s as she trembles alongside him.

“Worry not,” the Lady of the Garden promises. She reaches into the folds of her robe to retrieve small glass jars filled with water and stardust. “Drink, sweetlings. Drink so you may stand before Fate and live.” She takes their candles and glides down the aisle and the Fae bow like dominoes at each row she passes.

Stiles and Lydia let go of each other to pop the top off of their assigned jars.

Lydia holds hers up and clinks it with his with a discrete smile. “Cheers.”

“Cheers,” Stiles echoes and they both take it down. It slides down like sugary molasses. A shudder overtakes him and he’s suddenly aware of every living thing in every realm, he sees the beginning and the end, and there is this knowing that only gods and goddesses experience. But even though he sees, and hears, and feels, and knows, he doesn’t understand it all like he should. There is so much knowledge but it is not easily understood.

“You feel it too,” Lydia states this like a fact. “Curious, isn’t it?”

“It’s too much,” Stiles decides. “There is so much and I do not know what I do not know and even the things I do know I can’t understand.”

Lydia tangles their fingers together and their spirits, hearts, and minds align with an unheard conversation. “Will you go with me?”

“It is already written, cousin,” Stiles responds with a slight smile.

Lydia grips her dress with her free hand, lifting it as so not to stumble as they begin the trek down the aisle.

Amber rose petals rain down on them from the heavens and all of the Fae bow to them as they make
their way to the alter, their crowns glimmering with a significance that neither of them can understand.

The closer they get to the altar, the more they shake until they stumble to their knees from the weight and press of Fate’s splendor. It’s a glory made of unintelligible but endless love composed of the light of the heavens and the cosmos, and it makes even the DNA that makes them what they are vibrate and weep with resilient worship.

Fate sits on a throne of gold on the other side of the casket under the gazebo.

The congregation of the Fae shout with praise and sing songs of gladness, chanting, “We have overcome by the grace of Fate! By the power of your name, we are victorious!”

Fate speaks and Stiles can barely hold himself up because the voice shakes the stars and reverberates through the air with some sort of mystical force. There is nothing that can describe it or translates what Fate is saying. The words just flow endlessly into what is, what was, and what will be.

Stiles struggles his way to Lydia and they hold each other up as they cry with elation because Fate’s voice strips away all the unclean things that lie in wait in their souls, making them want to confess every sin they’ve ever committed. They babble on and on for mercy until there’s a fire in their bellies that rings true like a steaming broth made of forgiveness.

Fate stops speaking and there’s a second hush that falls over the open field.

The Lady of the Garden stoops down and gently lifts their chins. “Hush now, little ones. You are made anew. Fate shines upon your countenance, and so you are blessed with favor. You are royalty, can you not see? To whom do these crowns belong to? Are they not adorned on your head? Come, precious, both of you stand.”

Stiles and Lydia climb to their feet, still weak-kneed.

The Lady of the Garden cups their cheeks with a glorious smile. “It is time to mourn.” She looks at Stiles. “Fate has heard your cry and has consulted with the Faceless to advocate on your behalf. Mr. Ravenhill shall be pardoned and his name will last for ages. It will be written in the stars.”

Stiles sobs in hiccups of relief and he nods rapidly, trying so hard to even get out a ‘thank you’ but he just can’t because he’s choking on his tears.

Lydia pulls him closer to her and rests a hand over his heart. “Well done, cousin.”

Stiles weeps and his tears continue to flow, but wherever they drop, they form into wild flowers.

Fate remains silent on the throne of gold.

Stiles is still hyperaware of the entity and can feel a piercing gaze fixed upon him, even as he climbs the steps on the Lady of the Garden’s urging while Lydia clings to him. When they stand right before the ice casket, he reaches out with shaky hands and closes his eyes with a prayer that Mr. Ravenhill finds peace, and that he has a safe journey out and into the Cosmos.

Lydia leans down and kisses the closed casket before straightening and rubbing Stiles’s arm with affection as she leads him to stand at the right archway of the gazebo made of vines infused with berries and sunflowers.

They watch as one by one, Faeries lie down trinkets on the altar as an offering to fund Mr. Ravenhill’s celestial journey.
Stiles’s heart and soul quickens because he has found peace in the midst of it.

Drums sound off in the distance and Lydia tells him to close his eyes and when he does she gives him a chaste kiss on his lips until his body becomes heavy.

He blinks awake not even a second later, feeling heavy with the press of Earth’s gravitational pull. He can see fractured bits sunlight peeking through Nana’s purple-blue leaves, causing those rays to change colors like a kaleidoscope. His magic lifts it’s warming spell and he opens his mouth to breathe it in.

“How do you feel, dearie?” Nana asks as she watches him rise and stretch, apologizing to the assembly of fireflies he accidently swats. “You look at peace. You went to a Gathering, I suspect.”

“I can only remember fragments, but I remember being…it’s an indescribable feeling. I can’t even translate it. I remember being purged of…old things and being made anew. More than anything I recall being with Lydia as we stood together before Fate. Now that,” Stiles pauses to laugh and rub the back of his head after he stands. “I can honestly say I know what it feels like to stand before a higher power. That was so very intense.”

“You're Fae, but you’re still flesh and you eat the fruits of man, so your body knows of nothing else but the tribulation of this realm. I imagine it’s hard for you to withstand the spiritual wilds,” Nana supposes and she really looks at him. “I sang over you, darling. I interceded on your behalf and it seems that both of our prayers were answered. Which is unsurprising. I’ve talked to Fate only but a few times, and I was told that if two or more touch and agree on Earth, it will be answered swiftly by those who are the masters of the heavens.”

Stiles takes that in and wonders just what he could accomplish with Lydia if they touched and agreed on anything. “Do you know the time? Do you even have a concept of time?” he jokes. He dodges a few apples with a laugh.

“Silly little child,” Nana harrumphs. “It is almost seven in the morn on this rather wet Thursday.”

“Wet?” Stiles frowns as he looks around, just noticing the beads of water sticking to the grass. “It rained yesterday when — but that couldn’t be — I thought I dreamt that.”

“No dreams here, sweetling,” Nana confirms. “You don’t know, it seems.”

“What?” Stiles feels his brow furrow. “What don’t I know?”

“When you mourn a facet of nature, Fate opens up the sky and makes the Earth cry with you,” Nana explains gently.

Stiles gawks at that. "Nana...it hasn't rained for years."

Nana chuckles. “How many times do I have to remind you that your are a child of Fate. Do you know how blessed you are? Fate never withholds the desires of your heart. Treat this power and privilege very carefully. If you burn any bridges, they can never be recovered, understood?”

Stiles nods eagerly.

“Good. Go forth and begin your day,” Nana advises. “How was your fast? Difficult, I gather.”

“Yes, truthfully,” Stiles admits as he licks his lips. “But in the end my magic said I accomplished my goal.”
“You’ve been ordained with the mantle of Chastity,” Nana confirms. “We’ll continue our studies. Now go seek nourishment, and begin studying the book of Temperance. Do not do it all in one day, silly boy. Read a few pages each night and we’ll discuss what you’ve learned, well, let’s say Wednesdays from now on, yes?”

“Okay,” Stiles agrees and picks up all the apples Nana tossed at him because nothing from her must go to waste. “I love you, Nana.”

“Oh goodness me!” Nana laughs with rejoice. “But you must know that you won my affection long ago. All the love I have is yours, sweetling. Until the bitter end.”

Stiles smiles shyly before he wanders off and enters his house through the backdoor.

His dad and Isaac are sitting at the table with a spread of food. They stand when they see him.

“What’s all this?” Stiles asks with a curious frown.

“When I went looking for you after Isaac told me you weren’t in the house when he came home with Boyd, I found you at the base of your tree, bundled up in your magic, I’m guessing,” the sheriff explains. “Nana explained you were mourning Mr. Ravenhill.”

Stiles nods silently.

“I let you be. I trusted Nana to look after you,” his dad goes on to say. “It was Isaac’s idea to make you breakfast for a change. You’re always looking after us, so we wanted to return the favor.”

Stiles couldn’t contain his smile even if he tried.

Isaac is already walking over with a basket so he can help put the apples in Stiles’s arms into it. Then he gives his older brother a hug and steps out of the way so their father can do the same.

His dad pulls back and grips his shoulder. “You okay, kid?”

“I will be,” Stiles reports with a discreet grin. “Can I ask just how you two managed to make all this without burning the house down? This toast is whole grain, right? That better be turkey sausage and bacon. There isn’t enough fruit but at least there’s freshly squeezed orange juice. That syrup’s got to go though. There is way too much sugar in this, holy crap. Did you even look at the back? These calories are ridiculous. Hey, is that a cinnamon roll? I can excuse it this one time. Oh yeah, I was right. These eggs are kind of burnt and so is this toast. How did you even —”

Isaac and his dad sigh simultaneously but they let Stiles babble as they all sit to eat as a family.

So far, the day is going pretty well.

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Stiles rides bikes with Boyd and Isaac. It feels like it’s been a while since he’s seen his little brother off to school. But he kinda gets distracted the whole time thinking up a million scenarios of how his talk with Derek will go. He keeps picturing the hurt look on Derek’s face over and over, and it is just driving him up the wall. His magic has nothing to say about the matter, but that could be it’s practically knocked out inside him from the long night it spent staying up to keep him warm.

He pauses at the curb of the parking lot so he can watch Isaac and Boyd lock up their bikes at the nearby rack. He smiles when Isaac runs back to give him a long hug, unashamed of the looks he gets from his peers.
“Have a good day,” Isaac says quietly before he turns away.

“That’s supposed to be my line to you!” Stiles calls out after him. He snorts when Isaac just waves him off as he bumps shoulders with Boyd playfully while they disappear in the school. The next thing he knows, Allison and Scott are ambushing him into a hug. “Love you guys too,” he laughs.

Allison is the first to pull away with a dimpled smile. “Sorry, I’m just so excited about Danny and Lydia.”

Stiles wonders if he should act oblivious. There are a lot of things that Allison doesn’t know, but that’s because he made Scott promise not to give her too much information about what he’s been told. So he says, “Can you clarify?”

Scott keeps him in a one-armed hug. “Danny’s vitals are improving like crazy. Even the doctors are scratching their heads.”

“Jackson says that he might be up and moving by next week,” Allison elaborates further. “You should see the look on his face. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him happier. He’s been staying at his bedside nonstop. He’s missed a few days of school, but his dad is sorting that all out.”

Stiles is a little annoyed that Jackson’s been neglecting his girlfriend. Or maybe there’s more to it than what he sees or knows. He’ll ask Lydia at some point. “And Lydia?” he pushes.

“Oh! Well.” Allison takes a moment to think about it and Scott gets all moony-eyed over her expression. “She’s going to be released Friday night. I am so excited! I feel like I’m going to vibrate out of my body! We’re going to throw her a really small ‘welcome back’ party. You know. Me, you, Boyd, and Scott. And Jackson, if he decides to come.”

Stiles snickers at the lovesick expression on his best friend’s face and he slaps Scott’s chest twice before he says, “That’s understandable, Allison. I’m sorry I’ll have to miss the release.”

Scott and Allison frown at him questioningly and mild disappoint.

“Isaac and I are going out of town with the Hales for a surprise birthday thing,” Stiles explains but the looks of disappointment don’t fade. “Look. Maybe I could Skype on my way to the airport or maybe while I’m on the plane?”

Allison nods.

Scott’s frown just deepens. “Should I be jealous? You spend a lot of time with the Hales. No, forget that question, I’ve already began spiraling into jealousy.”

Stiles laughs and rubs his knuckles roughly into the crown of Scott’s recently neat haircut. “No one could ever replace you, Scotty!”

Scott pushes his hand away but he still graces the older teen with one of his sunshiny smiles. “Text me between classes?”

“Already have you on speed dial,” Stiles jokes and grins when he gets a laugh in return. “Do you think your mom would let you sleep over tonight?”

Scott brightens at that. “I’ll ask!”

Stiles snickers and twists his hands over his bike handles. “I have to get a move on. See you guys.”
“Be safe! It's wild that it actually rained last night. The town's been buzzing about it all morning,” Allison replies as she drags Scott closer to whisper something in his ear that makes a flush ride up the length of his neck.

Stiles is fine with not knowing. It’s not his business anyway. He just hopes for the best.

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There’s still quite some time before first period starts. The students in the halls are pretty thin with a good portion of them lounging in the cafeteria while breakfast is still being served.

Stiles doesn’t feel the need to join them. He’s still pretty full from the unexpected but pleasant breakfast his father and his little brother coordinated just for him. He grabs the books he needs for his next three classes before making his way to the second floor to wander through the sophomore hall in search of Derek.

Derek happens to be laughing amongst his teammates with a few cheerleaders thrown into the mix. He grins when a blue haired girl snatches his basketball and twirls it on her pointer finger as he rolls his eyes and motions for her to give it back. But she shoves at him playfully and bats her eyelashes.

Stiles clutches his books to his chest, suddenly intimidated. He’s always known that Derek runs in the popular circles with all the good-looking students. It wasn’t too long ago that he drifted through these very halls as an invisible nobody. Laura, Cora, Derek — they hadn’t even known his name. If it weren’t for Peter seeking him out, well, who knows how differently his life would have gone.

Derek frowns deeply and glances over at him.

Stiles quickly spins away, losing nerve, and heads toward the stairs to get to his AP Biology class.

“Wait, wait, wait.” Derek runs up and reels him into a one armed hug with his left arm. “You were totally coming to apologize to me, weren’t you? But then you got all sad. What’s that about?”

Stiles fidgets and tries to look the other way as he lets himself press into the warm line of Derek’s body. A blush dusts the bridge of his nose. “I don’t know,” he mumbles and clutches his books tighter. “I am sorry, you know. I know you were just showing concern and I —”

“Apology accepted,” Derek murmurs, pressing his mouth mere inches from Stiles’s ear, making the younger teen shiver. “I already forgave you anyway because there’s nothing to apologize for. It’d be pretty dumb if I sulked because you were mourning the loss of a friend. That’d make me an asshole actually.”

“You said a swear,” Stiles mumbles weakly as they continue a lazy stride down the hall. He flushes a little as curious eyes follow them. “Come on, Derek. Give me some breathing room. Everyone is looking at us like you’re one second away from trying to stick your tongue in my — oh my god.”

Derek hops out of the way with a laugh when Stiles hurls a notebook at him.

“My ear!” Stiles complains as he drops all his books for the sake of using his short sleeve to rid his right ear of Derek’s DNA. “Oh this is so gross and uncivilized! What is it with you and Cora trying to — to — defile my ear?”

Derek makes a face as he gathers all of Stiles's things. “I don’t want to hear anything else about my little sister sticking her tongue anywhere on you,” he begs in annoyance. “I might tackle her,” he mutters.
“I heard that,” Stiles says as he crosses his arms and watches the older teen gather his things because he deems this a worthy punishment. “So, um, who was that girl? With the uh — blue hair? She seemed —” he stumbles over his words. “— pretty?”

“I guess so?” Derek replies with a lifted brow as he straightens with all of Stiles’s things in tact. “That’s Trixie. We were like lab partners for AP Chemistry last year. She’s good people, you know?”

Stiles scratches the side his nose as it wrinkles and he glances down the hall at said blue haired girl named Trixie. “So does she have, maybe, possibly, a crush on you or something?”

Derek cocks his head with this adorable confused look. “Trixie? You think Trixie has a crush on me? Trixie?”

“Would you stop saying her name over and over like I have five second amnesia!” Stiles exclaims and winces as it garners looks. “And I didn’t say that she did. I was just asking a question. She has your basketball.”

Derek hums thoughtfully. “That’s actually Brett’s basketball. Not mine. He asked me to hold it while he went to the bathroom. Trixie, who happens to be his girlfriend, was taking it from me because she was waiting for him anyway. Stiles, are you jealous?”

Stiles wishes the ground would open up and swallow him because the blush on his face is so damning.

Derek smirks and he straightens even further. “Should I go back and get her number? Would that bait you into fighting for my affections? Or maybe Trixie and I will start some kind of polygamous relationship with Brett. You’d make a good fourth by the way.”

“Give me my books and never speak to me,” is Stiles’s grumpy reply and makes an annoyed sound when Derek bounces out of the way like this is some sort of one-on-one game. “Derek, I swear —”

“You shouldn’t swear, Stiles,” Derek mock scolds as he makes his way to the steps. “Now come on. I’m escorting you to class. I hope you get that weird thought that I’m looking at anyone else out of your head by the time we reach your first class.”

“Stop holding my books hostage,” Stiles grumbles but he lets himself grin behind Derek since the older teen can’t see. They trot down the steps in companionable silence. When they reach the AP Biology classroom, he holds out his hands expectantly.

“Nope, not until you confirm that you have no reason to be jealous,” Derek pushes with this sarcastic judge-y face.

Stiles gets a little pink. “Jesus, Derek. Say that any louder.”

“Well, okay.” Derek inhales and opens his mouth.

“Okay!” Stiles quickly exclaims. “I may have overreacted or something. It probably was silly of me to be all — to think — look, this is all new to me, okay? It’s already mortifying.”

Derek strokes his chin thoughtfully. “This is an acceptable response,” he decides.

“Go away,” Stiles complains and gratefully accepts his books back. He flushes a little when Derek quickly grazes his fingers over the knuckles of Stiles’s left hand. “Derek. No public — you said —”
“I was quick about it,” Derek swiftly interjects before Stiles can go on a rant.

Cora makes gagging noises as she pushes between them. “Don’t you have coloring books to doodle in? Or do you have show-and-tell today?”

“Cute, Cora,” Derek retorts sarcastically as he makes a face at her.

Cora snorts and turns away from him, purposefully smacking his face with the dyed tips of her hair. “Stop wasting your time on my airheaded brother. We have a final to get prepared for.” She starts shoving him over the threshold, giving her older brother a withering look.

“Stop accosting my friend,” Derek calls out and smirks when Stiles stumbles. He gracefully dodges the pencil hurled at him.

Cora holds his phone hostage for their next three classes, just to spite her older brother by ensuring that he gets no replies from Stiles when he texts.

Stiles think it’s all pretty funny, and he can’t even remember what life was like before Peter came crashing into it.

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Stiles sighs with relief and sends up prayers of gratitude to Fate that he’s completed all his finals without a hitch. He cleans out his locker and stands in the long line extending from the library for everyone who’s trying to relinquish all his or her schoolbooks. He’s glad that his Astronomy teacher ended the class early. He spends the next fifteen minutes in that line, texting Scott all the while as he waits. He finally makes it to the table with a sign overhead that says ‘P-Z’ for students with a last name in that range. He gives over his books with no problem before he happily makes his way to lunch.

He continues to text Scott between texting his dad who confirms that his punishment has ended and that yes Scott can stay the night. He stands in line for food and gets a concerning amount of cheese fries and three chill cheese dogs with a blue slushie. He takes his tray out into the quad and makes his way to the usual spot. He sits beside Cora because she gives him this look that dares him to try and sit anywhere else but next to her.

“Can you believe it rained last night?” Kate announces. "Was the weirdest thing. There were no weather reports for it or anything. Our local meteorologists were scrambling today on the news."

"Ugh, can we talk about anything else? I've been hearing this all morning," Cora complains. "Anyway, it's not a big deal. It was bound to happen eventually."

"Bound to happen? Let's not downplay it, sunshine. It's been what? A hundred years or so since it last rained? Don't you think this is something worth talking about?" Kate presses. She looks to Stiles. "Back me up here, buttercup. I say it's the work of the supernatural. Cora just thinks it's a freak occurrence. Who's right here?"

Stiles chokes a little on the next bite he takes from his hotdog and slaps at his chest as he shrugs. He carefully avoids their gaze as he sucks down some of his slushie to relieve the burn. He's not really ready to tell anyone he was responsible for what happened and why.

"That's not what's important today, guys. Voting for Prom King and Queen has started," Laura announces with a sing-song voice from where she's sitting between Kate and Derek. "All you goobers have to vote for me."
“We all know you’ll win. What’s the point?” Derek retorts as he goes to town on, what’s probably, his third spicy chicken sandwich. “You win every year.”

“She’s probably my third spicy chicken sandwich.” Derek retorts as he goes to town on, what’s probably, his third spicy chicken sandwich. “You win every year.”

“Hush your adorable little mouth, baby brother, and go vote for your gorgeous big sister,” Laura replies sweetly as she pats his cheek with greasy fingers.

Derek bristles and grabs a napkin to scrub his cheek until it’s pink. “You know I hate when you do that! I’m not voting for you at all.”

Laura just bats a hand at him as she polishes off another greasy taco.

Peter slides onto the bench on the other side of Cora with his gleam in his eyes. “No, I haven’t found whatever it is you have me hunting for, but give me more time,” he says right at the moment Stiles opens his mouth to ask. “Kate, darling. When is that little meeting with your charming older brother?”

Kate scowls at him. “I told you, Peter. Only Stiles has the privilege of accompanying me.”

“I just find it very peculiar that he would come back to our lovely little town after all this time,” Peter casually points out as he studies his nails. “I simply wish to be present when he offers the insight as to why.”

“Fuck off, Peter,” Kate snaps and wow, this is the first time Stiles has ever seen them in a real fight. “All you want to do is give him about ten seconds of talking before you slice his throat open with your fucking claws.”

“All you want to do is give him about ten seconds of talking before you slice his throat open with your fucking claws.”

“Kathryn, don’t be ridiculous,” Peter replies evenly. “I’d give him thirty seconds. I’m not completely heartless.”

Kate makes a frustrated sound and steals Stiles’s jello only to throw it at Peter (and of course he effortlessly leans out of the way before it can make contact). “Hey! Here’s a fun fucking idea! Why don’t you let me and Stiles handle Chris and you can, let’s say, go sit on a dick and spin.”

Cora chokes on a chicken nugget, wheezing out laughter.

Derek poorly hides his snickering behind his sixth spicy chicken sandwich.

Laura sucks on her bottom in an attempt to squash a humored grin.

Peter’s expression flattens and his resolve doesn’t crack one bit. “Charming, really. You’ll make for a perfect wife and mother.”

“I am not marrying you or having your snotty spawn,” Kate counters and she stands. “You’re pushing for a cold shoulder, Peter. I’ll become fucking Elsa if you don’t stop nagging.”

Peter stands as well. “Well, you see, I have these annoying little urges called feelings and, bear with me because I’m sure you’ve heard of those,” he remarks a little condescendingly. “It’s pressing at me constantly on your behalf to see to it that you and your heart remain in tact. So pardon me if I get a little hostile towards the man who trekked halfway across the other side of the world to find himself, only to suddenly decide that family is more important. There is no way my future wife, and yes I said wife because we both know that you’ll marry me the second you graduate college and bear my children effortlessly when you decide it’s worth your time,” he presses. “There is no way I will let you face that prick by yourself. Stiles or no Stiles.”

Kate just storms off and Peter follows right after her.
A few moments of awkward silence sets in after their departure.

“So,” Stiles says, first to break it because he hates awkward silences. “That was intense.”

“Not really,” Laura sighs. “That was actually one of their more civil arguments. At least I hope so.”

“Blood usually becomes part of the equation,” Cora elaborates as she eats some of his cheese fries.

“Oh,” Stiles weakly responds. He’s a little worried.

Laura gently kicks him. “It’s fine. They always work it out,” she promises with a wink.

Stiles nods but frowns curiously when he sees a dark-skinned girl with unmistakable claw scars on her throat slowly creep up. She smirks and cups her hands over Derek’s eyes. “Guess who!”

“No way,” Derek says and bats her hands away. “Braeden!”

“Derek!”

Derek climbs to his feet with a happy and excited sound. He reels her into a bone-crushing hug. “I hate you so much. You said you couldn’t come out this summer, you liar.”

“I said that to surprise you,” Braeden says with a laugh and squeals when Derek lifts her up and spins her around. “Let me down, you showoff!”

Derek lowers her to the ground with the widest smile that Stiles has ever seen. “When did you get here, Brae?” he asks as she presses into his side with a grin, and he pushes her hair over her shoulder to give a clear view of her clawed neck.

“Like three hours ago. Danielle picked me up from the airport,” Braeden replies, and rests her manicured hand on the middle of his abdomen. “She bitched at me the whole time about being a Dominatrix. If she knew how much it cost to attend a fancy preparatory academy up in New York, she’d be pulling out the whips and chains too.”

“She just worries,” Derek supposes as he cocks his head to look at her. “That’s what older siblings do, as annoying as they are.” He says that last part louder.

“Love you too, Der,” Laura responds, elbowing him out of the way so she can embrace Braeden. “I’m glad you made it here safely. Go vote for me.”

Braeden laughs and pulls away. “I don’t even go to this school, La-La.”

Laura just winks and taps the side of her nose before turning so she can strut around the quad and pressure people to vote for her.

“Do you still have a penis?” Cora asks crassly. “Or have you spun around enough stripper poles to get the cash for that. You know mom offered to pay for the surgery.”

“No, she offered it to my mom,” Braeden corrects, grabbing at the air with attitude all in her expression. “And no. I don’t have a penis anymore, so please, for the love of god, Cocoa, stop asking that every time you see me.”

Cora snickers and stands so she can go hug her. “I was just eager for you to finally make the transition from Brandon to Braeden.”

“It’s been a long road, but my he and him are officially she and hers now,” Braeden confirms,
hugging Cora so tight that it almost looks like she’s trying to crush the younger teen.

Cora pulls a way and shoves her gently. “Mom will be glad to know.”

“She always was my biggest support,” Braeden admits. “So who’s this then?”

Stiles has been quietly consuming his food while he watched all of it unfold. He uses a napkin to clean his mouth and his hands. “Stiles. Stilinski.” He stands and doesn’t know whether he should shake her hand or not.

Braeden arches a brow. “Your parents named you Stiles?”

“No, I named myself. My actual name is Polish and not very pronounceable for people apparently. Even I had a hard time with it so I took a fragment of my last name and molded into something much simpler.” Stiles rambles and fidgets under her skeptical gaze. "Call it a social coping mechanism if you will."

Derek rolls his eyes and nudges her. “Don’t be stupid, Brae. I’ve mentioned Stiles about a million times.”

Stiles gives him a look at that.

Derek flushes once he realizes what he just said.

Cora makes gagging sounds and mutters something about hunting down Laura so she can join her in terrorizing the student body.

“Oh, right. Stiles.” Braeden eyes him sharply. “So, Stiles. Has Derek mentioned me?” Her voice sounds both like a purr and a whip. It’s almost disorienting.

Stiles purses his lips and sends Derek a glare because the older teen hadn’t.

“Honestly, I’d be surprised if he did. He knows how I am. I like to screen the people in his life. It took seven months before he talked about me to Paige. He knows how particular I am,” Braeden confesses and she eyes him. “Well, my name is Braeden and I am transgender. Derek and I have known each other since we were in the womb —”

“Stop telling people that, you’re literally Laura’s age!”

“— and my mother and his mother are best friends,” Braeden continues, completely ignoring him. “And they have also known each other since they were fetuses. You see the pattern here? Furthermore, oh shit.”

Stiles blinks in confusion and leans back when she pushes her face close to his.

“You better not kiss him,” Derek playfully warns. “Not before I’ve gotten the chance to.”

Stiles makes a strangled sound and flushes.

“You’re a fucking Seven,” Braeden says suddenly and it startles Stiles. “I can’t even believe — Dee, why didn’t you tell me your boy toy was a Seven?” She turns away and Stiles can breath again.

Derek frowns. “Don’t call him that. And it was none of your business.”

Braeden just gives him the middle finger and turns her focus on Stiles. “Derek didn’t tell you, did he? Of course he didn’t, the loser. He didn’t even bring me up. I’m a Virtue too. I thought you looked
familiar. You were at the Gathering the other night with some redhead.”

“Strawberry blonde,” Stiles weakly corrects as his thoughts go wild. “You’re…like me?”

“Minimally. You’re a Seven. I’m just a goddamn Virtue of Diligence, Temperance, and Humility,” Braeden explains. “I’m a Three at best. Although, it would appear that I’m ahead in the game. You’re a baby Seven, well that’s adorable.”

Stiles doesn’t really like how she’s talking to him.

“I remember when I was that young,” Braeden goes on to say. “Do you have a Conduit?”

Stiles tries not to frown. “No,” he simply says.

“Wow, okay.” Braeden turns away from him. “I’ll see you at the house, Dee.” She pats him on the chest before she wanders off of campus.

“She’s abrasive,” Derek says, rubbing the back of his neck, and the way he says it sounds kind of like an apology. “She sometimes — you two just need to get to know each other.”

“I might have known where to start if you’d made even the smallest mention of her, Dee,” Stiles points out a little spitefully. “It’s fine. How long is she staying?”

“She usually stays for the whole summer. I don’t think this year will be an exception,” Derek admits and he looks a little upset. “I should have talked about — if anything— bringing her up kind of slipped my mind.”

“She’s your best friend, Derek,” Stiles reiterates. “How does something like that slip your mind? Please enlighten me. Meanwhile, she practically knows everything about me, and I barely know anything else outside of what she just told me.” He sighs and grabs his tray. “I’m not Paige, you know. You shouldn’t have to — just — never mind.”

“Hey,” Derek grabs his wrist and pulls him closer, grabbing the tray in Stiles’s hands and setting it down. “I know you’re not Paige. Trust me. I should have told you about her. I wasn’t sure if — I didn’t know how you’d react.”

Stiles says nothing.

“I really like you. I like you in a way I’ve never liked anyone,” Derek goes on to say. “I was worried that if I told you about Braeden and how she can be with people she doesn’t know, I thought you’d be skittish and rethink everything.”

“You’re stupid,” Stiles blurts without even meaning to. “I’m sorry, but you are. Actually, I’m not sorry. But you should be. Apologize.”

Derek grins a little. “I’m sorry.”

“You cannot keep vital information like this from me. Especially since we — since you —” Stiles fumbles with the words and gets a little red. “Because we’re talking about dating. Sharing is a two way street or something like that.”

“I agree,” Derek is quick to say, which is wise because he’s gaining back the brownie points he just lost. “Ask me anything about Braeden and I’ll tell you everything you want to know.”

“I will take this into consideration,” Stiles decides. “Now let’s go vote for Laura. She would totally
know if we didn’t.”

Derek sighs in agreement.

While they stand in line and wait their turn, Jackson sends him a text that goes like this:

**We need to talk about Danny**

Stiles instantly knows it isn’t good, and right when he comes to that realization, his magic stirs.
While they stand in line and wait their turn, Jackson sends him a text that says this:

**We need to talk about Danny**

Stiles instantly knows it isn’t good, and his magic begins to stir. The suddenness of it is so distracting that he runs right into Derek’s back when he pauses to wait for his turn at the voting booth. Stiles makes a small sound, stumbling back and into the people behind them. He quickly apologizes when he receives a glare from the two juniors he bumped into.

Derek tugs him close and sends the two girls a look. “Chill, Hayden. He didn’t do it on purpose. He’s clumsy like that,” he explains, urging Stiles to take the spot in front of him with his hands.

“Whatever. Just be careful, kid,” Hayden replies as she squirms back into her shoes. “No reason my big toe should have to suffer for you being vertically challenged.”

Stiles is quick to say, “Sorry. Again.”

Hayden nods and tugs her friend towards another line.

Stiles feels his pocket vibrate again. Same text from Jackson.

**We need to talk about Danny**

It’s not like he’s forgotten. It’s like he has a banner with those words in big bold text, set on fire in his mind. It refuses to be ignored.

“You okay?” Derek asks as the line moves up. “You smell like…everything. Panicked might be the word but it’s softer than that. Fretful, maybe.”

“It’s —” Stiles grips his phone when it vibrates for the third time with the same message. “— nothing, probably. Friend of mine is texting me about a mutual friend of ours. Did I ever mention Danny?”

“The one in the hospital,” Derek guesses with a furrowed brow. “I’ve heard you and Scott talk about him sometimes.”

Stiles nods, and his magic squirms around near where his kidneys are. “I went to visit him and my cousin Lydia on Sunday, and I gave them this paste I made.” He makes sure to keep his voice low. “It had some special purpose, you know? I think — I don’t know what to think. Jackson wants to talk about Danny, but I have a bad feeling about it.”

“It might not be as bad as you think,” Derek offers as minor consolation. “You never know.”

“Yeah,” Stiles faintly replies, as it may be true. He still can’t shake the negative feeling.

“So. Prom.” Derek moves so they can stand shoulder to shoulder. “It’s tonight, you know.”

Stiles had known, but he’d never had any intention of going. “I don’t like school dances.” He’s trying to be as polite about this as possible. “I know Laura wants me to be there. She always wants me to come to them, but I just — it’s not something I enjoy. I don’t dance and I end up feeling awkward and nervous. No thank you.”
Derek smiles softly but he does look vaguely disappointed. “There’s this image in my head that begs to differ,” he confesses as he bumps their shoulders together. “We’ve got about two or three years left of school.”

“Enough time to convince me of the idea?” Stiles squints his eyes knowingly, and feels a warm flush of affection swell inside of him when Derek laughs with this totally caught expression. “You’re already fighting a losing battle.”

“Maybe. Paige once told me that the best gods to follow were Compulsion and Persuasion.”

Stiles takes a moment to think to himself about how that’s a funny way to live your life. Then he thinks about Derek's ex-girlfriend in general. It does not escape his notice that Derek is more open to talking about her (or even saying her name). "How is she?"

"Recovering, if things are going well. I sent her a letter the other day. It's too early to tell if she received it or not, or if she'll even respond," Derek answers, and Stiles really likes him for his honesty and how transparent he allows himself to be without hesitation. "How is Kira?" he asks in turn.

Stiles frowns and looks away. "I'm giving her — space seems like — we haven't talked," he finally says, and it bothers him to talk about it. He's been trying to keep his mind off of it to be truthful. "It sucks, you know. I really like her."

"Yeah, I could tell," Derek supposes, almost thoughtfully. "You kind of click with her the way I clicked with Braeden when we first met as kids."

Stiles says nothing about that. But he does say, "The rain was me last night."

"I know."

Stiles looks at him sharply for that.

Derek gives him a half-smile, and his eyes go gentle in a way that Stiles never really understands. "We all kind of know. Well, everyone that knows you. Kate was trying to tease the answer out of you at lunch, but we were talking about it before you came over. I told them that I had to break the news to you about Mr. Ravenhill, and how it started raining not even five minutes after that. Not really hard to connect the dots."

"Ugh," Stiles huffs and crosses his arms. "You know, I don't even understand it fully myself."

"Not surprising, but we don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," is Derek’s simple reply before he steps forward to mark up a ballot.

Stiles is silently grateful because he's actually not in the mood to. He takes that small instance of waiting for Derek to finish his voting to muster up the courage to reply to Jackson:

When and where?

Ramona's Old Fashion Eatery. ASAP when school ends.

Stiles sighs and replies with a simple ‘sure’. His magic sinks down into his knees, as though seeking a change in scenery, before floating up to his chest again. He’s next in line to place a vote.

When the final bell rings, signaling the end of lunch, Stiles offers to walk Derek to his next class, if only to distract himself for a little while. They spend those few moments talking about what Stiles
will do when Scott comes over to spend the night, and then they they talk about the color scheme of Derek’s tux, and how it’s more than likely that Braeden will accompany him to the dance.

Derek offers to spam him with an obscene amount of pictures so he doesn’t feel left out and Stiles rolls his eyes but he accepts diplomatically. He knows that everyone else will do it now that he’s given the okay, but he doesn’t mind.

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Ramona’s Old Fashion Eatery on Mulholland Blvd is one of the most well known restaurants in, not only Beacon Hills, but all of California. It’s even been on Diners Drive In & Dives, that one TV show hosted by Guy Fieri. A whole entire episode was even dedicated to the layout of their whole menu.

It’s interior is cosmetically designed to look like a 50’s diner, with shiny red vinyl booths and checkerboard linoleum floors. Even the employees dress in vintage uniforms.

He has only been there twice. Once for breakfast on his birthday with his dad, Scott, and Isaac, and once more with Kate and Peter for the impromptu breakfast with Parrish. The food, as well as the general atmosphere, is so amazing that it is always filled to the brim with families, couples, and teenagers. There’s been a rumor that they’re considering a new ‘reservations only’ style of business. It is almost always packed with people, so he’s a little confused when he sees that the place looks practically deserted as he rolls up to it on his bike. He tries to push through the glass double doors but they’re locked, leaving him even more confused. He looks at the business hours and realizes that the restaurant is apparently closed on Thursdays.

Stiles scratches the back of his head with a frown as he backs up before spinning on his heel to sit down on the curb of the diner entrance and kick up his feet on one of the yellow painted cement parking spot blocks. He pulls out his phone to check for any new messages.

There are a few from Scott, enthusiastic with their get together plans. It makes Stiles grin, and he quickly notifies Scott that he’s meeting up with Jackson for whatever reason and that he should just follow Isaac back to the house. There’s also a group text from Talia, informing everyone of this weekend’s itinerary (including the walk-on role she arranged for Laura to have for one of her favorite musicals the night of their arrival), while also emphasizing that Laura must remain none the wiser.

It reminds Stiles that he should swing by the gift shop so he can buy something for Laura’s birthday.

There’s a text from his dad saying he’ll be home a little later than planned, but he made a pot of his infamous sloppy joe. That gives Stiles something to look forward to. He reads over a text from Deaton that says today’s meeting is canceled, as he is currently making use of the store to continue to mediate the communication between the Hale Pack and the Calaveras. He’s in the process of typing a message saying that he understands, when a sleek, jet blue BMW rolls into the lot and parks into the space in front of him. He stands, squinting. The glare of the sun makes it hard to see who it is in the car.

The driver, outfitted in a suit, steps out of the car and motions him to the back, holding the door open.

Stiles keeps his magic steady and holds it a bay when it prowls up and down his spine defensively. He makes his way to the open backdoor and sees Jackson waiting, texting on his pricey smartphone with a bored expression. He slides in and settles against the firm leather seats.
It smells obscenely new in this car.

The driver climbs in again, buckles up, and begins to reverse out of the parking lot.

“So,” Stiles starts as he fastens his own buckle. “What did you want to talk about?”

“You know, they put Danny in a medically induced coma to save his life,” Jackson remarks with cool indifference. He doesn’t glance over. He doesn’t stop texting. It’s like Stiles isn’t even in the car. “They saved his life, but when they tried to wean him off the drugs putting him under, there were, of course, complications. Sedation wasn’t what was keeping him under. The neurologist kept saying how his prognosis changed. That it was more to do with mental trauma.”

Stiles doesn’t say anything. He glances out the windows and realizes that Jackson must have instructed his driver to take them through the town aimlessly while they talked.

“His vitals kept getting worse. They wanted to pull the plug because it didn’t look like Danny was trying to fight and there was no family to claim custody,” Jackson goes on to say, thumbs still moving restlessly over the screen of his phone. “I had my dad fight the Board, the doctors, the nurses. Didn’t matter who. Danny’s my friend. He’s my brother. I wasn’t going to leave him to rot in a hospital, no matter if there were no chances of him waking up. My dad’s been filing petitions to get custody because they were going to release Danny to the state, and I think we both know just how that would have ended.” He finally turns off his phone. “He’s got claw marks all over him. The scars are just…it’s bad. But the doctors say he’s being ‘miraculously responsive’.” He sounds a little bitter. Then he says, “I know you did something, Stilinski.”

Stiles should have guessed the conversation would go this way.

“I don’t want to sound ungrateful,” Jackson continues. “I mean, the fact that he’ll be completely conscious by next week should be enough, right?”

Stiles feels his magic leap in his gut ominously. “Something’s wrong,” he reasons. “But I knew that. Of course I knew that.” He turns so he’s facing Jackson directly. “Just like you knew the moment the doctors reported anything positive, that it was me.”

“I’m not stupid,” Jackson reiterates. “You’ve been to see Danny less than a handful of times. You’re…you’ve always been different. Strange always seems to follow right on your heels. And after you fessed up to what was going on, and the way you and Lydia are around each other, it’s not too hard to put two and two together.”

Stiles wants to ask about Lydia but the timing feels off. So he says, “Danny will be fully conscious by next week, yes, I knew that, but there’s something more. What else did the doctors say?”

Jackson’s face becomes unnervingly blank. “Even with a full recovery,” he starts slowly, like it’s painful to bring up, “there’s zero chance he’ll ever be able to walk again. And his hearing is gone.” He blinks hard and looks away. “He’ll never walk again. He’ll never hear again. But he will live.”

Stiles feels sick. Those were Lydia’s exact words. She had known, of course she had known. “I’m so sorry,” he swears hoarsely.

“I don’t know what you did,” Jackson mutters, voice thick. “But I would rather you had done nothing if you’re just going to go around doing half-assed miracles.”

Stiles feels those words shred into his chest like a razor blade. His magic bristles in indignation, wrapping possessively around his heart in ribbons, foaming over the weak places where the aches can be found with tenacious consolation.
I dislike this ill-mannered Human child. He lives a life eating spoils, and so has become spoiled himself. Does he not understand whom he is talking to? Whose presence he is in?

He’s speaking his mind. Danny means more to him than I could ever hope to understand.

Unacceptable. He uses liberties he has no right to, all in the name of forsaking the phenomena you’ve managed. You are kin to the Great Queen. Favor and honor follows you, wherever you go.

He doesn’t owe me anything.

But you are due respect at the very least from this rotten child.

I will handle it.

See that you do, Faerie Princeling.

Stiles doesn’t respond to that. He knows that his magic is trying to make a point with addressing him by his otherworldly title. He overlooks it to address Jackson, saying, “I did what I could, Jackson. If I could have managed more than what was possible, well, I think we would be having a different conversation. Don’t you? Yet, here we are.”

Jackson’s expression shuffles through a deck of emotions before landing on something that looks vaguely contrite. He shifts away, putting more space between them. “You’re right, Stilinski. I’m being a dick. Let’s just leave it at that.”

Stiles nods. “Fine by me. No hard feelings.”

Jackson hums.

The car stops at a red light and Stiles recognizes this part of town. They’re near the Beacon Hills Library.

“Danny’s going to need more than just me,” Jackson decides after a few beats of silence. “He’s going to wake up and he’s probably not going to remember a thing, and I’ll have to be the one to rip his world wide open.”

Stiles flexes his hands. “It...won’t be easy,” he confirms.

Jackson snorts cynically. “The only family he had is gone. He’ll be paralyzed from the waist down for the rest of his life, and all those times I sat at his bedside reading and talking to him has all been for nothing apparently.” There’s a slight tremor in his voice. “So yeah. No shit.”

Stiles feels compelled suddenly to say, “You don’t have to feel like everything you’ve done has been for nothing, and that it will never be enough for him.”

Jackson gives him a sharp look at that, but he also looks like he’s trying mask his insecurities.

“Danny doesn’t seem like the type to take anything for granted. He’s a positive person,” Stiles points out. “He’s going to rebuild his life in the best way he can. He’ll have his best friend there to help in any way he can. As long as you remember these things take time, that’s what’s going to be enough. Patience and understanding.”

“I don’t have a lot of experience with those things,” Jackson admits, brutally candid. “I’m going to fuck this up. I know it.”
“Probably.”

Jackson glares at him.

“What? We’re all flawed. We’re not gods. We're just a bunch of stupid kids, Jackson. Mistakes and screwing up is all a part of life,” Stiles states. “But you have to own it and you learn from it.”

Jackson stares at him for a long moment before he huffs. “Whatever you say, Stilinski,” he supposes. He takes a second to tell his driver to take them back to the restaurant. Then he says, “How’s lacrosse?”

Stiles snorts bitterly. “Nonexistent. I haven’t been to any of the games. Not that my coach has noticed. I’ve pretty much quit without quitting.”

“No.” Jackson is glaring at him.

Stiles blinks. “Sorry? No what?”

“You’re not quitting, Stilinski. Are you fucking kidding? After all that time and effort I put into you? That Danny put into you?” Jackson makes an annoyed sound. “Danny won’t even be able to play anymore and you’re just going to —” He cuts himself off with a mangled swear. He takes a moment to exhale. “It’s not an option. Danny and I will be freshmen in the fall, along with McCall, but we made plans. We had a plan. But Danny…” He frowns. “It’ll just be me. Maybe even McCall if you can be bothered.”

Stiles is beginning to realize that Jackson is asking him to be a familiar face on the team when he tries out. He’s asking without asking. “Okay,” he says. “No quitting for me.”

Jackson’s shoulders actually relax a fraction.

“You know,” Stiles casually drawls; he feels extremely compelled to say this as well, “I’m taking a driver’s ed course at the Beacon Hills Park District. The one in the metropolitan area, not the one next to the library.”

“Your point?” Jackson presses with a raised eyebrow and a dubious expression.

“My point is that, I take morning classes, so that leaves the rest of my day pretty wide open. I wanted to know what else they had there,” Stiles elaborates. “One of the things they offer for free is American Sign Language for beginners. I thought maybe that’s something you might want to sit in for, from time to time. They’ll probably know more about how to get Danny integrated into the Deaf community. Danny can get connected to support groups and things like that.”

Jackson’s expression quickly changes. “Yeah,” he says faintly. He doesn’t say much more after that.

“Lydia’s going to be discharged tomorrow evening,” Stiles throws out there, just to see what the younger teen will do. “Allison is having a get together.”

Jackson just hums as he turn away to look out his window.

Stiles leans back against his door with a frown. “So, when was the last time you saw her?” he pushes.

“Stop fishing, Stilinski,” Jackson easily retorts. “What do you care anyway?”

“She’s my cousin,” Stiles confesses, going for the bold method.
Jackson doesn’t appear to be surprised at all.

“So you *have* been talking to Lydia,” Stiles deduces, because there’s no way he would have learned that from anyone else but her. “What does she tell you?”

Jackson tosses him a smirk as the car comes to a stop in the parking lot of Ramona’s Diner. “You’re fishing again,” he points out. “Let’s be clear here. You’ve done my best friend a tremendous service by infecting him with whatever kind of magical contagion you have up your sleeve so he’s not doomed to spend his life confined to a hospital bed and hooked up to the type of machinery that basically does all his living for him. Trust me when I say that all of us are merrily singing your praises, but you and I aren’t close enough that I’ll just divulge the kind of things my girlfriend and I discuss concerning or not concerning you. You understand that? Get the hell out of my car.”

“Rude,” Stiles counters with an annoyed frown. “You should be nicer to me, as we will be teammates and classmates for the foreseeable future. I also plan on keeping my face in Danny’s future indefinitely. Plus I’m the blood relative of your girlfriend, and I think she’ll care if you treat me less than courteously. So, being civil should be a thing we should do, you know, for the sake of running in the same circle of friends.”

“Whatever,” is Jackson’s reply, looking bored.

“And you have a good summer too,” Stiles mutters sarcastically, climbing out of the car, slamming the door shut. He steps back and watches as the BMW reverses and drives out of sight before he walks to retrieve his bike.

He’s not so lost in his thoughts that he completely forgets to stop by the gift shop.

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The house is surprisingly empty when he arrives. The unnerving quiet gives him maybe a few moments to investigate, and he doesn’t have to go far before he sees the note left for him on the kitchen table with Scott’s messy scrawl saying: *Every man for himself, dude.*

That’s when Stiles notices the orange and green toy gun.

It’s Nerf Zombie Strike Doominator Blaster that’s strategically placed at the top of the fruit bowl pyramid.

Stiles approves and crumples the note in his fist as he grabs the toy to give it an inspection. It’s already loaded up and ready to go. He throws away the note and goes stalking through the house in search of his opponents. He finds Scott first. They do a five-minute standoff before they decide to set aside their differences to join forces. From there they hunt down Boyd, and hold him hostage in the kitchen to lure out Isaac. It does get Isaac’s attention, but it only makes him vengeful and determined. Needless to say, Scott and Stiles never had a chance. They both end up with a dart to the forehead, which makes Isaac the winner.

It’s a pretty fun game overall, and they play at least three more rounds before they decide they want to call it quits. They make full use of the pot of sloppy joe his dad left behind and they eat until they’ve cleared at least half of it. Then they all rise from the table to settle in the living room for a *High School Musical* marathon while they let their food digest.

Boyd is occupying the second armchair across the way from where Isaac’s curled up in his favorite. Stiles passes out on the long couch, face down, left arm spilling over the edge, as his fingers bump
Scott’s foot from where he’s sprawled on the floor alongside the coffee table.

Scott’s singing along to the movie softly, mostly to himself.

He jerks awake some hours later when the sky has gone dark, and Scott is shouting protests over a game controller as Boyd and Isaac double team him in *Mario Kart*.

He sits up and shakes out his hair with a lazy stretch, making a soft sound when Scott shoves a game controller in his gut, begging for assistance. He obligingly intervenes, smiling to himself when Scott cheers his ability to quickly take the lead and avoid any misfortune of being run off the infamous rainbow bridge.

Eventually they all get tired of Stiles coming in first all the time and funnily enough, he gets embargoed. He rolls his eyes at their theatrical politics and skulks off to the kitchen to finish what’s left of the sloppy joe. He eats and scrolls through his growing texts from Derek, Laura, Cora, and Kate. He’s getting flooded with pictures of prom and the captions that follow are just as hilarious.

Kate is wearing a formfitting, obscenely plunging neckline dress made entirely of scarlet red sequins. Or better put, she looks like she’s cosplaying the hell out of Jessica Rabbit. Meanwhile, Peter is decked out in an midnight blue, satin couture suit, looking like James Bond’s younger sibling.

Laura’s attire is comprised of a strapless, plum purple chiffon floor length dress with a mermaid fit, and her hair is pinned up elegantly in a sultry twist to Audrey Hepburn’s infamous *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* do-up.

Braeden totally owns the ivory, two-piece evening gown as her hair hangs like a dark halo around her head in natural coily curls, looking as if she could pass for Olivia Pope’s double.

While Derek and Cora are wearing matching silver extra slim fit suits, hair neatly parted and slicked back (into a bun in Cora’s case) and they look like ambiguously unconventional model twins.

All of them look drop dead gorgeous.

Stiles won't deny the fact that he stares dreamily at some of these photos because he never shies away from appreciating physical beauty in a purely aesthetic way.

There are pictures of dancing (and even breakdancing), eating finger foods while drinking punch from punch bowls, as well as a raining storm of glitter, confetti, and balloons from above.

There are goofy poses being made with fellow peers, people that Stiles recognize as their teammates and the like. There’s strobe lighting, glimpses of a DJ, and a few sets from some random local bands.

At one point, it’s the moment of truth where Prom King and Queen are being elected. No doubt it’s Laura who wins alongside Brett Talbot. So he gets pictures from Derek, where Laura’s standing on the stage to accept her sash, flowers, and crown. Laura sends him pictures of her ‘adoring fans’ and selfies with her King (Brett Talbot of course).

The spamming winds down after that, since the dance is coming to a close, and then the communication ceases all together.

As Stiles pockets his phone, he feels his magic stir after being so dormant after their earlier argument but remains inconspicuously passive. He rises from the table with his plate and makes a quick work of clearing the sink, the stove, and the table of it’s dishes so he can have space to make some lemon bars.
Once done and out of the oven, the smell entices Boyd, Scott, and Isaac over to the kitchen to destroy the dish with enthusiasm. The four of them sit at the table, quiet for those first few moments, save for the sounds of chewing and smacking.

“This is really good,” Boyd remarks, first to break the comfortable silence. “How did you get it to taste as equally sweet and bitter?”

“He always adds sweetened condensed milk, no matter what,” Isaac answers before Stiles has a chance to shrug and blame it on practice. “I don’t really know how much he uses on what he cooks, but it’s always there. The amount is still the mystery of it.”

“Good. Stop learning my secrets,” Stiles complains, fondly exasperated at being called out on one of his best culinary tricks. Though, it’s not really his, but his mother’s. “At least now I know that when you watch me the way you do, it’s not because you’re trying to determine when the food will be ready.”

Isaac shrugs innocently, hiding a grin behind his fifth lemon bar.

Stiles narrows his eyes at his little brother but he smiles softly.

“Whatever you do, it works,” Boyd decides, reaching out for two more bars. “I think I want to play zombies on Call of Duty. I brought a few of my own versions. Anyone else in?”

Isaac and Stiles nod in unison.

Scott gets a little pale. “Uh, no thanks.”

Boyd doesn’t question it as he rises from the table to return to the living room with Isaac so they can set up everything.

“So…” Stiles is going for casual because he already knows the answer to this. “Zombies, huh?”

Scott goes red. “I have a literal fear, dude. Pero, mi abeulo — ah…with my grandparents, I was about five at the time, but uh, we — there was a drive-in and they were showing Night of the living Dead. Most terrifying thing I’d ever witness. I couldn’t sleep for days after. I’ve been scared ever since.”

“Really. Worse than the toilet thing?” Stiles asks, smothering down an amused smile.

“Yeah, it was pretty — hey! How do you know about that?” Scott looks really embarrassed now. “Oh, no. Mom told you, didn’t she? Why would she tell you that? No one else knows about that. Was it on her birthday? Oh no, that means Derek and Isaac know.”

Stiles holds onto his sides and laughs.

Scott scowls and utters a few complaints in Spanish rapidly before he grumpily snatches a few more lemon bars.

“Aw, buddy, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to laugh. Really,” Stiles swears when he can get himself together. “If it makes you feel any better, after I watched Dennis the Menace when I was little, I was petrified of s’mores for a very long time because I thought I was going to set myself on fire if I indulged.”

Scott snorts but he looks a little less ashamed. “I don’t really feel like that compares, but I’ll take it,” he supposes. “Do you think we could go do something else while they play that? I mean, I’d
understand if you wanted to —"

“Scotty, there is rarely anything I wouldn’t do for you,” Stiles interjects, throwing an arm over his best friend’s shoulder. “I can introduce you to Nana.”

Scott brightens at that prospect.

Stiles turns to face the living room and he says, “Hey, we’re gonna pass on the sleepwalker carnage. We’ll be in the backyard if you need us.”

Boyd grunts, already invested in the game, while Isaac gives a lazy and distracted wave.

Stiles accepts that for a response and drags Scott the back door, pausing to kick off his socks and shoes, before they proceed over the threshold. The night air is damp and sticks to them as they make their way to his magical tree. He’s not surprised by the quick appearance of fireflies the exact moment his magic vibrates inside of him anxiously.

The lightening bugs spread out like little flickering lamps of yellow.

Scott is instantly fascinated with the show, and he makes a quick work of catching a few before releasing them. He gawks when they circle him playfully, tittering as a mass with interlaced voices that are hard to separate.

Stiles walks along the line of the largest exposed root of Nana’s base before he reaches the engraved triquetra to slap his hands against it, palms igniting with its bluish glow while the symbol activates.

Nana’s face bleeds through a moment later. “Good evening, dearie. Always such a joyous occasion to see your lovely little face. And you’ve brought company. I believe I know him. I’ve seen him in your thoughts a few times. Go on then. Introduce us.”

Stiles jumps down, wiggling his bare feet against the grass, earth humming under the soles of his feet like a lullaby while he lets his magic unfold and expose itself. It spreads across his skin like ethereal vines but sticks to him like henna tattoos.

Scott gawks while his soulful brown eyes take in the change with greedy fascination.

“I give you permission to see,” Stiles says when he stops at a short distance across from his best friend.

“My, my. Why, you must come closer so I can get a good gander at those beautiful eyes of yours!” Nana remarks cheerfully from over his shoulder.

Scott springs back with a shriek. “The tree really does talk!” he exclaims to Stiles.

Stiles chuckles. “Yeah, but we both knew that.”

“Yes, but — but — knowing is different from actually, you know, seeing!” Scott is making wild gestures to Nana, making the fireflies within proximity murmur with displeasure as they sway out of reach. He stops suddenly and he blinks before he says, “You think my eyes are beautiful?”

Stiles snorts and rolls his eyes.

“Oh, you should know that I never say anything I don’t mean,” Nana promises with a wink. “Come, come. I don’t bite.”

Scott still looks unsure but, slowly and surely, he makes his way over to Nana until they’re blinking
into each other’s eyes.

Stiles watches from a distance, but soon it gets hard to see through the fireflies swarming around him as they vie for his attention. “Hey, guys. What’s going on?” he says, a little absentmindedly.

The greeting appears to excite the fireflies nonetheless, encouraging them to all speak at once. In the symphony of it all, he can hear some familiar salutations as they come by the multitude.

“Anyone seen Glitter?” Stiles asks after a while of watching them loop around him, voices chattering.

“Here I am, Your Majesty,” Glitter greets, floating up to his nose. “What would please you this evening?”

“Nothing specific,” Stiles assures. “They seem more enthusiastic than usual. I wanted to know why.”

“We wish to be embraced by your magic. You let it swim around you freely. It is enticing to say the least. Therefore, we seek permission to engage,” Glitter explains.

“Oh.” Stiles doesn’t know why he was expecting a more challenging request, but he’s more than happy to oblige if this is the only thing they want. He allows his magic to become like a mist over them, and they vibrate joyously at the attention. “So, um, anything new to report? Since we last spoke, I mean.”

Glitter responds, “Troubling news, Your Highness. I do not mean to burden you with such, but I cannot find a more appropriate moment than now to bring up such a concerning matter.”

Stiles lets his magic sink into his hands before he lifts them and fans them out, making the fireflies sway and float to another part of his backyard so he can focus just on Glitter. “What is it?”

“As His Majesty knows, Mr. Ravenhill has recently passed, and as such, many parts of our forests go unprotected,” Glitter reports. “He was a guardian for us. A chaperone. Now, many areas are sick with dark sorcery. We know not where it comes from, only that it spreads, and quickly.”

Stiles finds that jilting, and his magic echos the sentiment almost immediately. “Nana needs to hear this,” he decides and he makes his way over to her.

“…were you, well, I would not waste anymore time hiding my feelings. This Allison sounds like a lovely girl,” Nana is saying to Scott when he approaches. “You are young, and you have your whole lives ahead of you, this is true. But tomorrow isn’t promised to any of us.”

“Wow,” Scott marvels with adoration in his eyes. “You are really smart. You must know so much.”

“Ah, well,” Nana sounds heavily amused and flattered. “If you live as long as I have, you’re bound to learn a thing or two.” She looks to Stiles and notices the frown on his face with answering concern. “What is it, sweetling? You appear troubled.”

“Nana,” Stiles says. “Glitter says that the forests surrounding Beacon Hills are becoming infected.”

“Oh dear. That is troubling,” Nana acknowledges. “Would you mind repeating all that it is you’ve said once more, sweetheart?”

“Certainly, Your Majesty,” Glitter agrees easily. “As, I explained to His Highness, Mr. Ravenhill’s recent death has left a great deal of our forests vulnerable. They’ve become ill with dark sorcery. We know not where it comes from, only that it spreads, and quickly.”
Scott looks intrigued but confused by the fact that Nana is speaking to a firefly.

Stiles explains, “Glitter is kind of my right hand when it comes to the Firefly Nation. She also apparently keeps track of the goings on in the wild kingdom. Um, so you remember I mentioned the Hale groundskeeper? Mr. Ravenhill.”

“The big guy with the birds?” Scott offers with a thoughtful frown.

“Exactly. He recently passed, and apparently he was keeping the surrounding forests of our town safe,” Stiles goes on to clarify and he’s hit with a sudden thought. His magic bristles in anger with the realization as well. “Of course it wasn’t an accidental death,” he mutters.

“What’s that now, dearie?” Nana inquires.

“A sacrifice of nature,” Stiles clarifies, raising his voice as Scott mutters something about being unqualified for the conversation before excusing himself and scuttling off to the house. “Mr. Ravenhill wouldn’t have just been protecting nature. He was nature. He was rare, unique, and so creatures like him don’t just die. He would’ve had to have been killed.” He turns his gaze to Glitter. “How soon after Mr. Ravenhill’s death did this ‘infection’ start to happen?”

“Almost immediately,” Glitter confesses. “Mr. Ravenhill provided wards of protections by way of flora. He planted things all around. He used foliage as a channel for fortification and sanctuary. Many of the vegetation is dying, and so do the wards along with it.”

“This is the dark dealings of a Vice,” Nana reasons. “You’ll have to inform Dr. Deaton so that he may tour the preserves to gauge how far the damage goes and how quickly it spreads.”

Stiles already has his phone out, sending Deaton detailed texts in regards to the situation.

“But for now, Glitter, I implore you and your companions to keep a busy eye. Report all your findings to either Stiles or me. We shall do what we can with what we have,” Nana promises. “Thank you for bringing this to our attention.”

“It is an honor, Your Majesties,” Glitter states firmly. “I will inform the others of the situation. I bid you all good night.”

“And we to you as well,” Nana replies and Stiles echoes the sentiment. She waits until the firefly floats away before she says, “I was afraid we might hear something of the sort. Which is why it is important we begin here with your influence and develop your forest-magic so that your authority can become widespread. Among many things, you are a steward of nature.” She then adds, “There is another. I saw her in your memories. She’s a Virtue, I gather. Perhaps she can assist you with some of these things.”

“Braeden, you mean.” Stiles chews on his bottom lip as he notices there’s a good portion of the fireflies trailing after Glitter while the remainder stays behind. “Yeah, I uh, guess I could see.”

“Bring her to me, if you can,” Nana proposes. She adds, “You’re leaving for the weekend.”

“Yes. Isaac and I are going out of town, until Sunday, I think.”

Nana hums thoughtfully. Then she says, “You two be safe, but above all, enjoy yourselves.”

Stiles nods. “I’ll tell you all about it when I get back.”

“Quite. And I’m sure I’ll have some more information for you as well,” Nana supposes. “Keep up
with your prayers and your studies if you can. Goodnight, sweetling.”

“Goodnight, Nana,” Stiles quietly replies and watches her fade away.

It’s a few moments before he makes himself move, rotating counter-clockwise through his backyard to chant psalms of glad-tidings over the ground and into the air. His magic remains stuck to his skin like ethereal wax or glittering bioluminescent oils, eyes bleeding honey-gold and warmed with heightened perception of the moonlight, which illuminates the soft shadows of the night.

The crescent moon looks like a sharp but polished fossil while it remains suspended in the inky blue of the night, surrounded by flickering constellations that settle like white holes that have been punched through the sky.

The fireflies still in his backyard remain frozen where they float, only moving when they feel the need to make room for his pacing.

Scott eventually joins him again, complaining slightly that Isaac and Boyd are still at it with the zombie gaming. “Even the sound of it offends me,” he admits with a mock-serious frown. “What are you doing?” he asks, eyeing him with wonderment.

“I’m trying to stir up the atmosphere with prayers of sanctification,” Stiles replies as his magic vibrates around him. “I’ve also been contemplating the different ways I can practice setting up protective wards and barriers.”

“Like spells?” Scott asks as he follows him around.

“Kind of, but forest-magic is strange to begin with. There’s no incantations, it’s usually just about the push and pull of energy between my magic and the mystics of nature. It’s give and take, I think,” Stiles reasons as they gravitate towards his tree. “If Mr. Ravenhill planted flowers and trees and bushes and things like that as a way to raise shields and wards, then that has to mean that the enchantment wasn’t in growing the foliage, but establishing the places in which they were charted. It was timing, it was soil, it was weather, and it was even the positioning of the stars. It had to be, because it wasn’t just about the presentation. It’s about the craft and dedication.”

“I don’t think I really understand what you mean, but you sound really certain about it so I trust that,” Scott confesses with a bemused smile.

Stiles mutters a few prayers as they circle his tree before he tugs gently on his magic, folding it back within himself and out of sight. It is reluctant to go but it yields with little trouble. “Not sure how to break it down, Scotty,” he says as they head inside. “You want to play Dragon Age?”

“Yes, please.”

They get in at least an hour and a half of uninterrupted game time in Stiles’s room on his computer before Isaac pops in to say, “Dad’s home. He brought some chicken burgers. Yeah, I told him you would make that face. He’s eating a salad.”

Stiles huffs, his expression morphing from displeasure to something more likened to approval, and he saves the level of the game they’re on before exiting out.

Scott follows Isaac out and he seems eager to talk to the preteen about his summer plans.

Stiles trails them in amusement, taking notice of the slight perceptible change to their interaction from timid and awkward to more friendly and pleasant. He sees this as being something important, though he can’t quite put his finger on it since it’s like déjà vu. He’s distracted from the thought as his gaze
swings to the kitchen table where his dad and Boyd are sitting, deep in a discussion about the upcoming baseball season.

Isaac and Scott settle at one end to continue their discussion over some curly fries and spicy chicken sandwiches.

Stiles sits down beside his father, eating his food in random order as his magic swims loops through the teeth of his ribcage, still unsettled by the news given to them by Glitter from earlier. He knows all too well how it feels, because it’s still on his mind as well. Though, he would really like to follow Deaton’s lead on this one.

Boyd, Isaac, and Scott have finished their food with audible thanks to the sheriff and they take their milkshakes to the living room where they mutually agree on watching Pacific Rim.

Stiles hangs back with his dad, who is still taking his time with his chicken almond salad mainly from exhaustion and not reluctance. He waits until he can hear the movie starting up before he says, “The Calaveras?”

The sheriff grunts and sends him a knowing look. “Not to worry, son,” he reports, using a napkin to wipe the corners of his mouth. “You’ll be introduced to them soon enough. Deaton’s been helping me lay down some ground rules for all of us to follow so we don’t get our wires crossed. Once we’ve come to a proper understanding about that, then they’ll be given the pleasure of your company. Supervised.”

Stiles nods, unsurprised, and sips on his vanilla milkshake.

“You packed and ready for the weekend?” his dad asks, reaching out to steal his son’s frozen drink.

Stiles frowns but he says, “No. I haven’t packed. I’ll do it in the morning, I think.”

“Do it tonight, Stiles. You never know, and it’s good to be prepared for the unexpected,” his dad suggests. “You could wake up late. Packing will set you back. Isaac’s got his things together.”

“Isaac was manufactured in the goody-two shoes factory of perfect children,” Stiles complains and ignores the snort he hears coming from the direction of the living room. “I refuse and protest being compared to such unreachable standards.”

The sheriff rolls his eyes. “Settle down. Pack. Tonight.”

“Yes, sir.”

His dad grins a little at the response. Then he says, “It should be easy for you to get your things together. Melissa dropped off some clothes she handpicked for you and your brother. A lot of it is the same. Matching, I mean. She has a thing for family clothing coordination and similarity.”

Stiles raises both eyebrows at that. “Did you tell her our sizes or something? I didn’t even think you still kept track of that.”

“A father knows what he needs to about his children,” the sheriff remarks plainly after a few sips of his son’s frozen drink. “Never mind that anyway. You be sure to thank her when you get the chance.”

Stiles nods and snatches back his milkshake. He sucks down on it greedily. “Hey, dad. Are you going to miss us while we’re gone?”
“Of course,” his dad says, humoring him. “I’ll be beside myself with the quiet.”

“Oh yuck it up, old man,” Stiles sardonically replies. “You will be beside yourself with empty nest syndrome.”

His dad chokes on a little of his salad, and hacks up a piece of chicken.

Stiles almost collapses on the floor with laughter.

His dad eventually chases him out of the kitchen, and he’s forced to retreat to his room to pack as he was instructed to do.

Using the itinerary forwarded from Talia, which even includes the upcoming forecast, he goes through the bags waiting for him on the other side of his bed. He has to admit that Melissa has really good taste while he jams his luggage with the new clothes and shoes. Once that’s finished, he returns to the living room to catch the tail end of the movie.

Stiles is quick to grab the remote when it’s time to turn something new on and he turns on the regular TV to flip on Teen Nick to dive into the throwback Degrassi marathon still going on. Luckily, no one complains, and they actually spend eighty percent of the time making fun of the plot points and the acting.

They crash completely sometime around three in the morning: Scott and Stiles on the floor beside the game consoles, Boyd facedown on the long couch, and Isaac curled up in his favorite armchair.

The TV ends up watching them until the sheriff comes to wake them up for school the next morning.

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The halls are swamped with banners that read ‘Class of 2014’. There are tearful goodbyes initiated with the exchange of yearbooks. There is the excited chatter of the graduation ceremony taking place at noon in the auditorium. Most of all, there are seniors dressed their best for that very occasion.

Stiles feels the nostalgia in the air. It gets him a little whimsical, thinking of his first encounters with Derek, Cora, Laura, and Kate, and how much has changed since then. He won’t lie. He’s going to miss seeing Kate and Laura in the halls or at lunch, but he knows that it will be a little under a year before they make any permanent plans that may involve leaving Beacon Hills.

It’s a half day of school because of graduation, so Stiles spends his first three classes with Cora. They talk mostly about prom and summer plans, ignoring everyone else, even when they petition for a yearbook signature.

Actually it’s mostly Cora who scares away their peers with her flawless glare, muttering about how it’s stupid to do that sort of thing as freshmen, seeing as how they’ll be right back here for the next school year.

Stiles figures she has a point about that, which is why he makes no comment about her behavior. He patiently waits out these moments before he urges her into another game of tic-tac-toe to soften her otherwise prickly disposition.

When school is dismissed, Stiles follows Cora to the auditorium, where they meet up with the rest of the Hale brood. He’s surprised but pleased to see Isaac among them. “Hey, how did —”

“Talia,” Isaac interjects, answering the unsaid question when he presses close. It’s pretty crowded and noisy in the auditorium. “She was able to get me out on an early dismissal since, you know, we
have plans after this.”

Stiles does see how that would be ideal. He sticks close to his little brother, and he ends up sitting
between him and Nana Hale as the Hale Pack lays claim to the entire third row of the middle section.

Cora, Braeden, and Derek are sitting on the other side of Isaac, while Talia, Derek Sr. (who is
holding an adorably dressed Olive), and Peter reside in the seats on the other side of Nana Hale.

It takes approximately an hour for the seats of the auditorium to fill up.

The class of seniors occupy the section to the far right, which also happens to be closer to the end of
the stage where the steps reside. They’re all outfitted in their dark red gowns with matching caps,
chattering excitedly and taking selfies with their peers. There’s some more shuffling before everyone
is seated, and the senior band members begin playing the opening music for the ceremony.

Stiles watches as Talia aims a pricey video camera at the stage (like all the other proud parents), and
his gaze swings to the school’s color guard climbing the stage with the American flag to recite the
National Anthem. They’re all urged to stand and so they do so collectively. Once it’s over, everyone
sits down.

Victoria Argent takes the stage, looking professional, pristine, and terrifying as always. She stands at
the podium on the far left of the stage and says, “Good afternoon family, friends, loved ones, and
fellow students to Beacon Hills High School’s graduation ceremony for the class of 2014.”

Everyone claps when her pause cues it.

“My name is Victoria Argent,” Victoria continues once there is silence again. “I am this school’s
guidance counselor. I consider that a privilege. This allows me to see the incoming and outgoing
potential. Now usually the principal would spearhead this ceremony, and he would have loved
nothing more than to be here, but his absence is the result of a personal family matter. However, he
would like for me to extend his congratulations and to say good luck.”

Everyone claps when her next pause cues it.

“Before we commence with the handing over of diplomas, I would like to give the stage over to two
of our brightest students: the valedictorian and salutatorian. Kathryn Argent and Laura Hale,”
Victoria announces and claps, signaling for the rest of the auditorium to follow.

Stiles finds himself standing along with the others as they applaud Laura and Kate’s entrance. He
smiles when they give showy bows and fake like they’re crying while also encouraging its
continuance. What set them apart from their peers are the white sashes they wear over their gowns,
which displays their academic ranking. Laura’s reads **Salutatorian** while Kate’s read **Valedictorian**
and it’s engraved with dark red stitching down the left side of their stoles.

Laura and Kate pause at the middle of the stage, accepting their honorary certificates as valedictorian
and salutatorian from Victoria, shaking her hand before they all turn to the school’s professional
photographer for a photo. There are also a lot more flashes from the audience and more clapping.

Laura is the first to take a stand behind the podium, moving her white tassel out of her brown eyes
with an elated grin. “Wow,” is the first thing she says. “I am thrilled to stand here before friends and
family as second best apparently. Are we sure about that still?” She gives Victoria a mock-serious
look of dubiousness but it’s all in good fun. She grins as the auditorium echoed with laughter. “No,
but in all seriousness, I can’t think of anyone who is more deserving of the title then my best-est
friend in the whole wide world, Ms. Katie A. because she is the epitome of hard work. Her
Stiles is both intrigued and curious by this new information. He really can’t say this is a surprise because Kate may be a walking contradiction but her heart always seems to be in the right place. He claps and cheers with everyone else.

Kate gives a modest nod with a discreet half-smile and accepts the praise without complaint but she does look like she wants to roll her eyes.

Laura waits until the noise dies down to continue, “I just want to say that four years ago, when I stepped into the halls of Beacon Hills High School, I did so eagerly and already engaged. I think a lot of that is due to the fact that the faculty and staff were willing to meet me halfway and challenge the skills I already had to offer. Getting your education is made so much more worthwhile when you work hand and hand with people who are passionate about what they do. So thank you. Not for doing your job, but for doing it so well and with a purpose that helped me find my own.”

Everyone claps when she pauses to do so herself.

“And for my fellow classmates who are transitioning to the next stage of life, and even to the up and coming seniors, I say this to you,” Laura continues, “Have faith in yourself! And remember that even when you aim for the moon, and you miss, you will still land among the stars. Thank you and congratulations class of 2014.”

Everyone stands to their feet to clap and cheer as Laura smiles big and wide and beautiful in response.

Kate takes her place behind the podium next. When all goes quiet again, and everyone is in their seats, she starts flipping through the stack index cards in her hands furiously. Her frown is deep, sudden, and dissatisfied. It’s an awkward five minutes before she stops flipping and throws the cards up, letting it rain down around her chaotically, “Yeah, okay. You know what? Sorry, Laura, I’m going to have to trash the family-friendly speech you wrote for me. This is gonna go organically.”

She takes the mic off of its prop on the podium and walks center stage with it. She surveys the whole auditorium before she continues, “Look, we’re gonna fuck up. It’s inevitable. Life is short. Youth is finite. Everybody dies. It’s a sad reality, but it doesn’t have to be your sad reality. As some famous dead guy once said, we suffer not which to live but to strive to find why we live and what we live for. So, I challenge you all to seek out that reason, and to also let it propel you as far as your dreams can reach. Let it be the guiding light you need to take you to where it is you belong. As the masters of your own destinies, it’s your obligation to fight for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” She grins wickedly. “Congratulations, losers. We fucking did it!” Then she literally has the gall to mic-drop before doing a ‘suck it’ chopping motion with her hands.

The seniors climb to their feet with a roar, chanting Kate’s name and clapping all the while until the rest of the auditorium follows.

Laura engulfs Kate in a hug and she mutters something that makes them both laugh as they rock side to side until Victoria shoos them off the stage so that things can continue.

Victoria quickly sorts and hands out the diplomas going in order by last name. When she’s turned over the last diploma, she says, “On behalf of Beacon Hills High School, I would like to present to
you the graduating class of 2014. You may now position your tassels to the left side of the caps.”

The seniors do so as the auditorium explodes with applause.

Not even a second later, graduation caps go flying into the air.

Stiles pulls Isaac close and hunches over to him, using his own body as a shield.

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Laura makes a sound that Stiles has never heard when Talia breaks the news to her about their weekend plans. She’s jumping up and down, going back and forth from her mother to her step-dad with the purpose of giving thanks by way of physical affection.

From there, things progress pretty quickly. A series of white vans pull up to take them to the airport.

Stiles ends up being in Nana Hale’s group along with Cora, Derek, Braeden, and not to mention his little brother as well. He almost ends up sitting with Derek but Braeden makes a comment about how she’s sure Stiles would rather be with his little brother, and she hauls the older teen to the back seat.

Stiles doesn’t take it personal, but on some level it does bother him.

Nana Hale and Cora sit in the middle row with Cora spread over the older woman as she puts in some earbuds and reads a book about the evolution of breast cancer.

This leaves Stiles sitting in the first row with Isaac, who keeps glancing over his shoulder with a thoughtful frown. “What?” he asks.

Isaac turns forward again and leans into his older brother’s side. “Who’s that? The one with Derek?”

“His best friend Braeden.”

“I thought you were his best friend.”

Stiles turns slightly pink at the implications in his little brother’s tone. “I should have left you at home.”

“You’re everyone’s best friend,” Isaac presses. “She doesn’t seem to like you that much.”

Stiles shushes him. “You can’t know that.”

“Her body language is weird,” Isaac insists. “She smells like you do. Or how you can be sometimes. Is she a Virtue too?”

Stiles will learn someday not to be surprised at his brother’s perceptive intelligence. “Yes. She said she was a Three,” he elaborates.

“She’s not going to be very polite to you this weekend,” Isaac confidently decides. “I don’t like her if she’s being rude to you.”

Stiles feels overwhelmed with his affection for Isaac. “Well, I appreciate that, but let’s just keep the conflict to a minimum. This weekend is about Laura anyway,” he supposes.

Isaac shrugs and pulls out his phone. He says, “Have you ever seen the movie Heathers? Never mind. I don’t care. Watch it with me anyway because I haven’t.”
Stiles huffs but he indulges the preteen, sharing his headphones so they can listen without subtitles. It takes exactly the length of the entire movie before they reach the small airport terminal privately owned by the Hale family.

Once the vans are parked at the drop-off point, everyone pours out of the vehicles, stretching with excited chatter as the airport employees come out to greet them.

Talia snaps her fingers to grab everyone’s attention. “Let’s make this check-in as quick as possible. Everyone’s luggage would have already been collected and sent ahead earlier this morning.” She goes on to say, “I just want to make one thing clear. This is no different from any other vacation we’ve already taken. In saying that, I expect all of us to be on our best behaviors by being smart, safe, and careful. I even hold myself to these standards and I expect nothing less from any of you. The goal is to have fun and celebrate the milestone my daughter has reached, not only through education but also as a newly transitioned Alpha. So let’s stay under the radar whilst we are being entertained by Humans.”

Nana Hale is the next to speak and she says, “I would like to also point out that as we’re being mindful of our surroundings and each other, please, please, please keep in mind that you are to constantly revere, respect, and honor your Alpha. You do so by displaying positive pack mentality, as well as abiding by the dynamics Talia has set in place for us. And furthermore, know that Talia will be held responsible for any kind of conflict that your actions may cause while we’re in another Alpha’s territory. Now, she’s already spoken and gone to great lengths to ask permission of the Gurnee Pack to allow us to move forward with our travel plans while in their terrain. Let’s not let it be in vain.”

“Yes, I’m glad you brought that up,” Talia remarks while she surveys her brood as if she’s trying to get a total headcount. “The Gurnee Pack is twice as vast as ours in this individual area, so if you do happen to come across a pack member, you acknowledge them right away with the proper respect, keep the conversation short and then keep it moving. You are not to accept offers or favors of any kind, lest you intend on aligning yourself or pledging to a new pack. Understood?”

There’s a murmur of affirmation that sweeps through the group.

“Good. Let’s go. Let’s go. Let’s go.” Talia leads them into the terminal, allowing the standard procedures of security checks and the like. Then she leads them over to their gate, standing next to the door with the flight attendant so she can press her palm to the back of everyone’s neck as they pass through to get to the plane.

Speaking of the plane, it’s beyond amazing.

When Stiles finally steps onto it with his brother in tow, he’s struck by how the lounging area décor echoes that of a five star restaurant of a high-class hotel overseas. There’s so much soft lighting, elegant leather recliner-style seats, polished wood coffee tables fitted with crystal glassware, and are those suede couches with silk pillows?

Even the floor is carpeted, and it’s all placed in a living room-style configuration, with everyone facing each other from opposite sides of the plane. The legroom is so ample that it’s ridiculous.

Stiles doesn’t even protest when Isaac drags him around to explore the rest because holy god there is a full service kitchen with a personal chef at the ready.

There are full-size bathrooms with a stand-in shower and everything. The marble counters and floors are unbelievably detailed with the insignia of triskelions. And this is only the first level.
The second level, which is connected to the first by a wood spiral staircase, is comprised of a lengthy dining area outfitted with pristine silverware and plate sets surrounded by professionally folded napkins.

There’s an entertainment lounge on the other side of it, equipped with a decade worth of board games, family-friendly books of all genres, toys for the younger travelers, and flat screen TVs and laptops/tablets made readily available for the older ones.

It’s unlike anything Stiles has ever seen.

“Please marry into this family,” Isaac begs, half-serious when they come across an actual two-player Dance Dance Revolution stage machine. He doesn’t waste time turning it on and selecting some songs. “I’m not joking,” he swears and turns on Gwen Stefani’s Hollaback Girl.

Stiles is really trying to take him seriously but he’s too busy laughing too hard at the way his brother flails on the arrows. He is the worst dancer.

Aunt Rosemary comes to collect them just when the song switches to Kelis’s Milkshake and escorts them down to the first level so they can be present for the in-flight safety presentation.

Isaac drags him over to a pair of empty seats behind Nana Hale. He makes sure more than once that Stiles doesn’t want the window seat before he lets himself have it.

Stiles watches the flight attendants float up and down the aisle before they stand at the front to commence demonstrating what procedures to follow in case of emergencies. It goes pretty quickly and the flight attendants dispatch to take their own seats as the plane shakes to life.

Over the intercom, Derek Sr. says, “Ladies and gentlemen, this is your Senior Captain Derek Hale Sr. speaking. Welcome aboard Hale Esteem Airlines, non-stop service from California to Gurnee. Joining me in the cockpit are two of my favorite co-pilots, Cora and Derek.”

There’s some shuffling on the intercom for a brief second. “Junior Co-Pilot Cora Hale speaking. Nothing to worry about folks,” Cora remarks, deceptively pleasant. “I got dumped via text about ten minutes ago but I promise not to let it affect my performance. At least not again.”

“That jokes not funny. It’s never funny when you say it,” Derek complains in the background. “Can you please take this seriously?”

“Fine.” Cora goes on to say, “At this time, the Captain has turned on the Fasten Seat Belt sign. When the seatbelt sign illuminates, you must fasten your seat belt. Insert the metal fittings one into the other, and tighten by pulling on the loose end of the strap. To release your seat belt, lift the upper portion of the buckle. We request that all mobile phones, pagers, radios and remote controlled toys be turned off for the full duration of the flight, as these items might interfere with the navigational and communication equipment on this aircraft. We request that all other electronic devices be turned off until we fly above 10,000 feet. We will notify you when it is safe to use such devices.”

There’s some shuffling on the intercom for a brief second, once again. “This is Junior Co-Pilot Derek Hale Jr. speaking. Our flight time will be approximately 3 hours and 45 minutes. We will be flying at an altitude of 42,000 feet at a ground speed of 565 miles per hour. Keeping in mind the safety procedures demonstrated by our cabin crew, if there is anything you would like to revisit, you will find all safety information in the card located in the armrest’s cup holder. We strongly suggest you read it before take-off. If you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to ask one of our crewmembers. We wish you all an enjoyable flight.” There’s a harsh click that follows the disconnection of the intercom.
Stiles leans towards the aisle and waves at Laura, who’s sitting by herself across from him, holding Olive, who’s sitting up in her lap, tiny fists wet with the syrup of the peaches she’s eating. “Laura,” he calls when the waving isn’t enough.

Laura glances up and over at him. She smiles with her perfectly arched eyebrows raised expectantly. “What’s up, Blue?”

Olive glances over too, gurgling as she kicks her legs curiously. “Ya,” she says as she stares at Stiles with bright green eyes and cow-licked hair. She’s making a mess of her bib with the peaches she’s being fed by her older sister. She’s wearing a purple onesie that says ‘My Big Sister Graduated!’ in neat cursive with illustrations of a graduation cap, balloons, and confetti.

It’s almost enough to distract Stiles as he waves back, smiling with all his teeth, and genuinely pleased when she kicks her legs again in wonderment. “Is Derek Sr. a pilot? Is that what he does?” he asks as the plane begins driving out onto the runway strip. He drags his gaze away from the littlest Hale.

“No professionally,” Laura explains as she presses her large hand to her little sister’s tummy to keep her upright, using the bib she’s wearing to dry some of the drool pooling from the corner of Olive’s mouth. “He’s a certified pilot, yeah. But he flies for a hobby. His actual job is being a marketing manager, and with that he really knows his stuff. He’s been hired by some heavy hitters, you know, multi-billion dollar corporations who are really looking to put the spin in win.”

Stiles is intrigued by that. That’s not something he would have guessed, though he’s quietly wondered from time to time what different kind of professions run in the family. “What about Cora and Derek?”

“Oh, yeah, they love flying too,” Laura confirms with some solid nodding. “They’re not certified because their too young of course, but they go with their dad as often as they can until then. Must be in the blood. They’re great grandfather was actually World War II pilot, and then his son, their grandfather, joined the Armed Forces straight out of high school himself. I wouldn’t be surprised if that’s the sort of thing that Olive will want to pursue when she’s old enough to decide.” She kisses the top of five month’s head. “Isn’t that right? You love planes, don’t you?”

Olive just babbles as she commandeers another slippery slice of peach.

Laura grins and she says, “Just wait. Usually babies are unsettled by the takeoff but she laughs like it’s the funniest thing in the world. Don’t you, you little goober.”

Olive just leans back and blinks up at her while she gums at the fruit trapped in the prison of her tiny fists.

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Stiles uses the restroom the moment they’ve been cleared to move freely by Derek Sr., who assures them they’ve reached the right altitude and that things are going according to schedule. He’s pretty hungry, which is why he meanders over to the full service kitchen, where he finds Braeden sitting at the bar in an ivory off the shoulder bandage dress, cutting into tamales drowned in sour cream.

“Hey,” Stiles says upon approach. “Mind if I sit?”

Braeden grabs a napkin to wipe the corners of her mouth. “Sure. Why not? This should be interesting.” She removes her expensive handbag from the barstool to her left and sets it on the other side of her.
Stiles gingerly climbs on top of it.

“You must be hungry,” Braeden decides and she lifts her hand, snapping until one of the wait staff comes over to stand on the other side of the bar. “Andrew, right? I need you to do me a favor, and change the song to *Stayin’ Alive*. Put it on repeat until I say otherwise.” She gives him a smile full of charm.

*Stayin’ Alive* begins to fill the space of full-service kitchen and surrounding lounge and bar are.

“Perfect,” Braeden purrs. “Andrew, this is Stiles.”

“Nice to meet you,” Andrew says as he uses his hands to lean against his side of the bar. “What can I get you?”

Stiles requests a grilled cheese sandwich with jalapeños in the cheese and waits until Andrew scuttles off to fulfill the order before he turns to Braeden. He watches as she cuts into her tamales in a very meticulous manner before he says, “So. *Stayin’ Alive*, huh? Favorite song?”

Braeden snorts a little cynically, not lifting her eyes from her plate. “Not at all, kid,” she admits as she fiddles with a short glass of what looks like fresh squeezed grapefruit juice. “There’s no privacy in the supernatural community, what with the heightened senses right? My dad used to say that if you can find a way to disorient one of the five senses, it gives you an advantage over the others. Now, in our case, I feel like the following conversation deserves some discretion and privacy. The closest way to achieve this is to put *Stayin’ Alive* on an endless repeat.”

“Can I ask what the science behind that is?” Stiles questions.

“Simple, really. The song performs at about 100 beats a minute, which is the same range as a Human heartbeat, give or take,” Braeden clarifies. “To a supernatural creature, *Stayin’ Alive* is the equivalent to being in a professional baseball stadium of Humans. By using the simple mechanics of music, you’re able to create this generic bubble of privacy since, when you play the song long enough and loud enough, Human hearts within range begin to mimic it, therefore becoming indistinguishable. It’s not ignorable. The supernatural creatures get attuned to it, focused on it, and it becomes like white noise in the background. Deters the heightened hearing without distressing it. Almost organically.”

“Huh.” Stiles hasn’t heard anything of the kind before but with the way she describes it, it makes sense. “I’ll definitely have to put that in my back pocket.”

“Could prove useful,” Braeden supposes before she twists her barstool to face him and crosses her legs. “Go ahead.”

Stiles frowns in confusion.

“You’ve come to make friends,” Braeden reasons. “You’ve come to win me over. Well, you didn’t really expect to run into me like this. This is just a very lucky happenstance. I’m alone, you’re eager to engage, so you figure why not give it the old college try? So go ahead. Let me hear the pitch.”

Stiles blinks and mentally fumbles for a little because that was sort of his intention. He says, “I feel like maybe, you and I, we sort of got a bad deal with the whole introductions. What with you knowing practically everything about me apparently, mainly because Derek failed to say anything about you.”

“I’m sure you were very cross about that,” Braeden delicately supposes and her neutral expression doesn’t flicker once.
Stiles can tell this conversation is not going in a positive direction. “I would like the chance to get to know you. To be friends. Derek is — you’re important to him.”

“Yeah, kid. I know that,” Braeden scoffs, and it’s almost dismissive. “You and I are probably his closest friends, and I have no problem with that. What I do have a problem with is the fact that he apparently wants something more with you, just so soon after his last failed relationship.” She pauses to swallow down the remainder of her grapefruit juice. She continues, “As you’ve seen, Derek has the tendency to date the wrong people. You get where I’m going with this, right? Good.” She adds, “You want to get to know me? That’s fine. I could always use more friends. It’s actually quite progressive in our case, seeing as how we’re both Virtues. But do I agree or approve of this budding romantic relationship between you and my best friend? Absolutely not. He knows that. He’s known that. Another reason why he probably never brought me up. I just don’t think you’re good to him, for him, or with him.”

Stiles winces at the verbal blow and it leaves the kind of sting that makes even his magic hiss, recoiling almost violently, only settling when urged to.

“Listen,” Braeden goes on to say. “At the end of the day, it’s between you and him. I respect that, even if I can’t agree with it. But unless you can prove me wrong, I don’t see anything good coming from it. And I say that mostly because you have a Seven of Vices running amok through your territory, killing people, playing these power games that you apparently are okay with not engaging in. I know as a Three it’s not my place to tell a Seven how to use the gifts Fate gave them, but honestly, Stiles, after catching myself up with everything, I have to say I’m disappointed. Could you be anymore lackadaisical about it all? You’re letting it all unfold, grabbing pieces here and there, and solving what’s convenient or whatever has finally reached the peak of the crisis. It’s unacceptable. And I know you’re just a kid, and kids are selfish. They are. Innately. They’re lazy. They want to put their own comforts first, but the thing about being a Virtue is that we have to sacrifice so many things when it comes down it. And to be honest, I would have had this situation under control in as little as two weeks, even as a Three, because I understand that it’s important to shut shit like this down. To destroy it at the root as soon as it wants to try to manifest.

“You’re being coddled by each and every one of your handlers in my opinion, and you’re getting too old for it. We don’t get to have it easy, but we don’t have to have it hard. You’re supposed to have balance. So please understand that I’m not coming from a place of belittling, because I’m a Virtue too, and iron sharpens iron. Deep cries out to deep. I am your people, Stiles. First and foremost. We share a heritage that far surpasses all understanding, and I would give my life saving yours, as I’m sure you would for me,” Braeden goes on to say with absolute conviction. “Who better to tell you this than I? You want me on your side? I’m on your side but not because you want to date someone who’s been like a brother to me, but because you and I are supposed to be walking in correction, setting things right to all that’s wrong. You need to roll up your sleeves and get to work.

"Fate draws a clear line between two groups of people, so that you must identify yourself with one group or the other. You can’t straddle the line. On the one hand there are Virtues who are poor, who hunger now, who weep now, and who are despised by Men because of their identification and dedication to the Supernatural community. These folks are blessed because of both present, but mainly future, rewards. On the other hand are those Virtues who are rich, who are well-fed now, who laugh now, and who are acclaimed by Men and think nothing of doing what they were born to do, who could care little for justice. These Virtues are under woe because of what awaits them when they leave this life to fall to the next since they can be rightfully claimed by the wiles of Peril.

“The people you care about, the people I care about, everyone in your town, they are going to continue to be targets to that dark energy running rampant and unchecked, until you take it upon yourself to put your foot down, and start walking in your gifts,” Braeden insists. “Beacon Hills is
training grounds for you. It’s prep for the bigger picture. You want answers? You go. You. You go, and you get them using everything you have available to you. And if you don’t know what or who that is, you better start figuring it out. While I’m here, I’ll be available to you. I’m practically a seasoned veteran, and I’ve seen and done things I know you’ve yet to experience. I mean, I was really concerned when you told me you didn’t even have a Conduit yet. That puts you so far behind and at a disadvantage, like please listen to what I’m saying. You really have to get it together.”

Andrew returns with the requested grilled cheese sandwich and Braeden holds her peace all the while.

Stiles waits until they’re alone to say, “You don’t sugar coat anything.”

“Not at all,” Braeden agrees as she goes back to cutting into her food. “I speak my mind without apology. Even when I have to be honest about how I feel about someone I’ve just met. Fate gave me a mouth to use, and so I do so. Nearly sixty years ago, my people didn't have that courtesy, and we certainly wouldn't have been allowed to sit like this together and communicate about anything.”

Stiles huffs sardonically. “Fair point. Though, I haven’t gotten a lecture like that since I was six and I swallowed my neighbor’s goldfish during a dinner party.” He fiddles with the edge of his plate. “I’m upset. Well. No. Pissed if I’m taking a page from your book by being honest. There’s a part of me that wants to throw a tantrum and tell you that you’re wrong,” he reluctantly admits because nothing about that was pleasant. “Yet, the way of a fool is right in his own eyes. A wise man listens to advice.”

“King Jedidiah’s twelfth proverb,” Braeden acknowledges, and her tone warms with a little respect. “Looks like you’re not a complete lost cause.”

“I’m not a lost cause at all,” Stiles states firmly. “I know I’ve been letting things slip.”

Braeden chews and then frowns. “And?”

“And nothing.”

“I was sure you were going to follow that sentence with some kind of formulated excuse about how it’s all because you weren’t ready to accept your destiny,” Braeden remarks and snorts when she notices the blush he starts to sport. “Right. Of course that’s the spiel.” She drops her silverware less than gracefully and grabs a napkin to clean her mouth and hands with. “I’m sorry. You are not a lost cause, and I’m probably being a little — but when it matters to me I tend to get upset and preachy.”

Stiles doesn’t say anything to that at first. He picks up his cooling grilled cheese sandwich and takes a few bites. He chews silently, thinking through what must be the sixth loop of Stayin’ Alive. Then he swallows, and says, “You think I’m lazy?”

“Lazy is the only word that comes to mind, but I could be persuaded to settle on halfhearted,” Braeden concedes. “I know you care. You just don’t seem to be caring enough. It’s like you keep it all up here —” She points to her temple. “— when really you should be using these.” She holds up both of her hands. “You solve the illusive mystery of ‘x’ when you actually do the work that leads to the right conclusion.”

“You sound like Derek,” Stiles mumbles from behind his half eaten grilled cheese sandwich. He tongues a slice of jalapeño oozing out of the cheese thoughtfully. “You don’t think I’m good for
Braeden gives another cynical snort. “You make him happy,” she supposes. “But so did Paige. We’ve both seen how that ended.”

“I’m not Paige,” Stiles insists. “I wouldn’t — I’m not Paige.”

Braeden applies some chapstick to her lips while she pushes away from the bar and stands. She grabs her designer handbag and rests it on her right forearm. “We’re just going to go in circles on the subject.” She runs her tongue along the front of her top teeth. “I’d rather you and I put our heads together to put a name and a face to the Benefactor. I’m not interested in talking to you about anything else. Enjoy your food.”

Stiles watches her walk away and he pulls apart his sandwich out of annoyance, flummoxed over the situation in its entirety.

*Stayin’ Alive* starts all over again.

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Locating Peter is easy enough. He’s on the second level of the plane, in the entertainment area, near a window beside the short bookshelves with his own chapter book in hand. He's staring at something very intently at his feet though, hand half covering his moving mouth. It's almost as if he’s talking to himself.

Stiles has to navigate around a crowd of young Hales who are acting as an audience to Laura and Kate’s epic *Dance Dance Revolution* face-off. In any other instance, he would be more than happy to act as another spectator, but he has other pressing matters on his mind. He manages to dive in and extract himself on the other side of the congestion, blinking in surprise when he discovers that Peter isn’t talking to himself.

Peter’s talking to Isaac, who’s sitting opposite to him on the floor. They get curiously silent when he approaches.

Stiles frowns and glances between them. “What am I interrupting?” he asks.

“Oh nothing really,” Peter drawls as he snaps his book shut. “It seems I’ve found somewhat a kindred spirit in your little brother, as his love for animals appear to surpass my own. It got me to thinking.”

"You thinking over anything makes me nervous when I'm not clear on the details," Stiles jokes, half-serious.

Peter waves him off with an eye roll.

“He wants to take me on as some kind of intern,” Isaac explains further with a meek shrug. “I’d be lending a hand at the vet clinic until he could hire someone more permanent by the time school starts up again. For sixteen dollars an hour.”

“Part time,” Peter stresses.

Isaac shrugs again.

"A trial run,” Peter assures. “With the sheriff’s blessing, of course.”
“Uh huh.” Stiles isn’t sure what to even say about it. He never thought he would stumble across a conversation like this. He’s also a little disappointed that he didn’t know of Isaac’s apparent passion for animals. It makes him feel like an inattentive older brother.

Isaac’s brow furrows with concern when he notices his expression.

Stiles tries to give him an easygoing grin but he knows it’s beyond actually working. “Hey, could you give us a minute?”

Isaac doesn’t appear to be happy with the request and then there’s this strange glimmer in his eyes that Stiles has never seen before. It’s gone as quickly as it’s come. “Yeah,” he finally says. “Yeah, sure.”

Stiles watches his little brother warily as he trots off with an all too innocent expression that he somehow still pulls off even with the devious smirk. “That’s definitely going to come back and bite me,” he mutters.

Peter snorts. “His scent is riddled with the intent of mischief,” he verifies. Then he says, “You’re troubled.” He stands and guides him over to the next room (the dining area) for some semblance of privacy. “You want to ask me about what I found.”

“Did you find anything?” Stiles retorts as they both sit down at the south end of the long dining table.

Peter shakes his head in the negative.

Stiles sighs and combs his fingers through his short hair. “I’ll have to come over and look myself. I think we’re working on borrowed time we don’t really have,” he confesses and proceeds to tell him about what Glitter informed him of. At the end of it, he says, “You have to know something more about that. About the way Mr. Ravenhill died.”

“It was no accidental death,” Peter confirms with an bothered frown. “It was Tyson who found him. His account may differ from what I recall once I arrived on the scene.” He takes a moment to think. “He was by the bridge. I’m not sure if you’ve ever been or even know what I’m talking about.”

“Cora’s taken me there once before.”

“Ah,” Peter continues, “You might find it beneficial to visit the site. There was no other scent apart from the usual fragrance of the forest and Mr. Ravenhill’s own unique signature.” He seems to hesitate for a moment before he adds, “It had looked as though he had suffered a heart attack. There was nothing else to explain what might have happened.”

“Face up or face down?” Stiles asks, doing his best to ask the right questions. “Was he face up or face down? Nearer to the bridge or to the water or some kind tree or a bed of flowers?”

“He was lying face down in the direction of the bridge along the bank of the river,” Peter reports, brow furrowed in thought. “There were no footprints outside of his own. No scuffs in the grass for any signs or indications of a struggle.”

Stiles gnaws on his bottom lip thoughtfully before he asks, “Was his eyes open or closed?”

“Open.”

“Eyes open might indicate that the death was sudden and unexpected,” Stiles supposes, following his gut. “He could have also been looking at something specifically. Something he wanted whoever found him to notice. Was he looking towards or away from the river?”
“Towards, I believe.”

“I have to look at those maps,” Stiles decides resolutely. “If he was another sacrifice, then where he died was important.”

Peter doesn’t appear to disagree, and his blue eyes darken with calculation. “His cabin,” he says suddenly. “We hadn’t looked into examining his home, mainly because Talia said Nana did not want upset or unsettle any of Mr. Ravenhill’s personal items until they could come to an agreement about what to do with it. I went anyway, but I couldn’t get in. It seemed to be protected by something.”

“Mountain ash?”

“No.” Peter shakes his head. “Mountain ash has a peculiar sensation to it. This was something else entirely. Some other kind of magic. It wasn’t there before.”

“You’re just now mentioning this? There could be something there,” Stiles reasons. “Something that could shed light on what happened.” He fishes his phone out of his pocket. “I’m texting Deaton to see what he thinks and if he thinks it’s something worth looking into.”

Deaton’s response comes within the hour and it reads: *Certainly something to look into. I will do so myself, and report back with my findings.*

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After speaking with Peter, he quickly retreats for some privacy in one of the lounging areas. He manages to find one that’s completely abandoned. He settles there for the sake of reigning in his magic, which has been bubbling up like a pot of water set over a slow burning flame. He’s trying his best not to feel overwhelmed with self-doubt. Braeden really did a number on his confidence because here he is, thinking he’d been doing so well and coming so far, only to be told otherwise. He sighs as his agitation grows and feeds into his anxiety and restlessness.

His magic is quietly seething, undeniably offended. It’s roaring around in his gut, agitated with its confinement and building to an intensity that Stiles isn’t sure he can control. He’s fearful of the repercussions of succumbing to all that energy in such a confined space. Not to mention so far up from the ground.

Stiles is sitting on the floor with his back pressed to the edge of the suede couch behind him, a small wooden coffee table in front of him. He’s thinking desperately of how he can satisfy the growing need to release his magic. It needs a focus. A distraction.

There’s a glass bowl of marbles directly in the center of it of the coffee table.

Stiles decides on what he will do. He lets his magic seep out slowly like a blue bioluminescent cloud of smoke, gliding down to the floor like a fog before rising around the coffee table and engulfing the glass bowl of marbles.

Slowly, but carefully, he lets himself imagine the intricacies of space and all of its wonders. His magic works in tandem with his imagination and morphs the marbles into the collection of the solar system’s eight planets and their moons. It puts it all in orbit around a makeshift sun comprised of an echo of his magic, which is stuck to the largest marble like some kind of glowing adhesive. His magic then pushes it into the real time rotational movement of the star system.

Stiles spends the rest of his time alone concentrating on keeping his makeshift marble solar system suspended in the air and in orbit. This single-minded focus does a good job of dispelling his unease and distress. It’s certainly keeping his magic happily preoccupied and free to roam outside the
confines of his body productively. He’s so invested in the consistency of this endeavor that he hardly hears the oncoming footsteps.

“That’s quite a sight to behold.”

Stiles is slightly startled, but his magic doesn’t rebound, explode, or scatter. On the contrary, it glows a little brighter, illuminating its replicated cosmic display, almost like it’s peacock. He turns his head to the left to see Talia standing at the end of the couch watching the display with a soft and knowing smile.

“It’s the solar system,” Talia reasons as she moves closer, taking care to sit behind him on the edge of the couch, and trapping his upper body between her long, warm legs. She rests her heated palms on his shoulders, pressing her thumbs into the knob of his spine before dropping her chin to the crown of his head. “Go on. Show me what you can do.”

Stiles feels an unknown thrill at the request. His magic vibrates excitedly, echoing the sensation. He lifts his hands as they begin to glow and he expands his fingers to direct his palms toward his makeshift solar system. He has nothing particular in mind, but he is working on instinct alone. His fingers begin to flex as though he’s playing with some invisible dough and some of the marbles breakdown into fragments until it’s morphed together in a twinkling cloud. His magic forms into a bright orb at the center of it and he lets it settle, lets it glimmer and shine.

It’s his personal artistic ode to the Milky Way.

“It’s beautiful,” Talia murmurs, awe undisguised. She starts running her fingers through his hair, grooming it as she continues, “My former husband, Abraham, was fond of using raisins for all his parlor tricks. While we attended college together, in between studying for finals, he would erect these little tents made of paper towels and matchsticks, creating a ring using the smallest hoola hoop he could find. He put on a fake flea circus by using a box of raisins and making them jump all over.”

“Raisins?” Stiles echoes and laughs without meaning to because he can imagine it very well. “Huh. I might have to try that. Better than the real thing.”

“Possibly,” Talia agrees, voice colored with humor. “Would you like to tell me why you’re upset?”

Stiles stiffens a little. “What gave me away?”

“Not your scent,” Talia replies. “You smell perfectly complacent, if not whimsical. It’s the animation of the marbles that gave you away. There’s a reason Abraham only felt inspired to enliven dried prunes during the most strenuous times of his academic career.”

Stiles huffs quietly as he gazes thoughtfully at his makeshift galaxy.

“I care a great deal about you,” Talia declares, completely confident in the admission. “So my request that you lay all your burdens at my feet is not insincere.”

Stiles feels incredibly touched by that, and it’s overwhelming in ways he can’t fathom. He knows most of it has to do with his cravings for maternal attention; a lingering ache that’s always haunted him after his mother’s death. He isn’t going to take this moment for granted, so he’s honest about his confrontation with Braeden and his feelings on the matter, curious to know what she will say or do.

“I see,” Talia merely says once he’s finished. She pats his shoulders twice with both hands as she says, “Come on. Turn and let me have a look at you.”

Stiles twists until he’s standing on his knees before her. He does his best not to fidget or make direct
eye contact as her gaze strips away at him. He closes his eyes when she cups her hands on the sides of his face.

“Open your eyes, Stiles. You can look at me,” Talia murmurs, voice gravelly with weighed power.

Stiles squirms as he curls his hands over her forearms and musters up the courage to open his eyes. His breath hitches as he’s pinned with a red-eyed stare, and before he can help it, his own eyes bleed honey-gold as though responding.

The corner of Talia’s mouth twitches into a pleased grin. “There now,” she rumbles. “What a beautiful boy you are.”

Stiles goes pink as his heart swells.

“You have no reason to doubt yourself,” Talia continues, and she keeps her gaze steady. “I haven’t met an individual on this planet who isn’t constantly working to improve themselves. Do you think you’re alone in this endeavor?”

Stiles fidgets shyly, his blush refuses to fade, and he mumbles, “Well no but I could do better.”

“So then you’ll do better, but you will not push beyond what you are capable or what is in your control,” Talia states benevolently. “The greatest skill you have available to you is your willingness to be the best that you can be.” She adds, “You have to understand that Braeden comes from a family with a military background. Both of her parents were agents of special task forces, and they’ve pressed certain codes and ethics of living onto her. She believes that if you’re not relentless, then you’re being lackadaisical.”

Stiles makes a thoughtful sound at that.

“Braeden has a drive that’s as forceful as it is unequalled, but she lacks the empathy and love that correction requires,” Talia goes on to clarify. “I do believe there is a lot you can learn from her, but when it comes to matters of the heart, I imagine your wisdom surpasses her own in that area.”

“We can learn from each other,” Stiles faintly supposes, picking up quickly on what she means. “I don’t think she’ll change her opinion about —” He cuts the sentence short before he can let Derek’s name slip and their burgeoning relationship. He blushes and coughs to cover the pause. “Uh, you know, other things, I guess.”

Talia hums with an amused smile. “Approval does not always have to be earned. It can be freely given,” she says, slightly cryptic. “My son is similar to me in ways I sometimes regret. One of them being in not always picking the right partner, and letting our emotions cloud our judgments in ways that are not at all beneficial to the bigger picture of a healthy relationship.” She sighs. “It’s taken me a few times to get it right, but I did. And I believe he has too.”

Stiles’s cheeks feel as hot as her large hands do on the sides of his face. “I — we’ve been talking. We aren’t —”

“I know,” Talia gently interrupts and she drops a quick kiss to his brow before pulling away with a smile. Her eyes have resumed their normal color. “That’s one of the very things I appreciate about you. It never hurts to take your time. To be sure. That’s one of my biggest regrets in life. For as much as I loved Abraham, we didn’t give each other enough time to grow, or decide if having a family was right for us. But, well, Laura came of it, no matter how it ended, and I am always happy for that.”

Stiles swallows thickly and nods, relieved that she understands.
“I meant what I said, Stiles,” Talia insists. “You are so very good for him.” She leans in close until their noses bumps in an affectionate eskimo kiss before she pulls back with a wink and calmly says, “Braeden will eventually get her head out of her ass.”

Stiles chokes on his own spit in astonishment and smacks at his chest as his magic jerks with the spike in his emotion, sending all the fragments of marbles crashing to the floor.

Talia cackles.

Stiles abruptly realizes where Laura gets that from. “You said a swear!” he manages to wheeze.

“So I have,” Talia calmly agrees, still chuckling. "I have said a surprising number of them in my day. Mostly to Peter and my mother. Two people who I've never known to be more alike. And so frustratingly mouthy, in the most inopportune times."

"Your mother," Stiles begins to ask, hesitating because he isn't sure if it's a safe subject. But Talia motions for him to continue with a smile. He says, "She was clever?"

"Oh so very clever," Talia confirms. "A woman of strategy. I stayed closed to my father for comfort and matters of the heart. Peter cleaved to our mother's side to learn the value of intellect and how to wield it like an axe set ablaze with a flame that couldn't be doused. I was always so very sure she was going to give him the Rights so he could lead the Pack. I think maybe he thought so too, and he resented me for a long time when she didn't. But I can't say why either of us was confused, she was always such a traditionalist when it came to Pack Values."

"Rights..." Stiles echoes in confusion.

Talia chuckles warmly. "Not 'Rights', but 'Rites'. R-I-T-E-S. It's when one Alpha passes the mantle of their power to another with Pack as witness. Anyone who wanted to challenge my claim would first have to defeat my mother and suffer banishment if they lost. My mother, well, no one was stupid enough to try that," she explains. "And so things went accordingly, and my mother stole Peter away for three months without saying where or why or for what reason. But when he returned, he showed me his neck without question, and he wasn't angry but optimistic. Which kind of both frightened and made me suspicious."

"Naturally," Stiles quips with a smirk. "Peter is cunning."

"And calculating, but he promised he would never try me, and I believed him," Talia goes on to say as she gazes off into the distance with this faraway look that says she's remembering something he can't see himself. "But," she says as she exhales and blinks away whatever memory she was dwelling on. "I see now that perhaps those three months helped him put things in perspective, and it would certainly explain why he's so eager to take my place as Headmaster to the schools under my authority while Cora minds the territories and boundaries."

Stiles is hit with a sudden thought. "So will you and Laura give her your Rites?" he asks.

Talia just hums thoughtfully. "Maybe, but there is still some part of me that thinks Laura may grow out of this childish hope of hers so Cora doesn't have to take on the responsibility of holding so much power. Yet. Laura says Broadway is more than a dream but...such things are so fickle and fleeting," she supposes.

Stiles frowns but holds his tongue.

Talia still grins at him like she knows. "You disagree with me," she states, rather than asks.
"It's...not my place to say, I don't think," Stiles hedges carefully. He looks away and down at the scattered marbles on the floor.

Talia makes a thoughtful sound. Then she exhales before she pats the space to her right. “Don’t worry about the mess. Sit with me until we land. I need to be sure a declaration that you are linked to my pack is blatant. I imagine your father will be very unhappy if I find myself returning without you.”

Stiles nods and quickly curls into the inviting warmth of her side. She scents him less like an Alpha, and more like a mother. Her long fingers combing through his unkempt hair, grooming it as she presses her nose to his temple. He can’t help that he dozes off to the sound and vibration of her rumbling chest.

His magic circles them like a cloud of stardust with impressions of contentment and gladness.

It feels like he’s right where he belongs.

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Stiles is stumbling down to the first level to buckle in for the landing when he hears the unmistakable sound of Braeden yelling in outrage as she indicates to her body because she’s covered from head to toe in red soda. He hardly has enough time to process it because Isaac is dragging him to the very last row, shoving his brother to sit on the inside while he takes the aisle seat. It takes a moment because he’s still foggy from his unexpected nap with Talia, but he notices the self-satisfied smirk on his little brother’s face.

Braeden stomps towards the bathroom but pauses to glare at Isaac when she reaches them.

Isaac’s smirk just widens. “I really feel bad about what happened, but at least I’ll know not to shake cans of soda like that in the future,” he says with the most insincere tone.

Braeden gives him a look that says she’s calling utter bullshit. “And do you usually open all your cans facing the person in front of you? Because I found that to be a little odd and to be honest, kind of suspect.”

Isaac doesn’t respond but he does shrug and start humming.

“Are you kidding me? You’re just going to — I hate kids,” Braeden snarls as she disappears from sight.

Isaac chuckles to himself.

“Did you —” Stiles isn’t even sure what he should be asking. “What did you do?”

“Nothing I’m sorry for. She upset you. Dad would say that’s probable cause.”

Stiles faces the window and presses a grin into his hand. “Dad would make you apologize,” he mumbles as he eyes the sea of lights cutting across the ground like a lit motherboard.

“It’s a good thing dad’s not here then.” Isaac kicks the seat in front of him. “Are you going to make me apologize?”

Stiles takes a few minutes to think about it before he shakes his head. He’s not exactly sorry about what Isaac had done either.
No one but them needs to know that though.

He locks away the memory of Braeden’s enraged but soaked expression to pull up for his convenience during any future unpleasant conversations.

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They land in Gurnee at another small airport that isn’t privately owned by the Hale family. It’s not too hard to guess who it might actually belong to. Especially when there’s a tall dark skinned woman in a sleek black and white pantsuit and white hijab waiting for them at the exits by a pile of neatly stacked luggage ready for collection.

Talia seems caught off guard and she sends Peter an unmistakable look that has him pushing Stiles behind Kate and Laura, before he adds his own body to the obstruction.

Isaac sticks to his side in concern while he gives him a questioning look.

Stiles shrugs, totally clueless, but he nudges his magic to stay alert.

“Alpha Hale,” the grey-eyed woman acknowledges upon their approach. She holds out her right hand, palm down.

“Alpha Gurnee,” Talia responds in kind. She squeezes the other Alpha’s right hand with her own very quickly before letting go. “This is quite a surprise. I was not aware you would be here to greet us. Nevertheless, thank you for taking the time to do so, Jemila.”

“Of course, Talia,” Jemila merely says and she doesn’t seem to want to explain why it is she’s come either. She raises her hand to make an indication to someone.

A second later, a Chinese woman in a black sundress materializes. She appears to be in the same age group as Talia and Jemila. She doesn’t smile, and the look in her brown eyes is cold and hard.

“Talia, I’d like for you to meet my Second. Lei Shĕn.” Jemila nods to the severe looking woman.

Lei Shĕn turns her gaze to and fro, as though she’s doing a head count before she directs her focus to Talia. She says, voice heavily accented, “How fortunate it must be to have so many daughters in the family. I imagine they must hold great potential for leadership. Yet, it concerns me that it’s as rumor said. You are without a Second.”

Talia’s smile wavers slightly and Stiles knows that something is going wrong. “I lost my Second the same day I became a widow. As I’m sure it can be understood, that role is quite hard to fulfill,” she elegantly replies.

“Lei Shĕn means no offense,” Jemila assures but she also seems curious over this information. “Your surname is great throughout the country. There is gossip that many are vying for the position but you refuse.”

“I have my reasons,” Talia flatly reports.

“Don’t we all?” Lei Shĕn counters quickly. “These are trying times, Alpha Hale. Please do not forget that we lost a mother and child to the whims of Human fear shortly ago. I have no doubts it will happen again.”

“I’m not here to politic,” Talia states firmly.
Lei Shěn finally smirks. “Your love for Humans is no secret,” she drawls as she glances to Derek Sr. as her eyes flash blue. “I’ve always found the age gap of your children to be a curiosity,” is the last thing she says before she spins on her heel and takes long strides to disappear from sight.

Talia’s shoulders are tense and that puts everyone else on edge.

“Please try not to take anything Lei Shěn says to heart,” Jemila encourages. “She is certain there will be an oncoming war sometime very soon. She loathes seeing any of our kind vulnerable in anyway. Though, please understand, not all of us are as accepting as the Hale clan has always been known to be.” Her eyes flicker over to Kate, then to Derek Sr. for the briefest of moments. “Humans are quite the gamble without the proper slight of hand.”

“I’m comfortable with my odds,” Talia retorts, unmoved. “I don’t want to keep you, Jemila. I’m sure with a territory as vast as yours, there’s always something that needs looking after.”

Jemila’s eyes give a quick hint of red before settling normally again. “Right you are,” she coolly replies. “Enjoy your stay.” She turns and clicks out of sight.

Talia still lifts her left hand and no one moves for a long time. Then, when she deems it safe enough, she lowers that hand and her shoulders dip. “I apologize for that little display. That was unexpected.”

“Is everything okay?” Laura asks, looking concerned.

Talia doesn’t smile but she does nod reassuringly. “Let’s not linger,” she says. “After all, you’ve got a show to get to.”

Laura beams a thousand watt smile and it lights up her face with joyous excitement. She does a dorky little dance before she says, “Okay, people! This is not a drill. Let’s get going! My life has been leading up to moments like these!”

Everyone rolls their eyes and murmur over her antics but they all grab their things to make their way to the taxi vans posted on the curbs, waiting for them.

The drive to the Marriott Theatre and Hotel is a short one thankfully. It’s run by a polite and attentive staff uniformed as the characters from the *Breakfast Club, Sixteen Candles* and *Pretty in Pink* (apparently it’s Molly Ringwald appreciation week).

It has huge lobby that almost looks like a ballroom. There’s also a standard pool area, workout room, accessible arcade room, deluxe spa and salon, and a long carpeted hall that leads to it’s conjoined theatre.

Talia passes out keycards to everyone who wants to share a room, with the exception of Nana Hale. She declares that she doesn’t share rooms with anyone other than her experienced and cultured lovers.

The adults roll their eyes at that and the younger ones make gagging noises.

Stiles rooms with Isaac of course, and watches all the other pairings curiously. Some of them are expected with all of the married couples pairing their own kids with their eldest ones or in the same room as them.

Laura gets her own room as well, not because it’s her birthday, but because she’s already transitioned as an Alpha. She needs her own territory, no matter how small. This is something everyone seems to understand.
Cora and Braeden come to some quiet agreement about sharing a room with Derek.

Stiles feels like he’s barely gotten a chance to say even a single word to the older teen, and it leaves him with something that feels like emotional wanderlust. His magic doesn’t help in that department, rolling anxiously inside of him whenever he glances at Derek from a distance that feels wider than it actually is.

Isaac shoulders him towards the elevators so they can go to their room, which is located on highest floor, and also happens to reside right across from Derek, Braeden, and Cora’s.

Stiles swipes the keycard and stumbles into their room. Only by the sight of it, the appropriate word for it would be suite. It’s definitely a suite. One of the nicest he’s ever been in if he’s being honest.

Isaac throws down his bag, dives into the California king and literally disappears into the mountain of differently sized pillows.

Stiles huffs and continues his inspection.

It’s fully equipped with a ½ kitchen and a dining area, a small living room with a flat screen TV, and a decently sized bathroom with both a stand-in shower and a Jacuzzi bathtub. He knows automatically that Isaac will take advantage of it because his little brother is fond of taking long, lazy baths when he has time to. He empties his bladder and washes his hands before moving to his luggage to find something to wear.

“You should start getting ready,” Stiles says when he finds some new dark jeans and a powder blue dress shirt to wear under striped cashmere sweater. It’s one of the matching outfits that Melissa bought. “Talia says we all have to meet back in the lobby in like thirty minutes.”

“I know. I was there,” Isaac retorts from wherever he is, voice muffled by the weight of those pillows.

Stiles rolls his eyes. “Come out from your sanctuary of pillows then.”

“I’m hungry.”

“We’re gonna go out to eat afterwards,” Stiles offers and when he sees no movement under all those pillows, he adds, “At a buffet. Largest selection of seafood ever heard of.”

Isaac pops right out of that pile.

Stiles laughs and says, “I knew that would get your attention.”

Isaac stalks to his bags. “What are you wearing? Dad says we’re supposed to match and take pictures that he can forward to Melissa. I don’t get that.”

“Sentimental reasons,” Stiles supposes as he shows him the outfit he picked. “I think that if it makes Melissa happy, it’ll make dad happy.”

Isaac shrugs but doesn’t argue the point. He strolls over to the bathroom to take what he swears will be a five-minute shower.

Stiles times him anyway. He also calls his dad in the mean time to let him know that they arrived to their destination safe and sound. He ends the call with a promise to talk to him tomorrow morning.

Isaac comes strolling out with a towel around his waist and his gold curls settling wetly over his
forehead and eyes because that’s how long his hair has gotten.

“Call dad,” Stiles advises as he makes his way into the bathroom next. “I think he misses us already.”

“Good,” Isaac decides, unapologetic. “I like feeling wanted.”

Stiles laughs and shuts the door behind him. He showers just under three minutes but not because it’s a competition. When he emerges, he’s dressed and ready to go. He idly makes his way to his suitcase.

Isaac is standing by the windows with his phone pressed to his ear (talking to their dad more than likely).

There’s a light knock to their door.

Stiles goes to answer it, and his heart jumps a little at what’s waiting for him on the other side.

Derek grins lazily at him. He’s dressed semi formally as well. A grey blazer over a v-neck white t-shirt, and some green jeans.

Stiles doesn’t mean to stare but it happens anyway. “Hey.”

“I didn’t really want anything,” Derek admits by way of greeting as he shifts and tucks his hands away in the pockets of his blazer. He looks at the younger teen from underneath his thick eyelashes. “I’m being nosy. I know your room must look like ours but…” He shrugs when his sentence doesn’t lead anywhere. “Do you mind?”

Stiles shakes his head and steps aside.

Derek slips through easily and his gaze jumps around. He nods at Isaac, who lifts an eyebrow but nods back before tucking away in the bathroom to continue his conversation away from view.

“So,” Stiles says as he makes an incomprehensible gesture to the room. His magic is gathering in his stomach anxiously. “I can’t say, um, I can’t say it not much because it’s definitely…something.”

“It’s comfortable,” Derek agrees, almost plainly and it reminds the younger teen that he’s probably seen and experienced better. “Hotels in the midwest are usually like this, I think. But I haven’t been to too many states in this region to say,” he adds as his gaze explores the ceiling.

“That still makes you a lot more well-traveled than me,” Stiles remarks as he shifts from foot to foot. His magic is stretching loops through his abdomen, anxious that Derek’s focus is elsewhere. “Which still makes this the nicest room I’ve ever been in,” he goes on to say because he wants to have something to talk about.

Derek cocks his head as he looks at the bathroom door. “Your brother’s talking to your dad about us,” he murmurs.

Stiles isn’t sure he wants to know what exactly it’s about.

Derek just hums before he turns his back to that door, not even glancing around anymore. He just strides directly to the younger teen like he couldn’t be bothered to pretend to be paying attention to anything else.

Stiles’s fumbling for some words as he presses himself against the back of the door and his magic rises and falls in anticipation.
Derek keeps him cornered there, putting his hands on either side of his head and makes no move to come any closer or go any further away. “I have so many things I want to say,” he quietly confesses. “Some times I feel like I’ll explode with it all.”

Stiles exhales carefully as his heart races at all the possibilities. “I’m not sure if I can handle any of those things,” he replies, just as quietly and makes himself hold eye contact. “But I don’t want to be cruel, so.” He swallows thickly. “Tell me the one thing you need for me to know right now.”

Derek hesitates and a loaded silence follows.

Stiles is beside himself with the suspense. His magic is fizzling around his hammering heart with the impression of excitement wrapped up in the maroon paper of hope.

“I miss you,” Derek says bluntly and without apology. “I don’t like when we’re not talking. It feels weird. It’s like pretending we’re strangers.”

“Yeah,” Stiles exhales because that’s the exact feeling he’s been trying to place all day. He starts a little at the feel of a warm palm flattening over his chest.

Derek has his left hand settled over the place where Stiles’s heart is with his brow furrowed thoughtfully. “You feel it too,” he remarks, but oddly enough, he sounds relieved. “I wasn’t sure what you might think when I said it. But, you feel it too.”

Stiles can feel his cheeks getting warm. “I didn’t want to make it a big deal — I just figured with Braeden being in town, you kind of — and it’s really only been a day. Jesus, it hasn’t even been a full day. What’s wrong with us?”

Derek laughs and he pulls him close. He hums appreciatively when Stiles wraps his arms around him without hesitation because maybe they both need this right now. “I like when you say things like that,” he admits as they continue to hold each other’s gaze.

Stiles blinks twice. “Why?”

“Because it’s like you’re say what I’m thinking.”

“Oh.”

Derek hums as he slides his hands up and down Stiles’s shoulder blades. “You know, it’s almost like we have a crush on each other or something.”

“Dude, how weird would that be?” Stiles retorts, playing along before he hides his smile in Derek’s right shoulder. "Especially since I've been after Laura this whole time."

"Watch it," Derek retorts with a playful growl.

Stiles snorts and rubs his face against Derek's shoulder. He sighs gently at the familiar, comforting smell of vanilla that reaches his nose. “Braeden doesn’t like me. With you. Even though we aren't exactly — it’s like she’s pre-disapproving.”

Derek drops his hands to rest on Stiles’s waist and pulls back, ducking his head to catch the younger teen’s eyes. “She doesn’t get the final say. We do.”

“I know that.”

“Do you?”
“I do,” Stiles quickly says.

“Stiles.”

“I do know!” Stiles swears but gnaws on his bottom lip to stifle anything else he might say that would contradict it.

Derek carefully pulls away and crosses his arms, waiting with his eyebrows lifted expectedly.

Stiles presses his lips together and fidgets because he hates that face. He always breaks at that face. He tries his hardest this time around. He can only make it to about a minute and a half before he blurts, “She’s your best friend and I know you guys love each other like family and family is really important and I know it’s up to us what we want to do. I also know you like me and I like you and we’re just friends right now but we did say we would be honest. I have to be honest in saying that she hasn’t been the nicest person but she’s certainly not the worst or anything, so in considering all of this, just for like, a split second, would it be so crazy if I wanted her to like me?”

“Braeden’s complicated,” Derek replies calmly, immuned to Stiles’s babbling. “For as long as we’ve known each other, I still don’t have her completely figured out.” He grabs Stiles’s left hand with his own, almost like a loose handshake. “But that works both ways too. I’ve grown in ways she hasn’t realized yet.”

Stiles squeezes Derek’s hand because he’s never able to resist doing so and his heart thrums, thriving with the contact. His magic continues to vibrate in pleasure where it’s pooling warmly in his lower gut.

“She thinks she can look at all my mistakes and piece together my future,” Derek goes on to say as he gazes steadily at the younger teen. “That instinct isn’t really her fault. Her parents taught her to look at the world that way.”

“You mom did mention her parents came from a military background,” Stiles says, thinking back on the conversation. “No room for error, only precision. I mean she didn’t say it like that exactly, I just kind of pick up on it that way.”

“That describes Braeden in a nutshell,” Derek agrees as he sandwiches Stiles’s left hand between both of his. “All I’m saying is, her approval isn’t detrimental to what we have because maybe she might not ever come around. Her liking you shouldn’t discourage you from wanting to like me or be with me.”

Stiles frowns in confusion before it dawns on him. “You think I want her to like me because it would make it easier for me to like you?”

It’s Derek’s turn to look confused.

Stiles snorts and shakes his head fondly. “No, stupid. I want her to like me to make it easier on you. The last thing I want is for you to feel torn or like you have to choose between us at any given moment,” he clarifies. “I mean, sure I’m not used to this, and I have my insecurities but I don’t need Braeden to like me to boost my confidence about the direction we seem to be headed.” He squeezes Derek’s hand again. “As far as I can tell, I’m not going anywhere. I haven’t found any reason to.”

Derek ducks his head and he smiles as he looks at their hands. Then he frowns and looks at Stiles sharply. “You called me stupid,” he complains.

“Oh wow. Out of all of that, that’s what sticks?” Stiles huffs and shakes his head. “And no, I didn’t. I said ‘shoe pick’.” He gives a fake laugh, trying to look like a self-deprecating goof on the verge of
self realization and he squirms when Derek starts poking his sides. “Help me pick some shoes, is what I was trying to say. Ah! Dude, lay off my gooey sides.”

“You can’t lie to a Werewolf,” Derek sighs but he’s grinning in amusement and he pokes the younger teen once more just to hear him squawk. “Plus you’re already wearing shoes.”


Isaac exits the bathroom with a face. “Listening to you two carry on like this is painful. Shouldn’t we be leaving?”

Stiles blushes and Derek rubs the back of his head sheepishly, embarrassed as well. They both had forgotten he was still within hearing distance.

“Right.” Isaac just makes his way over, shoving between them and pushes his phone into Derek’s chest. “Take a picture of us,” he commands, like he’s entitled to making such requests. He puts his right arm over his older brother’s shoulders since he’s the taller of them.

Stiles straightens as Derek takes a few steps back and aims Isaac’s phone at the two of them.

“Smile,” Derek says.

“I am,” Stiles swears.

“I’m talking to Isaac,” Derek clarifies, looking amused as he adjusts something on the phone. “You’re doing perfect.” He wiggles his eyebrows.

Stiles goes pink but his smile wrinkles into a pleased grin.

Isaac makes an annoyed sound.

“Still not smiling, Isaac,” Derek points out cheerfully.

“This isn’t a professional shoot,” Isaac mutters but quiets when Stiles nudges him with his elbow. He sighs and gives his best grin.

Stiles looks away from him and meets Derek’s eyes over the edge of Isaac’s phone.

He finds he has no trouble finding his smile again.

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Stiles doesn’t get the pleasure of sitting beside Derek during the show, Braeden kind of sees to that, but he finds himself between Cora and Isaac. Normally, that wouldn’t be so bad, but they keep passing literal notes over him like they’re still in school or something. It’s a little distracting. Not just because of the frequency, but also because it’s making him overwhelmingly curious.

“You guys could just text like normal people,” Stiles mutters as they make an exchange over him. Again.

“We’re not normal people,” Cora confirms wryly. “Now be quiet. Laura’s coming on for her debut.” Isaac snorts and mutters something that makes her snort as well.

Stiles sighs but focuses on the stage.
The show is *A Chorus Line*. It’s barely begun but Laura is killing it so far.

Stiles thinks that the most amazing thing about it is how she does everything so gracefully, so effortlessly. It’s as if she’s been touring with the cast for months, and not at all as if she’d *just* flown in after having graduated and joined the ranks, all in the same day. He can tell that this really is her favorite musical because of how fluid her knowledge of this production is.

“Oh god!” Laura cries, pressing her hands to the side of her face with wide-eyed panic as she runs up to the bearded director/choreographer. She’s wearing a purple leotard, nude tights and grey leg warmers while her hair is pinned up into a messy bun. She looks every bit of the dancer she’s pretending to be. “I don’t remember my number!”

“When I find a number without a person, it’s you,” the bearded director/choreographer replies wryly.

Laura nods her head worshipfully and moves back to join the other dancers as they wait to be grouped.

The lights dim as the bearded director calls out and pantomimes the proper dance formation, pointing upstage and downstage. The singers and dancers begin to chime, “God, I hope I get it. I hope I get it. How many people does he need?”

The play rolls on.

Stiles knows he’s supposed to watching the other characters too but Laura just has this presence about her on the stage that he finds himself actively seeking her out throughout the entire production. He watches her click into place, performing in her element, and it’s the most natural thing he’s ever seen. And as soon as the thought floats through his mind, he glances over to the end of the row where Talia is sitting and sees a dawning expression on her.

Talia finally understands. There is not a hint of doubt on in her eyes. She knows.

This is where Laura belongs.

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There’s a flourish of praise and flowers waiting for Laura at the end of the show. They take the after party to a nautical themed buffet style restaurant called *Captain Whale’s Booty* (all the kids find this title hilarious).

Stiles can’t say he indulges as much as his little brother does, but he eats enough. Most of his focus stays on the dessert area. Eventually they return to the hotel because they have to get up early for their visit to Six Flags and be there when the park opens.

Everyone tucks away in their rooms.

Stiles climbs into some sleepwear but he doesn’t go to bed right away like Isaac does. He grabs his phone and takes it with him to the pool area to give his brother a fighting chance at sleeping undisturbed. He uses his keycard to gain access to the deserted pool area, and he rolls his pajama bottoms up to his knees before he sits on the edge. He kicks his feet back and forth in the lukewarm water while he goes through his contacts until he finds the person he’s looking for and dials out.

“Oh that’s kinda freaky,” is the first thing Allison says when she picks up. “Lydia said you were about to call just the second before you did.”

Stiles lifts his eyebrows but he isn’t surprised that she would know. “Can I talk to her?”
There’s some shuffling on the other end before it becomes quiet again.

Stiles can hear Lydia breathing steadily. “Everything okay?” he asks gently.

“In a way,” Lydia murmurs. “Allison and Scott tell me that you’ve gone away.”

Stiles rubs the back of his head. “Yeah,” he confirms. “I wish I could have been there when you were released.”

Lydia doesn’t say anything.

“Maybe we can video chat?” Stiles suggests. “If you’re up to it, that is.”

“No.” Lydia exhales, and she sounds a little annoyed. “It wouldn’t be the same. It wouldn’t change the fact that you’re not here. That you weren’t here.”

Stiles opens his mouth.

“Don’t apologize,” Lydia interjects knowingly. “That’s not why I’m saying any of this. I just...don’t want to video chat. Makes me long for the real thing.”

Stiles licks his lips, uncertain.

Lydia sighs.

“I talked to Jackson. He told me about Danny,” Stiles remarks, in response to her silence. He figures it might be safer to change the subject. “All those things you said, it was about him, wasn’t it? You knew somehow.”

“I don’t always want to know,” Lydia remarks curtly and this isn’t going at all like he’d hoped.

Stiles sucks in his upper lip and lets his bottom teeth graze it when he releases the flesh slowly. “I know,” he sighs.

“You don’t really,” Lydia disagrees and she inhales sharply. “But it’s easier with you,” she goes on to say. “I love Allison, and Scott, and...Jackson.” There’s some shuffling. “But they don’t understand. They can’t possibly. You come the closest and sometimes that’s enough for me. It’s help to have you, when it feels like I don’t have anyone else.”

Stiles rubs his face tiredly and nods, even though he knows she can’t see.

Lydia sighs shakily and says, “Hurry up and come home to me. This mask I have to wear around them is stifling. I’d rather not pretend.”

Stiles isn’t given a chance to reply or to question the statement because she’s hung up the phone, and he’s left to wonder.

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“Listen well, all,” Peter announces over the chatter coming from the entirety of the group at they stand at the special entrance gate for large parties. He’s wearing black skinny jeans and a purple button down rolled up at the elbows, unbuttoned just short of scandalous. Though he’s not the only one sporting purple.

In honor of Laura’s 18th birthday, everyone is wearing her favorite color.
Laura’s dressed in a purple and black geometric print backless romper with her hair up in a Dutch fishtail hair braid interwoven with fake flowers (obviously Derek’s handiwork). She must have bribed or nagged him into doing it as beautifully exotic as it looks. She and Kate are the only ones crazy enough to wear a pair of white suede wedges.

Speaking of Kate, she’s dressed almost identically to Peter, only she’s wearing a pair of black high waisted denim shorts and she’s not wearing a bra, button down barely even *buttoned* down. She’s got a flower crown of purple coneflowers adorning her shiny, golden pixie cut styled hair.

Talia is outfitted in some white capris and a lilac silk camisole top with her hair clipped up and a pair of matching crocs huarache flats, while her husband stands beside her in a pair of khakis and purple henley with some Toms.

Nana Hale is dressed casually in some purple floral leggings and a white sleeveless blouse a pair of matching crocs huarache flats.

Stiles and Isaac are coordinating again, but his little brother is the one who decided what they were to wear. This happens to be dark purple, white and black plaid shirts with a white tank top underneath and some casual white shorts and sneakers. Isaac probably doesn’t feel the heat like he does. Stiles already feels like he’s burning up.

It’s practically eighty degrees out, and in the Midwest it’s not dry heat.

Peter whistles sharply until there’s a hush that follows. Then he says, “My lovely sister, Talia, despite my pleas and resistance, has designated me as the family beacon, as I have opted out of engaging in today’s activities.”

“Because you’re a total wimp!” Tyson calls out and everyone in his age group titters.

Peter ignores the comment diplomatically and continues, “As the family beacon, you will find me responsible for all your informational needs. I’ve taken the liberty of memorizing the landscape and layout, so it will be very easy for me to direct you, upon request, to the exact attraction you are looking for. If you would like to take pictures with certain *characters*, I’m able to give you the precise time and spots with which you may find and accost them.” He looks grim at that aspect. “Last, but certainly not least, I have arranged for a bundle of flash passes, a simple device that will speed up or completely surpass the attraction wait times, assigned to only work for two people.” He smirks and adds, “Think of it like a field trip. Keep an eye on your buddy.”

Everyone rolls their eyes.

“If you should need me for any of those reasons I just specified, you can contact me via text or I can be easily found in the land of County Fair, quite near Kidzopolis, acting as the shepherd to the cattle of kiddies who don’t meet the height requirements,” Peter reports dryly.

Stiles snorts and smiles when Derek bumps their shoulders together because he’s just as amused.

Peter just waves his hand dismissively as he leads them into the park and to Hometown Square, over to the flash pass activation center where he spearheads the distribution of said devices.

It doesn’t escape Stiles’s notice that the entirety of their group turns heads during their trek over.

People all ages and sizes stop and stare with wide eyes filled with wonderment. They’re acting as though they’re in the presence of royalty or celebrities. The crowds part for them and vibrate with curious interest. He hasn’t been able to put a name to the kind of presence the Hales hold.
They posses a supposed emanation to which the action of hypnotism is ascribed.

You might want to speak plainly.

Humans may be dense by their own right and willfully oblivious, but their baser instincts allow them to pick up what little they can detect of the supernatural.

Is that what it is? Is that what it’s always been?

With Were, underneath the façade of ‘normal’ is a natural force exerted only by shifters of their caliber.

So, animal magnetism?

In lesser terms.

Stiles rolls the information around in his mind as he watches everyone pair up. His eyebrow raise in surprise when he’s approached by Cora and Isaac, and then he grows amused when they both fidget in their own way under his speculative gaze.

“I’ve never been to this kind of theme park before,” Cora reluctantly confesses, defensive scowl pressed to her beautifully stern face and she even goes the extra mile by crossing her arms. She’s wearing acid washed ripped jeans, a purple crochet half shirt with a gold body belly chain and some leopard gladiator sandals. Her hair is in a pair of messy pigtails, ears decorated to cleverly match both the belly chain and her shoes. “Derek and I had a frank conversation about how you and he were — like it wasn't obvious I wouldn't get a moment of your time during this trip. Anyway, Isaac knows the lay of the land and he’s the least irritating person, I guess.”

Stiles laughs because that is a tremendous compliment coming from her. “Are you — oh my god I can’t breathe — are you asking me for permission?” He laughs harder when she splutters and turns red indignantly at his implicating tone. “Do you want to date my little brother? You know he’s like twelve, right? He – whoa!” He manages to spring out of the way in time when Cora’s fist comes swinging at his face.

Isaac manages to grab her and keep her at bay. He even glares at Stiles like he’s done something wrong.

“What? What did I do?” Stiles complains as two of some of his favorite people stare him down unhappily. “Well, what should I be thinking?”

“Not that, dumbass!” Cora snaps as her blush begins to recede and she shakes off Isaac’s hands, but not as quickly as she usually would with anyone and that’s kind of telling. “Forget it. I told you this was a stupid idea.” She snatches a flash pass device from Peter before storming off.

Isaac watches her go with an unhappy expression and then turns that very same expression on his older brother and makes it even more pouty which is so not fair. “I’m not pouting,” he calmly corrects.

Stiles realizes he said that aloud. “Well, can you blame me for jumping to conclusions? You guys are passing notes and wanting to be all buddy-buddy, by yourselves by the way, and roam the park doing who knows what. I can’t help if I’m a little —”

“It’s not like that,” Isaac interjects and he seems a little tense. “She’s…we have an understanding. We’re different. You know how. This doesn’t usually — it’s not usually — but it’s different. We
have this understanding. You have to trust that. You know what I...how I can be. It’s…”

“Different,” Stiles adds before he sighs. Then he sighs again, feeling almost like his own father when he does. “You’re going to have to help me out one day and explain just what all that entails.”

Isaac perks up and he begins to grin. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. I guess. Dude, just,” Stiles is fumbling. “Go. Go before you lose her in all of this craziness. Or I lose my mind trying to figure out this craziness.”

Isaac nods and moves to leave but he ends up backtracking instead, pulling his older brother close and whispering words of gratitude before he dashes off and out of sight.

Stiles tracks him as far as he can before he loses him in the crowd.

Derek saddles up beside him and says, “So...that was a little weird.”

“Yes,” Stiles wholeheartedly agrees, practically breathing the sentiment into the word, and he glances at the older teen. “You wouldn’t happen to have any insight into whatever the hell is going on with all that?”

Derek snorts, and grins. “She likes him. But not the way you think,” he supposes. “Not the way anyone would think, really. Same for Isaac. It’s hard to pinpoint and put into words. It’s different.”

“I’m getting tired of that word already,” Stiles mutters but he accepts what Derek says at face value and leaves well enough alone for now. “So,” he exhales as he turns to face Derek completely.

“So,” Derek echoes, amused. He’s dressed like his father: a pair of khakis and purple henley with some Toms.

Stiles shoves his hands in the front pockets of his shorts and says, “Cora said that you two had a frank conversation about me.”

Derek flushes and mutters a swear to himself before he rolls his eyes. "She's making it sound way more dramatic than it actually was."

"Oh yeah? But I’m almost certain that Braeden’s called dibs to be your buddy this weekend.”

Derek uses his left hand to shake out his hair as he shrugs his mouth before it stretches into that stupid lazily grin that always gives him butterflies. “Dibs, huh?” he repeats. “I actually wouldn’t mind if you called dibs on me. I’d rather be your buddy anyway.” He wiggles his eyebrows suggestively.

Stiles blushes a little but he snorts. “You’re such a horrible flirt,” he complains but he’s laughing at this point. “I’m actually more annoyed than I am flattered. I don’t think that’s how flirting is supposed to work. Teasing, maybe. Not flirting.”

“Consider it something to look forward to as the day goes on,” Derek reports cheerfully with a wide smile.

At the exact moment, a gang of girls, caught in the midst of their dreamy staring, collide into one another.

Stiles feels nothing but sympathy as they scramble to gather themselves with color in their cheeks and stars in their eyes.
Derek is either oblivious to it or pretending to be because he doesn’t take his eyes off of the younger teen.

Stiles is thankful he already has a flush stuck to him because of the heat. He has to deal with this bundle of fuzzy emotions constantly, and his immunity to Derek’s natural charms isn’t really building like it should. He finds himself grinning back nonetheless as he wipes some sweat from his forehead.

“You two look awfully chipper,” Braeden drawls as she strides over to them, hair falling around her in voluminous ombre curls, white sunglasses resting on the bridge of her nose as she lifts a perfectly arched eyebrow. Her makeup looks as flawless as her outfit. She’s wearing baggy electric purple overalls with a graphic half tee and some white sneakers. She also has a purple and white snapback with her name printed in cursive and interwoven with white roses on the top of the brim and it’s cocked slightly to the right. “Dee, you realize I’m not partnering with anyone else but you, right?”

Stiles could have guessed this would happen. He gnaws on the corner of his bottom lip and waits to see what they will do.

Derek huffs and says, “Brae, I’ve no shortage of family members you can hitch your wagon to.”

Braeden gives him a cutting smile as she pushes her sunglasses up her nose. “I love your family but I didn’t fly thousands of miles just to hitch my wagon to theirs for the rest of the summer,” she retorts evenly.

“I feel special. I really do,” Derek swears as he slaps a hand over his heart. “But I’m going to have to take a rain check on our bonding and pair up with Stiles.”

Braeden’s mouth tightens petulantly. “Now look here, Miss Peaches. You have about two more years to hop on his dick and ride him like the trophy stallion at the county fair,” she remarks crassly.

Stiles chokes on his own spit.

Derek bristles, even though his cheeks get a little red. “Watch it, Braeden,” he warns.

“I, on the other hand,” Braeden continues, completely ignoring their reactions. “Have only this summer to fully dedicate to you, and I expect to do just that.” She bats some of her hair over her shoulder, and the dyed tips fly gracefully when they do so. “I’m coming up on my last year of school before I officially enlist. You promised me.”

“Brae…” Derek gives her this look but she crosses her arms resolutely. “Maybe the three of us could —”

“Nope.” Braeden holds up a flash pass device. “Only two to a device, remember? I’m not participating in any rider swaps like I’m six or something.” She turns her head towards Stiles. “Well, I don’t want any problems. Do you?”

Stiles couldn’t possibly respond to such a loaded question.

“I tell you what,” Braeden says as she takes off her sunglasses and looking at her best friend earnestly. “Let’s leave it for Stiles to decide.” She turns her gaze to him, blinking slowly and deliberately. “Stiles?”

Derek doesn’t look particularly fond of this idea but he holds his peace as he turns his attention over to the younger teen.
Stiles licks his lips as he weighs his options. Fight or flight?

Braeden is assessing him with a cool gaze and the stare almost feels like invisible talons trying to claw through his exterior to expose what lies await underneath.

Stiles feels his magic twist inside of him in a way that unexpectedly sways the answer he decides to give. He says, “You know what? It’s fine. You two can go ahead. I think I’ll keep Peter company. Help him watch some of the kids.”

Derek’s brow furrows and he looks like he wants to protest but Braeden presses into his side with a victorious smile. She says, “Come on, Dee. You heard the man. We have his blessing.” She drags Derek towards Orleans Place while tossing Stiles a wink. “You’re such a doll.”

Stiles physically returns the sentiment with a forced grin. He swallows down his disappointment and puts up a nonchalant front as Derek looks at him while he’s being pulled away. Something tells him that if he’d let slip how he really felt, Derek wouldn’t hesitate to put his foot down to Braeden. So he keeps grinning until he can’t see them anymore because despite everything, he trusts his magic, which had urged him to let things be for a reason yet to be determined.

He rakes his fingers through his short hair, slightly damp with sweat, and watches as Laura pairs up with Talia, while Kate pairs up with Nana Hale. There are other pairings but he bypasses watching the affair in favor of locating Peter in County Fair.

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Kidzopolis is like the promise land for toddlers. It’s a world awash with bright colors, happy smells, joyful nursery rhymes, gentle kiddie coasters like spinning teacups or miniature Ferris wheels, and hands on activities. And kids. So many kids.

“Ankle biters,” Peter mutters as he watches them all distastefully. He’s only taking special care to watch the ones that belong to his family.

Stiles snorts. He’s standing in the shade with a barefoot Olive in his arms as she smacks her lips fitfully on the red, white and blue popsicle he’s holding for her with one hand.

The juices are dripping on her purple chevron dress. It’s a sticky mess but Olive is having a good time with it so Stiles lets her be.

“I thought you liked kids, Peter,” Stiles teases as he sits down on a nearby bench and Olive instantly begins kicking her legs energetically.

A bumblebee zips over, stopping to hover just at the tip of his nose before moving to land in his hair.

Stiles isn’t worried. This is something that happens frequently during his summers for as long as he’s remembered. He’s prepared for the oncoming attention from nature’s smallest creatures. At least this time around he knows why.

Peter finally replies, “I’m not fond of small children who I do not consider pack.” He winces and steps out of the way when a gaggle of them run around him during their game of tag before springing off again. “No respect of boundaries. Nosy and opinionated. Sticky, handsy, little creatures.”

“I am personally offended on behalf of all sticky, handsy, little creatures,” Stiles remarks mock-seriously. “Isn’t that right, Olive? Uncle Peter is too uptight.”

Peter shoots him a marginally amused but warm look. “Uncle Peter, huh?” he repeats and grins when
Stiles rolls his eyes. “No, please continue. I find I’m rather fond of you uttering the title.”

“Dear god, I’ll build you a time machine and send you back where you belong, just give me time,” Stiles bemoans as Olive kicks her legs and slurps on a fragment of white popsicle she’s managed to break off. “That was a one time thing, anyway. I was voicing Olive’s inner monologue.”

“Of course,” Peter drawls, humoring him. “When you muster up the courage to ask my nephew to marry you, I will have to insist you refer to me accordingly, as you will be family.” Then he goes on to say, “Speaking of my nephew, I’m surprised it’s not you who he’s traipsing around the park with.”

Stiles just makes an incoherently thoughtful sound and shrugs as the bumblebee finally takes flight from his hair. “It’s complicated,” he supposes.

“It’s Braeden,” Peter cleverly corrects. “I never much minded her willful, territorial behavior when it came to Paige because frankly I never much cared for the dull girl,” he admits. “You’re different however.” He glances briefly over at him and then away with a smirk. “I’ve always liked you.”

“I’m swooning.”

Peter snorts as he goes back to surveying the area. “Ah, see. When you say things like that, you only make my affection for you grow.”

Stiles scoffs but he’s smiling. He has to reach over to grab Olive’s bag and fish for some wet wipes so he can get to work cleaning her up. She’s finished her popsicle and he’s terribly thirsty himself. Once he has her all sorted out, he places her back in her stroller and turns to Peter, pausing when he sees a vaguely familiar face in the distance.

It’s Lei Shěn.

“What is it?” Peter asks, but he doesn’t look concerned, just curious. “Your mouth is open as if you’re about to ask a question but you’ve yet to pose it.”

Stiles blinks at the older man before looking back, but of course Lei Shěn isn’t there anymore. If she ever was there to begin with. His magic unfurls in his chest and it makes him wonder if it had been just some strange mirage or vision. Whatever the case may be, he doesn’t let it show on his face, and says, “I was going to ask you if you wanted a lemonade or something. I’m thirsty and headed to a concession stand to buy one of those green refill thingies.”

Peter scans him quickly, and dismisses whatever sliver of doubt he may have been developing in favor of replying, “I’m fine at present, thank you. Try not to be gone too long. I’d hate to have to wonder.”

Stiles gives him a sloppy salute and makes his way through the crowds of parents and children to reach the nearest refreshment stand. His magic expands across his chest, alert and alive, which in turns puts him on his guard.

“You keep walking, Virtue,” says Lei Shěn directly from behind him, voice low and barely concealing an underlying warning. She’s close enough that her abnormally body temperature starts trying to cloy to his skin. “I would have words with you.”

“Somewhere secluded I’m guessing,” Stiles mutters and his magic doesn’t writhe defensively, which is a curious thing. It’s the only peculiarity that keeps him from being completely worried about the situation.

“The smoking area,” Lei Shěn stiffly replies. “It will mask our scents.” She shoulders past him to
take the lead and guides him to said heavily shaded area just a few feet from the restrooms. She waits until the few smokers still lingering are forced to scatter under the weight of her dead-eyed stare before she says, “You must understand that I have taken a great risk in consulting with you.”

“Why would you want to consult with me?” Stiles asks and he takes a quick moment to notice that she’s dressed in all black, hair slicked back into a tightly controlled bun. It makes her look pale, not like porcelain, but like vaporous smoke.

Lei Shěn replies, “My loyalties to Alpha Gurnee confine me to her territory. She no longer is concerned with the interests of her people, and with respect, I fear her mind has become poisoned with falsehoods. Many times I have tried to broach the subject, and my concerns are dismissed.”

“I’m sorry,” Stiles interrupts and she’s not fidgeting anxiously but he can feel the urgency there. His magic seems calm over the whole thing, almost like it anticipated this moment. “What exactly are you accusing your Alpha of?”

“Accusations,” Lei Shěn echoes slowly, as though testing the feel of the word on her tongue for herself. “I believe I am in danger for what I know.” She goes on to say, “I have been Jemila’s most trusted confidant for as long as I have known her. Being her Second makes me privy to all her secrets, but a few months ago, she became different. She’d been talking to someone, an Alpha without title. What he’s promised her for her cooperation, I know not. What I am certain of is that she instigated the Chicago Incident. She knew the officer who shot the mother and the child. She was given to taking walks with him, and having meals, though she never confirmed with me whether it was of a friendly or courtly nature.”

Stiles feels his magic sprint up to his mind to merge among the fireworks going off in his mind. “Alpha Gurnee knew the officer,” he repeats faintly, marveling at the information. “She had the chocolate, didn’t she?” is the first thing he asks when he’s able to catch up again. “She has more. Did she give it to him so he could give it to the little girl?”

“This is a dangerous conversation, Virtue,” Lei Shěn replies instead, but that’s confirmation enough. She reaches out and pushes a folded piece of paper in his right hand and there is suddenly a sensation of fear, hope, intrigue intermingled in an almost violent fashion at that brief bit of contact. “I’m expected back. You must give this to Alpha Hale. She will know what it means.”

Stiles has not even a second to respond or ask a follow up question because Lei Shěn disappears as quickly as a small waft of smoke. His fingers twitches around the piece of paper in his hand and it whispers to the curiosity of his mind. He gives into the urge, glancing around quickly to make sure he’s not being watched and he unfolds it.


It’s almost random.

*The pattern is not random. It is a language.*

Yeah but I always thought things like growling and whining and howling was the dialect.

*You are not wholly wrong. Just as we have words, Weres have a way to transcribe those sounds into something ophthalmic.*

They must have tons of texts like these.

Undoubtedly. *Recorded history, secular dossiers, bards contrived from oral tradition, and*
Stiles stares at the paper in his hand, trying to make sense of it as his magic retreats into the space of his mind that processes information so that it may take shelter there. He forces himself not to dwell over it, and folds it up again to tuck away in his pocket. He grabs himself a lemonade, and several ice cream cones for the kids.

Peter watches him closely when he returns and beckons over the little ones they’re both looking after.

Stiles holds his peace until Artemis is the last one to grab his share and follow some of his older cousins back to most of the play areas. Then he says, “Lei Shěn paid me a visit just now.” and before Peter can ask any direct questions, he gives a full account of what happened.

Peter doesn’t say anything at first, and when he does, it’s not what Stiles expects. He says, “Your magic was right. We have records of everything, from the origins of our beginnings, to our most current affairs. They’re kept by scrolls. Not books. No, not like in the ways that Humans do. And we also keep them hidden. They’re sacred. They have all our secrets.”

Stiles is absolutely fascinated by that. “How does that work exactly? Who keeps all the records?”

Peter’s blue eyes survey the area. He’s being vigilant about keeping his eye on the young ones. Even more so now because of Lei Shěn’s unexpected appearance. “There is a concord of Alphas that presides over such things every eight years to coincide with the number of phases there are to the Moon. Though in our community we know what Alpha belongs to which territory, not everyone knows when and where exactly these gatherings take place.” He smirks a little as he looks to Stiles. “But between you and I, I think my sister was recently assigned to the task of record keeper. Just last year she had a family vault built for us, to which only she and Nana know the combination to. They never did say why or what the purpose of the vault was for, but I’ve had my suspicions, seeing as how last year marked the first and last cycle in the eight years for the Alpha Parliament.”

“Oh,” Stiles merely says and with it put into perspective like that, it does happen to make sense. If Talia had to build an entire vault then that just means the collection of scrolls and the like must be tremendous. “Did you want to see?” he asks and fishes his pocket for the folded piece of paper.

Peter looks at him sharply. “No, I can’t,” he warns. “It isn’t for me to know. Only Talia. So you mustn’t let anyone else see it without her permission. Understand?”

Stiles nods and pushes it back down. “Does it matter that I’ve looked at it?” he asks.

Peter shrugs faintly and turns his gaze outwardly again. “You’re a Seven of Virtues,” he supposes. “I believe the title affords you such privileges.”

Stiles can’t confirm if that’s true or not. “I can’t read it anyway,” he admits.

Peter huffs wryly. “At a point, Beethoven couldn’t hear the music he played, and yet he continued to contribute to his field greatly,” he remarks. “Wonders never cease, Stiles. Don’t ever forget that.”

Stiles isn’t quite sure what Peter means but he finds it oddly comforting.

Olive kicks her legs and begins to fuss until she gets some attention.

She’s covered in strawberry ice cream.

Cleaning her up gives Stiles enough time to really think.
Talia is rounding up the pack and counting heads at the parks exits the minute it closes when Stiles finds her. He doesn’t say much, he doesn’t really have time to because it’s just that busy, but he slips her the folded piece of paper with a look of meaning. She frowns but she gives him a short nod before she clutches it in her right hand and uses her left to continue to press her scent to the back of everyone’s neck as they pass her during the counting. She then indicates to the transportation she has waiting for them so they can go to their next destination.

This so happens to be a dine-in movie theater.

It’s Laura’s pick of course and she chooses *Maleficent*.

While everyone is being seated with the help of the ushers, Talia pulls him aside and has him sit at her table with her, Derek Sr., Nana Hale and Olive.

Stiles ends up sitting to her immediate right and after they order their food, he goes on to explain his confrontation with Lei Shēn.

By the time their food comes out, and the movie has started, Talia says, “I see.” She unearths the folded piece of paper from her pocket and unfolds it. She looks it over intently, no matter that there is not much light to work with, though she is a Were. She makes some thoughtful sounds before, without lifting her eyes from the paper, she asks, “What do you think of all of this?”

Stiles could have expected the question because he has been wondering over the anomaly. He says, “I think Braeden should have some input on this too. It’s a peculiar situation, and it should be handled with care by all of us.”

“I agree,” Talia says, voice colored in approval. She waves over one of the ushers and whispers something in his ear.

The usher walks away.

Talia then leans over and whispers something to Derek Sr., who nods and gathers Olive in his arms and passes along the message to Nana Hale.

The three of them rise from the table and move to join the tables of their other family members.

The usher returns with a speculative Braeden, who sits to the left of Talia.

Talia begins to explain the reasoning behind her calling her over.

Braeden sits in silence with the information for several moments as the movie continues to drone on in front of them. She takes a moment to glance at Stiles, irises flickering to ivory.

Stiles feels his own eyes warm in response, bleeding to honey-gold before returning the moment he blinks. His magic settles in complacency because for that brief moment he was able to see Braeden’s magic hang about her like a wedding veil made of bioluminescent ivory material. There’s this minor connection he feels to her that’s as faint as the solidarity between distant relatives.

Braeden appears to feel that they’re on the same page as well because she gives him an acknowledging nod. Then she says, “She wants to be your Second, Talia.”

“I suspected as much,” Talia admits. “But I am curious to know what led you to this conclusion as well.”
“Lei Shěn could have gone to anyone else,” Stiles clarifies, confident in his theories when Braeden nods to confirm. “She wants to betray her Alpha, but she would rather the betrayal be instituted with someone she deems of value. She doesn’t plan on settling for anything less than her current title affords her.”

“She’s telling the truth,” Braeden goes on to say. “Given time, Stiles and I can find out how deep this truth runs, but it’s clear that Alpha Gurnee did have something to do with what happened in Chicago. I wouldn’t be surprised if the Alpha who was without title happened to be Mayor Argent’s very own Deucalion. I’ve been reading up on him. He gets around. I just haven’t figured out why.” She continues, “Talia, can you think of any other reason why she would attempt such a bold move?”

Talia sighs but it’s clear she does. “Please do not repeat this to anyone else without my permission,” she sternly urges. “That goes for all the curious ears listening in,” she adds, directing it to her pack.

Stiles glances around to see a few of them duck their heads guiltily.

Talia goes on to say, “When the Alpha Parliament of North America assembled on Halloween last year, our Chieftain Alpha announced that at the end of the next eight years, she would be retiring the position to a worthy contender, and that during the allotted time of eight years she would be seeking a protégé. She named only five candidates that she and her Second both agreed were eligible. I was one of those five. Coincidental, or not, Jemila was not among that number, but she and Lei Shěn were in attendance at the time of the proclamation.”

“Bingo,” Braeden says, clapping her hands together. “You understand how these things go, Talia. She’s politicking. She wants to be with someone she can control and groom in the next eight years. Alpha Gurnee managed to slip through her fingers, so she’s trying to implement an exit strategy.”

“Even if that means starting from scratch,” Stiles adds. “She’s obviously been doing her homework if she knows I’m a Virtue. I’m not sure if she knows at what level, but she knows, and she’s fishing. I wouldn’t be surprised if she had portfolios on all the Alphas in the running for Chieftain.”

“With that said, we’re urging you to be cautious of Lei Shěn’s motives,” Braeden remarks and holds out her hand. “May I?” she asks, indicating to the paper riddled with full of paw prints.

Talia gives her a nod of consent before she looks to Stiles. “Would you like to see, if you have not already?” she asks.

Stiles opens his mouth to reply but Braeden interjects, “He won’t be able to understand. He doesn’t have a Conduit.”

“I see,” Talia says and she grins. “I almost forgot. My former husband had a boxer turtle named Patty-Cake. He was a grumpy little thing. I never heard anything he said, that was for Abraham of course, but the translations he would give me led me to believe so. We kept him even after Abraham’s passing, up until the summer Braeden arrived with her Conduit when she was eleven.”

“I continue to take full responsibility for what happened,” Braeden chimes, not looking up from the paper she’s examining with ivory eyes. “I could have never predicted that staying up the night before watching Highlander would give Whit Lee the incentive he needed to swallow Patty-Cake whole.”

“There can only be one, huh?” Stiles reasons and chuckles when Braeden nods with an eye roll. “Can I ask what your Conduit is?”

“I’d be disappointed if you didn’t,” Braeden sighs as she folds up the piece of paper again. “Whit Lee is a snow leopard. You’ll meet him when we return to Beacon Hills.”
Stiles is officially both impressed and envious.

Talia reaches out and runs her hand through his hair as though she can read it in her face. “You’re time will come, I’m sure,” she murmurs with a smile before she pulls away. She looks to Braeden. “What do you make of the letter?”

“It’s definitely Alpha Gurnee’s mark, but I would like Whit Lee to look at it as well if you don’t mind,” Braeden replies and then she flicks her gaze over to Stiles. “If we translate for you, do you think you can offer some input?”

Stiles nods without hesitation. Then to Talia he says, “What will you do in the meantime?”

“What I feel is best,” Talia supposes. “Confronting an Alpha of Jemila’s caliber without confirming the evidence and accusations Lei Shěn has provided could prove to be a fatal risk. It will take a little more time. For now, I believe we should go on like we have been, and make our exit as polite and hastened as possible. No need to incite a feud.”

Stiles and Braeden both catch each other eyes and they nod in sync, agreeing with this line of action. The matter has been settled for the moment.

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Isaac is practically falling asleep on his feet during the elevator ride up to their room much to Stiles's amusement. His head bobs and dips towards Stiles’s shoulder until the final ding of their floor jerks him awake. Stiles lets Isaac curl his fingers in the front of his shirt and drag him eagerly to their door. He fidgets anxiously as his older brother swipes the keycard a few times before it gives and he practically sprints to the California king bed, throwing himself in the newly stacked mountain of pillows.

“Pajamas!” Stiles protests as he shuts the door behind him.

Isaac unearths himself, muttering grumpily as he begins to strip blindly, making grabby motions for his luggage to fumble free some sleep wear. He quickly climbs into it before diving right back into bed and out of sight.

Stiles chuckles and makes his way to the bathroom to relieve his bladder. When he exits, he surprised to see a blurry-eyed Isaac sitting up with an unhappy frown. “What’s the matter?” he asks.

“It smells wrong,” Isaac hoarsely complains. “Not like home or — can you come sit with me?”

Stiles blinks curiously at the request but he nods and treks over. He has to push some pillows out of the way to get to his little brother. He settles propped against a pile of pillows behind him as Isaac rests half of his body in his older brother’s lap. He threads his fingers through the preteen’s curls.

“This okay?” he asks.

Isaac nods with a tired sigh.

Stiles continues to silently run his fingers through Isaac's soft, blond curls.

“I miss dad,” Isaac mumbles as he rubs his cheek against his brother’s leg like a total cat. “I miss home.”

“Me too,” Stiles concurs quietly.
Isaac finally settles with a sigh and he says, “Cora challenged me into a hotdog eating contest, which she won, and then as a consolation prize, made me ride Vertical Velocity until I puked. It was terrible.” Then he adds, “She’s awesome.”

“You guys are confusing,” Stiles huffs as he continues to stroke the mop of curls resting on the preteen forehead away from his eyes. “As long as she’s, I don’t know, nice to you. I guess I can be fine with this bizarre camaraderie you two have got going.”

Isaac just hums tiredly and grins slightly as his eyelids begin to droop. “I...” he hesitates. "I want to ask a question, but I don't want to make you upset?"

"I mean, yeah, I can't promise not to be. But you're not cruel, so I won't hold it against you," Stiles replies, amused. "What's the question?"

"It's just that..." Isaac hesitates again, but he seems to be finding the right words to say what he needs to. "You and dad never talk about your mom."

Stiles stiffens. He can't help it, but he forces himself to relax. "When she died," he says carefully. "It was really hard to heal from. But, I think it's healthier to talk about it...about her. Even though it hurts. What did you want to ask?"

"I don't really know. I just wanted to know about her. What was her name?"

"Claudia. Claudia Justyna Wojtanek. Well, formerly Wojtanek. It became Stilinski when she married my dad."

"Was she born here?"

"No. But neither was dad, you know, him with Canada and all that. You and I are the only Americans in our family. Ha, you can tell dad I said that. He always gets grumpy about it. Uh, anyway. She lived in Warsaw with her family on a vineyard for most of her life. She left Poland when she attended Berkeley for a degree in Econ. That's where she met my dad while he was doing his law enforcement training."

"What did she look like?"

"Dad would say I was her spitting image. She had brown hair, spotted moles everywhere, paler than snow most days, even in the California sun. Her English was spotty, like really spotty, and most days she would mix up words like 'shellfish' and 'selfish'. She loved to cook so much that dad and I had to bribe her out of the kitchen sometimes. And she always wore her flaws like a point of pride. It's something I always admired about her."

"She sounds wonderful," Isaac says quietly, almost like a whisper. "I wish I could have met her."

"Yeah," Stiles agrees gently, even as his eyes grow warm at the thought, and his heart gets heavy with sorrow. "She would have loved you."

Isaac puts a hand over his. "I have you," he supposes. "I think you're a pretty decent echo."

Stiles snorts, even as he quickly scrubs his arm across his eyes to dry his face. "Pretty decent, he says," he mocks. "Compared to her, maybe I am."

"Your the best I've ever known," Isaac mutters, frankly. "You and dad both."

Stiles smiles and tugs playfully at his ear.
Isaac scowls but doesn't complain. "Tell me more about her."

Stiles thinks back. Way back, and lets himself see her as he did. He says, “She was the salt of the Earth. Usually you don't really get it when someone says that, but because of her, I do. She wasn't good at singing but she loved it anyway. She loved music, which is why she gave lessons. She loved playing the piano too. And cooking, but I'm sure I said that. She just really loved cooking,” he rambles, mindlessly. "She made everything from scratch. She was just a little old-fashioned in that way. Well, if you can consider that to be old-fashioned. She despised anything automatic outside of the electric stove oven. I once caught her berating a brand new toaster oven my dad bought because he was tired of having to wait for her to make a loaf of bread from scratch and then putting it in the broiler to toast.” He expects Isaac to laugh with him about it, but Isaac is curiously quiet.

When Stiles glances down, he finds his little brother looking up at him this strange look on his face. “What?” he says. “What's with that face?”

“You were speaking in Polish. I couldn’t understand a thing you were saying,” Isaac explains as he sits up on his elbows. "Did you not know?"

Stiles blinks and thinks back. Then he realizes that he was. His tongue was working extra hard to curve over the vowels - he really should have noticed the switch. “Ah, sorry,” he retorts, shrugging jerkily before he quickly turns his face away so Isaac doesn’t see how unsettled he is. “I don't usually get a chance to — without her — sorry, I really didn't notice. Uh. Anyway, I was just saying that she loved music and cooking.”

Isaac looks at him for a long time before he lays his head down on Stiles's lap again.

It's quiet for a long time, and Stiles tries to pass it by stroking Isaac's hair again.

Isaac finally breaks it by asking, “Do you think dad will marry Melissa?”

“Yes,” Stiles says without hesitation, though he doesn’t know how he knows without knowing. “Dad would tell us before it happened. You know how he is. He’ll make sure we can adapt to it.”

He then says, “Why? Would it be such a terrible thing?”

“No. Not at all. I just want dad to be happy,” Isaac mumbles with a jaw-cracking yawn. “I'm just not into the idea of possibly sharing a room with Scott.”

Stiles huffs as he swipes his thumb over Isaac’s eyebrow as if to groom it. “How do you know we won’t move?”

“We can’t,” Isaac decides. “You’ve got Nana and your garden there. I don’t want to move anyway. I like our home.”

Stiles supposes he has a point. “I don’t want to move either,” he admits. “I’m sure they’ll work something out.”

Isaac just makes an incomprehensible sound of agreement. “Talk to me,” he requests after a while. “It’ll help me sleep.”

“I don’t know whether to be flattered or offended by that,” Stiles remarks but he follows through regardless. He talks idly, reciting facts at random, and generally anything that springs to mind.

Isaac drifts off to the sound of his voice well after the clock reads midnight and he doesn’t show any signs of stirring.
Even his magic is sound asleep.

Stiles is sliding away carefully when there’s a light knock to their door. He treks to it, switching lights off as he does so, and he cracks the door open to see Cora and Derek standing there. He steps out into the hall and gives them a questioning look.

“My brother wants to take you out on a date,” Cora drawls as she pushes past him to tuck away into the room. “I’m here to look after Isaac.” The door click shuts behind her.

Stiles lets that process for a second before he looks to Derek. “A date?”

Derek rolls his eyes with a smile and says, “I never said it was a date. She likes to assume.”

Stiles scratches the back of his head. “Okay. So, then…what are we doing?”

“It’s a surprise,” Derek replies. “Do you trust me?”

“Of course,” Stiles says with hesitation.

Derek scratches the side of his nose, which is his way of hiding a self-satisfied grin, and says, “Close your eyes, and keep them closed until I say it’s okay to open them.”

Stiles lifts an eyebrow but he lets his eyelids fall shut. He says nothing when he feels Derek’s warm hand press to his lower back, urging him forward in an unknown direction.

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“Okay. Open.”

Stiles peeks an eye open, and then the other.

They’re standing at the deserted gates of Six Flags, which begins to light up and come to life.

“I had Kate pull some strings for us. She’s good at stuff like that,” Derek explains. “Didn’t really seem fair that you were the only one that didn’t get to enjoy any of the rides today. I thought you and I could try again.”

Stiles stares at him.

Derek patiently looks back.

Stiles tries to stare at him harder.

"What?” Derek laughs and fidgets.

Stiles blinks. Then blinks one more time.

"You need some eye drops, or something? Your face is kind twitching."

"Oh my god, shut up." Stiles shoves Derek as the older teen laughs. “You are completely unreal.” He pokes Derek’s cheek as if to confirm this theory. “How are you real?” he mutters, amazed. Then he laughs a little deliriously. “This is unreal,” he insists as he glances back to the lit park.

“I will take that as a…good thing?” Derek has this adorably unsure face before he grins bemusedly. “Come on. I promised mom that we would be back before astronomical twilight. We can go clockwise.”
“Uh, yeah. Sounds good to me,” Stiles agrees, still floored.

Derek beams and tangles their fingers together before striding to their first ride with a purpose.

The first ride happens to be Superman and it’s completely awesome.

“Can we go again?” Stiles begs, breathless by the time the red lap bars pop up. “Seriously, I want to go again.”

Derek nods and gives the two employees a thumbs-up to signal they want to go again.

They go about four more times.

Stiles is so chock full of adrenaline by the time they stumble off, he’s bouncing in his shoes. “Okay what’s next?” he asks, giddy with the thrill.

Derek looks so very amused but enthralled by the color in the younger teen’s cheeks and the twinkle in his eye. “Stiles, when was the last time you were on a rollercoaster?”

“Sixth grade, maybe,” Stiles supposes as he grabs Derek’s hand so he can pick up their pace. “You’re walking too slow!” he complains.

Derek throws his head back and laughs but willingly allows himself be dragged to the Dark Night ride.

Stiles likes it enough to go twice but nothing more because it’s a little rough on his neck. As they exit, he says, “You think they’d notice if I stole a prop?”

“Don’t steal anything,” Derek huffs as he pushes him out of the building and to the direction of the King Chaos ride. “Not unless I decide I want it too. Then we’ll steal it together and discuss custody arrangements.”

“This is an acceptable plan,” Stiles agrees soberly before they laugh.

King Chaos is the kind of ride that almost acts like an oversized swing, only it spins you around while it spins you around.

Stiles gets vertigo from it and he spits at the ride as soon as they’re far enough from it. “My brain feels scrambled,” he complains as he leans into Derek before frowning and pushing the older teen away. “You gave me no warning.”

“Thought you could handle it,” Derek merely says with a shrug. “I like the ride just fine.”

“Ugh.” Stiles picks up his stride as they cross over onto Yankee Harbor, and he has to pause just outside of the Batman ride to get his bearings. “I might need to put my head between my knees. You ever feel like your stomach was trying to escape, but like, not through your mouth?”

“When we were toddlers, whenever Cora was pissed at me about something, she used to sit on top of me and force me to watch her swallow worms like spaghetti,” Derek confesses as he makes a face and shudders in disgust at the memory. “So, yes. I definitely know the feeling.”

Stiles laughs but he kind of gags at that visual too. “I hate you,” he chokes out, eyes getting misty with his laughter. “Why would you even reference that right now?”

Derek just shrugs and smiles cheerily. After about two beats of silence, he says, “Are you okay now? Do you need me to carry you?”
“Shut up,” Stiles retorts and straightens. He shakes out his hands, then says, “Race you!” before sprinting off.

Derek almost bowls him over when they make it to the end and he spends a full minute steadying the younger teen so he doesn’t topple over in an excuse to be handsy.

Stiles blushes and slaps his wandering hands away before climbing into the front seat. “Any excuse, huh?” he accuses, throwing the older teen a look as he buckles in.

Derek just blinks innocently at him. “I was just making sure you didn’t fall,” he swears but he smirks. “But yeah. Any excuse.” He winks.

Stiles flushes and shakes his head. “Watch it. This is really starting to feel like a date,” he warns, half-serious.

Derek just presses a finger to his own lips, shushing him with a grin as the ride starts up.

Stiles might have enjoyed it if it hadn’t been for the fact that he constantly felt as if he was going to knock his feet into a tree or something. Needless to say, he doesn’t ask for an encore.

Derek leads him to the Vertical Velocity with this mischievous look in his hazel green eyes.

Stiles can’t figure out why until they’re climbing in and pulling down their lap bars.

Vertical Velocity happens to be the kind of ride that shoots off like a rocket with no warning, going backwards and forwards into the sky.

Stiles stumbles off the ride with shaky knees, glaring as Derek laughs so hard that he has to brace himself against something. “I’m glad you find this so funny. I almost peed myself, you jerk,” he complains, breathlessly.

Derek just keeps on laughing.

Stiles ends up chasing him all the way through Yukon Territory to County Fair and up until they reach X-Flight. He manages to forgive the teen by the time they’re climbing in and buckling up but only because this is the first ride Derek actually looks honest to god giddy over. It’s not until they’re pulling back into the station does Stiles understand why.

The coaster is literally like riding on the wing of a plane.

Stiles understands what the appeal would be for Derek from what little he knows about the older teen’s inherited love of flying. He’s curious to know more about it, but he holds all his questions for when they’re not zooming through the air.

After having gone twelve times already, he actually has to beg Derek not to ask for another go.

Derek pouts theatrically but he quickly gets over it as he detangles from the seat easily, shaking his head fondly as he walks up to Stiles to help free him from his own trappings.

“So you really love flying,” Stiles states rather than ask while they backtrack some to venture to the American Eagle ride. “Laura mentioned something to that effect when we were taking off yesterday.”

“Yeah,” Derek admits easily as he keeps his gaze forward, but his expression gets a little wistful. “I don’t know how to explain. Cora’s always been better at describing it than I ever was. She once said
that flying for us is pretty much like trying your favorite dessert for the first time, you know, before you even knew something could taste so good. Before you even knew you were looking for something like that. Only it’s a million times more intense.”

“That’s a pretty clear visual,” Stiles assures as they pause at the ride’s crossroad. “That’s kind of how I feel when I’m performing forest-magic.”

Derek nods and smiles. “Maybe I can take you flying some time,” he supposes, but he says it almost shyly.

“Yeah.” Stiles can’t say he would be opposed to the idea. “Your dad’ll be there too though, right? Not that I don’t trust your abilities but —”

Derek laughs. “It’s fine. I get it. I’m not certified, so that’s a fair question.” He glances up at the signs overhead. “Blue car or red car?”

Stiles frowns and turns to look at what he’s talking about. The ride appears to be split into two sides, color coordinated by red and blue. “Blue, of course,” he answers because it’s not even a question.


“Like you wouldn’t pick green if that was an option,” Stiles points out and starts shoving him towards the stairs.

The American Eagle is the park’s oldest ride, and it sure feels like it. The friction and turbulence leaves a lot to be desired.

“I thought the whole freaking thing would collapse,” Stiles swears as they exit after having only gone just once.

Derek snorts. “Is that why you were screaming the whole time?”

“Shut up. You were too!”

“In sympathy,” Derek explains and jumps out of the way when Stiles tries to swat at his shoulder.

“So, what was Braeden’s favorite ride?” Stiles asks, curious enough to want to know.

Derek says, “It’s a toss-up between the Demon and Raging Bull.”

“Should I pretend that I don’t find that surprising?” Stiles asks and smiles when the older teen bumps their shoulders together playfully.

“Not at all,” Derek replies.

Stiles is suddenly reminded of something she said earlier. “She’s enlisting?”

“She’s been recruited actually,” Derek amends. “CIA and special ops. She doesn’t tell me much, merely because she says she can’t but that’s the gist of it.”

“Wow,” Stiles marvels. Then he finds himself asking, “Is she doing it because she wants to or because her parents did something of the same?”

“Little of both, maybe,” Derek supposes when they finally reach their next ride (the Demon). “Her dad went missing during a mission overseas about six years ago. It kind of got to her. She was really close to him.”
“That’s terrible,” Stiles says as they pause before they get to the final threshold in the line.

Derek nods. “I think not knowing what happened is taking it’s toll on Brae and her family. Keeps them from finding peace,” he reasons. “She’ll go into her career looking for answers. I know her. She doesn’t give up, and she doesn’t give in. She’ll hunt down the truth relentlessly.”

“I’ve been there before,” Stiles admits, and he realizes what he’s let slip when Derek gives him a questioning look. “I told you my mom died when I was younger, but I never explained what happened. Well, that’s because I can’t.” He shakes his head. “I remember we were at a neighbor’s house for a barbeque. Fourth of July. Someone said something about there being no more hamburger buns and my mom volunteered to make the run. My dad wanted to go with her but she said she didn’t feel comfortable leaving me with strangers.” He exhales shakily. “The next thing I know is my dad’s calling a taxi to take us to the hospital. Mom was already dead when she’d arrive and — as far as the doctors could tell, she was perfectly fit. They couldn’t give my dad and I a single explanation of how someone as healthy and as active as she was just simply went into cardiac arrest. And believe me, I’ve done enough research to confirm that.”

“I’m so sorry,” Derek says and he staring at him with earnest eyes. “I can’t even pretend to know what that must be like.”

Stiles gives a jerky shrug. “It sucks and sometimes it feels like I’ll never be able to move on completely, but I’m learning to remember more of the good things than the bad.” He gnaws at his bottom lip anxiously.

“What do you do? For the fourth of July, I mean.”

“Try not cry?” Stiles jokes weakly before he sighs. “Dad and I don’t usually have the energy to celebrate it properly, but, I don’t know, now that we have Isaac, that might change.”

“You guys should join us,” Derek suggests. “We usually always have enough food and fireworks to go around. I can’t say it’ll take your mind off of things completely, but it might help.”


Derek nods.


Derek rolls his eyes and reels him into a hug. “I wish you wouldn’t apologize for things like this. Good or bad, I like seeing different sides of you,” he promises. “How many times do I have to tell you I like you until you understand I mean that in every definition of the word?”

Stiles hides his burning face into the older teen’s shoulder and hugs back.

“You can tell me anything, anytime, anyplace,” Derek goes on to say, speaking gently as though he doesn’t want to spook the younger teen. “I’ll always be ready to listen.” He adds, “You don’t have to worry. I won’t leave you behind. Not for Braeden, not for anyone.”

“Derek,” Stiles chokes and pulls back. He bumps their foreheads together in a chastising way. “That’s too much,” he whispers and shudders when the older teen presses their cheeks together.

Derek just hums thoughtfully before brushing his nose against Stiles’s jaw. He says, “I really want to kiss you.”

Stiles presses the fingers of his left hand to Derek’s soft mouth and uses the leverage to push him
away as he goes scarlet. “You’re painfully honest,” he complains.

“Possibly,” Derek idly considers. “But I can’t help it. You’re very attractive.”

Stiles scrubs his face as he snorts ironically. He drops his hands and says, “Derek, I’m pretty sure there’s not a word that does your looks justice.”

“I’m partial to ‘devilishly handsome’,” Derek suggests as he wiggles his eyebrows with a gorgeous grin.

“There’s no way,” Stiles scoffs as he continues on to the ride.

Derek says, “But I’m totally willing to tell you how pretty you are every single day for the rest of our lives. You can’t at least give me that?”

Stiles stumbles and almost face plants into the train car. He shoots Derek a look after he manages to right himself and climb in.

Derek just meets his gaze evenly. “What?”

“You know what, you loser!” Stiles exclaims as he buckles up and pulls his lap bar. “You’re being presumptuous again. We’re not even — we’re still talking.”

“And I enjoy our talks,” Derek merely agrees. “I think we’re building great momentum. I can’t help that I’m optimistic about the future.”

“Yeah but…” Stiles doesn’t get a chance to finish because the ride begins. It lasts only for a minute but it feels like longer because he spends the whole time bracing himself for every bump and sharp turn. He climbs out of the ride with what feels like a spinal injury.

“Here.” Derek cups his hand over the side of Stiles’s neck and leeches the pain. “Better?”

Stiles slumps into his side because, “Yeah. Much better. Thanks.”

Derek nods and says, “I think we should skip Viper. It’s just as bad as this one.”

“Good call.”

“What were you going to say before?” Derek asks as they walk to their next ride lazily. "Before the ride started, I mean. You didn't finish."

Stiles frowns and tries to think back. He says, “I can’t remember. That stupid ride must have knocked it out of my head.” He’s surprised that his magic hasn’t stirred yet, but apparently it’s a deep sleeper when the occasion calls for it.

“It’ll come back to you,” Derek supposes as they approach the Giant Drop. He nods at the employees as they make their way to their seats. “We have one more ride after this.”

“Gotcha,” Stiles says as they begin to ascend twenty stories into the air, where they are given the best view before their car is released unexpectedly, sending them plunging towards the ground. He doesn’t even remember grabbing Derek’s hand in the midst of it all, but it certainly fails to escape his notice when he realizes how tightly he’s clinging.

Derek just looks over at him with this pleased yet breathless grin, eyes a little dazed with his thrill from the ride and cheeks slightly pink from the adrenaline.
Stiles takes a second to appreciate the sight before he forces himself to detangle from the trappings of his seat. As they walk to the final ride (Raging Bull), he voices a thought and asks, “How is that a pack of Werewolves can hop onto rollercoasters without the fear of shifting in plain sight? With the adrenaline, I mean.”

Derek grins, amused. “It’s not adrenaline that makes the shift hard to control. It’s the anxiety that follows stress, anger, fear or arousal,” he clarifies.

“Say no more,” Stiles says as he snorts. “Last ride, huh?”

“Last ride,” Derek confirms when they reach their destination. “Front, back, or middle?”

“That sounds like innuendo,” Stiles huffs and snickers when Derek rolls his eyes. “Middle.”

“Middle,” Derek echoes and they commandeer the middle train car. “I hope you’re ready.”

“What? Why?” Stiles questions as the ride starts. “Why would you wait to say that when you know I can’t back out even if I wanted to?”

“Because I know you can’t back out even if you wanted to,” is Derek’s good-natured reply.

Stiles kicks him as the car climbs up the track and spends the next minute screaming his lungs out. As they pull back into the station, he says, “Okay. I think I just found my favorite ride. Let’s go again.”

Derek nods and gives the two employees a thumbs-up to signal they want to go again.

They go about eight more times.

What little adrenaline Stiles has left washes cold the minute they step foot outside of the park to catch a taxi back to the hotel. He’s dead tired from the excitement. He leans against Derek all the while, until they make it up to their floor. He fumbles to swipe his keycard and pauses in the doorway when he sees Cora and Isaac curled together on the bed.

Stiles sighs. He starts eyeing the couch but Derek’s tugging him across the hall to his shared room before the idea of sleeping on that piece of furniture can stick. It’s dark and he can barely see, but he does hear some light snoring.

Must be Braeden.

Derek guides him to an empty bed before he pulls away and begins to strip down to his underwear.

Stiles hesitates before he climbs into the bed, too tired to really put up a fight about inconveniencing the older teen. He kicks off his socks and shoes, moves to the far side of the bed, and grabs a pillow he can hug to his chest as he faces the window while he lies on his right side.

Derek climbs in next, making the bed shift and dip with each movement until he settles right in the middle of it. He reaches out and drags the younger teen closer so he can spoon him from behind.

“Astronomical twilight,” Stiles mumbles randomly. “You said that earlier. That you promised your mom we’d be back before then. What is that?”

Derek hums tiredly. “There are 3 types of twilight,” he clarifies. “Civil, nautical, and astronomical.” He pauses to yawn. “Civil starts around five in the morning. Nautical around four. Astronomical occurs about three.”
“Oh.” Stiles sighs as he lets the information sink in. “You really know your space.”

“Bits and pieces,” Derek supposes quietly. “There’s always more to learn.”

Stiles hums thoughtfully as his legs shift under the covers.

Derek snorts. "You were falling asleep a minute ago. What happened?"

"I was focused on lying down. I’ve accomplished that goal and now my mind is looking for something else to think about."

Derek doesn't say anything at first. Or for a long time. Then he asks, "Whale or dolphin?"

Stiles snorts, but he plays along. "Dolphin. You?"

"Whale."

"Swamp or amazon?"

"Amazon."

"Amazon," Stiles agrees. "Beach house or highrise?"

"Beach house."

"Same."

"Iron Man or Wonder Woman."

"Dude, that's not even fair. Wonder Woman."

"Iron Man," Derek replies with a scoff. "Think of the technology. And the science."

"Yeah, of course you would be in it for the science."

"You can't see, but I'm rolling my eyes at you and your plebeian ways," Derek mutters. "Would you rather live in a nice house with an ugly view or an ugly house with a nice view. You can't change the house or the view either."

"What? Why not?"

"Them's the rules."

"Bologna." Stiles sighs and takes a moment to think and weigh his options. "I would pick the nice house. I like to live in luxury."

"Yeah, most people say the ugly house to impress other people but I agree," Derek says with an approving tone. "I like having the best. Company included."

"Wow, super flattered, Dee."

"Don't start or I'll take it back," Derek warns. "TV or movies?"

"Movies all day."

"TV is superior though."
"You're insulting my personal beliefs." Stiles asks, "If you could only eat one thing for the rest of your life, what would it be?"

"Man, you're asking the real soul burning questions now," Derek teases, and laughs quietly when Stiles kicks him. "Uh, I guess, if I really had to choose, then it would be, anything with chili."

"Not chili itself?"

"As much as I absolutely love the taste of chili, I only like it paired with other things, you know, hot dogs or nachos or whatever. Almost as much as I love Nana's crêpes."

Stiles nods and files the information away for later use. "Her crêpes are pretty legit," he reasons. "It'd have to be tacos for me. Just steak tacos I think."

"Tacos are good," Derek decides, sounding amused and thoughtful. "Morning or night?"

"Actually, I don't like getting up before ten a.m. if I can help it. So...slightly morning?"

Derek snorts. "I feel the same way, only I aim for before noon. What's your biggest pet peeve?"

Stiles tries to think of something, but these questions are kind of wearing him down, making him crave sleep. "Uh, I guess, like, when my name is pronounced wrong. Or if I don't get a straight answer to a question I ask. Also people who take my things without asking. Or like take my food without asking."

"Doesn't Kate steal your jello all the time?" Derek questions but there is a little laughter in his voice.

Stiles sighs despairingly. "Yes, but I had to accept that. Anyway, she's graduated. Shouldn't be a future problem anymore. What about you? Though I think I know."

"Oh yeah? Humor me then."

"People who talk with food in their mouth."

"Lucky guess. I also don't like when people talk over me. That happens almost always with my cousins though. Not really fond of when people drink directly out of something without getting a cup."

"Guilty as charged."

"Ugh, please don't tell me you do that. I had such high hopes for us."

Stiles laughs quietly with a smile as his eyes fall shut. "You know…" he whispers drowsily. "Braeden’s probably going to pitch a fit in the morning."

"Probably." Derek shifts closes. "I don’t care."

"I'm going to have to blame you for my own self-preservation."

"I still don’t care," Derek murmurs, wrapping his arms around him and pressing his forehead to his shoulder, chest rumbling.

Stiles mumbles grumpily.

Derek huffs in amusement and shushes him while he laces their fingers together, squeezing their fingers gently.
Stiles wakes up with the taste of honey in his mouth, the feel of arms around him, and a forehead pressed between his shoulder blades. He blinks, frowning at the sound of whirring vents pumping cool air, and his thumb subconsciously strokes the wrist of the arm he has hugged to his chest. He realizes it’s Derek who is pressed up against him, almost all skin, lean and long, spooning him tightly; and his body happily soaks up the older teen’s body heat greedily, keeping him comfortably warm in an otherwise chilly room. They’re lying on their sides and Derek’s wearing nothing but his underwear, Stiles is still in his street clothes, so there isn’t a lot of skin on skin contact.

They’re facing the windows with closed, hanging blinds that extend from left to right, rocking gently from the air circulating around the room in a side to side sway. Along the edges of the window, Stiles can see the glowing flashes of lightning. The dim light coming in is pretty deceiving because though it still looks to be dark outside, he’s mindful of the pitter patter of the rain hitting the glass, which means that the clouds are too thick for sunlight to pass through. He tries to glance around from his position to locate a clock but his line of sight is very limited. He turns very slowly, and very carefully, putting his back to the windows so he’s facing Derek completely.

His dark hair is slightly unkempt from sleep but not overly so, and his thick eyebrows twitch together in no exact pattern. His eyes are moving slowly under his eyelids, making his lashes brush against his slightly pink cheeks while his lips sag into a peaceful frown. Something indescribable spreads through Stiles’s chest, making his magic stir, and he can't help but to think about how beautiful Derek is. It kind of makes him breathless.

If Stiles lets himself, he could almost lose himself to the desire of wanting to kiss Derek. He doesn’t though. He swallows it down until he’s not wrestling with it and he lets his magic roam freely when it presses at him desperately for it. He knows it won’t go far, and he’s right. As soon as it escapes him in a flash of blue light, it floats and settles over Derek like an ethereal mist, encasing him with excited affection.

He watches as his magic splits itself into a dozen small ethereal blue butterflies, sitting on different points of Derek’s body, like in his hair, on the tip of his nose, his shoulder, his hip or his arm. They flap their tiny wings and float around him, jumping from limb to limb as though Derek is the perfect flowerbed.

Stiles smiles wistfully as he sees it all unfold but soon the smiles fades and twists into a frown of confusion. He smells incense; raw and bitter as it wafts over from the living room. What follows is the sound of light tantric music. He slides out of bed carefully, not wanting to disturb Derek, and he lets his feet carry him to the living room.

The furniture has been moved against the wall almost strategically, giving a sort of a different weight and atmosphere to the room. Seven sticks of incense burn hot but slow on the coffee table where they’re clumped together like a bouquet in a porcelain mug.

Braeden lies in wait in the very center of the room as though everything around her is left at the mercy of her gravity. She’s in ivory yoga pants and sports bra. Her athletic legs are crossed like a pretzel, eyes closed as her full lashes twitch against her bronze cheeks, and slender fingers steeped right against her sternum. Her head is held high, exposing the claw marks on her neck brazenly while her hair rests in a low, messy bun.

Her magic is condensed into a single ethereal cloud of ivory vapor in the shape of a miniature humpback whale that floats around her as though swimming in unseen water.

Stiles is entranced by the sight, not because it is beautiful to behold, because it is. But because it’s
familiar, almost kindred, and it pleases him to see someone like him in their own element, doing what he can do.

“Good morning, uninvited room guest,” Braeden drawls as her brown lips twist into a smirk. She opens her eyes and they glow hot with ivory.

Stiles’s own eyes bleed into honey-gold instinctively, as if to say hello.

Braeden cocks her head and glances down pointedly at the space in front of her, then up to him again. “I know you’re curious, neighbor. Meditation is the fruit of the spirit for our people.” Then she adds, “Sit so we can chit-chat. You can do your walk of shame later.”

Stiles ignores the jab as he makes his way over and sits across from her, folding his legs under him while his hands curl over his bare knees. He calls his magic to him and it comes floating over in no real tangible form, coiling around his shoulders like a bioluminescent shawl.

“Huh.” Braeden’s ivory eyes peer at it almost eagerly. “That’s really impressive how malleable it is. I can’t get my magic to form into anything other than a whale. And that’s only easy to do because it’s my favorite kind animal, heaven forbid Whit Lee ever hear me say that, he’s a jealous little thing.”

Stiles doesn’t really understand why his magic’s ability to be ever changing can be considered a big deal. “Is it not normal?” he asks.

“I wouldn’t say that. But Virtues don’t tend to have much flexibility with what they can do with their magic when it’s away from the body and spirit. It takes a lot of control and focus. Even years to make it do what you appear to be able to do without even thinking about it,” Braeden clarifies, and she’s obviously impressed.

“I don’t make it do anything,” Stiles carefully corrects. “My magic is its own. We have an understanding. I kind of support anything it does to be honest.”

“Well for someone who doesn’t even have a Conduit yet, you’re pretty fucking advanced in the magical bonding department,” Braeden marvels as her magic swims over, butting curiously at Stiles’s magic, which vibrates in amusement. “You might have to show me a thing or two. Imagine that.”

Stiles wouldn’t even know where to begin, but he doesn’t voice this. He’s too busy watching as his magic uncoils, floating off to the side to mimic Braeden’s magic by splitting itself into several baby whales.

“Holy shit,” Braeden whispers as she watches as well. “Your magic can divide? Holy fucking shit. Now that’s just showing off.” She stares and watches as their magic chases each other playfully. “Okay. I take back at least about thirteen point two-five percent of my criticism of you.”

Stiles snorts wryly.

“Be grateful,” Braeden insists before she forces her gaze away from the display and directs it to him. “While our magic is having it’s little play date, you and I need to talk about a game plan for when we return to Beacon Hills. I meant what I said about the Benefactor thing. I want to help you get a face and a name by the end of the week at the very least.”

“I’m not going to say no or refuse that help, but how exactly do you expect for us to do that?” Stiles questions.

“Elementary, my dear Watson,” Braeden retorts sarcastically. “Basically I’m going to devote all my time and manpower into helping you unravel all those tangled web of mysteries.”
Stiles raises both eyebrows at that.

“And I’ve got the perfect place for us to start,” Braeden goes on to say as she smirks. “The Nemeton.”
"I’ve got the perfect place for us to start," Braeden goes on to say as she smirks. There’s nothing nice about the way she does it. It’s all sharp angles that seem to point up to her gleaming, mischievous brown eyes. “The Nemeton.”

“I have a feeling the answer is obvious,” Stiles states slowly because he’s getting better at understanding the way she operates when it comes to him. “But I’ll ask anyway — why would we start there?”

“It’s the birthplace of everything right and wrong in Beacon Hills. It’s practically a well of power, which has been tapped into by your little nemesis, the Benefactor,” Braeden explains patiently. She runs her tongue over her front teeth as she takes a moment to think. “I’ll put it to you this way: we’re Fae and we have magic, but you can’t say that you’ve never pulled from other sources. The Sun, the Moon, the Earth, other Fae, even Fate — though that last one is almost impossible unless you’re the best of the best or some shit.”

Stiles kindly does not mention that this is something he’s done on more than one occasion. He can only imagine how she’d react to that, and he needs their relationship to be a little better before he can just share trade secrets comfortably.

Braeden’s still talking, “…we’re like links to a chain. We can connect ourselves to almost anything to forge the strongest cable of magic possible. Isn’t your Druid teaching you anything? This is like basic stuff. Don’t tell me you’re that much of a fucking newbie.”

“Deaton teaches me what’s valuable when I need it, and tells me what’s vital when I ask for it,” Stiles replies evenly, ignoring the jab.

Braeden’s eyes widen a little and she looks a little appalled as she scowls. “Deaton’s your Druid?” she says, sounding outraged.

Stiles nods very slowly, unsure if it’s wise to do so or not.

But Braeden, for all her difficulties, doesn’t react violently. She just mutters quickly and quietly to herself before summoning her magic to her hands. Her eyes glow and her hands become flush with ivory light and she elegantly orchestrates her magic like a puppet master with a gallery of their best puppets. Her hands move in graceful loops until a black cigarette case dispenser and lighter are floating to her on small, puffy clouds of ivory. It hovers in front of her face as she retrieves a single brown cigarette and lights it before she sends the remainder back to her bags.

Stiles watches as she sucks at it greedily, the tip burning an unnatural reddish purple, but it doesn’t even compare to the heat in her eyes. He has a feeling he said the wrong thing, but she doesn’t confirm it if so, no matter how long she stares at him unhappily like she’s willing him to change into something she actually likes. He’s beginning to think that it’s probably always going to be like this with her.

Braeden summons an ashtray before dismissing her magic entirely until it settles all around her, sinking back in and out of sight like a dewy mist. Her left eyebrow twitches with agitation, but her voice is as steady as ever as she continues, words enveloped by purple smoke that twinkles, “Magic has a fingerprint. Like code but more complex. A living signature. That’s why the Nemeton. It’s like a reference, or the timestamp card you find on the inside of a library book. We’ll be able to see who last checked it out. If you get my meaning.”
"You know Trace magic," Stiles realizes, and only because he’s read just glimpses of it in the bible of Virtues. It’s referenced so little, and even then it’s treated like it’s nothing to be proud or boastful of. If he had to guess, he’d assume that it must err on the dark side of Fae magic. In all fairness, it does require a living sacrifice, and Virtues do not dabble in death (at least they’re not supposed to). That is *Vice* territory. “I thought Tracing was forbidden to us Virtues.”

“There are... exceptions," Braeden hedges as she exhales sparkling, purple smoke that smells sweetly of wet sunflowers and warm, honeyed milk. She looks away from him to follow his magic as it takes the form of a litter of kittens made of ethereal blue light, nosing around the perimeter of the room, climbing over the furniture, or curling into Stiles’s lap, shoulders, and the crown of his head in a very territorial manner. “Jesus, you don’t even blink when your magic does that shit,” she comments, voice tinged with *something*.

Stiles sighs quietly because he doesn’t have it in him to attempt to decipher that look and says, “You’ve done it before, haven’t you? Tracing.”

“And if I have?” Braeden challenges. She flicks her cigarette over the ashtray balanced on her right thigh and the ash falls like glitter. It must be made from magic because normal cigarettes don’t do any of *that*.

“If you think I’m going to lecture you, you should know that I don’t know enough about Tracing to do so,” Stiles admits as he watches her cigarette with curious interest. He wants to ask but he won’t. She’d probably be a dick about it anyway. “But that’s not to say it won’t happen when I finally do because I have a feeling it’s not going to be a method I’m going to agree with.”

Braeden snorts and lifts an eyebrow. “I’ll continue to take my chances, thanks,” she retorts dryly. She goes back to looking peeved. “Derek really should have asked me before letting you sleep here,” she decides, mostly to herself as she sucks away and exhales heart-shaped clouds of twinkling, purple smoke. It really contradicts her words.

Stiles can’t keep up with the mood swings or the irony. But nevertheless, her comment causes some kind of ripple affect, and all the bioluminescent kittens bristle defensively on his behalf.

Braeden doesn’t even bat an eye at it. The only thing that seems to disappoint her is reaching the end of her magical cigarette. “I don’t like unannounced guests. He knows that.”

“You’re not my Dom, Brae. I don’t need your permission. We’ve been over this, haven’t we? We can do it again. I’m prepared to utilize PowerPoint and flashcards if it comes to it.”

Stiles gets that familiar pulse-quick sensation at the sound of Derek’s voice, which is still a bit wobbly from his sleep. He tries not to roll his eyes when his kitten-shaped magic gallops over to Derek, eager and shining brightly enough to almost blind.

When he cranes his head to see for himself what his magic will do, he can’t even put a name to the warmth that spreads through his chest like soft ribbons curling through the teeth of his ribcage at the sight.

Derek seems more amused and oddly fond of the way the glittering litter of kittens tries to climb his half naked body like a tree, preening under his watchful gaze.

“Make me coffee,” Braeden demands, bothered. She’s beginning to look really prissy in an intimidatingly beautiful way. “Make me coffee and I’ll consider being polite today.”

“To who?” Derek counters with a raised brow, entirely too comfortable with the fact that he’s still in
nothing but his underwear. He touches Stiles’s magic in an almost distracted fashion as he glances to Stiles with a grin. “Good morning. I don’t like that I woke up without you.”

Stiles flushes, jerking his gaze away the second he realizes his eyes have been wandering inappropriately. “Just wanted to let you sleep. You always complain when I disturb your rest,” he mumbles.

“That was one time and you were whistling, Stiles,” Derek points out with a breathy laugh and the sound practically squeezes Stiles’s heart. “You’re not allowed to hold that against me.”

“I’ll be nice to a person of your choice. Now how’s that sound, Miss Peaches?” Braeden interrupts and she gives Stiles a knowing look that’s both amused and annoyed. “You realize he wants you to eye-fuck him, right?”

Stiles feels his flush getting worse and it spreads rebelliously, right down to the soles of his feet and to the roots of his hair.

“You talk too much,” Derek swears, sounding a little put out. “If you don’t let me flirt the way I want to, I’m just going to spit in your coffee.”

“You wouldn’t be the first, and at this point, I think it adds character to the flavor,” Braeden breezily replies as she gets on her hands and knees before doing a handstand. And if that impressive display isn’t enough, she begins to do pushups while she does a perfect upside down split.

Derek mutters, “Show off.” as he heads to the kitchen area with Stiles’s otherworldly magic still clinging to him and trailing after him as doting infant felines.

Stiles catches himself noticing the slope of the older teen’s neck, before his gaze dips down to his shoulder blades, roaming his tan skin until he’s staring at the way Derek’s hips move as he wanders around the kitchen. He really is well toned and Stiles may have let that slip his notice but as oblivious as he can be most times, there comes a point where when he does pay attention, he really pays attention. And right now he can’t stop.

“So are you going to kick him out or should I?” Braeden pants after a while.

Stiles jerks his gaze away to watch the way Braeden’s muscles ripple as she continues to do pushups.

“Be nice,” Derek says from the kitchen and he sounds like a benevolent parent indulging their spoiled child.

“Impossible without coffee,” Braeden drawls. “I’d like to get dressed in peace, and while I don’t mind you seeing me naked, I doubt you want me to add him to that growing list,” she kindly elaborates as she drops her feet to the floor and straightens. She uses a nearby hand towel to mop up the sweat off her brow.

Derek makes his way over with two mugs of coffee, giving Braeden a pointed look when he serves Stiles first and then her.

“Cute, Miss Peaches,” Braeden mutters into her mug as she narrows her eyes at Derek over the rim. “This tastes like dirt.”

Stiles knows she has to be lying because his coffee tastes like the most exotic and mystically undiscovered parts of the upper heavens. “Oh my god,” he moans quietly between sips. “Fish, popcorn, coffee — I am making a list of these things, Derek.”
Derek grins, all self-satisfied, looking unfairly attractive and smug in nothing but his underwear.

Stiles wishes the mug in his hands were bigger so he could hide how pink his cheeks are. He takes a hasty sip, and chokes a little when he burns his tongue.

Braeden raises a finely arched eyebrow as his magic rushes back to him, brushing his cup aside so that it can sink into his mouth in a film of glittering blue vapor.

Stiles gets the impression that his magic is *tsking* at him as it soothes the minor burns on his tongue with a cooling foam that froths over the slick appendage sweetly. By the time his magic sinks down his throat and into his ribcage, his tongue has completely healed.

_Well that’s going to come in handy. I feel like you’ve been holding out on me._

*I do only what is necessary, but do not expect me to correct all of your clumsy fumblings. Then how will you learn from those mistakes?*

_There are a million ways to say ‘I love you’ but I think that one was my favorite._

_What a charitable assumption to give yourself._

_I know you care for me a great deal, you just don’t know how to express it, Mr. Darcy._

_**Absurd Faerie.**_

Stiles snorts and takes another sip of his coffee as his magic retreats further into his chest where it pads around his heart. He glances over to Derek, who is muttering complaints to Braeden about her lack of hospitality while Braeden pretends not to hear it. He says, “I should probably get going anyway.”

Braeden’s mouth tilts upward a little. “Well *I* certainly won’t keep you. Your brother’s gotta be wondering where you are,” she adds before sashaying away.

Derek frowns after her and he says, purposefully loud, “Don’t let her attitude put you out. This isn’t just her room. It’s practically communal. Like an island you can be voted off of.”

“Cocoa would side with me!” Braeden shouts from the bathroom.

“Cora wouldn’t,” Derek protests. Then mutters, “Not if she knew what was good for her.”

“Both of ya’ll can get the fuck out for all I care,” Braeden replies, then starts blasting Kendrick Lamar before slamming the door shut.

Derek’s frown deepens. After a few seconds, he says, “I’ll walk with you.”

“You should probably put some clothes on,” Stiles delicately states and Derek shrugs but goes to do so. He sets his empty coffee mug on a nearby table and waits.

Derek returns not even a moment later wearing a grey graphic tee of some foreign beach and lightly ripped jeans. His hair is still a mess, but oddly (or not oddly) enough, it works for him. He guides Stiles out the door and across the hall to his room.

“It’s too early for Isaac to actually be awake,” Stiles supposes as he swipes his keycard. He pauses in the doorway as Derek steps in behind him, close enough to touch.
Cora is sitting in the bed with her legs folded into a pretzel, back pressed against the headboard while Isaac’s head rests in her lap. She has a permanent marker in her hand and she’s gleefully drawing a marker mustache on his slack face. She doesn’t even look at them when she says, “He sleeps like the dead. You can’t blame me for taking advantage of the opportunity.”

“Cora.” Derek lets out a longsuffering sigh. He weaves a few fingers through his unkempt hair, tugging and petting more in a display of frustration than an attempt to groom it. “You said you could be trusted. You promised —”

“To behave. I know, I know,” Cora interjects, annoyed. Her brow furrows and she couldn’t look more like her older brother even if she tried. “This is as close as I could get.” She looks down at her handiwork and smirks. “He’s gonna think it’s funny. I’m not worried,” she decides as she slides off the bed before padding over towards them, barefoot.

Derek catches the permanent marker with grace when she hurls it at him, throwing it back just as quickly.

Cora merely ducks and continues, “And don’t make this all about me. You didn’t come back last night like you promised. How scandalous. Think of what the neighbors will say, brother. Show at least a small manner of decorum in your courting. Even a simpleton like you must marry.”

Derek presses a hand to Stiles’s hip and huffs. “I knew it was you that cleaned me out for all my Jane Austen novels,” he accuses. “You’re almost as bad as Uncle Peter.”

Cora flushes and she looks horrified. “Why would you —” she splutters before her eyes flash dangerously and she growls. “I will murder you, Derek,” she swears hotly.

Stiles jaw drops as he connects the dots and he grabs the hand Derek has pressed to his hip with dazed glee. “You read period romances? Oh, oh, you like —”

“Shut up,” Cora interjects, almost desperately. She actually pauses to swallow like she’s trying to force down vomit. “You really shouldn’t —”

“You favorite character is Mr. Darcy, isn’t it?” Stiles exclaims and barely notices when Derek steps in closer to rest his chin on his shoulder as he laces their fingers together. “No, that’s not it. You’re too similar to him. Maybe you’re more of a Mary Crawford. Mansfield Park —”

“No, no, no,” Cora interrupts, growing even more alarmed. That horrified look on her face intensifies. “Derek got the books from dad and so…so they’re his. Or they were but it’s — he doesn’t even use them like — so it's almost wasteful —”

“Oh my god, Cora.” Stiles feels like he’s been given the greatest piece of information since the beginning of time. “You’ve read all of them then, haven’t you? Pride and Prejudice. Emma. Persuasion. Lady Susan. Mansfield Park —”

“The historical importance of her social commentary,” Cora quickly explains, almost desperately, like she’s trying to catch sand with her bare hands, “has become widely accepted in academia as —”

“Stop cutting me off,” Stiles complains and he laughs gleefully in he face of her sinister glare (which is full of dark promises and warnings). He’s not even fazed at this point. “If you had taken a second to listen — if you would just listen…” He huffs and shakes his head. “This isn’t me making fun. This is like, you know, deep crying out to deep. Just, truthfully, Cora, I’m trying to tell you that Mansfield Park is one of my favorite Jane Austen novels. That’s all.”

Cora goes quiet. Her cheeks are still pink, and honestly there isn’t anything to make that stop since
she must realize that all that protesting beforehand had been unnecessary. She swallows again and sighs like it’s been punched out of her. After a minute or two, she finally manages to mutter, “Mine too.” with as much dignity that she has left.

Derek snorts.

Stiles gives Cora a friendly grin and tugs a lock of Derek’s already unkempt hair until he makes a fake wounded sound. “Be nice,” he reprimands lowly, flinching away when Derek’s head snaps to the side so he can nip at Stiles’s wrist. It only serves to both fluster and annoy him. “Could you stop with the — ugh, forget it. Your sister and I are totally bonding and you’re ruining it.”

“Yeah, but they were my books to begin with,” Derek points out like the utter spoiled child that he is and probably always will be. “You should be bonding with me.”

Stiles rolls his eyes and hip checks the older teen away from him.

Cora’s collected herself by now but she still looks like she’s swallowed something sour. “Don’t be fooled. He neglects to mention the fact that he never actually read any of them. They were collecting dust by the time I got to them,” she remarks, annoyed.

Derek coughs innocently and rocks on his heels with that boyishly charming grin of his. “Maybe if you hadn’t stolen them…”

“Oh, so now it’s my fault?” Cora grumpily retorts and this is the opposite of what Stiles wanted, still ready to engage passionately over their newly discovered mutual interests. He can’t do that if she’s being a cactus. She adds, “You know you overlook anything that doesn’t come with crayons.”

“You little punk,” Derek starts and he takes a threatening step forward.

“Come on guys,” Stiles says, putting a hand on both of their shoulders, trying to lighten the mood. “You’re both smart and pretty. No need to fight.”

Derek and Cora just level each other with an annoyed stare.

Stiles sighs. Well. So much for that.

Aunt Rosemary appears in the open doorway with Artemis at her hip and a raised eyebrow. “Should I ask?” she inquires with unconcealed amusement.

Cora and Derek look away from each other wordlessly with identical unhappy frowns.

Stiles gives a meager shrug because that’s all he can do at this point.

“Right,” Aunt Rosemary says and shifts Artemis to her other hip when he squirms unhappily and kicks his little legs, eager to get down. “Well, I’ve just come to tell you all that the family of Adelaide and Ezra, Mother Moon rest their souls, has invited us to breakfast. They are terribly fond of Laura it seems, and are grateful for the speech she gave the last time she was here, and wanted to show their appreciation by honoring her on her birthday. Talia is adamant that we don’t repay their kindness by showing up late. She wants us to leave in the next forty minutes, so gather your things so they can be sent ahead of us to the airport. We’ll be leaving as soon as we’re done eating.”

“I never pass up free food,” Cora says, combing her fingers through her hair lazily. “Thanks for the heads up, Auntie Rose.”

Aunt Rosemary smiles but huffs when Artemis manages to slide down to the floor and runs over to
Derek. “Artemis, your cousin doesn’t have time to indulge you,” she warns lightly.

Derek just chuckles and picks Artemis up as the toddler makes happy sounds, resting his head on the teen’s shoulder. “It’s okay. I don’t have much I have to do anyway. I’m practically packed to go,” he promises.

“If you’re sure. I still have to make my rounds to make sure everyone knows, but I’ll be back to grab him,” Aunt Rosemary promises, eyeing her son with a fondly exasperated face. “Trouble likes to find him, so please help him avoid it, all right?”

Derek nods.

“And one more thing, and this is mostly for you, Stiles,” Aunt Rosemary remarks. “The Gurnee Pack has certain traditional values when it comes to men. So during our visit, I would let Laura and Talia do all the talking. And if you need anything or have a question, ask Nana Hale since she’s our Elder Matriarch.”

“Um, okay,” Stiles replies, perplexed.

Aunty Rosemary just smiles at him before she walks over to kiss Artemis’s forehead and then she exits the room.

“I’m going to get ready. Is the Duchess awake?” Cora asks and Derek nods. “She’s going to soak up all the hot water if I don’t get over there to stop her.” She glances discreetly to Isaac before she makes a pair of finger guns and aims them at Artemis, who smiles back. “Try not to linger too long, Derek. I’m not hauling your crap down to the lobby for you.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Derek mutters as he watches her go.

Stiles waits until he hears the door across the hall click shut before he closes his own. He curls his hand around the door handle as he turns to Derek and says, “What kind of books do you like?”

“Hm?” Derek appears to be distracted by his little cousin trying to climb onto his shoulders. He arranges the toddler until he’s comfortably settled and fistng his chubby hands in Derek’s dark hair. “Say that again, I didn’t catch it.”

“Books,” Stiles repeats and smiles against the urge to take a photo because it’s a fetching sight to see Derek like this. “If you’re not into Jane Austen, what do you like?”

“Anything that can keep my attention. Otherwise, I’ll be too distracted to really absorb it, and I’ll just end up reading the same sentence over and over again,” Derek admits as he rocks back and forth on his heels, much to Artemis’s delight. “Right now I’m kind of juggling time between The Feynman Lectures on Physics and Gone Girl.”

“Isaac’s reading that too. Gone Girl.” Stiles has noticed a copy of said book resting on his brother’s nightstand and it was bookmarked pretty deep. “I’m still flipping my way through the Hobbit and Maze Runner. I was thinking of starting The Illustrated Man. I’ve read it once before but I was younger, so I don’t remember much. At least not enough to appreciate it.”

“That’s a good one,” Derek agrees. “So you like adventure, huh?”

Stiles doesn’t know what to make of the amused grin being aimed his way. “You could say so,” he carefully confirms.

“Have you ever read American Gods?” Derek questions further. When Stiles shakes his head no, he
continues, “I’ve heard good things about it. Maybe you and I can read it together? Maybe I can convince you to narrate. I kind of like the thought of you reading to me. I like the sound of your voice.”

Stiles blushes but still manages to snort when it finally clicks. “Are you really jealous about that thing with Cora? You realize we can bond over comics right? You and I have the same type of collections,” he points out.

Derek just gives him a sheepish smile and shrugs under his cousin. “Not jealous. Envious. Still,” he says. “It might be nice to start something together and talk about it.”

“I take my time when I read things for fun,” Stiles warns. “No matter how into it I am. It takes me a while. Like months. Slow and steady is my pace.”

Derek’s face scrunches with disapproval. “The longest I can go is a week, but even then it has to be extenuating circumstances. Stiles, how does it take you months to finish a book?” he exclaims.

“See, you’re already trying to give me problems about it,” Stiles retorts and moves to drag his brother’s luggage closer to the door. Then he grabs his own before he goes through both to make sure everything is there. While he’s elbow-deep in clothes, he says, “There’s still a frustrating amount of movies and TV shows you haven’t seen and — wait, have you seen Star Wars?”

Derek snorts. “Why? Is that gonna be the deal breaker?”

“You like space,” Stiles states, mostly to himself. He’s folding a pair of his brother’s jeans. “There’s no way you haven’t seen Star Wars or Star Trek. That would just be nonsense.”

“I’ve seen them. But I was so young, I don’t really remember much. I get the general sense of the plots and storylines,” Derek clarifies. “My dad threatened to disown Cora and I if we didn’t watch it with him. He’s a real fanatic about it and mom’s not really into science fiction. She likes drama, soap operas, and reality shows. Like Laura, but Laura’s more for the trashy reality TV.”

Stiles could totally see that. “What about you? As my friend, I feel like I need to help you discover the wondrous bounty that fantasy and adventure has to offer you. Game of Thrones may be a good place to start. I’ll consider starting Firefly and Supernatural, but only if I think you’re worthy.”

Derek’s lips curl in amusement, but his eyes seem to glimmer with quiet excitement. “I’m the kind of person that doesn’t really stray outside of the History Channel. Although, I do usually watch black and white television. I Love Lucy. Leave it to Beaver. Perry Mason. That kind of stuff. But that’s only if the History Channel is playing re-runs I’ve already seen.”

“You’re such an old man, oh my god.”

“You asked. My favorite show is Golden Girls, Stiles. That should pretty much tell you about my taste in TV.”

“I have no idea how you can be so flawed, but I’ll make you a deal,” Stiles says. “We can trade off. You watch some of my favorites, and I’ll watch yours. Neither of us can complain. We can bond over that.”

“I get to spend time with you. Why would I ever complain?” Derek cleverly retorts.

Stiles silently rolls his eyes but grins because he’s facing away from the older teen. “You’re such a bad flirt.”
“I am the smoothest person you’ve ever met,” Derek protests, pretending to be offended as Artemis dozes off on top of his head. “What’s your favorite movie?”

“What Dreams May Come,” Stiles answers, zipping up his bother’s suitcase. “Yours?”

“When Harry Met Sally,” Derek replies. He adds, “It’s okay. You can say it.”

“Say what?” Stiles says, trying for innocent as he glances at him from over his shoulder.

“That I’m a hopeless romantic,” Derek continues, unimpressed. “Which is true, I’m not going to deny it. Even though I don’t have the patience to read about it. Nor am I fond of setting myself up for disappointment when the two characters I was rooting for do not end up together.”

Stiles huffs. “Are you speaking from personal experience? What book did you try to read?”

“In grade school, I had this epic crush on my English teacher,” Derek says, shifting and rearranging Artemis so that the toddler is slumped against his chest, resting his head on his right shoulder. “And every day, for months, my subtle way of expressing how I felt, because you know how subtle I am with my feelings,” he pauses to laugh a little self-deprecatingly. “So I would do this thing, where after class, I would linger and I would ask her for recommendations. Not just any type of recommendations, but the best of the best romance novels. She gave me lists, and you know, I never read any of them, mind you —”

“Oh my god,” Stiles laughs, shaking his head as he retrieves the outfit he will wear for the day.

“— because like I said, I just don’t have the patience to do it,” Derek continues, sounding just as amused by his own story. “But one day she recommended her favorite book, and in my lovesick little mind, I had to go for it, because that way we would have endless things to talk about if I just took the time to dissect this piece of literature piece by piece. And would you like to know what the name of that book was I spent so much time on?”


“No, but thanks for helping me add those to my ‘Do Not Read’ list,” Derek replies. “It was The Great Gatsby.”

Stiles bursts out laughing but has to slap a hand over his mouth so as not to disturb the two sleeping occupants in the room. “Oh my god,” he manages to choke between words. There are literal tears of mirth building up in the corners of his eyes. “Oh my god.”

“I know,” Derek sighs. “I know.”

“She referenced that as her favorite romance novel?” Stiles asks, trying to calm down, but he keeps breaking off into little giggles at Derek’s sour expression, which could almost rival Cora’s in that moment. “That’s cruel. No wonder you — oh my god. What did you do when you finished?”

“I rode my mountain bike to her house and, over a cup of sunny delight, had to politely explain to her why we were no longer compatible,” Derek sarcastically drawls but grins when it gets Stiles to laugh and he ends up looking pleased with himself. “Then I took the fragile remains of my heart and dated the pain away, stumbling my way through relationship after relationship. Remind me to tell you about them, they all ended as tragically as The Great Gatsby.”

“No one was shot though, right?” Stiles questions playfully as he zips up his suitcase.

“Well not all of them.” Pause. “Give or take.”
“You’re not funny, Derek,” Stiles says but he’s totally laughing.

Derek pretends to be offended. “I’m hilarious. You just take my humor for granted,” he insists. He glances down at Artemis and his expression sinks into something thoughtful. “You did have a good time last night though, right?”

Stiles pauses and turns fully so he can look at the other teen. Derek gives a sort of nervous half-smile. “It’s probably silly to ask but…” he trails off and he seems stuck for a moment. He shakes his head and clears his throat. He opens his mouth and then closes it.

Stiles finds it a lot more endearing than he probably should. “Yeah,” he replies mercifully and doesn’t miss the way Derek’s shoulders relax. “Were you really worried that I didn’t — because that’s just — I mean, seriously, it was really the most fun I’ve had in a long time. I’m still partly convinced it didn’t happen because things like that don’t happen to me. Derek, we had the whole park to ourselves. Consider me impressed.”

Derek’s smile grows and he straightens. “Well…good,” he says simply. Then he mutters, “You’re worth it.”

Stiles flushes and quickly turns away. “Wasn’t a date,” he maintains. “Just so we’re clear. That was an activity between friends.”

“Oh, of course,” Derek says, like he’s humoring him.

Stiles rolls his eyes and when he’s done packing and organizing his things (as well as Isaac’s), he stands with the outfit he’ll put on. He steps toward Derek and observes the sleeping toddler in his arms. “I think this is the first time I’ve ever seen him stay still for more than five seconds,” he mentions.

Derek snorts and tweaks Artemis’s nose but he doesn’t even stir. “Yeah, it’s — well he usually only likes coming to me because he’s tired. I don’t know if I’m just that comfortable or what, but it never fails. He doesn’t last five minutes with me before he’s dozing off,” he says.

Stiles hums thoughtfully.

“Well,” Derek sighs. “I’m gonna get out of your hair and let you get ready. I should probably return Artemis to his mother. Do you need help with your luggage?”

Stiles shakes his head. “If anything, I’ll make Isaac do the heavy labor,” he supposes but he’s mostly joking.

Derek nods before he steps closer and grabs Stiles’s left hand, swiping his thumb over the pulse point of Stiles’s wrist. Then he leans forward a little and lifts the wrist to his mouth, kissing so gently as if in fear of shattering it.

Stiles feels a slow flush crawl across his face in all directions because this is definitely a new development. Warmth pools in the pit of his stomach as his magic squirms happily, fizzing around his heart like static. He opens his mouth to say something but then Derek adds teeth and tongue to the equation with just the slightest suction, and Stiles ends up choking on the words.

Derek glances over at him beneath his lashes, hazel eyes gleaming with dark mischief and something else.

Stiles thinks that it would be really embarrassing if he fell over from being so weak-kneed and he
spends less time thinking when Derek uses his tongue and teeth again. He can feel a warm pattern being made against his freckled skin and he makes a small sound.

Artemis stirs a little.

Stiles gets flustered and tries to yank his hand back. “What are you — what are you doing? You’ll see me in like fifteen minutes. This isn’t — isn’t a long farewell or — Derek.”

Derek just hums. “I know,” he murmurs against Stiles’s pulse point. “I’m scenting you. We’re going around new… it’s better this way.”

Stiles blinks and tugs his hand back, grateful that Derek lets him go so he can cradle it to his chest. He has a nice little hickey on the inside of his wrist now and he’s the kind of person where that kind of thing will linger for days. “Dude. Not cool,” he complains as he glares at the mark. He nudges his magic, hoping it’ll help but it just seems content to let the hickey linger. “It’s not like — I’m not going to run off with a pack of werewolves I don’t know!”

“I know,” Derek repeats patiently. He’s looking at Stiles like he wishes Stiles understood what this meant. “It’s not you I’m worried about,” he carefully explains. “This is just to show my… intentions. It’s not exactly like a claiming but it’s just a polite way to declare I’d rather not have anyone else try to court you.”

“That’s exactly like a claiming,” Stiles replies, exasperated. “You could’ve asked to do that, you know. That’s not exactly something friends do to each —”

“Friends, right,” Derek interjects impatiently. “Listen, I know what we are, okay? You can view it or call it however you want or see fit, but I know what this —” He takes a moment to gesture between them. “— means to me. And you’re right, I should’ve asked, but sometimes I can’t help the way I am when instinct gets in the way. I was born a Werewolf, Stiles. Sometimes you have to trust that I know better than you about how these things go. I said it isn’t you I’m worried about and I’m really not. But the Gurnee Pack has a reputation about them. Friend or not, I’ll always think that protecting you is more important than a little common Human courtesy. And for that, I’m not sorry. I’m not a —” Derek kind of stutters to a halt and his face shuts down. “Never mind.”

Stiles watches, befuddled, as Derek turns away with a thunderous expression and quickly exits the room, slamming the door behind him. He’s extremely confused about what just happened and he can’t help but to feel like he’s the bad guy in this scenario.

Isaac makes a small sound as he stirs. “Stiles.”

Stiles walks over to the edge of the bed to meet him. “I’m here,” he says quietly, agitated and puzzled. “Did you hear all that? Did we wake you?”

“I always hear everything when I sleep,” Isaac admits as he blinks tiredly. “Side effect of being what I am. You get used to it. It’s like white noise. Helps with danger though,” he explains. “He’s right, you know.”

Stiles blinks, processing. “I’m sorry but you’ll have to clarify which part you mean.”

Isaac sits up and rubs drowsily at the scarred half of his face. “It’s like a cultural difference. There are things that supernatural creatures do differently. Having to get permission for things, or for certain actions that really are harmless is just a Human courtesy,” he explains. “Derek’s not a Human, Stiles, and neither am I. We’re going to do things that don’t make sense to you and it’s gonna seem offensive or like it’s pushing boundaries but it really is just instinct. There’s no way to fully explain
without you just knowing like we do.” He shrugs.

“You’re basically saying I should be more patient and understanding,” Stiles speculates, and honestly he thought he was. That he had been. But clearly Derek and his little brother were both trying to tell him something. “So I guess this means you’re on his side, huh?”

Isaac climbs to his feet with annoyed expression and purposefully stretches to his full height so he’s almost towering over Stiles. He wryly replies, in his most matter-of-fact tone, “Sides? What sides? You’re my brother. My opinion will always be bias.” He then hugs Stiles very tightly before he can even blink and releases him just as quickly. “Besides,” he continues as he makes his way over to his luggage. “You were starting to look miserable and I don’t like the way you smell when you get like that.”

“Oh?” Stiles says lightly, clearing his throat because he’s beyond touched by Isaac’s affection. “What kind of smell is that?”

Isaac makes a thoughtful sound as he starts tugging free a similar outfit to Stiles’s (which he has yet to put on still). He says, “Bananas when they’re too ripe.”

Stiles wrinkles his nose as he imagines it. He’s not much for sickly sweet scents either. “Does everyone smell like that when they’re upset?” he asks because he’s curious enough to. Even though he really should be getting ready right now.

“I said miserable, not upset,” Isaac corrects. “And no. No one smells the same. Things would be pretty easy to confuse if they did. But everyone has a unique type of scent depending on their emotions.”

“Is that like your thing? It explains why you’re always wrinkling your nose,” Stiles supposes and when Isaac doesn’t deny it, he guesses he’s right. “What do I smell like when I’m happy?” he asks because Derek once told him he preferred the way he smelled when he was happy rather than the alternative.


Stiles snorts but he smiles widely. “Maybe it’s a Fae thing. Does Braeden smell like that?”

Isaac looks almost appalled that he would even think that. “She smells like bitter coffee, ash, and resentment all the time. I don’t think it’s a Fae thing. I think it’s just a you thing.” He zips up all his things. “Are you going to take a shower first, or should I?”

“You can go ahead. Just don’t use up all the hot water trying to remove that marker mustache.”

“It’s a hotel. I don’t think that’s something you can do here,” Isaac sarcastically comments. “And what are you talking about?”

Stiles throws a pillow at him. “Just see for yourself. You look like an old-timey villain.”

The slam of the bathroom door is Isaac’s response. But a few minutes later he’s laughing from behind it.

Stiles stalks over to the couch and flops facedown on it before wriggling his phone free from the pocket of his jeans. He calls his dad to let him know what’s going on.
By the time they leave the Hotel, it’s almost noon and Talia seems very displeased by this. She doesn’t say much about it if so, but rather focuses on herding everyone towards the transport vans as quickly as possible.

Stiles ends up in the van with Isaac, Uncle Jonah, his husband and their five kids.

Derek had actively avoided him while everyone swayed to his or her preferred choice of seating partners.

Stiles tried not to think about what it meant when he chose the van furthest from the one Stiles was climbing into. It bothered him too much and only left him feeling gloomy.

Isaac attempts to cheer him up by challenging him to a game of Temple Run, and it works for a little while until Boyd interrupts one of their games by calling. His little brother shoots him an apologetic smile before shifting away to locate his headphones so he can answer the call.

Stiles just sighs, shimmying closer to the window, and rests his forehead against the cold, foggy glass, watching as the rain splatters against it.

The sky seems as grey as his mood.

He tries to shake himself out of it when they finally arrive to their destination forty-five minutes later and he steps out of the van to observe the nice urban area they are in. They’re parked outside a block of connected townhomes with iron fences. It seems to be a community of women with dark skin of differing tones and their children.

Talia walks up to the gate surrounding the house at the end of the block belonging to the family that’s expecting them. It’s nestled beside a public children’s playground that’s being fully utilized at the moment.

From the outside, this specific house looks lavish with brown stones and marble decorations. Tall, rectangular windows add to the overall graceful yet unassuming visage in a mostly asymmetric way. The building is fairly rounded in shape but the house is partially surrounded by overgrown wooden trees.

The second floor is smaller than the first, which creates a layered style of look in combination with the roof where one large chimney pokes out the center. Inside its fences lies a modest garden, with mostly grass, a few flower patches and clean cut bushes.

Stiles’s magic simmers curiously in his chest as they all make their way up the cement walkway, which stretches into steps that leads to the porch and a door with a metal screen.

Talia rings the doorbell with Laura at her side and everyone waits in silence.

There’s some shouts of excitement in a foreign language that follows before the door bursts open with three young girls wearing matching black hijabs.

“Assalamu Alaykum Wa Rahmatullaahi wa barakato!” they greet simultaneously with happy, wide smiles.

Laura returns it softly with, “Wa alaykum assalam.” and she takes a moment to hug the three of them.

The young girls gesture them all in, making indications to the dining room, where a spread of food awaits them. It sits atop a long table that is wide enough to accommodate seating such a large group.
There’s chicken, fish, milk, olive oil and honey surrounded by baskets of unleavened bread, black, purple, and green olives, red grapes, dates, figs, pomegranates, pulse, and cereal.

It smells as divine as it looks and Stiles presses a hand to his growling stomach as Isaac tucks in close to him while older women in burkas run in and out of the kitchen, adding more dishes and pitchers of drinks to the table. More women of all ages file in quickly, sporting black hijabs, niqabs, al-amiras, and khimars as preparations for seating arrangements are made.

After a flurry of commotion that takes less than ten minutes, a dark-skinned woman with claw scars riddling her face who looks to be Nana Hale’s age steps into the room, making all the other women snap to attention. She gravely introduces herself as Ikramiya Gurnee, the interim Alpha to her family unit.

She addresses the Hale women in English but to her own, she addresses in Arabic. Her eyes are two different colors (grey and blue) and there’s something so guarded about her tone of voice. She sits at the head of the table with Laura directly to her right and her own oldest daughter to her left.

Stiles finds himself sitting on the right side of the table with the Hale Pack between Nana Hale and Isaac, while Derek sits all the way at the end between Cora and Braeden (who’s cradling a babbling Olive).

Stiles distracts himself from the fact by eating quickly and quietly, letting his gaze wander. It takes him longer than he’d like to admit to notice that there is a pointed lack of males present, despite the fact that there are more than a handful of these women who are far along in pregnancy. It makes him think of Aunt Rosemary’s words earlier. He also notices that none of the Gurnee women even acknowledge any of the males in the room, but only the women.

There’s a bit of tension at the table because of it, fueled by the fact that the Gurnee women shoot Stiles and all the other males disdainful looks like they resent the fact that there are any males present at all.

Peter certainly doesn’t help, going out of his way to speak to any of the ladies, asking questions about the meal or making comments about the weather.

Said women react by shooting him appalled looks and glancing at Kate like they expect her to bring him to heel, before looking even further appalled when she doesn’t, smirking in amusement instead.

When Stiles has his fill of the food, he leans back with a content sigh before turning towards Nana Hale to whisper, “I have to go to the bathroom.”

Nana Hale gently pats the back of his hand, nodding in understanding before she turns away. She lifts her hand to get Ikramiya’s attention and says, “Alpha, I wonder if you could not direct this little lad to the bathroom.”

Ikramiya’s expression remains placid as she assesses Stiles with a blank look before she says, “With the proper chaperone. He may not roam my house unaccompanied. For his safety, of course.”

“Oh of course,” Nana Hale assures placatingly.

Ikramiya nods stiffly before she turns to her daughter (who is her spitting image), addressing her in punctuated Arabic before returning her attention to Stiles. “Aaliyah will escort you,” she decides.

Stiles stands quickly as Aaliyah rounds the table to get to him, and she’s intimidatingly tall. He shoots her a nervous smile but she just adjusts her al-amira and gestures for him to follow her.
Aaliyah is hard to keep up with as she strides towards the stairs with long legs, and she’s not even polite enough to match his pace.

Stiles glances back at the table in time to see the worried looks Derek’s shooting his way as he fidgets in his seat as though he wants to follow.

Isaac looks no better.

Stiles shoots them both a thumbs-up (even though he’s still not sure where he stands with Derek) and he hopes it’s reassuring.

Aaliyah makes an impatient sound as she stands at the top of the stairs.

“Sorry.” Stiles smiles sheepishly and takes the stairs two steps at a time to pick up the pace.

Aaliyah says nothing in reply, turning away to lead him down a dark, chilly hallway with creaking floorboards and shut doors.

Stiles can vaguely make out the spirals and inverted triangles etched into the walls as if it were done with claws. He supposes they might have been. He shoves his hands in his pockets as they warm anxiously with his magic. There’s a weird energy that prickles at him as they venture deeper into the house.

Just when it seems like they’ll never reach the end of the hall, they come to a single white door with a gold doorknob.

Aaliyah makes a noncommittal gesture towards it and says, “Make it quick, if you can help it.”

Stiles isn’t sure what one should to say to that, so he doesn’t say anything at all. He opens the door, and the hinges groan as the floorboards under his feet continue to whine and squeak.

The almost first thing he notices – apart from the oddness of it all in and of itself – is how off-putting the bathroom is, like the room doesn’t even want you there.

Toothpaste splatters the mirror hanging above the sink, congealed on the counters and sinks, while mildew grows around gritty faucets, peeling away at vinyl flooring that traps blackened dirt and grime. There’s overflowing laundry baskets, dirty clothes on the floor around them, dust and hair around the bathtub.

There’s a thick line of grime making a high tide mark around the tub, assortment of shampoo bottles, some empty, some half full. A slimy bar or soap is welded to the edge of the bath, pink scum growing around toilet bowl, hair in the shower drain, pile of old razors, towel rack half hanging on the wall, used damp towels cast onto the floor in a crumpled heaps, and tiles falling off the wall in the shower.

Stiles opens his mouth to say that actually he didn’t need to use it anymore but Aaliyah’s already shut the door behind him as if she anticipates the reaction. He frowns, shudders, and braces himself to follow her advice by making this as swift as possible. He uses the edge of his shoe to lift the lid and pulls himself out to do his business.

Some time between when he flushes and walks to the sink to try and wash his hands, he hears the soft lull of music, and melancholic voices singing. It’s coming from the other side of the bathroom where there is a second door.

His magic simmers curiously and urges him forward to investigate.
Fate makes no mistakes. All things work together for the Common Good.

What’s the Common Good? No, forget it. Don’t tell me because I’m not going to see what’s behind door number one.

You’re here for a reason. What good is a Virtue who does not fulfill their purpose?

It’s not my business.

You make everything else your business when it concerns you. The moment you stepped onto these grounds it became your business, princeling. Open the door or I will. How is that for the Human courtesy you still cling to?

Stiles bites back a snappy retort because that jab was unfair and low. Of course his magic would be siding with Derek about that impromptu fight they had earlier. So much for loyalty.

His magic bristles under his skin as it begins to manifest and he knows he has to act fast before it really does take the lead here. He strides forward carefully and once he reaches the door he pauses before he opens it.

His magic tries to press its way out more insistently.

Stiles cracks the door slightly and is stunned by what he sees.

It’s nothing but albino males, all ages and sizes, crammed into one room, sitting on a carpeted floor and atop their sleeping mats. Their legs are crossed and twisted into an almost pretzel. None of them are empty-handed but their work is hardly recreational; some of them are knitting, others building things like cribs or chairs with rough, calloused hands.

They seem to work in tandem as they hum or sing. For those who are standing, mostly lingering by the barred windows, have a child (squirming infant or toddler) in their arms. And for as cold as the rest of the house may be, this small room is almost sweltering with body heat, sweat is trickling down everyone’s face.

What disturb Stiles the most are their eyes. They don’t seem to have any under the lids that have been scarred shut to their cheeks. They look gaunt and thin like wraiths but strikingly handsome despite these facts.

At his presence, they all seem to straighten, nostrils flaring as confusion works its way across their faces, and then they stop moving altogether as if afraid.

Stiles is at a loss for words, and even more so when a small child that looks no older than seven years of age wanders over to him with his walking stick. He stops just before he can collide into Stiles, and reaches out quickly to grab his right hand, clutching almost desperately before he sniffs at his knuckles.

The boy’s face lights up in excited recognition and he twists his body away to shout, almost joyfully, “la shay’ al'alghaz alllah!” and then, “laqad han fadilatan lana fi mahannatina!”

There are some seemingly stunned murmurs that follow as everyone scrambles to their feet, swaying and leaning on each other for support as they make their way over curiously.

Stiles is scrambling for something to say as they pull him into the room while they form a tightknit circle around him, chanting, “la shay’ al'alghaz alllah!” while also singing joyfully. And he has no idea what any of this means but his magic seems to translate the need here because it begins to strip
away from him, swirling above his head like a thundercloud of magic, twinkling and sparkling. Then it separates, matching the number of occupants of the room as it individualizes into the shape of blue bioluminescent lions.

His magic prowls around, growling lowly, chasing away the shadows in an almost predatory manner. Some parts of his magic prowls around the blinded men as if guiding them away from Stiles to sit down, ethereal tails swinging lazy as they’re petted and spoken to. His magic is comforting these men in a way Stiles can hardly understand because of the language barrier, but it amazes him nonetheless.

“Nothing puzzles God.”

Stiles jumps and his gaze snaps to the right where Aaliyah is standing beside him, watching it all with an incomprehensible expression. He fumbles over an apology but she shakes her head firmly.

“I was hoping your curiosity would lead you here. You are in no trouble with me,” Aaliyah assures and for a moment, her mismatched eyes (grey and blue) seem to grow misty before she blinks quickly. She indicates to the door (which is now shut) and says, “The room is soundproof, so if you have questions, ask them quickly before our absence is noted and my mother sends for us.”

Stiles has a million things he wants to ask but he ends up saying, “Why?”

Aaliyah seems to understand what he means anyway. She doesn’t look ashamed, which is worrying. “It is our way. This is what my mother says. She trusts no man unless he can be subdued. She says the only way to take the fight out of a man is to take the two things that matter the most to him: his eyes and his pride.”

Stiles feels sick. “Why?” he whispers, almost choking over the words.

“The Gurnee Pack was established in Africa, and the women were treated brutally for generations until the Great Migration to North America. When our tribe landed, the women rebelled when one of our female ancestors took the Bite from a local for the promise of power,” Aaliyah struggles to explain. “She then gave the Bite to all the women, and those who survived joined her rebellion and they successfully overthrew the male leaders until she dismantled the old ways completely. From that was birthed the New Religion, placing women as the head of the house and men as…whatsoever we wish. We honor the New Religion by blinding all those born as a male Werewolf. We don’t touch the ones that are Human. They are…given back over to the Humans. Placed in orphanages in hopes that they will be adopted by their own kind.”

“How is that any different from how things were before?” Stiles asks and he’s trying not to be insensitive to this culture. But he doesn’t understand. It’s horrible. “What’s to stop them from rebelling against the new ways now? That pattern of violence never just goes away or resolves itself. Teaching hate is —”

“And who would fight for them? The Humans have their missionaries and ambassadors, but what do we have? Virtues are a dying breed, but no less needed,” Aaliyah snaps, and her shoulders shake with the frustration her eyes show as they glow without changing color. “The Bite was always supposed to be a gift. I’m not like my mother. Neither was my sister when she was gunned down by that cop. This way of life is building a following in our home country. People are risking their lives for the Bite. You think the wars over in the Middle East are just about Human affairs? It’s a power struggle spurned from gender politics.”

“But you’re not like your mother,” Stiles reiterates faintly, just because he needs to wrap his mind around this.
“I want better,” Aaliyah growls, eyes burning hotly like liquid. “I deserve better. Everyone wants to either advocate for violence or education. But I say, why could we not do both? Pain is the greatest educator after all. Laura and I may not see eye to eye on a lot of things, and that’s fine, but we’re desperate not to repeat our mother’s mistakes. I may want subjugation but I also want peace. Men are meant to be ruled, but there are better methods to ensure it.”

That queasy feeling returns and Stiles understands it all too well this time.

“But if I’m going to make waves for my campaign,” Aaliyah continues, and she grabs his left hand in such an abrupt way that it startles him. “I need the backing of a Seven of Virtues. In whatever capacity I can get.” She looks at him intently, before her gaze drops to his wrist and her face twists into an unhappy frown.

“How does everyone know I’m a Virtue?” Stiles exclaims in exasperation.

Aaliyah is still staring fixedly at the inside of his wrist when she replies, “Everyone knows about the boy who returns children to their families by freeing them from the wretched grasp of Antediluvian Ghouls.”

Stiles flushes. “That wasn’t completely me.” His hand twitches in her grasp, and that wrong feeling returns. “Um…I don’t think you should be —”

“Your magic has a distinct smell to it as well,” Aaliyah interjects. “It’s a sticky, sweet kind. The scent clings to you like wax.” Her grip tightens when he tries to pull away. “I could offer you something better, if you would stay with us. I would like an alliance with you, which could be all the more progressive if we bonded.” She doesn’t smile, and her eyes aren’t any kinder than they were before, but that single minded gaze is a bit mesmerizing. The kohl around her eyes only accentuates the intensity of her blue/grey colored irises. She steps closer to him. “I’m willing to sacrifice anything for the duty I will pledge to my family when my mother relinquishes all her Rites as the interim Alpha. I’ll do what my sister could not…” She lifts her free hand to press to his jaw gently, as if afraid she might break him and he freezes up. “Bring us all to the promise land whether by blood or by fire,” she murmurs as she leans in.

And Stiles, for some reason, can’t move. He’s trapped in the glowing embers of her gaze — can’t quite remember what freedom or willpower means. It wouldn’t be so terrible to kiss her, would it?

To let her have and take — this is what he wants — to give — just give in, you want this — give in.

The room suddenly shakes as his magic fuses each duplicate version of itself into one colossal lion with a mighty roar that practically shakes the foundations of the house. The sound wave lashes out and knocks Aaliyah back, sending her flying into the far wall with a crack.

Stiles blinks out of his stupor and immediately feels woozy; utterly wrecked with the side effects of his self-control returning to him. God, what had she done? What had she been trying to do?

His magic is furious, crouching before him protectively and coiled like a snake ready to strike. It snarls at Aaliyah and the Werewolf whimpers in fear, curling in on herself as the door behind Stiles bursts open with a commotion of sound.

Stiles turns to see Talia and Ikramiya standing there with confused, red eyes. They both take in the scene respectively before they react.

Talia’s expression grows thunderous and she begins to shift ever so slowly. “What insult is this for your daughter to touch what belongs to me and mine?” she growls, struggling against the change as it tries to overtake her.
The men huddle together protectively around the younger children in the far corner as they listen anxiously.

Ikramiya quickly falls to her knees before the other Alpha, tearing and ripping her clothes apart with an anguished cry. “What is this that you’ve done, Aaliyah?” she wails. “Has not one daughter been stolen from me? Allah, have mercy and do not take another.” She quickly presents her neck to Talia before falling on her face at Talia’s feet. “Please, Alpha Hale, I beg you. Let the fault be with me. My daughter has been wildly rebellious since the death of her older sister and her niece. I know this is no excuse for the grievous trespass she has done against you by forcing herself on your young charge. I will take her before the Silver Magistrate to be judged myself, but I beg you, let there be no blood spilt on this day. I know I do not deserve your mercy, but I beg it anyway.”

Talia’s shoulders are still shaking and her cheekbones and teeth are taking on a sharper, more animalistic shape. It makes the angles of her face look terrifying. Her fingers have lengthened out into claws, twitching anxiously at her sides as she stares down at Ikramiya. It’s a while before she grits out, “Come, Stiles.”

Stiles doesn’t even hesitate, almost tripping over his own feet in his haste to make it to her side. Talia doesn’t even give him a chance to reach her before her hand shoots out, claws curling into the front of his shirt to yank him into the hot press of her side. She growls lowly in her throat, pressing her nose to the side of his face where Aaliyah’s hand just was with an unhappy sound. Without moving away, she sharply states, “Do as you say, Ikramiya, or I will personally see to the matter.”

Ikramiya rights herself, nodding with such enthusiasm that Stiles is afraid her head will pop off. She wastes no time edging around a taut Talia and skirting past Stiles’s rumbling magic to get to her daughter.

Stiles doesn’t get to see what happens next because Talia is dragging him away by the scruff of his neck.

His magic breaks down into duplicates again, holding the form of a herd of blue bioluminescent lionesses this time as it trails after them. It then flanks them on either side until they reach the dining room like an ethereal bodyguard.

The whole walk over, Talia says not one word, and she neither lessens nor tightens her grip from his neck, but she never hurts him.

All the Gurnee women have made themselves scarce upon their return, probably sensing a disturbance.

All the members of the Hale brood stand quickly, alarmed that Stiles’s magic has been forced to manifest. Then one look at their Alpha, who still looks halfway to shifting, and it creates a ripple effect. Their eyes flash in solidarity as they give animalistic whines in concern and confusion before shaking into the urge to shift as well.

But Talia lifts her right hand (keeping her left on the back of Stiles’s neck) and stalls them from making any sudden movements. Her head cocks slightly towards the ceiling as if she’s listening for something before her red eyes jump over Stiles’s magic, which is still boxing them in as a herd of lionesses.
Braeden steps forward, eyes flashing ivory as her magic gathers and engulfs her open palms in wraithlike ivory fire. She looks prepared for a fight.

Stiles feels his own eyes warm in response, bleeding to honey-gold like a Pavlovian response, and he can see the rest of her magic hanging about her like a wedding veil made of bioluminescent ivory material.

“We need to leave,” Talia suddenly announces. “Now.”

At the command, everyone snaps to, heading towards the door with as little commotion as possible.

Isaac breaks from the group to venture towards Stiles.

Talia looks at him sharply, shaking her head. “No, Isaac. There will be time to — please follow the others,” she urges.

Isaac flushes, stopping dead in his tracks to look properly chastised. His shoulders hunch a little but he doesn’t struggle when Cora pulls him along with her, muttering low and running a hand up and down his spine as she ushers him out the door.

Talia waits as Nana Hale, who is the last to exit, gives them a look (eyes flashing more pink than red). She then waits a few more seconds before she says, “You will need to reign in your magic, and ride with me. I have a few things I need to explain.”

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“The… lifestyle of the Gurnee Pack has always been mere speculation and rumor to outsiders,” Talia explains on their way to the airport.

They’re in a transport van by themselves (with the exception of the driver) and even then Talia had seemed reluctantly wary of it.

Talia continues, almost thoughtfully, “There are things you see, and things you don’t see about different packs. There are different races of Werewolves, and the Gurnee Pack is an unusually mixed breed. History tells us that long ago, during the Great Migration, when supernatural creatures from foreign countries traveled to North America to fight for the land, the Gurnee Clan, before they became Lycanthrope, fell prey to a group of Mermaids when they stumbled across one of their nests. A lot of them were seduced and impregnated, and those with child took the Bite during the Gurnee Rebellion, knowing and not knowing the risks. Because of this, they became more Succubus than Werewolf. They usually keep to themselves for that very reason. They don’t lure Humans if it can be helped, and they are not supposed to use their powers on outsiders. Especially not one who belongs to a rivaling pack. This is law. This was agreed upon decades ago during the Territory Wars.

“It was around this time that the Alpha Parliament of North America was established to keep the peace and to keep order and justice for all Werewolves. The acting Chieftain Alpha initially wanted to destroy the Gurnee Pack, convinced they were nothing but abominations but it was taken to a vote, and there were certain conditions set in place for the promise of their continued survival.” Talia looks a little uneasy by the thought. “Nana would probably be better to explain these things. Her great, great, great grandmother was alive during those times. I only know as much as I do as the existing Curator of our history.”

“Aaliyah said that their policy was to keep men under subjection by blinding them,” Stiles says when she gives a long enough pause for him to do so. “She said a lot of things,” he admits.

Talia sighs, looking a little sullen. “She was giving you half-truths it seems,” she realizes. “Yes, they
believe in female dominion because that is the way things started when they became Lycanthrope. But the subjugation of their males is not because of religious or political reasons. They blind them because it is the males that carry the stronger incubi gene, giving them incredible powers they are only able to utilize by eyesight alone. The females are only able to develop their skills through touch since they’re born without eyes.”

Stiles gives her a horrified look. “So they steal their eyes?” he chokes.

Talia nods as she cards her fingers through his short hair idly.

Stiles thinks about his encounter with Aaliyah, and how drawn to her he felt when she stared him down. God, it explains why some of the women were in burkas. Their resentment towards males were not because they were males but because they had something they wished for – longed after. Aaliyah had known he’d misinterpret the whole situation and she used that to her advantage, feeding him this whole sob story to play on his sympathy.

No wonder Derek had been so worried about him.

Stiles groans and rubs the heels of his hands against his eyes. “God, the way that they have them living. It’s awful.”

“I apologize, Stiles,” Talia says as she tucks him into her side. “Ikramiya gave me her word that no harm or insult would come to us during our visit. I’m quite disappointed about how things turned out. I know Laura will be devastated. She is fond of them.”

Stiles sinks into the embrace with a frown and sighs as she pets his hair. His magic is nestled deep within his gut, rolling back and forth in heated waves of trepidation. “Can I ask you a question?”

“You may ask me anything you like,” Talia replies.

Stiles chews on his bottom lip for a moment before he says, “Technically, I’m not apart of your pack. Will the punishment still be great for Aaliyah?”

“I was hoping we would have this talk a little later,” Talia admits with a wistful sigh as she drops one hand to the curve of his neck, keeping the other in his hair. “Stiles, I want you to know that I’ve spent a lot of time contemplating you as a potential Second for the Hale Pack.”

Stiles freezes in surprise.

Talia ignores his shock in favor adding, “You have incredible potential, not because you’re a Seven, but because you hold the kind of qualities needed to lead and this way I could groom you for Cora when she comes of age. She’s expressed her desire to take over the California and Alaska territory for me so Peter and I can focus on maintaining New York, Texas, and Florida. In fact, I have been discussing this with your father, since you are underage, and protocol dictates I seek his permission, which he expressed that he'll back any decision you make. Of course, it’s been theoretical at the moment, and I was not going to approach you with the request until I was serious.” She sighs again. “I really wanted to talk to you and Cora at the same time about this, but with the way things have gone this weekend, I’m realizing sooner is better than later.”

“You want me to be your Second? To be Cora’s?” Stiles repeats aloud, stumped. And flattered. Very flattered. “What about Braeden? She has a lot more experience and knowledge than me. I’m just only beginning to figure this whole thing out. There’s still so much I don’t know —”

“You’re a natural,” Talia interrupts softly and her hazel eyes are twinkling in amusement when he
dares to glance up. “Yes, Braeden has quite a few years of experience under her belt, but she’s not the soft touch I require or Cora needs. Also, I believe she has plans of her own that goes beyond politicking for Weres. If you don’t feel comfortable stepping into the role, you simply need to say so. You don’t have to try and convince me out of what I already know. You’re a perfect fit, not only for me but for Cora. For all of us.”

Stiles’s face grows hot. “N-no! I wasn’t — that’s not to say — of course I’d want to —” He gives up with a frustrated sound. He takes a moment to gather himself. “If you can be patient with my progress and explain exactly what it is that’s expected of me, then yes, I accept your offer,” he says earnestly.

Talia’s lips curl. “I believe I can agree to those terms,” she reports, humored. “I will not be relinquishing California and Alaska over to Cora until she’s twenty-five, so no worries. You will have plenty of time to feel at ease with the role, or change your mind.”

Stiles silently admits to himself that he is relieved to know that.

“I’ll have to speak to Alan about this so he can adjust your training accordingly. Cora may be joining you,” Talia supposes, mostly to herself. “But, that can wait. For now, I still have to answer your question about Aaliyah. Yes, she will be punished because she broke the law. The Silver Magistrate will decide on what’s fitting according to the situation, but rest assured, she will not die for her crimes. The Silver Magistrate would sooner banish anyone from North America than put them to death.”

“What is the Silver Magistrate exactly?” Stiles asks because he has a feeling this is going to be useful to know down the road if he really is going to be so involved in the Were community. “Is it like a supreme court for Werewolves?”

“For all supernatural creatures,” Talia lightly corrects. “It is a mixed panel comprised of supernatural creatures to ensure fairness, as they play both judge and jury.”

Stiles pokes the corner of his mouth with his tongue as he ponders over everything. “What will happen after the — when Aaliyah is tried?”

“My best guess is that the Gurnee territory will be brought under investigation,” Talia explains, sounding vaguely troubled by the notion. “They may want to solicit some statements from you and I. We will have to be truthful about what Lei Shěn confided in us. If her accusations are valid, then that will warrant a review of Jemila’s position as Alpha.”

“So that means we hand over the letter Lei Shěn gave us?”

Talia is quiet for a moment. Then she replies, “I would still like to have Braeden get it translated for you to see what you make of it. I believe we still have a window before we would need to hand it over.”

“Okay,” Stiles simply says. He waits a beat or two before he casually says, “So…about the Calaveras…”

Talia huffs in amusement. “For now, your father and Alan are both acting as my interim Second,” she explains vaguely. “You will meet them when the time is right.” She adds, “Under careful surveillance.”

Stiles sighs but he doesn’t argue the point. He’s more curious than anything. Everyone seems to be going to great lengths to make sure he’s prepared for that encounter.
You can’t blame him for wondering.

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It says something significant that Talia keeps him close all through their transition through the airport to their terminal, and even when boarding the plane. She seems wound tight, as if poised for a blow that never comes, never quite settling down even when they’re in the air. She shuts down anyone that tries to get close or speak to Stiles, and it’s not until she’s got him alone in the privacy of one of the lounging areas that she offers an explanation of the behavior.

“It’s invasive, I know,” Talia apologizes in a way. She has Stiles kneeling on a pillow at her feet as she sits on the couch, her long fingers combing through his unkempt hair, grooming it with this faraway look on her face. “As an Alpha, my wolf feels grievously insulted by the intrusion of another. You are under my protection and care, and yet —” She stops and seems a little lost in her thoughts. Dazed almost as her red eyes glow with bright intensity. She blinks and then the look is gone. “And yet,” she merely says. “I wish there were better words to explain.”

“It’s instinct,” Stiles offers with a wry smile.

Talia returns it with her own. “Yes, that is the word, isn’t it?”

Stiles shrugs but all he can think about is Derek. He hugs Talia’s calves and presses his right cheek to the hard curve of her knees. His magic begins to manifest and pushes from his body in a flock of ethereal blue canaries, fluttering about and perching where it pleases.

“Clever thing, your magic,” Talia murmurs and he glances up to see one glimmering, blue canary settling on her shoulder, shaking out it’s glittering wings before rubbing against her cheek affectionately. She simply smiles and condones it. “It’s as beautiful as Abraham’s magic was,” she recalls and her eyes grow a little misty with the memory.

"Can I ask what happened to him?"

Talia goes silent, but her expression is both thoughtful and sad. She appears to be trying to find the right words. "It is...complicated. I want to say he died as a result of a car wreck, but there were other things at play during the time that could be blamed as well. He was picking Laura up from ballet practice and we'd been fighting the night before —" She stops suddenly with this look of guilt. She exhales and continues, "That wasn't what I meant to — it's just very difficult to explain."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to stir up anything," Stiles says.

Talia shakes her head with a sad smile. "It's alright. I think maybe I can talk about this another time. It might be important for you to know in the future since Abraham was my Second when he was still alive," she supposes as she eyes the ceiling in thought.

“Do you ever miss —” Stiles bites his tongue, feeling foolish for even letting just a few words of his question slip.

Talia just pulls her gaze to him and it’s so deep and knowing. She gives a pained smile and says, “Yes. There is...always a part of me that does. A wound that never seems to want to close.”

Stiles cradles her right hand in both of his. He swallows around a lump in his throat. “My mother —” He fumbles with the words. “She — me too.”

Talia uses her left hand to cradle his cheek. “It gets better but it never really stops hurting, does it?” she wonders aloud.
Stiles swallows again as his eyes grow warm but it’s not his magic this time. He shakes his head slowly.

Talia exhales.

Stiles feels more longing in the sound than he hears, and he knows exactly what it means.

They both watch as his magic flutters around in animated swoops and loops on wings of glimmering sparkles of bioluminescent blue that looks like streams of stardust in companionable silence.

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From: mskirathunderkat@outlook.com
To: stilinski_kid99@gmail.com

2014 May 5

弱肉強食 - “The weak are meat; the strong eat.”

Dear Stiles,

It’s taken me days to muster up the courage to write this email. I am sorta lame like that, I know, but here I am, or rather, here it is. Not sure what to say. The way we left things was pretty awkward but I have to insist that I’m not holding any resentment against you. Okay, maybe I’m a little bitter. I was so enthralled by the idea of being with you that when it didn’t turn out that way it kind of smacked some reality into me. FYI, reality has a mean backhand and it doesn’t even take of any of it’s rings!

Anyway, I promised that I would text or email or whatever, so that’s what I’m doing. As much as it grieves me to know that I don’t mean to you what you mean to me, I can’t see my life without you. If you want to be friends, I will accept that because you are too awesome not to be around. I’m sure I’ll get like Celine Dion’s infamous Titanic song and “My Heart Will Go On”. I wouldn’t want my first real friendship to go up in flames.

Yes, you read that right. You are my first real friend. So what? Say something, I dare you! I will fight you to the death! I mean it! We will go under the Thunderdome and battle it out! Or maybe not. I think we’re like years ahead of the actual Mad Max concept. Or is it behind? Wait, if that movie came out in the eighties, doesn’t that mean the world should’ve been a desert wasteland ruled by a band of feral orphans by now?

And what about Waterworld? Is it weird that I’m disappointed that our planet hasn’t been completely submerged underwater leaving only a select few of us no choice but to evolve by adapting to the ocean by developing gills? Speaking of, how hot was Kevin Kostner way back when right? And wasn’t that the movie that launched Jack Black’s career? Correct me if I’m wrong. I’m probably wrong. Hang on, let me Google this.

I was wrong, but also got sidetracked and watched Nacho Libre. How awesome is Nacho Libre? I really should’ve sent this email to you hours ago. I literally had to reread this to see where it was I was going with this. I think the point was to say that you and I are cool, and if we’re not, well, we will be. And now that that’s settled, I have to go pick out an outfit because my boy cousins and I will be going to celebrate Children’s Day in Tokyo. It’s still Sunday for you, but we’re a day ahead over here. It’s like 6ish(?) p.m. for ya’ll and it’s almost 11 a.m. on a Monday for us!

My Aunt’s wedding is in a couple of weeks, so that should be fun. Also, my mom has been kind of
teaching me the divine way of the Kitsune, you know, all Karate Kid and whatnot, which is almost a dream come true cause I always wanted to be Daniel-san! Anyway, I’ll give you more details about that later. This is just like a cursory email to break the ice or the tension or whatever you want to call it.

Thunder! Thunder! Thundercats, HOOO!

(I don’t care what my mom says I’m totally a Thundercat now!)

Kira xoxo

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They land a little after six, but the sky is still full of daylight.

Somewhere between exiting the plane, walking from the terminal and to baggage claim, Stiles finds himself in the energetic swell of the Hale Pack.

Talia seems to have finally satisfied whatever intrinsic part of her subconscious that demanded the righting of wrongs instigated by third parties. She lets Stiles move freely without her being right there and he gets ten minutes of breathing room before Isaac and Cora invade his space again. They pull him to and fro, grabbing his bags for him, hounding him with questions and leading the way to the transport vans waiting for them out front.

Stiles tries to both answer and placate them at the same time as they pull him into the thick of the Hale brood.

The family is a river of people, everyone moving in the same direction. There are only joyful faces as they climb into the vans, relaxing in elation of returning home, returning to their territory. It seems to fill them with adrenaline pumping with happiness. They move not like pebbles in a jar, but like water molecules flowing smoothly past one another, staying together as if they’d never dare to be parted.

Even Isaac has something about him that’s more relaxed and eased with the prospect of going home.

Stiles winds up sharing a van with his brother, Cora, Nana Hale and Olive. He barely catches a glimpse of Derek at all, but he knows he’s somewhere and it’s both comforting and agitating at the same time. The knowing and yet not knowing.

He has to read Kira’s email a few times so he can distract himself from the frustration of it all. Soon he doesn’t need to because his dad is texting him and Isaac every five minutes, just as anxious about their return home as they are.

Cora and Isaac are all cozied up in the backseat. They’ve got their heads bent close together as they whisper conspiratorially.

It’s enough to make Stiles rolls his eyes but he leans towards Nana Hale, who sits by him with a drowsy and fussy Olive (who is doing her best to fight against the thought of taking a nap).

Stiles snorts at the adorable tot. “How old is she now?” he asks. “Five months right?”

“Well, let’s see. She was born the eighteenth of November,” Nana Hale replies thoughtfully. “So she’ll be six months on the eighteenth of this month.”

“She’s getting so big and growing so fast. It feels like I only blinked,” Stiles jokes imaginatively. He gets an idea. “She likes ducks, right?”
Nana Hale nods bemusedly.

Olive fusses and wiggles in the older woman’s arms, face red and eyes glazed with her sleepy tantrum.

Stiles takes advantage of his magic’s drowsy state by siphoning a little to his hands as they rotate around each other. He summons just enough not to completely exhaust his magic. He wills it into the form of a single, ethereal blue duckling before dropping it on the adorable tot’s lap.

The response is instantaneous.

Olive stops crying and she blinks wide, leafy green eyes with intrigued childlike wonder. She stares for the longest time at the blue bioluminescent duckling as it waddles across her stomach to settle on her tiny chest. Then she reaches out with her chubby fists and (predictably) attempts to put it in her mouth with a happy sound. She coos when her fingers pass through it like condensed fog.

Stiles smiles tiredly at the display and ignores the slight twinges of annoyance his magic sends to him in waves.

It’s worth it.

When the duckling turns and wiggles it’s short tail against Olive’s nose, she laughs like it’s the funniest thing to ever have happened in all of space and time. Her laughs are so adorable and contagious that everyone in the van echoes it as well (even the hired driver).

Cora and Isaac venture closer to watch the display, attention firmly snagged.

Olive eventually laughs herself to sleep.

It’s actually the most amazing thing Stiles has witnessed.

Though he hasn’t really been around a lot of babies to have much to compare to. He still files it away as something significant and special as his magic recoils, seemingly relieved that its services have been rendered to a point. It retreats into his mind to hide away in the photoreceptors of his brain that specifically functions by responding significantly to color.

Stiles lets it be, distracted anyway by the fact that his phone is vibrating in his pocket as they draw nearer to Beacon Hills. He glances at the screen, heart doing a funny punch-kick as his screen shows a text from Derek that reads:

I’m taking you and Isaac home, and we’re going to talk this out properly.

Okay.

Stiles quickly pockets his phone after he sends his reply. Luckily, his phone doesn’t vibrate again with a response. He thinks he’d lose his nerve if Derek pressed him.

He tries his best not to feel anxious about it all.

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The arrival to the Hale Manor happens around eight or so. Everyone pours out of the transport vans with loud exclamations, whooping cheers, and contented sighs. The younger kids immediately start to strip down, kicking off their shoes as they chase each other into the house, or the backyard, or into the woods. This leaves the adults to do the rest.
Huge fluffy wolfish looking dogs with black, white, and grey fur come galloping out of the house to greet their masters and family with yipping enthusiasm.

Isaac’s face twists in disappointment when he climbs out of the van. Then he aims that expression at Stiles, as if he could be responsible.

Cora rises, pausing her petting of a simpering Ginger, to roll her eyes at Isaac. She just bumps her shoulders into his and explains that their luggage got all mixed and confused, so the easiest option was to just unload here.

Isaac doesn’t look comforted by it at all but he does stop sending Stiles that ‘kicked kitten’ look long enough to humor Ginger with a few pats here and there before he follows Cora over to the vehicle containing said luggage.

Ginger trails after them devotedly.

Stiles figures Isaac will grab both of theirs together because he seems anxious enough about returning home to do so.

Laura walks over and hugs him tightly as Gumdrop settles next to her feet, pink tongue lolling out of her mouth. “I’m so sorry about that whole mess earlier,” she says, voice brittle and when she pulls away, he immediately notices that her eyes are swollen from crying. Even the tip of her nose is red. “I just — I’m sorry,” she repeats, and exhales shakily.

Stiles feels his own heart twist in sympathy. “Laura, you have to know that it wasn’t your fault,” he states soberly.

Laura gives a broken little laugh that sounds like it’s been ripped from her chest, and her brow furrows with such a gloom. “Sure doesn’t feel that way,” she replies, apologetic. “I trusted them. It rips me up inside to think what might have happened if…”

“I’m okay,” Stiles reassures softly. “I know you worry but I’m not completely defenseless.” He lets his eyes shift to honey-gold and back again just to prove a point. Also because he thinks it’s cool that he’s getting better at his control. “My magic’s just as protective. It’s better than any bodyguard, at least.”

Laura sniffs, nose wiggling with the sound as she nods. She doesn’t look any less mournful. “I understand what has to happen next but, you know, not all of them are spoiled of virtuousness,” she says with such certainty. “In our world, the mistake of one person has the potential to hit the masses.”

“Your mom said the worst that can happen is banishment,” Stiles soothes.

Laura snorts bitterly and sweeps her fingers under her eyes as her mouth trembles. “Yeah, well, she has too much faith in the Silver Magistrate,” she mutters resentfully. “It’s a council of old farts stuck in their ways. I wouldn’t be surprised if they —” Her expression changes suddenly and her jaw clenches. “Whoops,” she grits out. “Seems I’ve spoken out of turn.”

Gumdrop whimpers a little before darting off.

Stiles frowns in confusion and he has to follow the aged canine for clarity.

Gumdrop settles over where Talia is.

Talia has her arms full with Olive as she watches everyone sort through the pile of luggage. She’s taken a moment to give Laura a sharp look, and she’s murmuring something very lowly.
Stiles turns back to Laura to ask but her changing countenance is so abrupt and minute, like a deck of cards being shuffled. The questions die on his tongue.

Laura’s ears twitch a little and her hands curl into fists as her eyes flash red. “Excuse me, Stiles. My smart mouth and outlandishly biased assumptions have gotten me into trouble,” she remarks, petulant. “As if I’m not already in hot water.” She grunts as she pulls away from him completely and stomps towards her waiting mother with a mutinous visage.

Stiles is understandably worried, but he’s not given enough time to linger over Talia and Laura’s complicated relationship because Braeden steps into his direct line of sight. He blinks and refocuses his attention.

“I want all of your time tomorrow,” Braeden bluntly states. She runs her fingers through her dark, voluminous ombre curls. Her lips are painted with deep, reddish purple (like a dark wine), and it’s almost as menacing as her flawlessly winged eyeliner. “Are you going to stare at me or are you going to confirm?” she demands impatiently.

Stiles blinks and flushes. “You’re really pretty,” he retorts defensively. “I mean —” He scrambles to recall just what she’s been saying to him.

Braeden lifts a perfectly arched eyebrow and doesn’t thank him for the compliment. “Your time. Tomorrow. Mine.” She’s being deliberately obtuse and demanding. “Does that process for you, or do I have to put a bag on my head so you won’t be so distracted by my beauty?”

“Uh, no. You’re attitude kind of takes care of that,” Stiles responds, displeased. Then he pauses. “Did I say that out loud?”

Braeden’s full lips curl into a slow smirk and her eyes gleam. “Ah, see,” she drawls. “There’s that attitude. I knew you weren’t so polite. I was getting worried Derek was attracted to a pushover, but then again he did always like the snarky ones.”

Stiles mutters, “Glad you approve.”

“Never said that,” Braeden cheerily replies. Then she straightens like she’s been zapped and her smirk grows a little more wicked. “Is that my baby?” she purrs gleefully, looking at a point past his shoulder.

Stiles turns in time to see a snow leopard the size of a full-grown polar bear come barreling out the house on large fluffy paws. He quickly steps out of the way before a long fluffy tail swishing furiously behind the huge feline can strike him.

Braeden makes a gleeful squeal as she’s pounced and pinned to the ground by her conduit. She practically disappears under the spotted and speckled white fur. “You fucking needy bitch, get off,” she cries but she’s snickering. “Whit Lee!”

Whit Lee just huffs and lazily licks at her face, neck, and hands. He growls something guttural and moves to settle back on his hind legs. He’s given her some breathing room but he still curls his long tail around her waist possessively, using it to heave her upright to her feet.

“Goddess,” Braeden huffs as she tries to catch her balance and quickly tidies herself with as much dignity as she can muster. When her conduit growls, she laughs again. Before Stiles can look confused, she explains, “He’s complaining that he was stuck with babysitting duties. He claims he spent his weekend soaked in slobber.” She grins. “He’s only affectionate with me. Everything else is just a threat to mess up the brilliant coat of his fur. Such a prima donna. Don’t know where he gets it
Stiles snorts disbelievingly and tries to look innocent when Braeden sends him a look for it.

Whit Lee’s chest rumbles.

Braeden keeps staring Stiles down but she bats some of her hair over her shoulder. As she puts her hands on her curvy hips, she says, “Whit Lee, this is Stiles. He’s a Seven, so show proper respect,” she introduces blithely. “Stiles, this is Whit Lee. Please don’t try to pet him,” she warns.

Stiles wouldn’t dream of it but he does wave awkwardly when Whit Lee cocks his head and assesses him with glowing ice blue eyes burning with age old intelligence. “Nice to meet you,” he says.

Whit Lee’s left ear twitches at the words and Stiles could almost swear he was amused but he can’t tell. Then, out of nowhere, Whit Lee bows his head, chest rumbling.

Braeden rolls her eyes. She translates, “He says it’s an honor to meet a Faerie Princeling.” She then spitefully adds, “You just remember who your queen is. Don’t go buddying up to the first slice of Fae royalty you’ve ever met. You’re mine. You don’t get to trade up for better.”

Whit Lee just huffs dismissively and rumbles something that could be considered him returning the sentiment. This assumption is only proven when Whit Lee slowly brushes his side against hers and rubs his face against her cheek affectionately.

Braeden purrs and coos. She takes a moment to call her conduit beautiful and gorgeous as she kisses his snout, releasing her magic in a wave of ivory fog that blankets the great cat like a cape. Then there’s a moment where both of their eyes turn into mirrors, echoing a bright ivory color as she presses her forehead to his and they stare at each other with indiscernible love.

Stiles feels something in him long for a connection like that. His magic even twists anxiously somewhere in the back of his mind before settling quietly again.

Isaac returns to his side empty-handed. Without taking his curious blue eyes off of Braeden and Whit Lee, he explains, “Derek said he’s taking us home. I gave him our stuff. Think he’s putting it in his car so he can pull around.”

“Cool,” Stiles replies weakly. He becomes a bundle of nerves again.

If Isaac notices his tone, he ignores it. He could also be distracted by the fact that Braeden’s conduit begins to circle him with a curious sound. He gives Braeden and Stiles a helplessly confused look and doesn’t move an inch.

“Don’t worry,” Braeden replies lazily, but she looks like she’s enjoying how uncomfortable her great cat is making Isaac. “He doesn’t eat naughty children. He thinks you’re a baby.”

Isaac glowers at her but he still refuses to move a muscle while he’s being circled.

Stiles frowns in confusion. “Why exactly does he think my brother is a baby?” he asks.

“Well, I guess kitten would be the better term,” Braeden supposes, voice lilting thoughtfully. “He smells a familiar ancestry in his blood.” She swings her gaze to Stiles. “He’s a Werecat, isn’t he?”

“He is right here and can speak for himself,” Isaac interjects sourly before Stiles has the chance to confirm it. “And it’s none of your business.” He flinches, frown deepening when Whit Lee pokes his cheek with the tip of his long fluffy tail, and he gives an amused growl at the reaction.
“That’s enough, Whit Lee,” Braeden commands. “Wouldn’t want his rudeness to rub off on you, love.”

Isaac’s glower returns and he stands behind Stiles with a menacing expression.

Derek pulls up in his lime green Camaro (Jordan sitting in the back) with perfect timing. He gestures for Isaac and Stiles to join him. To Braeden, he says, “You can’t come.”

“Our unreasonable, but fine. I’m sure you’ll tell me all about the heart to heart later,” Braeden remarks breezily before blowing him a kiss. She grabs Stiles’s arm before he can get away. “You need to understand,” she says as Isaac climbs into the backseat. “That I have decided that we are going to be spending time together tomorrow.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Kate drawls pleasantly as she strolls over with Peter and a black, hulking mass of fur trailing after her. “Stiles and I have plans of our own.” She gives Stiles a significant look as she says, “We still on for breakfast?”

Stiles blinks, letting the question process before the weight of the words hit him.

Christ Argent. Bitter family reunion. Right.


Kate smirks with good humor as she pets the canine hiding its face in her stomach.

“Why don’t I just join you two? Then Stiles and I can get to what we’re supposed to do,” Braeden suggests tenaciously.

“Nope,” Kate simply says. “Sorry, but members only.”

“Even I’m not invited,” Peter reports with morose resignation. “As much as it pains me to say.”

“You’ll get over it,” Kate retorts, batting a hand at him. “Now, take Cinderella for a run. I have to help Laura pack so she can move in to our condo. She suddenly has the inspiration to get this done tonight. Must have gotten into a fight with your sister.”

“Ah, but what’s new?” Peter utters satirically. “Very well.” He turns to Stiles. “Any news from Deaton about the information I shared with you?”

Stiles shakes his head because Deaton has been pretty radio silent this weekend.

“It’s just as well I suppose,” Peter sighs, taking a moment to think. Then he says, “I think we should arrange a meeting. First to explore the grounds at which Mr. Ravenhill died, and then do the same for his cabin.”

“Oh, I’m definitely tagging along to that,” Braeden declares. “No concessions.”

“You have a funny way of asking,” Stiles notes.

Braeden snorts. “I see where your brother gets his manners.” She turns to Derek, who’s still waiting patiently in the car. “You know what? Don’t give him all the dick tonight. He don’t deserve it. Give him half. Nope. Matter of fact. Just the tip, Miss Peaches. Then pull out.”

Stiles splutters indignantly.

“Brae...” Derek growls warningly, eyes flashing to amber.
Isaac’s face twists up like he’s envisioning something he really wishes he couldn’t and he slumps down further in the backseat. He gently pushes Jordan away when the canine tries to climb into his lap and lick at his face.

Braeden just snaps her finger at Whit Lee and sashay’s away. “You will be giving me some of your time tomorrow, Stiles,” she decrees, making her way over to the luggage pile. “I’ll just go ahead and make myself comfortable in your room, Dee.”

“You can sleep in the basement for all I care!” Derek calls after her, disgruntled.

“She’s almost as bad as you,” Peter remarks to his girlfriend.

Kate looks like she resents that. “Please. No one is as bad as me. I’m insulted. Use protection, Derek. Remember, you can’t tap it if you don’t wrap it.” She winks at Stiles as she strolls away. “I’ll pick you up first thing tomorrow. Get plenty of beauty sleep, buttercup.”

Stiles huffs but he nods agreeably, ignoring the flush worming across the bridge of his nose. He glances down with a curious expression. “So this is the infamous Cinderella? She’s shaggier than I imagined,” he admits because she is and he’s trying to stall for time.

Cinderella is literally a husk of black, shiny fur.

Peter’s face twists distastefully. “Ella does not think highly of my grooming methods. Her hiding gets clever if she suspects I’ll attempt to do anything more than a wash and a brush. Cutting her fur is out of the question.” He sighs fondly. “She likes it long.”

Cinderella’s tongue lolls out the side of her mouth while she pants happily and cocks her head towards Stiles curiously.

Stiles reaches out to pet her but she darts away shyly. “Guess she’s still not used to me,” he supposes.

Peter just hums noncommittally. “You should get going,” he suggests. “My nephew keeps sending us these anxious little glances.”

“Am not,” Derek mutters and quickly looks away with pink cheeks when Stiles glances over. “Bud out.”

“If I must,” Peter chuckles. He gives a singular wave, turning on his heel and venturing off to find his companion.

Stiles exhales quietly and braces himself, hesitating just for a few more moments before he makes his way to the car, rounding it to get to the passenger side.

Derek says nothing when he climbs in. He fiddles with his touch screen satellite radio, stopping on a blues/jazz station while Stiles buckles in. He honks as he slowly drives forward, making sure to warn his family so they can move out of his way.

Stiles leans against his door and watches the passing scenery as they take the twisty private road that leads them out of the preserve.

The black before them has a velvet quality, like the air has been thickened somehow, and the sound of the radio does nothing to dull the tension slipping in. It feels oppressive almost.

It’s not until Isaac lowers his window, does it offer some relief.
The breeze that blows in is warm, announcing the coming of summer's hottest days. The aroma of the pine trees is an almost calming perfume, and sequin-silver stars shine like the scattered embers of a dying fire above them.

The forest is dark and quiet, but there is peace in its sullen landscape.

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From: stilinski_kid99@gmail.com
To: mskirathunderkat@outlook.com

05/04/14

Kira

I'm sorry, again, and I hope you know I never meant to hurt you. I'm glad I didn't screw things up so bad, and that you still want to be my friend. I'm also glad you reached out to me. Wasn't really sure where we stood after our last conversation. I'll try to be an even better friend to you from now on. I can’t wait to hear all about your time in Japan (I am endlessly envious), and hopefully I can get into enough trouble to keep my emails somewhat interesting. This one is pitiful, but I’ll make up for it in my next one.

Stiles

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The street is quiet and clear when Derek pulls up to the Stilinski house.

His dad is sitting out on the porch, holding hands with Melissa as they sit in a pair of white wicker hanging chairs Stiles doesn’t remember ever being there. They are artfully installed on the left side of the porch, in front of the large living room windows. He doesn’t see Scott but Stiles figures his best friend must be around there somewhere.

Isaac practically climbs out the open window in his haste to get to their father.

Stiles smiles fondly as he watches his little brother sprint across the yard, practically knocking their dad on his back when he rises to meet Isaac halfway.

His dad stumbles on the steps in the embrace but he carefully adjusts his stance so they don’t both go tumbling down the stairs. He wraps one arm around him and uses the other to pet the back of his head affectionately.

Isaac hides his face in the side of their father’s neck, and he’s obviously scenting him but their dad knows it, taking it in stride.

Melissa watches from where she’s sitting with soft eyes and a cheerful grin.

“Give me one second,” Derek suddenly says, grabbing his attention.

Stiles turns to face him but the older teen is climbing out of the car and rounding the back to pop the trunk. He watches through the rearview mirrors as Derek carries their luggage up to the house, stopping at the bottom of the steps to place them there.

His dad greets him and his expression turns thoughtful before he glances over at Stiles with a raised eyebrow.
Stiles has no idea what Derek has said to elicit that response so he kind of shrugs helplessly as Jordan sticks his wet nose against the back of his neck, sniffing. He reaches back to stroke the canine distractedly as he watches his dad exchange words with Derek. He tries in vain to try to read his dad’s lips since he can only see the back of Derek’s head.

Eventually Derek nods and gives a slight wave to Melissa before he turns back towards the car. He glances at Stiles as he approaches the passenger side door, and he opens it for him. “Come take a walk with me,” he says. “Please.”

Stiles wordlessly nods, not sure he could have even said no when Derek is looking at him with such undemanding determination. He steps out of the car and closes the door behind himself.

Derek lets Jordan out and then they begin a silently slow stroll up the block towards the next four-way stop sign intersection.

The tall metal streetlamps cast an artificial glow around them, illuminating the moist grass and asphalt in garish yellow light. They step in time, unhurried and languid with contemplation. Stretching out of sight on either side of the road are identical detached houses, each with a path running down the middle of it’s lawn leading to porch steps. The windows are glowing with either the flickering light of a television or the solid white of a ceiling light.

It always amazes Stiles how the arrival of nightfall brings with it such a universal hush in sleepy towns such as these. Back in Los Angeles, the chaos of sound never ceased, day or night; it was a thriving, unceasing cycle.

Jordan sprints ahead of them to sniff around the base of a tree.

Stiles waits until they’ve almost reached the stop sign before he blurts, “I’m sorry.”

Derek looks at him with a frown, never faltering in his pace as he jams his large hands in the pockets of his hooded jacket. “Me too,” he admits.

“You were right,” Stiles continues. “You have nothing to apologize for.”

Derek mutters something quick and low before stepping directly in Stiles’s path. “I don’t want to be right,” he presses. “I never wanted to be right about… that.” He gives a distressed sigh as he runs a hand through his hair. He weaves a few fingers through his unkempt hair, tugging and petting more in a display of frustration than an attempt to tidy it.

Stiles takes a moment to notice how Derek’s almost as tall as the stop sign he’s standing next to. Then he refocuses his attention on the situation at hand. “I was being insensitive about your culture,” he insists. “I was being insensitive about you.”

“Sometimes you don’t know what you don’t know,” Derek retorts as he cocks his head with a soulful look. “I should be more tolerant about that. I should be explaining instead of storming off in a fit when I don’t have the right words to make you understand. That was really stupid of me to get upset about.”

“Same here,” Stiles mutters and rubs the back of his neck. “I know you’re not Human.”

Derek looks at him wordlessly, but there’s something so guarded about his expression.

“Derek, I know you aren’t — that things aren’t going to be like what I’m used to or whatever,” Stiles continues, resolute about being understood. “It’s like I told Cora. I’m not asking any of you to be anything you’re not. I’m not asking — I would never ask you to change.” He adds, “We both
overreacted, but I won’t lie and say that I wouldn’t prefer if you told me things that I need to know about the way your dynamics work in the best way you can so I don’t flip or freak out. It kind of felt like I was being...” He pauses to swallow and just accepts the flush that overrides his face. “…seduced,” he admits weakly.

Derek maintains his poker face, but there’s something that flashes in his hazel eyes. It takes him a full minute before he blinks, snapping out of his thoughts before he inhales slowly and exhales carefully. “Okay,” he says quietly. “That wasn’t what I meant when I marked you. I can understand why you reacted the way you did. It makes more sense now.” He straightens and his shoulders relax a fraction. “Uh, I’m more of a neck guy when it comes to…that.”

“Oh.” Stiles wishes that the cover of night could hide his pink face. He clears his throat and shifts awkwardly. “Good to know, I guess.”

Derek looks a little embarrassed by his admission as well because he just shifts his gaze to watch Jordan paw at the edge of someone’s lawn as he shrugs halfheartedly.

“Well this took an awkward turn,” Stiles mumbles and smiles a little when Derek snorts. The mood lightens with the humor of the situation. “I don’t think we’re supposed to discuss kinks until way later.”

“So you’re saying there will be a later,” is Derek’s quick snap response, and he’s definitely grinning now. “Nice to know I’m not the only one thinking ahead.”

Stiles rolls his eyes but he grins too.

Derek’s expression grows somber and he says, “I didn’t want to be right. I just heard rumors about them, but Stiles, I never wanted to be right.”

“I know,” Stiles says, deflating because he doesn’t like to think about the circumstances. He rubs his face tiredly. “I meant to just use the bathroom and go back to the table. But my magic, you know. It insisted I see what was behind door number one, and I did because I trust it more than I trust myself.”

“Even now, still? After what came of it?” Derek is watching him closely, like he’s trying to memorize the details of his face.

Stiles feels a little winded by the look and he has to glance at the stop sign behind Derek to collect himself. “Yes, even still. It protected me when I needed it the most. It didn’t — wouldn’t ever let me be vulnerable. And I do believe I saw what I saw for a reason. Gave me an idea about what the bigger picture is to this whole Seven of Virtues title. Something Aaliyah said to me, you know. That Humans have their ambassadors and missionaries but what does the supernatural community have? I want to help, Derek. Sunrise and sunset, all I can think about is how I want to make a difference.”

Derek nods like he understands (maybe he does), and for some reason, that’s just as comforting as a verbal confirmation would have been. His easy acceptance is beyond comforting.

Stiles feels an unexpected swell of affection for Derek that makes his heart sway in a punch-drunk way. He feels free with Derek in a way he’s never felt before with anyone else. Like he could say or do anything and Derek would not hesitate to support him in anyway he needed.

Holy shit.

Holy shit.

Stiles really could see himself with Derek for the rest of his life and they’re just talking about his
ambitions on a wet sidewalk at a four-way stop sign intersection at ten o’clock at night and it’s not even anything special. Dear god, it’s so sudden and unexpected, how much he just wants Derek in anyway he can have him. It burns him up on the inside, imploding his mind, and making him ruthlessly dizzy.

“You okay?” Derek asks with a concerned frown. “You’re heart went a bit wonky there for a second. And you look a little twitchy,” he remarks, vaguely amused. “I mean, more than usual.”

Stiles is still on autopilot when he reaches out to pinch Derek’s arm for that comment. He feels stuck somehow, unable to extract himself from the loop of ‘I want him forever’ swimming laps in his mind.

If his magic had been awake, it would have been thrilled. He’s trying not to freak, but there’s something almost freeing about it as well. Like he’s finally made up his mind about something he’s been struggling with for what seems like the longest time.

“Seriously,” Derek states. “You’re being scarily quiet right now. You’re only like that when we fight.”

“I’m fine,” Stiles replies faintly, and even to his own ears that sounds suspicious and unconvincing. He blinks and snaps out of it. “I’m just tired. Jetlag.” Half-lie, half truth.

Derek seems to accept that response better than the previous one, and Stiles makes a mental note that there is a way to stump that patented Werewolf Lie Detector. “We should probably head back anyway. I promised your dad I would only take up thirty minutes of your time,” he confesses.

“Yeah, I don’t think I’ll ever get used of you trying to earn brownie points with my dad,” Stiles pensively reports.

Derek just grins unrepentantly and asks, “Can I hold your hand?”

Stiles almost bites the inside of his cheek as he gives the other boy a wide eyed look.

Derek’s mouth twists into a sentimental half-smile. “I know we cleared the air about things, but I’m making it a point to broadcast my intentions,” he explains. “I want to hold your hand. I mean, I want to do more than that, but I’ll settle for holding your hand. It’s been kind of a crazy day. I feel like I need to touch you and I’ll take anything I can get if —”

Stiles’s face grows hot and he chokes a little. “O-okay, Derek, yes, Jesus, yes. Just stop talking for a minute. Please,” he begs, lightheaded.

Derek smirks but he makes a show of zipping his lips and wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

Stiles gives a nervous short laugh before he laces the fingers of his left hand with Derek’s right hand. His blush deepens when the older teen swipes his thumb over the inside of his wrist where his mark still remains.

Derek uses the grip to tug Stiles closer with a content sigh. He has a small grin on his face as they begin the walk back. The kind of grin that makes it seem like he’s just won something precious.

Stiles is partially sure that his heart is trying to leap out of his chest. He wonders if Derek is paying close attention to it and he tries not to feel self-conscious. Though it may tell him that Stiles is nervously excited but it doesn’t explain the reasoning behind the reaction. He’s still trying to protect his thoughts and feelings about this blossoming relationship he has with Derek. He doesn’t officially know what he wants to do yet.
Derek grows a bit more somber when they reach his car and his grin fades with a melancholy expression. He sighs and squeezes Stiles’s hand one final time before letting go. “I wish I could stay longer,” he admits. “But my mom will wonder.”

“Yeah,” Stiles says quietly as he watches Derek open the passenger side door to let Jordan climb in before he shuts it. He stays where he is as Derek leans back against the door behind him. The distance agitates Stiles in a way he can’t even put into words. “Come back tomorrow,” he exclaims, no proper set up for it, and he feels so gangly and awkward about it.

Derek grins excitedly. “Yeah?”

“Yes,” Stiles breathes, hardly standing it. “You should come back tomorrow night. Tomorrow night because I’ll be, you know, I’ll probably be running around earlier. Um, with Kate and maybe Peter or Braeden if she gets her way.”

“She’s crafty enough to always gets her way, sadly,” Derek kindly sympathizes.

“Right,” Stiles merely says and shifts his stance. He gnaws on the corner of his lip. “So, um, come back tomorrow night because I —”

Derek waits for him to complete that sentence but he doesn’t. “Because?” he prompts.

Stiles’s skin feels tight and itchy with nerves. “Because I want you to,” he concedes softly.

Derek’s grin lengthens out into a thousand watt smile. “I really want to kiss you,” he professes, almost like a painful sigh. “You make it so easy to want it.”

Stiles ducks his head shyly, stuck between flattered and flustered; his heart might burst. But what else is new when it comes to Derek? He replies, “I don’t know if I can get used to you just saying stuff like that to me.”

“I’m a brave soul,” Derek supposes with slight self-deprecation. He seems to have mercy and asks, “Are you going to Kate and Laura’s housewarming party? I think they were aiming to have it this coming weekend. You should go with me.”

“Or not at all?” Stiles teases a little as he straightens. He laughs when Derek does that stupid finger guns thing at him. “You’re such a dork. I need to roll with someone cool or you’ll ruin my reputation.”

“Wow. Rude.” Derek slaps a hand over his little dark heart. “I keep telling you it’s not dark,” he insists, eyes crinkling in amusement.

Stiles flushes. “I didn’t even say that out loud!” he swears.

“Hm,” Derek patiently replies before leaning forward to tug Stiles’s left ear. “Guess I can just read your mind then.”

Stiles grabs that hand, not thinking when he bites at Derek’s knuckles.

Derek’s hazel eyes darken before burning to liquid gold with a flash of excitement, shifting back again, and he makes a sound that Stiles has never heard before.

Stiles gets a little flustered when he realizes that his plan backfired. “Uh, no! No, don’t look at me like that! I was trying to offend you. Not, um…” He kind of stammers over the words.
“Seduce me?” Derek supplies, his voice sounds gravelly. He straightens and steps closer. “Sure. Okay. That was very offensive. I wonder what else I should pull at to get you to bite the rest of —”

Stiles quickly slaps a hand over his mouth with a hissing sound. “Jesus, Derek, don’t you dare. My brother can probably hear everything we’re saying,” he warns, panicked. He groans and drops his forehead to Derek’s shoulder. “I’ll never live it down.” He lifts his head quickly with a glare. “He’ll tell Cora. And you know how she is. She’ll make verbal jabs in front of everyone. And I like going to your house too much to have to choose between my dignity or facing that.”

“Don’t know what to tell you,” Derek answers with an apologetic shrug. “Enhanced hearing is just something you have to get used to.” Then he sighs and woefully adds, “I guess I can calm down with the dirty talk outside of the bedroom. Can’t make any real promises about it…”

“Lose my number,” Stiles starts, counting off his fingers with each point. “Lose my email. Lose my address. Don’t come back tomorrow. Or the next day after that. Or the next day after that. And I’m not going to the housewarming party with you. We are not even friends anymore. You are a horrible person — stop laughing, I’m so serious.”

Derek is literally wiping gleeful tears from his eyes as he leans back against his car to hold himself up.

“Okay.” Stiles may be nodding but he’s really annoyed. “Okay. I’m glad you find it all so amusing. Yes, let’s have a good laugh at Stiles.”

“I’m trying,” Derek chokes out and starts laughing even harder.

Stiles’s mouth wiggles as he fights against an answering smile and he shakes his head with an eye roll. The smile wins out eventually. “You’re so annoying,” he promises.

“Yeah, maybe, but I think you like it,” Derek retorts as he begins to calm down. He gets thoughtfully silent and then asks, “Can I kiss you on the cheek?”

“Geez, is this what you’re going to be like now? Broadcasting everything that goes through that head of yours?” Stiles complains with pink cheeks but his heart kicks up in anticipation.

“Well,” Derek drawls with mock contemplation. “Not every thought.” He wiggles his eyebrows with a smirk.

“Shut up before I change my mind,” Stiles mutters and tilts his face away slightly. His fingers wiggles anxiously and waits. “Um, are you going to do it or…”

Derek blinks and snaps to. “Sorry. Got distracted by your neck,” he admits offhandedly and leans forward to press his warm lips to Stiles’s heated cheek.

Stiles closes his eyes against the sensation, thinking about how ridiculously into Derek he must be if he thinks that this cheek kiss blows all others out of the water. His heart is beating so loud and so fast that there’s no way the whole neighborhood can’t hear it. His magic is swirling with gleeful joy in his mind, suddenly awake and alive.

Derek’s lips are the right amount of soft and firm; just perfect.

Stiles feels warmth spread through his limbs and his chest tingles with a pleasant buzz. Every good thing seems possible in that moment. It’s just a goddamn cheek kiss but it somehow conveys the same kind of intimacy a full on kiss to the lips would.
It might have been an eternity when Derek finally pulls away but Stiles wouldn't have noticed. As the soft lips of Derek’s mouth left the side of his face, the exact spot where they came into contact with burned and tingled.

A small grin creeps onto Stiles’s face, his cheeks a rosy color, and Derek’s face mirrors the look.

Derek’s eyes seemed brighter almost, filled to the brim with joy. His eyes are like the color of milk chocolate edged with a deep forest-green. Sometimes the two colors seem to swirl together like moss creeping over rich soil. And when he smiles just at Stiles, it’s like both colors ignite with a glow.

Stiles is dazzled. He is simply overcome. And when their eyes lock, having a private conversation of their own, he just knows.

He’s found what he didn’t even know he had been looking for. Someone to show him what it means to be happy from the inside out.

“Goodnight,” Derek says quietly and he seems slightly wrecked at the thought of leaving.

“Night,” Stiles returns because he’s in the same position. With everything in him, he doesn’t want Derek to leave. “I — I’ll see you tomorrow,” he says like a promise. Like encouragement for himself.

“Yeah,” Derek dreamily agrees, and he brightens at the prospect with a grin. “Then it’ll be your turn to kiss me on the cheek.”

“Joy,” Stiles responds weakly. The word sounding almost strangled because he can imagine it, what it would be like, and his lips tingle. He swallows and takes a desperate step back before he gives in to the urge to jump the gun. “Right. Um. See you tomorrow.”

Derek nods, still hesitating before he musters up the will to round the car. “Text me. Call me. Anything. I just want to hear from you,” he begs as he climbs into his car. “Later.”

“Later.”

Derek pulls away from the curb in a u-turn, waving one final time as he passes.

Stiles waves faintly and watches what feels like a piece of himself drive away. His magic twists and folds into itself behind his heart, quelling with dissatisfaction. He’s about to turn in but he recognizes the familiar feline figure of his uncle sitting under the soft glow of the streetlamp across the street.

His mood begins to take an ugly turn.
The cat puts on his midnight paws and prowls into the thickening night as he crosses the street. Even in the stillness, his ears seem to twitch, picking up sounds that Stiles didn’t care to hone in on, even though he knew he had the ability to. He navigates around a fire hydrant, slinking like a true feline, claws still sheathed. The cat pads without noise, barely disturbing the dew-laden carpet of grass under paw when it comes to a rest on the off grey of the curb.

Claude’s ginger fur looks clean and neat, making Stiles wonder how his uncle manages that. His tail swishes anxiously behind him as he gazes up at Stiles with yellow cat eyes, ears still flickering and swishing on his head.

“Where have you been?” Stiles questions. He doesn’t believe beating around the bush will cut it this time. “You’ve missed out on a lot,” he adds, mockingly.

“I had some business to attend to. Things that required my immediate attention,” Claude vaguely explains, and of course he does because he’s a secretive bastard. “Couldn’t be helped, Stiles. I did my best to be quick about it.”

“I’m sure you did,” Stiles mocks sweetly. “So what is it this time? Come to deliver some last minute news about someone I care about being in danger? You’re famous for that.”

“You still don’t trust me,” Claude realizes, and he bristles. “I’m your uncle. I shouldn’t have to prove myself to you.”

“You go ahead and believe what you want. You haven’t been here. You never were,” Stiles snaps back. “So excuse me if I want to make this quick but what do you want?”

“The Reyes Twins have returned,” Claude responds tightly, tail swishing furiously. “I’ve been tracking them down. I figured you would appreciate that.”

“Yeah, well, you know what they say about assumptions,” Stiles states hotly. “I already know who’s been behind everything, no thanks to you. Why didn’t you tell me that the Benefactor wasn’t Gerard? And what’s worse, you never said it was a Seven of Vices either.”

Claude looks as surprised as a cat can as he shifts out of his seated position on the curb.

“Again, do you still not get why I don’t trust you?” Stiles peevishly restates.

Claude shakes himself out of his stupor and slowly sits back on his hind legs again. “The Benefactor is not the real enemy here.”

Stiles laughs coldly. "I think you and I have different definitions of what defines an enemy. For one, I don't play favorites. You're either for me or against me. There is no first or last," he clarifies.

Claude still ignores his reasoning, and continues, "What’s pressing — what’s more important is Gerard. He’s the real threat to us. To everyone like us.”

“I’ll take your opinions into consideration when you can stop feeding me misleading information,” Stiles retorts tiredly. He really doesn’t have time for this. “What is the significance of the sacrifices and where they’re done? And —”

"Sacrifices!" Claude gasps.
“— don’t you dare pretend like you don’t know what I’m talking about or talk your way out of it. There’s a reason the Reyes Twins activated Kira, and not just for some power outage to help their mute father fly the cuckoo’s nest, and I think you know. I’m not even going to touch on the black soap. Are you working for the Benefactor?”

“I will not dignify that with a response!” Claude fumes icily, springing to his feet or paws or whatever. “You are letting things that do not hold precedent distract you. Gerard is the enemy and by ignoring that, you’re putting us all in danger.”

Stiles can’t hold back his magic when it sinks into his hands, consuming them with blue ethereal light that flickers like glitteringly dangerous flames. He hopes no one is watching them, but he’s too angry to glance about. “Mr. Ravenhill is dead. He was your friend, wasn’t he? Did you know, or do you even care?” he asks as calmly as he can.

“We are at war. There are losses to be expected,” Claude pigheadedly remarks but he looks a little frightened at the sight of his nephew. Coward. “You’ve developed since I last saw you, but there will be no talking to you now. Not like this,” he fretfully decides and eases away. “Perhaps some distance will put things in perspective for the both of us. In the mean time, why don’t you sort out that attitude of yours?” He darts off before Stiles can even keep him in place.

“Fine!” Stiles yells after him. He makes a frustrated sound and shakes out his hands until his magic extinguishes obediently. “Good riddance,” he mutters, fingers still tingling hotly. His gaze darts across the street and he sighs when he sees Mrs. Doyle’s curtains flutter close.

Great. Just great.

Stiles will have to deal with that later. He stomps towards the house, up the steps and through the front door. He slams it behind him.

It startles Melissa and his dad, who are sitting at the kitchen table with their hands wrapped around their cups of coffee.

Stiles simmers down long enough to look sheepish. His magic is swirling around his lungs. “Sorry. I…um. Sorry,” he offers by way of explanation. He takes a moment to try and calm down.

“You and Derek having a disagreement?” his dad tentatively questions, looking concerned.

“Trust me when I say that’s not the case,” Isaac interjects as he comes skulking down the steps, barefoot. He goes to the fridge to pull free his mint-chocolate chip ice cream and grabs a spoon. His lips are a bit pinched at the corners when he forces himself to add, “I had to put on my headphones, Stiles.”

Stiles turns red, unable to pretend he doesn’t know what his little brother means.

“Now why exactly…” His dad starts, trailing off before he completely pauses, and then he looks a little uncomfortable. “Uh, son?”

“It’s not what you think!” Stiles swears, maybe a little too loudly. “We were just talking, okay? We weren’t doing anything!”

Isaac just snorts.

Stiles gives him a look that could curdle milk.

“What exactly were you two talking about?” his dad presses, and he’s got on his best ‘my son’s
victory is at risk’ game face on. “Do we need to have a talk?”

“Jonathan,” Melissa interrupts gently and places a placating hand over his. “I’m sure if Stiles has any questions or concerns about that aspect of his relationship with Derek, he will not hesitate to come to you about it. Isn’t that right, Stiles?” She turns to him with a pointed look.

Stiles could kiss her but he settles for rapidly nodding. “Totally. Totally would do all that, and then some, and then even more. I just, would so do that. But I’m not at that place. We’re not at that place, so that doesn’t even need to happen. We are so beyond from being to…there. The scale is practically on the scale of a galaxy, you know, that same mechanics of distance. Derek could probably explain because he’s into that whole space thing and I just am making a very uneducated guess. But, you know, galaxies. That just sums up about how far from being *there* Derek and I are. So, you know, I’ll just keep the talking to you about…*that*…in the…future?”

Melissa hides a smile behind her next sip of coffee.

His dad just looks like he wants to turn back the time to when Stiles was nothing more than a squirming, wet newborn.

Isaac just seems vindictively satisfied by the turn of events, licking lazily at each spoonful of ice cream he manages. He is the worst little brother in the world because he started *all* this.

Stiles is sorely tempted to just walk over and slap that ice cream out of his ungrateful hands.

“Right,” his dad grunts and clears his throat. “Good to know you and Derek are far from being *there*. Even though there’s no chance of either of you getting pregnant, it’s still not something to be taken lightly. I know you’re old enough to make some of your own decisions but you’re barely fifteen and in the eyes of the law, well, sixteen is technically the age of consent but —”

“Dad, please,” Stiles begs and he literally wants to evaporate. “We have established that there is no need to get into that. Why aren’t you giving Isaac this speech?”

“He did,” Isaac inconsiderately declares. “I’ve done my time.”

Stiles sends him a withering look. “But it doesn’t even count,” he protests. “You’re asexual.”

Isaac shrugs. “Dad thought I should know anyway. He did a lot of research about my sexuality type before he sat me down.”

“That’s right, I did. I wanted to be fully prepared,” his dad confirms proudly and dear god, just make it stop. “Looks like I’ll have to research a thing or two about Werewolves. I’m sure Talia will be willing to answer anything I can’t find.”

“Yup, there it is. Right there. Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to introduce my breaking point.” Stiles raises his hands in surrender. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go die quietly in my room.”

“I suggest the backyard, what with it being such a beautiful night,” Melissa quips playfully. “You’ll find Scott there. As a nurse, I know how important it is to have someone there during your final moments.”

Isaac snorts fondly.

Stiles sighs and wishes he had someone in his corner right now.
“Now hang on,” the sheriff says, holding up a hand. “If Derek isn’t the reason you came in here all huffy, then what was?”

“Uncle Claude,” Stiles mutters, mouth twisting in displeasure. “I’d rather not talk about it right now. I can see why mom never mentioned him. He’s an asshole.”

“Language,” Melissa gently scolds.

His dad grins tenderly at her, and his dark eyes go all gooey. It’s an amazing but gross sight. He says, “I’ll have to take your word for that one, son. Your mother had her secrets but not without reason. You okay?”

“I will be,” Stiles promises and he finds that he means that. “If I never see him again, it would still be too soon.” He looks to Melissa. “You said Scott’s in the back?”

“He’s talking to your tree but I was quickly informed that there was a magical property about it before I could truly begin to worry about my son’s mental health,” Melissa reports in a mock-serious tone.

“If you have some time to spare, I can introduce you,” Stiles offers because he figures she’s becoming family now. “We call her Nana.”

“Oh, well then I would love to meet her,” Melissa declares, rapping her knuckles against the table before standing. She hands her empty mug to his dad before kissing him on the cheek.

His dad quickly turns his head so that their lips touch briefly and pretends to look surprised.

Melissa giggles as she flushes and swats him on the shoulder. “Sneaky,” she accuses.

“My timing’s rusty,” his dad claims innocently. “I weaved when I should’ve bobbed.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Melissa dismisses as she follows Stiles out the backdoor.

Isaac lingers with their dad, joining him at the table so they can have a heart to heart about his weekend.

Stiles manages to kick off his socks and shoes as he passes over the threshold with Melissa on his heels. It’s more than a habit at this point. He enjoys being barefoot. He likes the energy that seems to pulsate under his feet as he walks across the damp grass. He likes the feel of the earth under his toes.

Melissa pauses to openly admire the shimmering colors of the purple-blue leaves sprouting from Nana’s branches.

There’s a slight rainfall of translucent rose petals fluttering down from between them, making it almost look like soft, thin glass floating in the air.

Suddenly, the soft warm glow of fireflies begins to slice through the dark atmosphere with their sugary light. They always seem to sense Stiles’s arrival. They chatter amongst themselves in a symphony of indistinguishable voices.

“Did you miss me?” Stiles says as he jumps on Scott’s unsuspecting back, letting his magic seep through and spread across his skin like blue bioluminescent vines.

Scott squawks and tries to right himself.

Nana chuckles jubilantly, leaves shaking with the motion. “Are you asking me or Scott, dearie?”
“Both. Both is good,” Stiles responds, quoting *El Dorado*.

“Well of course I missed you, dude,” Scott exclaims, twisting so he can put Stiles in a headlock. “You’re giving me abandonment issues.”

“And downright miserable, I was,” Nana adds in jest. “Now stop being rude, sweetling, and introduce me to this one’s mother.”

Stiles shoves Scott away long enough to motion Melissa closer. “Melissa, this is Nana. Nana, this is Melissa. I give you permission to see.”

Melissa reaches out and blindly clutches at Scott’s hands in surprise, blinking in awe at the wooden face that suddenly transforms before her. “Ay Dios Mio…” she breathes. “A talking tree! *Suena como un cuento de hadas*.”

“*Y este no es el único cuento de hadas que nos decimos a nosotros mismos, respecto a la naturaleza,*” Scott replies with a laugh. He turns to Stiles and translates, “My mom says it’s like something out of a fairytale.”

“Ah,” Stiles says, understanding. “I don’t blame her.”

“You are quite lovely, my dear,” Nana compliments. “As enchanting as Queen Isabella the second was before her reign over Spain began. I was one of her personal avocado trees in her court. Dear me, I’ll have to tell you about that, if you can remind me. Oh don’t be afraid, step a little closer. I can see where your son gets those beautiful eyes.”

“Thank you.” Melissa presses a hand to her chest, looking flattered. “You know, people tell me all the time that he has my eyes. Ever since he was, you know —” She pauses and snaps her finger as she tries to think of the proper words. “*Un chico que te mueres.* Do you — I’m sorry, do you speak Spanish?”

“Don’t ever apologize for speaking your native tongue. Feel free, dearie. There is no dialect unknown to me,” Nana proudly boasts. “Come to me anytime. I am quite the aficionado of conversation.”

“Yeah it’s okay, mom,” Scott assures, as if Nana’s words aren’t convincing enough. “I talk to her in Spanish all the time. We talk about everything!”

“He certainly does, and he’s quite the charmer,” Nana remarks sincerely. “You would’ve made a dashing prince in another life.”

Scott ducks his head with a sheepish grin, flushing a little. “You make it easy to talk to you. *La vida aquí es más amena,*” he murmurs shyly.

“Well, then I will definitely have to take you up on your offer, Nana. But for now, I’m afraid I have to get going. I have a graveyard shift to get to,” Melissa says apologetically with a gorgeous smile. “*Ya tengo trabajo hasta por encima de las cejas.* I wouldn’t dare add running late to the list. Don’t get me started on my boss. *El hombre es el Diablo sobre ruedas.*”

Nana laughs heartily. “Yes, that is rather unfortunate. I will not keep you if that’s the case. We will chat soon,” she promises sweetly.

“Definitely, Scott,” Melissa calls and gestures him to follow her as she heads back inside. Probably to say goodbye to his dad.
“I’m coming,” Scott swears and turns to Stiles. “Mom only came over because I asked her to. She usually likes to nap before work if it’s a night shift. I thought you’d be back sooner.”

Stiles feels a little bad. “Wish things would’ve worked out better,” he mumbles.

Scott just shakes his head with an easy smile. He replies, “It’s totally fine. I mean I was trying to hang out and tell you about Lydia and everything. But I’m going to the hospital to visit with Danny, otherwise I’d stay. They might discharge him this week. I’d suggest you come but you look tired.”

“Yes,” Stiles admits with a weary sigh and rubs at his eyes. “I really want to see Lydia too. I just — I’ve got so much going on, you know?”

“I get it, dude. Tell me about it when you can,” Scott requests.

“Scott! Bajémonos aquí!”

Scott rolls his eyes. “I gotta go. Bye, Nana.”

“Have a good night, dear,” Nana kindly returns. “Oh, just a second. Give this to your mother. I noticed she has some baggage under those darling eyes of hers. Quite a shame. So, if you wouldn’t mind, tell her that I insisted she eat this piece of fruit before she settles for sleep. Warn her it has to be before she sleeps.”

Scott nods and cups his hands together obediently so that a juicy peach can plop in.

“And an apple for you as well,” Nana decides, dropping the shiniest, red one she has in his awaiting hand.

“Thank you!” Scott says brightly with a smile.

Nana waits until Scott is out of sight before she says, “Then. Let’s have a look at what you’ve been up to, then off to bed with you.”

Stiles draws near, letting his magic illuminate his palms as he touches them to Nana’s rough cheeks. He feels the inevitable soft press of Nana probing his mind, sifting through his memories like lukewarm water washing over his thoughts.

The curfew siren rings off in the distance.

Nana hums thoughtfully. “That will do it, sweetling,” she announces.

Stiles drops his hands and lets them rest limply at his sides.

“You’ve questions about supernatural history. Well, the Great Migration is a good place to start if any. It’s one of the key events that turned the tide of the paranormal timeline,” Nana supposes, sounding wistful. “I’ll give you the oral report, but some other time perhaps. It’s getting late, and you have enough on your mind.”

Stiles ignores the way her eyes twinkle humoredly and he doesn’t think about Derek. “Sorry to say I haven’t kept up with my studies,” he acknowledges instead.

“Think nothing of it,” Nana assures, optimistic. “We can resume all of that later this week. Go and get some proper sleep, dearie.”

Stiles won’t argue. “Goodnight, Nana. I do love you.”
“And I do love you as well,” Nana swears. “Forever and always.”

Stiles smiles and his magic breaks away from him, wafting into the air to take the shape of a swarm of blue, glimmering bumblebees. They float around and beside the fireflies as if entertaining them with a dance. He takes a second to watch before he lets it be, making his way inside and grabbing his fallen socks and shoes in the process.

His dad and Isaac are in the living room when he returns, both perched in their favorite armchairs and watching *Frozen*.

“I’m off to bed, busy day tomorrow,” Stiles explains and rubs the heels of his hands into his eyes as he yawns. “Breakfast with Kate and her estranged older brother. I might stop by Deaton’s too. Not sure where that will lead, but, when I do I’ll let you know.” He drops his hands and blinks away the fuzziness creeping into his vision. “Also, Derek might come over for dinner. Is that okay?”

“Fine by me, as long as I’m not expected to cook. We can order out,” his dad supposes.

Stiles makes a face. “I’ve had enough of that this weekend to last me, so no thanks. I’ll make something if I’m not too tired,” he decides. “Do you have to work tomorrow?”

“Yes, I will be really busy this week. I’m trying to put in some hours so I can take this weekend off. Melissa and I have plans,” the sheriff admits, being as vague and casual about it as possible.

Stiles is definitely not going to ask. “Cool. Can Scott stay over then? Assuming this means you guys are going out of town or something?”

“I don’t see why not. I believe that’s what Melissa wanted to happen anyway,” his dad confirms. “I’ll let you know if anything changes. We won’t be far. There’s this resort a few miles north of this town. We’ll only really be two hours away if we’re needed.”

Stiles nods and yawns again. “Isaac, did you tell dad about the internship you were offered? Peter wants to hijack him for the summer.”

“I’ll be speaking with Peter personally to sort out the details for that,” his dad replies, only confirming that he had discussed it with Isaac already. “Now go to bed, you look like you’re going to collapse any moment.”

Stiles grunts noncommittally as he grabs a bottle of water from the fridge before trudging up the steps to his room. He doesn’t bother turning on the lights, letting his room be illuminated by nothing but the pale moonlight. He unzips his luggage and just dumps the contents out before tossing the emptied suitcase into his dark closet. He sorts through the pile to get some pajamas before he strips down to climb into them.

He throws open his window to get a nice breeze going in his stuffy bedroom and also just in case his magic wants to return to him once it’s done frolicking.

The last thing he does before he stumbles into bed is grab his phone and Derek’s stuffed wolves so he can curl up with them, humming softly at the smell of vanilla. He gulps down his bottle of water and uses the last bit of juice his phone has to send Derek a text that reads:

*Hey why does Braeden call you Miss Peaches?*

Derek’s response is instantaneous.

**You noticed that, huh?**
She’s called me that for as long as I’ve known her.

She says it's because I'm too sweet.

I personally don’t think that’s the real reason.

*What do you think it is then?*

I don’t know to be honest. I just know it’s not that. She’s funny that way.

*Yeah, she’s funny all right.........*

He tries to wait for Derek’s response, but he falls asleep before he gets it.

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Stiles wakes up practically roasting on a sweltering Monday morning with the taste of peppermint on his tongue.

The sun is shining determinedly through his windows, like it’s looking for unmerciful revenge.

He’s sticky and hot, skin glistening wetly and forehead damp with sweat. He kicks his way free from the sheets he’s entangled with, knocking his covers off the bed with a miserable groan as he fans at himself desperately. The muggy heat eventually chases him out of his room and into the shower for some release.

He steps out sometime later, shivering but blessedly cool. He wanders back to his room with a towel around his waist and his dirty clothes in his hands. He dumps it in his already overflowing laundry hamper. He obviously needs to do his laundry, but he has so many clothes that the need isn’t urgent, though by the look of his hamper, one would think the opposite.

As he gets dressed (dark blue shorts and a thin orange t-shirt with a graphic of Chewbacca on the front), he considers donating a portion of his wardrobe and wonders if Kate would know anything about doing that. After all, she’s apparently an advocate for giving back to the community.

While he’s putting on his shoes, he feels his magic wiggling deep within his gut. He figures it must have returned while he was sleeping last night and is still exhausted from the events of yesterday.

Stiles grabs his phone from where he locates it from under his bed, sighing in annoyance when he realizes that he forgot to charge it. He taps the edge of it against his chin thoughtfully before an idea strikes him. He gathers a pinch of his magic to his index finger and his middle finger before he swipes it across the black screen.

Nothing happens.

At first.

It takes a few seconds but it does chirp to life, fully charged.

He fists pumps with a joyous sound, elated with a proud rush of power. His magic, however, coils around his ribs, oozing waves of displeasure at being disturbed and used for such a remedial thing. He rolls his eyes in turn but happily notes that this will come in handy for the long run.

Stiles unlocks his phone to sort through all his unread texts, and he sees a few missed calls from Kate. He’s just about to call her when his phone buzzes in his hands. He’s quick to answer at the
familiar name.

“Finally, I thought you were bailing on me,” Kate states tetchily. “I’m outside. Come on, we’re already running late.”

Stiles isn’t even given a chance to reply before she hangs up. He sighs and stares at the screen before he pockets his phone, grabbing other things that he’ll need to put in his backpack. He does not have enough pocket space for it all.

Stiles also should have guessed that Kate would be in a mood over this whole thing.

He passes Isaac’s room to see it’s empty (his bed is made and everything). He jogs down the steps and upon further inspection, notes that the house is empty. He wonders idly if Isaac hadn’t just tagged along with his dad to work since school is out for the both of them. He knows his dad wouldn’t ever let Isaac be in the house by himself, so he must be elsewhere.

Kate starts doing that thing where she really lays in on the horn.

Stiles rolls his eyes and grabs a handful of peppermint candies from the bag that’s been left on the table and wonders briefly over where it might have come from as he crams some of them in his pockets. Then he quickly makes his way out the front door, locking it firmly behind him before marching over to her shiny, black Jaguar. His temples and the back of his neck are damp with sweat and he’s only been outside for a few minutes.

Kate’s waiting with the top down and is texting away on her expensive phone with one hand while pressing down on her horn with the other.

“Okay, okay — I’m here!” Stiles exclaims as he climbs in and buckles up. He puts his backpack at his feet.

“Hm,” is Kate’s only response but she let’s up. She’s dressed in a formfitting red romper with red lipstick, diamond stud earrings, and a freshly done manicure. She fiddles with her radio and starts blasting The Horrors.

“Is this their latest album?” Stiles asks, surprised that she actually knows them.

“Sure is,” Kate replies before pulling off. For all of her rushing, she sure doesn’t seem in a hurry to get there. “Peter’s taste in music is slowly weaseling its way into mine. I’m guessing you’re a fan.”

“I am,” Stiles confirms. The conversation ends there and he keeps himself busy by texting Derek and Scott at different paces. Before he knows it, they’re turning into the parking lot of Ramona’s Old Fashion Eatery on Mulholland Blvd (owned by Boyd’s mother).

Kate slaps on some expensive shades, clearing her face of any expression before leaning over to pop open her glove compartment. She pulls out a small pistol.

“Kate!” Stiles hisses and grabs her hand, making sure the safety’s on as he struggles with her. “You are not bringing in a concealed weapon!”

“It’s either this or the hunting knife,” Kate insists. She’s drop dead serious (no pun intended).

Stiles stares at her wide eyes. “The knife if you have to,” he relents when he realizes she won’t budge. This is way more dysfunctional than he thought.

Kate shoves the gun back into the compartment before exchanging it for a personalized hunting knife
with an oak hilt and steel blade (it even has her initials etched in dainty cursive on the hilt). She jams it into her white Gucci pocketbook. Then she climbs out of the car all nonchalant, like Stiles hadn’t tried to pry a gun from her hands a minute ago.

Stiles cannot believe that this is his life.

Kate waits for him at the glass double doors and doesn’t actually enter the restaurant until Stiles pulls one of the doors open for her. She has to be the most high maintenance person he’s ever met.

Nope. Wait. Musn’t forget about Braeden.

Stiles trails after her with a sigh, letting the cacophony of idle chatter, and the enticing smell of diner food wash over him.

The restaurant is full, but no surprise there.

Stiles looks around and takes it all in.

There’s an old couple seated by the door, eating side by side and playfully fighting over a flute of sparkling mimosa.

A group of young women in their thirties collapsing with helpless giggles as a stern woman dining alone nearby looks sternly at them with a frown.

Businessmen in their grey suits are studiously bent over their meals on stools at the bar.

There are international tourists trying to decipher their menus with intimidated expressions.

A family and their messy, syrup-covered children are getting their pictures taken with one of the waitresses (who is costumed to fit the 50’s style theme of the restaurant).

The noise level is high but it’s hardly overwhelming.

“There he is,” Kate mutters as she presses close to his side and points to the other end of the diner where Chris Argent is sitting in a booth alone, facing the door. She doesn’t wave back when he signals to them. “Fucker’s gonna foot the bill if I have anything to say about it.”

Stiles snorts and lets Kate drag him over. He slaps her hands away when she tries to shove him towards the inside of the booth. He slides over without her help so she can settle in next to him.

“Katherine,” Chris says, voice low and rough. He’s kind of dressed like a denim model. “I didn’t realize you’d be bringing company. I thought it would just be you and I.”

Kate just white-knuckles her menu, opening it up so she can hide behind it. She doesn’t even remove her shades.

Stiles exhales quietly, drums the fingers of his right hand against the surface of the table and clears his throat. “Sorry, Mr. Argent. I figured Kate would’ve told you I’d be joining,” he explains. “I can go if —”

“No fucking way,” Kate hisses lowly. She slaps her menu down with a scowl. “If you’re asking him to leave, then I’m leaving too.” She turns to Stiles and even though she has on sunglasses, he can tell she’s glaring at him. “You promised. You don’t get to chicken out now.”

Stiles grimaces. “Technically, I didn’t really promise —”
"Oh what the fuck ever! You’re on the inside anyway, so you have to crawl under the table like an idiot if you want to get out,” Kate points out vindictively.

“You say it like that will be the thing to stop me.”

“I’m your fucking ride, buttercup.”

"I have both Uber and Lyft installed on my phone, and I'll be happy to price match if it comes to it."

"Stiles..."

“It’s fine,” Chris announces, grabbing their attention. He doesn’t even look marginally amused. “No one has to leave.”

“Good to know,” Kate grumbles hotly and grabs her menu to hide behind again. “Stiles and I will be ordering whatever we want while you bitch and moan about your feelings. You’re paying.”

Chris’s expression gets a little tight and he clenches his jaw but he doesn’t argue as he flags over a waitress.

Kate orders some breakfast burritos, hash browns, bacon, and a short stack of blueberry pancakes. Stiles just orders a few slices of their infamous breakfast pizza.

Chris orders a cup of Irish coffee.

Kate makes a snide remark about it being five o’clock somewhere.

Chris doesn’t even bat an eye and says, “I heard you moved out of the manor.”

Kate’s mouth twitches towards a frown.

“I’m glad,” Chris continues when she doesn’t respond. “I was never comfortable with you living with dad and dealing with his lifestyle. I should have done more to make sure that you grew up knowing better. Having better. But I was a dumb selfish bastard that took the first out I could get when I found one. I’m not making excuses for what I’ve done. I just want to do right by the people I’ve hurt now that I’ve realized how short life is.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, are you —” Kate straightens and wrenches off her sunglasses. “Are you dying?”

“You’ve picked up a colorful vocabulary, Katherine,” Chris replies instead.

“It’s Kate, you fucking —”

“Okay!” Stiles exclaims, jumping in. “Quick timeout,” he says, miming the gesture along with the words. “I’d rather we didn’t get escorted out before our food even has the chance to get to us.”

Chris and Kate look away from each other.

“Mr. Argent, I think you’ll find Kate a little less suspicious of your motives if you just explain why it is exactly you’ve decided to return after all these years,” Stiles clarifies. “To be fair, she did make peace with the notion that you’d never be apart of her life.”

The waitress returns with their drinks before darting off again.

Chris takes a long hard sip of his Irish coffee.
Kate crosses her arms and stares him down; refusing to touch her freshly squeezed orange juice.

Stiles takes little tentative sips of his strawberry milk as his magic squirms restlessly in his gut.

Chris sets down his glass mug and wipes his mouth clean of any lingering foam with a napkin. Then he says, “I am trying to reconnect with you.” He adds, “But I also need your help taking our father down.”

“And there it is. The real reason, ladies and gentlemen,” Kate quips icily, seething. “You could care fuck all about me. It’s this agenda you need me for.”

“Katherine, that couldn’t be further from the truth,” Chris swears tiredly. It deepens the aged lines of his face. “You can say no, but just know, it would mean a lot to me if you did help.”

Kate hides her shaking hands under the table, and if Stiles hadn’t been sitting beside her, he would have never known this was affecting her so much. She has the best poker face there is.

“My intention,” Chris goes on to say, oblivious. “To submit him to the Coalition of Huntsmen for gross negligence and official misconduct.”

Kate laughs sharply. “Malfeasance,” she says disparagingly. “You want to get the old man for malfeasance?”

“Among other things,” Chris confirms evenly.

“Well good luck with that,” Kate says with false cheer. Her hands are still shaking under the table though. “Because that old son of bitch may be fifty shades of evil, but he’s not sloppy. How exactly are you planning on getting enough dirt on him that the Coalition has no choice but to convene a special tribunal?”

Chris looks distinctly uncomfortable but no less determined. “Katherine — Kate,” he corrects with a grimace when she glares at him for the slip. “He’s responsible for our mother’s death.”

Kate stiffens and she gets a little pale. “She committed suicide,” she denies weakly.

“That’s what we were led to believe,” Chris states, shaking his head. “I remember when I was younger, how they’d go through these spells where Gerard would come home late and mom would be waiting for him. She’d be drunk off her ass by the time he passed over the threshold. She’d start screaming all this nonsense about him cheating. Called him every name she could think of.”

Kate is deathly quiet.

Stiles feels queasy because he can guess where Chris is going with this.

“Turns out it wasn’t nonsense,” Chris insists. “I can’t even begin to —” He stops suddenly. The waitress approaches with their food, handing it out quickly before spinning back towards the busy bustle.

“He’s got illegitimate children,” Chris continues lowly. “I’ve spent the last three years tracking them all down. There are hundreds of them.”

Stiles keeps his gaze pinned to his plate as he listens. He never thought Chris knew about that, much less that he’d do something about it.

“So?” Kate replies stiffly. She makes no move to touch her food and neither does Stiles with his
own. “She was crazy. We all knew that. What’s it to us that he could never keep it in his pants? He certainly didn’t kill Karoline over it.”

“He would if she knew that they were all underage,” Chris tersely corrects. “He would if she knew enough to threaten him with it. He wouldn’t have been able to hold the mayoral office with such a scandal, or keep his ambassadorial position with the Coalition. I believe she was going to leave him, and she was going to take us with her.”

Kate gets ahold of a napkin and rips it up in a distracted fashion as she says to her older brother, “How could you be sure? This is practically out of the blue. How do you know this is why Gerard killed Karoline? That it wasn’t a suicide?”

“Three years ago, I went to one of the family’s timeshares and I found a sealed box containing mom’s old diaries,” Chris remarks. “She wrote down all her suspicions. Included names and dates and times, and…our Uncle Alexander had been trying to help her put a case together.” He pauses to take another long sip of his Irish coffee. Then he goes on to explain, “I did some digging myself and it all checks out. Turns out that all those ‘business trips’ Gerard would take had some double agendas to them.” He pauses again. “This is too much of a public space to say anymore than that.”

Kate looks like she’s hurriedly turning this information in her mind. Then finally, she says, “Okay.”

Chris looks as surprised as Stiles feels.

“For Karo — for mom,” Kate explains with a firm tone. “She — deserved better than that if what you say is true.”

Chris’s eyes flash and he nods once in understanding.

“If he’s been impregnating underage teens or whatever,” Kate hedges. “Then all we need to do is get either the birth certificates of the kids or a DNA test.”

“I’ve already tried that. Most of the certificates were forged and the families have been paid off to keep their silence. I can’t even find the records for the forged ones. Someone’s gotten to them,” Chris reports. “Whether to use it for blackmail or something else, I don’t know.”

“So let’s do the DNA tests then,” Kate impatiently suggests.

“I told you, the families have been paid off for their silence, and threatened to a devastating degree. There were legal binding contracts involved,” Chris tersely explains. “Unless we can find one person who’d be willing to do it, then we are, quite frankly, shit out of luck. The illegitimate kids he has here are our last options, and they are, quite frankly, the youngest bunch. The others have all been my age and have moved on from what they consider a particularly shameful blemish they’d rather forget.”

Kate’s hands curl into fists. “He has —” She cuts herself off. “How many are here? How many have been here? Is it anyone I know?” she asks lowly.

Chris says nothing but that’s just as telling.

“Who are they?” Kate demands. “If I have some goddamn half brothers and sisters running around, I deserve to know.”

Chris glances at Stiles and then away. “I don’t think this is the best time to go over the details,” he remarks.
“Bullshit,” Kate spits. Then she stiffens. “You just fucking looked at Stiles, didn’t you?” She looks horrified. “Don’t tell me he’s one of —”

“No!” Stiles blurs and blushes when it catches the attention of a few onlookers. “No,” he insists, quieter this time. “It’s Isaac, okay? He’s…I shouldn’t even be telling you this because it’s not my place to —”

“What the fuck did you just say?” Kate interrupts, voice like steel. “You mean you knew about this? What the fuck — how long have you known?”


Kate laughs coldly, once, and then twice before she goes deathly quiet.

Stiles winces again. He rushes to add, “I was going to say something but I was kind of sworn to secrecy by Parrish. Please understand that.”

Kate’s expression shudders before completely shutting down. “Sure. I understand all right,” she promises pleasantly. She slaps on her shades. “The clarity is fucking undeniable.” She slides out of the booth and storms off without another word.

Stiles watches helplessly as she climbs into her car and speeds off.

“How long have you known?” Chris asks, but there’s no judgment in his voice.

“A couple of months, give or take,” Stiles mumbles, turning back to face the older man. He’s a little torn up inside. He feels like he just betrayed one of his closest friends. He sighs, pushes his plate of untouched food away, and hides his face in his hands.

“I know I have no right to ask this, but do you think Isaac would be willing to do a DNA test?” Chris questions evenly. “A few samples would be enough to make a difference, and give the Coalition the jurisdiction they need to launch a full investigation. To put an end to Gerard’s depraved influence.”

“I can’t tell you that,” Stiles replies tiredly and drops his hands to his lap. “Isaac doesn’t know and when he does find out…” He can’t even say it. He’s frightened of the thought, of what the outcome could be. “I have to go. I have to warn Parrish.”

Chris nods and says, “Just ask him to consider it. In the mean time, I’m wondering if you could arrange a meeting between Talia and I. I’ll ultimately need her permission in order to successfully reach out to Jackson Whittemore and Malia Tate.”

Stiles slides out the booth. “I — I don’t know about that. I’ll see what I can do but right now I have a lot going on if you haven’t noticed,” he says and makes a hasty exit. He dials out and silently wills Parrish to answer. When he does, Stiles is quick to say, “Where are you? Kate knows.”

Parrish is deathly quiet for the longest time before he mutters, “Fuck,” and then, “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” before he swiftly hangs up.

Stiles sighs in annoyance. He hates being hung up on like that. He paces and pauses, laughing bitterly when he notes that Kate was at least nice enough to leave his backpack at the curb. He grabs it, tossing it over one shoulder and tugs at the front of his shirt to fan himself because he’s getting hot.

He calls Isaac but it rings and rings and rings until it hits his voicemail. He hangs up and texts his little brother to call him as soon as possible because it’s extremely important.
Then he calls his dad but that goes straight to voicemail and he’s forced to leave a message for his dad to call him and that it’s about Isaac, making sure to clarify that no one is hurt (it’s just really, really, really important, dad, so please call me back asap).

Chris exits the diner by this time. “Do you need a ride anywhere?” he offers.

“Deaton’s please,” is Stiles’s response because he doesn’t know where else to go.

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For once, Violet and Garrett aren’t parked across the street.

Stiles wonders if it’s a godsend or an omen. He ponders it as he climbs out of Chris’s classic 1968 silver Ford Mustang. He awkwardly thanks the older man before rounding the back of the car to get to Deaton’s store. He peers in and sees that it’s dark and the front door is locked. He works with fishing for his keys as Chris speeds off with a roar of his engine, out of sight. He locates his keys and quickly works at the locks before pushing inside.

Thankfully the ceiling fans are fully active, keeping the shop cool and separated from the vacuum of heat settling stubbornly over Beacon Hills.

“Deaton?” Stiles calls out and he gets no response. He sighs and makes an attempt to call the older man. But of course it goes to voicemail. He leaves a brief message and ends the call. A few seconds later he gets a text from Deaton that reads:

Collecting the last of the amethyst stones you’ll need for your garden. I will be there in 30 minutes or so.

Stiles exhales in relief. He wanders over the glass display counter, unsurprised that on top still sits the small, dark mahogany bowl with a matching grinder that looks like a miniature baseball bat with a fat head; the glass jar (which looks like a see-through cookie jar) that’s almost filled to the rim with clear water; the jar of honey and brown sugar; the flowerpot full of thick, black dirt and a measuring cup full of white sand.

Stiles leans forward and stares at the objects wondering exactly how he was supposed to make tea out of these materials. He stares and stares, trying his hardest to will the answer to come, but it refuses to. His amped nerves makes him feel raw and exposed, so he considers taking a moment to meditate. Panicking and being anxious is not going to solve his problems. So he straightens, closes his eyes, and breathes in through his nose and out through his mouth; it separates his lips for every moment he does this until his lungs are empty and hollow.

This keeps happening over and over again until the motion becomes louder. He starts to hear the wall to his immediate right, which is littered with clocks whose hands tick, tick, tick. And even that winds down before all he hears is the side-to-side tic tock of the pendulum swinging behind the glass of the grandfather clock.

Then there is the sound of the whirring and swish, swish, swish of the fans over his head. There’s the buzz of electricity humming behind the walls. He can hear the steady twinkling of his magic, which is slowly waking up, and it sounds the way wind chimes would on a mildly windy day.

The world slows and everything sounds like a drawn out lullaby.

He looks over to confirm that all the clocks have slowed, and they have, to a slothful degree. He twists his body around to observe the sunlight sneaking into the shop window. The dust that’s
swimming in the rays of gold is twisting ever so sluggishly like specks of shiny glitter. He lifts his chin and raises his gaze to look at the fans but they’re rotating lazily. His body begins to light up with a blue glow that overtakes his fisted hands like bioluminescent flames.

The magical fire starts licking up his arms in vines of ethereal light, like sweltering spiraling marks that leaves a searing trail of heat in it’s wake as it spreads. It travels up his arms like a sleeve, curling over his shoulders before spreading across the expanse of his chest and stomach like armor.

He feels it curl along his shoulder blades, and the heat there intensifies. He feels a fluttering ache under the skin of his back where the bones of his shoulder blades are. It’s almost painful; the skin of his back feels paper thin, like something is trying to shift under it to break free.

No.

What are you afraid of? This is who you are. This is what you must become.

If I have wings, I’m not ready for them. I’m just starting to learn how to manage you.

Manage? What means this word ‘manage’? You are no more a master to me than I am to you. What I yield to you is only my respect and trust. Not my obedience.

He winces at the indignation he can feel pressing at him from his magic and he knows he spoke out of turn.

I’m sorry. You’re right. I’m not managing you. I’m learning.

His magic gives no reply to that. But it does retreat from his shoulder blades, winding it’s flames up to wrap around his neck like a collar. It doesn’t fan out towards to his jaw or face as a courtesy.

Stiles sends it waves of gratitude and repentance.

When you are ready to accept who you are — who you truly are — I will show you the way.

Stiles swallows and can’t bring himself to acknowledge the offer. Instead, he asks:

What do you call this? This…slowness of time? What does it mean?

Faeries are able to travel between the planes of time. There are different levels. You were born with access to the different realms of time. But as a consequence, your aging will slow when you reach full maturity.

I…will live forever?

As long as you have you me, you will never die.

Stiles jerks at that and shock floods his sense. He straightens and shakes out his hands to extinguish them. The rest of his magic follows and it rises like steam from the outer edge of his body like glittering blue smoke.

The world resumes its normal pace.

It makes no difference to Stiles. He’s too busy freaking out at the thought of his inevitable immortality.

You do not have to remain in the World of Man. We can return home to Faerie when you are
Please stop talking. I can barely digest the fact that I have wings.

You must accept who you are. You’ve lived too long as a Human. You’ve begun to think like one. You may have been born to them, but this is not who you are. You are a Prince. You are Fae. Accept who you are.

Stiles is about to give a short-tempered reply but his nose suddenly twitches with the thick scent of sea water and his ears are flooded with the sound of crashing waves and seagulls. He can feel the sunlight on his skin, even though he’s far away from the shop window, and the soles of his feet feels like he’s standing on a mound of sand.

The doorbell chimes, and a wind sweeps into the shop, curling around Stiles like a siren song.

“It’s truly unfortunate, all these smells.”

Stiles’s hands twitch at his sides at the familiar face.

It’s Heather.

She’s just as tall and willowy as he remembers. Her neck is long, her stature is proud; she’s outstandingly stunning. It’s a kind of abnormal beauty. She has long, shiny dirty blonde hair that reaches to her tiny waist in gentle curls. Her leafy green eyes wrapped in thick dark lashes glisten with the kind intensity that says she’s seeing into you and not through you. She wrinkles her pointy button nose and her cushion lips, which look coated with some kind of lip-gloss, face twisting into a displeased frown. She practically glides over the floor like a graceful queen.

There’s a thin sheen of translucent glitter covering her skin — it’s the kind of shimmer you see on fish when they’re exposed to the sun.

Heather takes her time, lingering at the different trinkets of the antique store, turning it over in her thin, long fingers. “Dry land. It stinks. Everything stinks. Yet my brothers seemed so fond of it at the time. Entranced by all its mysteries and curiosities.” She pauses to grab a nearby snow globe, shaking it violently, watching what happens before putting it back. “It isn’t like the sea, you know.” She taps the glass of the grandfather clock resting against the wall and the sound gets muted as though it’s underwater.

Stiles wonders over the magic of it.

“Too many soft places up here,” Heather continues with a silvery voice. “You have no secrets. No depths.” She sighs but even that sounds like a song. “Dull colors. Desiccated. Tedium.”

“That’s a strong opinion,” Stiles says and his heart stays steady against her charm.

It’s because his magic wraps around it defensively while also branching off to form into a bioluminescent blue anaconda. It coils around his midsection, up to his chest before draping over his right shoulder. It poises itself as if ready to strike the Nymph, if she should decide to get too free with her hands or her allure.

Heather has some kind of pull about her. Nymphs usually do. He’s read about it: the extrasensory seduction.

So he’s grateful that his magic is acting as impenetrable armor for his heart. It bristles when she gets near to him with her head cocked.
Stiles wonders what she will do.

“What do you dream of, Your Highness?” Heather questions, voice soft and graceful like a cradlesong as she circles him.

Stiles is surprised at her acknowledgement.

“Fate must give you sweet dreams since you reside under the banner made for Virtues. Peril is not always so kind, but my people are not always left adrift in slumber when Peril feels benevolent enough to make it so. Lately, I dream of water and seashells,” Heather resumes as if she doesn’t notice. “Of home. My paradise.”

“If you hate dry land so much, why follow your brothers here?” Stiles asks as she reaches out to glide a hand over his face without ever really touching him. He quickly restrains his magic as it tries to surge at her with wild possessiveness. His gut tells him that she won’t do anything to him.

“My mothers sung a hymn about the coming of a Seven. Naturally, I was curious. I was disappointed the first time I saw you, and only a little impressed when you saw me. No one can see me unless I will it. But you looked right at me. So I did you a favor by leading you to the pale one as a peace offering. The Lost Girl.”

“Paige…” Stiles remembers that night all too well.

“Is that how she is called? Well,” Heather drawls. “The daughter she is carrying will be the spitting image of her. Right down to her very marrow. Conceived in misery as well. And it will occur to her that she will need to teach her daughter new lessons. Like how to lose her innocence but not her hope.”

Stiles won’t ask how she knows that, or what she even means. “How about now?” he questions instead. “Do I still disappoint you?”

“I doubt His Majesty is ever capable of such a thing,” Heather cleverly remarks.

“If you’re trying to get on my good side,” Stiles starts. “Then that must mean that there’s a reason you’re here.”

Heather just hums as she glides away from him and Stiles’s magic settles finally. “Would you like to know what happens between you and the boy you will love more than life itself?” She doesn’t even glance at him nor does she say Derek’s name, but Stiles knows perfectly well what she means. “Would you like to know how much you will sacrifice for him?”

“You didn’t come to talk about Derek.”

“His Highness assumes very inaccurately to whom I refer,” Heather lightly corrects. “Would you like for me to tell you of who it is I speak about? Or maybe you’d like to know something else. You can ask me three questions. I’ll answer them all truthfully.”

Stiles hears seagulls again and crashing waves before he sees a dark shadow lingering at Heather’s back. “No,” he says with sharp clarity. “You want me to be indebted to you because you need something from me. Your brand of fortunetelling always comes with a steep price.”

Heather’s glamour fades and there’s nothing but a gaunt, horrid looking creature with silvery scales, pointed and sharp teeth, yellow eyes, and black straw hair. This is what she really is. “I underestimated your intelligence, Virtue,” she hisses, but it sounds like she’s talking underwater. “Would ripping you apart make you more compliant?” she spits.
“You won’t hurt me,” Stiles supposes rather than states or asks. “My magic would rip you apart before you even took a step towards me.”

His magic breaks away to manifest above his head like a vengeful, bioluminescent hurricane, making everything in the shop tremble as it quakes and rumbles with blue lightening. All just to dramatically confirm his words.

Stiles smirks slightly as Heather puts a good amount of distance between them. “So, again,” he continues, leaning back casually against the glass counter behind him with his arms crossed and his magic swirling thunderously above him. “What could you possibly need from me? I don’t want my fortune read. I know the plans Fate has for me.”

Heather snorts to cover her apprehension and the glamour appears once more. She’s a beauty to behold again. “Fate is your creator. Peril is mine. There will be no love loss between us. Faeries are very distant cousins to us Mermaids.” She adds, “But even still, I apologize for disrespecting you. It’s hard for me to remember that you are not like these Walkers with their greed.”

“Delightful,” Stiles sarcastically retorts. “Why don’t you just tell me what’s wrong and we can cut to the chase.”

“I am bewitched.” Heather doesn’t explain. “I find it highly disrupting.”

Stiles lifts both his eyebrows at that. “By who?”

“I do not know,” Heather reluctantly admits. “I’ve maintained my distance from this town ever since my brothers were delivered back to our kingdom.”

“You and your brothers hurt a lot of people,” Stiles doesn’t excuse. “This could be justified retaliation for all I know.”

Heather just looks at him blankly. “One does what one feels is right in their own mind. So is the burden of free will,” she curtly reasons. “Yet, I doubt this is the work of a Walker.”

Stiles sighs long-sufferingly. “Are you talking about Humans?”

"I know no other word to describe them. What would you call these things?" Heather questions impatiently.

Stiles laughs when he realizes what part of her body she is indicating to. "We call them legs."

"Legs," Heather slowly repeats as she blinks before her mouth frowns disapprovingly. "Strange word. Is that also the action?"

"No, walking is," Stiles confirms.

Heather's frown deepens and her beautiful face is riddled with irritation and confusion. "It is more seemly to refer to them as Walkers," she decides. "In our language, we describe everything by what it is able to do."

Stiles takes that tidbit of information and folds it away. Then he says, "You said you're cursed. Why come here to me?"

"You are a Virtue."

"So, I’m supposed to what? Break the spell?"
“If His Majesty can find the time,” Heather icily replies through gritted teeth as her glamour flickers on and off. “Water is offended by me in the most unnatural way.”

“You must be trapped,” Stiles realizes. “You want to go home and you can’t.”

Heather just hums and turns away to continue her examination of the shop.

Stiles watches her thoughtfully. “How long has this been happening?”

“For three full moons.” Heather fiddles with the knob of an oak armoire. “Countless times I have tried to return home, and yet this form flails uselessly in the water. It’s as if I’ve become a newly hatched fledgling again.”

“In other words, you can’t swim,” Stiles clarifies, slightly amused.

“If His Majesty must use those words,” Heather relents tetchily. She looks a little offended. “I will be forever indebted to you if you can resolve my issue.”

“I’ll think about it,” Stiles decides and doesn’t flinch when Heather snarls. His magic rumbles above him again and she backs down. “I’m not even sure I can help you. If I can think of how I would like for you to repay me, then I’ll give it a shot. Until then, I’ll do some research about your symptoms to see if I can single out the problem. Nothing more.”

Heather looks incensed but she manages to nod stiffly. “I will return to you in a week’s time. Let that be enough.” She floats away and she’s gone just as quickly as she’s come.

Stiles wonders what he’s gotten himself into.

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Deaton’s arrival comes almost forty-five minutes later than he initially said, and by this time, Stiles is sitting surrounded by piles of books centered around Sirens, Mermaids, Nymphs, water spells and elemental incantations. It’s a lucky thing that he has access to Deaton’s expansive library. His magic has settled down and is now roaming the shop in the form of glittery mice as if there were some kind of paranormal infestation.

Stiles scrambles to his feet at the chime of the shop bell, and he rounds the row of bookshelves to greet Deaton with everything he’s been holding at bay. He stops short, tongue glued to the rough of his mouth when he notices the state of his overseer.

Deaton has quite a few noticeable cuts and bruises on his face. The rest of him seems in tact, but he moves carefully towards the glass display like he’s concealing the full extent of his injuries.

Stiles is understandably worried. “What happened?” he asks, right on his heels. He waits anxiously as Deaton moves to the other side of the glass counter. “What happened?” he presses.

Deaton just places a dark blue, velvet pouch before him. “Amethyst stones are not always the easiest to procure,” he explains lightly, and even his voice has a lilt of concealed pain to it. “Nevertheless, it was necessary. You will find everything you need there.”

“Screw the stones if it gets you hurt!” Stiles snaps and stomps towards a nearby rocking chair. He drags it over, muttering under his breath as he places it at the right end of the glass display. “Sit down,” he insists.

Deaton almost looks amused but it can be so hard to tell with him. He’s always so serious, never
cracking a grin or a smile. But he doesn’t protest the point, rounding the counter and the back of the chair before he gingerly sits down. The quiet exhale of relief does not go unnoticed by Stiles and he’s convinced that he made the right call.

The older man leans all the way back, taking a moment to close his eyes and plant his feet on the floorboards to stop any back and forth movement from the chair.

Stiles stands back and watches fretfully, running his eyes over his overseer to try and source out the cause of why he’s holding himself so tensely. His distress attracts the attention of his magic, and it comes scuttling over until there’s an army of ethereal blue mice surrounding the two of them.

Then they begin to climb Deaton, overtaking him almost, but he says and does nothing if he notices, which he must. It looks like he’s wearing a suit made entirely comprised of glimmering, twinkling blue mice.

Stiles would almost find it amusing if he wasn’t so worried.

“I went to the mountains,” Deaton suddenly says, no proper set up for it. His eyes remain firmly closed and he looks like he’s meditating. The magic clinging to him begins to glow brighter, on and off, like the flashing of a lighthouse or a beacon. “It’s been quite a while for me, and I barely realized how out of practice I was until it was too late.”

Stiles gnaws on his bottom lip anxiously as he watches his magic work.

Deaton’s bruises are beginning to fade, little by little. “The best amethyst stones come from the mountains, and even more so when they’ve been fortified and consecrated by Dwarves,” he clarifies. “The mines run deep, like veins, but the proper entrance is very hard to find. I accidently stumbled across the workmen’s entrance, and due to a misunderstanding, was captured by those who guard the Dwarven Enclave. They are not the most gentle bunch.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” Stiles snorts bitterly. “If I wasn’t upset about the state you're in, I would be amazed and excited over the fact that Dwarves are an actual thing.”

“They are not barbaric,” Deaton assures, if only to placate his young apprentice’s dour mood. “What is considered tender for them, is otherwise rough to us. They do not fully realize their own strength, as they do not have many run-ins with outsiders.”

“I’m not excusing them,” Stiles stubbornly decides and crosses his arms. “What happened after that? When they…captured you?”

“I was taken to their dungeons until the Queen was alerted. Once she was, I was taken before her and her assembly,” Deaton goes on to explain. “But because I, at one point, had successfully brokered a liaison with the old Queen, she recognized me. Sizaehilda was a child at the time, but she recognized me. And from what I gathered, she’s been crowned following the recent passing of her mother. She was surprised to see me since it had been so long, but she apologized and I was pardoned. I, of course, had to explain just why I had come, but she was more than willing to accommodate my quest. Only on the grounds that I, as she put it, arrange an audience with the Seven I have recently interned.”

“Not surprising.” Stiles supposes. That seems to be a running theme, people wanting things from him because of who he was. “Rumors of my existence are spreading like wildfire apparently. Did she say why she wants an audience with me?”

“Ever since the old Queen died, the treaties that were established with the Troll Horde has collapsed,
and so there has been many battles over the neighboring territories they share. There has been great losses on both sides,” Deaton explains. “Queen Sizaehilda says she’s tried countless times to reason with Queen Zulraja of the Trolls, but to no avail. She believes if you were to become involved, Queen Zulraja would see reason and agree to a summit to negotiate a new cease-fire contract.”

“I know absolutely nothing about Trolls or Dwarves to even pull *that* off,” Stiles complains and he scrubs his hands through his hair with weary frustration. “I can’t even make the tea you keep insisting over. You’re going to have to show me what I should be doing. I am not *all-knowing*, even with my remarkable magic.”

“Which is what I hoped you would realize,” Deaton confesses and most of his cuts and bruises have faded, but a majority are still lingering. He sweeps his hand across his body and a shockwave ripples across Stiles’s magic, causing it to retreat back to its host. “It is an age old lesson on self reliance that many Druids begin the start of their internship with. It is a trial that determines if you are really ready to learn all that I have to give by testing your pride.”

“Oh,” Stiles says weakly as his magic sinks into his body before pooling into his gut like a warm broth. “I could have told you a long time ago that I don’t think I’m all that.” He blinks, then asks, “So did I…pass?”

“Yes, Mr. Stilinski,” Deaton confirms as he stands to his feet, his movements a lot more at ease now. His magic must have healed quite a bit for that. “I would say so.”

“Okay, good,” Stiles sighs in relief. “I am a sponge, ready to soak up all your awesome expertise,” he assures, watching as Deaton rounds the rocking chair to get to the other side of the glass display case. “So, I don’t mean to be nosy or pry but, um, has there been others that you tried to take on and they’ve failed?”

“Yes,” Deaton simply says. “And there has only been one other that has passed as well as you have. She was —” He pauses and it’s the first time Stiles has ever seen a pained look cross his face. But it’s gone as quickly as it came. “That was a long time ago, before you were born, I imagine. It was a relationship that fell through, unfortunately. I was forced to dismiss her. If you don’t mind, I do not like to discuss it. I find that the past is a dark, twisted forest of horrors.”

“Right. Sorry,” Stiles says because he doesn’t know what he can say. “Um, so *can* you make tea out of these ingredients?” he asks, trying to change the subject.

“I cannot, but you can,” Deaton carefully corrects. “I can only guide you through the steps, as I can with most things. It is my purpose after all.”

“But you do have magic too, right? What was that thing you did earlier?” Stiles questions curiously. “You like pushed my magic away with it.”

“It was not magic exactly, but more of a guidance spell,” Deaton clarifies. “I do not have magic in the same capacity as you. What I can do takes practices and time. It takes a lot of research and memory. Druids have the ability to do such spells and incantations without pulling from a source of power. But there are limits and restrictions. I can only do protection and guidance charms. Beyond that, I have to rely on the use of incenses, draughts, elixirs, and potions. Or good company.”

Stiles lets that sink in and he grins. “Am I good company?” he jokes.

Deaton nods and his lips twitch but never curve up or down. “You do fit the category, yes,” he concedes lightly. Then, in his usual serious tone, says, “Regarding the detailed message you left me. You must let the issues concerning Isaac resolve itself.”
“What? I can’t just become uninvolved!” Stiles exclaims, disbelieving.

“That is not what I meant,” Deaton replies evenly. “For now, it is not your responsibility of how your brother will come to know of his true parentage. Nor is it your duty to make amends between Katherine Argent and Deputy Parrish if any of it should result in a confrontation. You are not the source of the issue.”


“As for investigating the site where Mr. Ravenhill died and his cabin,” Deaton goes on to say. “I have not been able to get to it, as I found myself delayed in the company of the Dwarves. You can accompany me as I do so now, just in order to familiarize yourself with how to approach circumstances such as these.”

Stiles nods enthusiastically. “Peter was also wondering if he could join us,” he reports. “And Braeden too, I guess. Do you know Braeden?”

“I am familiar with Ms. Journey,” Deaton confirms vaguely. “You may inform them that they can accompany us. We will be leaving shortly. We’ll start at the location where Mr. Ravenhill died.”

Stiles nods again and pulls out his phone to send Peter a few texts. He wonders though, if he’s not already swept up and preoccupied by the whole ‘Kate finding out’ situation. He has to text Derek in order to get through to Braeden because he doesn’t have her number yet.

Deaton indicates to the dark blue, velvet pouch when he finishes. “Have a look, Mr. Stilinski. I went through quite a bit of trouble to get them,” he says.

Stiles can’t tell if that’s a poor attempt at a joke or not but he grabs the pouch and studies the strange marking on the front of it. They look like the markings you would see on a heart monitor, or even a lie detector test (separated polygraph symbols).

“By stone or steel,” Deaton translates. “It is a common Dwarvish saying.”

Stiles nods distractedly, taking a moment to appreciate how soft and weighty it feels in his hands before he loosens the opening. “Oh wow,” he breathes and pulls out a handful of glinting, engraved gems the size of sunflower seeds. They’re a mix of luminous blues and violets. “Did you do this?”

“Queen Sizaehilda took the liberty of fashioning them on my behalf, as a sign of goodwill,” Deaton explains. “It is a rare thing, indeed, Mr. Stilinski, for Dwarven royalty to style a stone for those who are not immediate family. You should feel fortunate.”

“Trust me, I do,” Stiles swears as his magic unfurls in his gut before spreading through his limbs. It consumes the hand holding the amethyst seeds in glittery blue flames. “You’ll show me how to plant them, right?”

“Yes,” Deaton assures. “I will supervise the process until we are both comfortable with your progress.”

“Ok, good,” Stiles replies and he draws his magic back in before dropping the amethyst seeds back in the bag. They land with noisy clacking sounds. He tightens the opening and drops it in his backpack, along with the books he’s borrowing, which reminds him about Heather. “By the way, you should know that a Nymph was here. Well the one I was asking you about way back when. I’ve been calling her ‘Heather’ in my head. Not sure what her real name is.”

“What did she want?” Deaton asks, overlooking everything else that was said. “You did not let her
“No way,” Stiles promises. “If anything, I got her to agree to be indebted to me. She said she’s bewitched. She can’t go home. Does that sound like anything familiar to you?”

“Mermaids need a natural stream of water in order to travel between their aquatic realms,” Deaton simplifies as he presses his hands to the edge of the glass counter to lean forward. “There are portals they activate that only accept the passage of a pureblood Mermaid. It is considered the safest way for them to travel and protect their kingdoms. If she cannot do that, then the problem must lie in her blood. I will do some research to confirm, but I believe she may have a parasite.”

“Makes sense,” Stiles remarks, impressed and grateful that he even knows someone like Deaton. He grabs his backpack and tosses it over his shoulder. “I borrowed a few books.”

“It makes no difference to me as long as they’re returned in the condition they were taken in,” Deaton states and straightens. “Now, if there is nothing else, we’ll take my car to the preserve.”

Stiles talks to Deaton about Talia and about being her Second during their short drive to the preserve in his white Toyota Prius.

The older man agrees to talk more in depth with Talia and the sheriff about how they want to arrange things to fit his current line of training. And just like that, the matter is settled.

Stiles also mentions his frustrating confrontation with his Uncle Claude and his comment about the Reyes Twins.

At this point, it’s high noon.

“I don’t know,” Stiles concludes when Deaton comes to a halt on one of the preserve’s private roads. He unbuckles his seatbelt and says, “I don’t really think they’re that big of a threat as my uncle is making them out to be. I think he’s trying to distract me.”

“True as that may be, do not underestimate any of them,” Deaton advises as he shuts off his engine and they climb out his car with his messenger bag. He locks and sets the alarm on it before pocketing the keys. “It might be that your uncle knows exactly why the Reyes Twins have returned, if he did not lure them back himself.”

“My point exactly!” Stiles exclaims as he trails after the older man as they trudge through the woods. “I just don’t know what to do about it.”

“Focus on what’s initially important at the moment,” Deaton advises.

“What do you mean? Like live in the now or something?” Stiles questions.

Deaton says, "Virtues are not supposed to be anxious. The Faceless made Fate, just as they have designed all living creatures for an intended purpose. Fate chose you yet while you were being formed by the Faceless in your mother's womb. But what is Fate's role? To provide." He adds, "Take birds for example. They don't weep and wonder when they will eat next or where they will sleep when night comes. They trust that everything for them will be provided for in due time, because Fate makes it this way."

"So I should be more like birds?" Stiles jokes, but he truthfully doesn't understand what his mentor is saying.
I'm saying that if Fate can provide for the birds, and see to their needs," Deaton patiently explains. "Then how much more valuable are you to Fate in comparison? Knowing this, what, really, do you have to worry about?"

Stiles takes his words to heart as he stumbles over an exposed tree root. He’s able to right himself before he goes crashing down and his magic begins to twist excitedly in his chest. He figures it must be the heavy presence of nature pressing in around them.

In the forest, the sky vanishes almost completely in the tops of the trees, only a few fragments of blue remain; like scattered pieces of an impossible jigsaw puzzle. The air is rich with the fragrance of leaves and loam, and it feels soft under his footsteps, damp too.

Above the trees is the noon daylight, the powerful rays of early summer, but in here, between the trees, everything is cool. The colors have the softness of that time just before twilight. The huckleberries in the bushes are mostly black, with varying shades of blue and red. There are scattered flora and foliage everywhere.

The only movement is the occasional bird, startling in the trees or a squirrel dashing up a nearby trunk. As they draw near to the bridge perched over the river, the sound of running water rings clear in the brook and it has the same hypnotic quality as music.

Stiles wants to stop to just drink in the sound and he’s not surprised when his magic begins wafting from him, breaking away to become a flock of glowing, blue owl-shaped beings. They carry away on wings of glittery blue light that’s like stardust trailing after a speeding comet.

Deaton lifts his head to observe the spectacle of it and makes a thoughtfully impressed sound. “You’re becoming more comfortable and attuned to your magic, I see,” he comments.

Stiles rubs the back of his neck sheepishly as he quickens his pace so they’re walking side by side. “Yeah,” he simply says. “I think it’s more of me trusting it to know what it wants. I don’t want to cage it if being free to become whatever it pleases is what makes it happy.”

“Bonding with magic requires a great amount of mutual respect and understanding, so that is an adept observation,” Deaton compliments. “Most Virtues and Vices spend the first portion of their lives trying to wrangle their magic submissively before they come to the same conclusion you’ve instinctively discovered.”

Stiles blushes at the praise and shrugs weakly. “I, um, do what I can with the little I have,” he jokes. “So it seems,” Deaton murmurs and shifts his attention once they reach the clearing, which is basically cut down the middle by the river.

It’s the kind of river that is a slice of mellow harmony amid the fragrant leaves. It flows like time, always onward, always toward its destiny. The water’s surface is livened by brief crescents of white that are fish arcing as they swim. It winds through the forest, welcoming stray flora that comes its way.

It is part of this place, integral to life, yet also a thing unto itself. It’s a ribbon of living turquoise, boldly flowing amid the green of the forest.

The clearing that rests on either side of it is a cacophony of color on the fading green; purple thistles, blue cornflowers, red poppies and tall asters with their yellow centers. There is no coordination to it like the displays on the streets of the metropolitan area of Beacon Hills; just a free-for-all choreographed by the wind. Bumblebees, butterflies, and all manner of insects jump to and fro in
graceful leaps.

Stiles spies the familiar old oak bridge that Cora had taken him to only once before.

Braeden is dressed in a pale ivory floor-length gown, detailed with tonal twinkling beads and sequins. Her ivory ombre hair is in beach waves. She waits at the center of the bridge with Whit Lee and Derek. His heart does a funny little tango at the sight of the older teen, and just like that it draws Derek's attention.

Derek turns quickly to single out the sound and grins widely, waving when he spots Deaton and Stiles nearing. He’s wearing a pair of mirror shades, a green henley rolled up at the elbows, and white shorts. He leaves Braeden where she is (rolling her eyes at him) to sprint over and meet them halfway. He doesn’t even sound breathless when he says, “Hello, Deaton.”

“Derek,” Deaton greets in return. “Where’s Peter?”

“He asked me to stand in for him,” Derek explains, almost apologetically. “Something about Kate going on a rampage over family issues. I’m not sure.”

Stiles grimaces because that’s what he feared might happen.

“Very well,” Deaton says, taking it in stride. “If you have the time to spare, I am grateful. I’ll get set up and you can show me the designated spot where Mr. Ravenhill was found.”

Derek nods and waits until Deaton is out of earshot before he turns to Stiles and says, “Hey.” He smiles.

Stiles’s heart flip-flops in his chest and he says, “Hey.”

“How did the thing with Chris and Kate go?”

“Didn’t turn out the way I hoped. I’m pretty sure she’s upset. The aforementioned ‘rampage’ your uncle was alluding to.”

“You should tell me about.”

“Maybe later,” Stiles supposes with a sigh. It makes him exhausted just thinking about it. “I’m tied up in knots about it as is.”

Derek chuckles at his phrasing. “You look like you need a hug,” he suggests with that boyish grin of his as he pushes his sunglasses up to rest in his hair. “I’m pretty good with those.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Stiles mutters. He pretends like he doesn’t know that Derek heard. “Maybe just a quick one? Don’t want to keep Deaton waiting.”

Derek just hums noncommittally and reels him into the warmest and most comfortable hug. He spreads his palms against Stiles’s shoulder blades because at this point he knows exactly how Stiles likes to be held.

Stiles lets himself sink into it with every fiber of his being. He hides his face in the side of Derek’s tan neck, savoring the older teen’s abnormal body temperature as they press together, chest to chest. He melts into the embrace as the smell of Derek (vanilla and jasmine) acts like a trigger for all the tension in his body to flee.

He knows there’s no use in pretending that his hands aren’t trembling with nerves and yearning as he
fists the sides of Derek’s shirt. Or that there are not butterflies, but full-fledged bats flapping around in his stomach when he’s this close to Derek.

These hugs could never be long enough for Stiles.

In Derek's arms he is safe and his worries disappear like drops of rain falling over the ocean. In this embrace he is cocooned better than any butterfly-to-be. Derek always applies the right amount of pressure that never feels suffocating to Stiles like hugs usually did with others. His arms are soft, yet strong.

In the warm swaddle of Derek's chest and arms, the world feels as though it's stopped still on its axis. How could it be that something so simple as a hug could be so perfect? So pure. So unselfish. So undemanding. So freeing.

When the end comes, it's too soon, and he reflexively grips Derek tighter when he starts pulling away, mentally launching a campaign for just a little more time.

Derek just snickers indulgently, rubbing his hands up and down Stiles’s back as he’s gripped.

Stiles knows he’s being clingy and his cheeks get pink but he’s addicted to the way Derek can make him feel so cherished.

“Not that this isn’t sweet, because I’m definitely getting diabetes, but do you think you can extract yourselves from each other’s alluring gravitational pull?”

Stiles sighs. He should have known it wouldn’t last.

Not if Braeden had something to say about it.

Stiles loosens his grip and reluctantly pulls away, blushing when Derek sneaks a quick kiss to his left cheek. “Thought it was my turn,” he complains quietly.

“I'll add it to your tab,” Derek quips brazenly, wiggling his eyebrows mischievously. “And I'm definitely gonna collect later.”

Stiles pinches his side and hops away when Derek tries to grab him.

Braeden places herself between them and lifts a finely arched eyebrow. “Derek, we’re all waiting on you. Go show us where Mr. Ravenhill was struck down,” she demands, looping an arm with Stiles’s so she can drag him towards the riverbank where Deaton is waiting patiently. “Hello, Alan,” she purrs, but there is underlying scorn to it. “Handsome as ever, aren’t you? I see Stiles managed to trump your little test.”

Deaton offers her a cursory glance before he refocuses on extracting a metal censer suspended from a single chain. “Ms. Journey,” he greets back shortly. “I'm sure you already realize that my affiliation with Mr. Stilinski is a private matter that cannot be discussed with a Virtue who is still in training herself.”

Braeden’s mouth twists unhappily. “Right. How rude of me,” she replies tightly. “It’s just that one wonders how far I might have gone had I passed as well as he seemed to.”

“I’m informed Druid Lehuanani’s teaching methods are truly without equal,” Deaton remarks evenly. “Are you not graduating from her apprenticeship at the end of this summer? She never struck me as someone who left a lot to be desired.”
Braeden pulls away from Stiles to frown, and she avoids Deaton’s gaze. She actually looks a little ashamed at herself. “She is… the best, yes,” she confirms and runs her hands through her hair. “But you know that you’re the one I always —”

“I’d have care of your words, Ms. Journey,” Deaton interjects firmly. “You pay a great disrespect to your overseer, and my own protégé. I have explained to you once before why things between us did not work out.”

Braeden purses her lips and swallows. She gives a short nod as Derek joins them with a concerned frown.

Deaton, deciding the matter is settled, turns to Stiles and says, “This is a thurible. Its purpose is to disenchant any glamour that may have been left behind to disguise any dealings of magic.” He makes a quick work of showing Stiles how to open it. “You’ll see I have already equipped it with the proper incense. Do you recognize what this is?”

Stiles shakes his head no as he studies what looks like a handful of small, green wooden dice resting over charcoal.

“It’s Sandalwood,” Deaton clarifies. “Sandalwood is fire and water associative along with being seen as the divine wood. Because of this, Sandalwood is a good incense to burn to purify or sanctify an area.”

“I thought Sandalwood was supposed to be like red or something,” Stiles points out, watching as Deaton lights a match and drops it in before closing the thurible.

“The shades vary,” Braeden answers, looking composed now but she’s staring at Deaton. “But green is recommended when dealing with elements of nature.”

“Correct,” Deaton remarks and when smoke begins to escape through the holes of the thurible, he swings it back and forth by its chain. It produces a sweet smelling scent. “Pay attention to the surrounding area as Derek leads us to the place of death,” he instructs and gives an indicating nod to Derek.

Stiles watches as Deaton continually swings the thurible as he follows Derek. Nothing of particular note happens as he steps into pace with Braeden. When he sees her eyes bleed to ivory, his shift as well, warming to honey-gold.

The difference is undeniable.

The world looks enhanced, like it’s being broadcasted in the highest definition possible. The colors of the earth have magnified to a startlingly degree. The forest becomes a ballet of splendor, displaying one dance of beauty after another. The sun's cascading light, a brilliant white shaft illuminating the vibrant hues of the wildflowers and the grass, extends itself endlessly.

There are no words to really describe it — at least no Human terms that could do it justice.

“Concentrate, newbie,” Braeden murmurs and elbows his side before gliding over to the riverbank. “Something’s got Whit Lee spooked. He doesn’t know what it is but he hasn’t left that bridge since we got here,” she announces.

Stiles blinks and notices that, yes, Whit Lee is still sitting like an unmovable statue on the middle of the bridge a little ways up the river. He also notices that Derek is indicating to a flower patch as Deaton rotates the thurible in an anti-clockwise direction over it. He moves closer to observe.
The incense does as it’s supposed to. There’s some sort of translucent film that peels away from the patch, and the wildflowers begin to wilt. The surrounding grass begins to wither and lose its color. Like a sickness that’s spreading, it becomes brown and changes into the indention and shape of a figure.

Stiles realizes it’s the outline of Mr. Ravenhill’s body.

“Someone did try to conceal his deathbed,” Deaton concludes and lowers to his knees for a closer look. He points to the brown outline and says, “Based on the pattern of decay, and pigment of the foliage, he was poisoned.”

“You can tell all of that by looking at some dead grass?” Stiles marvels.

Deaton glances up at him. “If he was hit with a spell, there would be an indication of a struggle, but there are no signs among the foliage that suggests this is the case. But as you can see by the outline, he fell forward, meaning a sudden death. He didn’t have time to react because the amount of steps from his cabin to this spot was enough to activate and circulate whatever he was poisoned with through his system, causing cardiac arrest,” he explains without pause. “Now, how do I know he was poisoned exactly? Well, there is a thin film of slime on the grass, meaning that he perspired enough of the toxin to render the same effects on the foliage as well, which is why it is dead in just the place where he died.”

Stiles exchanges a look with Derek because that was super impressive.

Deaton takes out a pair of blue rubber gloves from his messenger bag and rips up some dead grass to collect as a sample in a zip lock bag he carefully seals. He then rips off the gloves and tucks the sample away.

Derek ducks his head with a frown and says, “What’s that?”

Stiles shifts his gaze to where the older teen is pointing and he grits his teeth when he notices the paw prints.

“Cat paw prints. ‘That son of a bitch,’” he hisses lowly. “I knew it. I —”

“Settle, Mr. Stilinski,” Deaton warns as he stands. “We have to be sure.”

“How?” Stiles snaps. “That right there should be enough!”

“It’s a forest,” Braeden simplifies unhelpfully. “Could belong to any animal. But lucky you, it wasn’t just anybody who put up that concealment charm. See all the discarded purple mushrooms? They’re bone dry now since they’ve been fully utilized. Someone tossed them to and fro in the same way a person would hurl a smoke bomb to get away.”

“She is correct,” Deaton confirms. “The glamour was set into place by a Gnome.”

“Gnomes,” Stiles echoes dazedly. “Gnomes — because why not?”

Derek sends him a sympathetic look, but he doesn’t seem surprised at the announcement of Gnomes being an actual thing. “They usually keep to themselves,” he clarifies which only confirms Stiles’s theory about him already knowing. “So I don’t get why they would want to involve themselves with what happened to Mr. Ravenhill. They never bother coming up from underground if they can help it.”

“It must have stolen an item of importance from him,” Deaton reasons. “If so, it makes sense that it would cover its tracks in an attempt not to be blamed for the death itself.”
“Fucking thieves,” Braeden mutters with a rough exhale. “I’ll snuff it out, that is, if it’s okay with you, Alan,” she asks a little bitterly.

Deaton does not rise to the bait. “I have no objections. This may prove to be beneficial if we are to confirm Mr. Stilinski’s suspicions.”

Braeden nods before releasing her magic like a sigh, and it wafts from her like mist. It gathers together and condenses into a single ethereal cloud of ivory vapor in the shape of a miniature humpback whale. It floats around her as though swimming in unseen water. As if she were speaking to a beloved pet, she murmurds the instruction, “Go find them.”

Her magic hovers back and forth before shooting across the river and sinking into the ground resting a few feet away from the river’s edge.

Stiles remembers that Peter told him that Tyson claimed Mr. Ravenhill had been looking towards the river when he stumbled across him. He wonders if it’s because he saw Gnomes standing across the way.

“Got it!” Braeden exclaims with a gleeful smirk. She lifts her hands, manipulating something unseen, before unearthing a small, ugly creature. “It put up quite a fight.”

“Careful,” Deaton cautions. “We’ve already offended it by dragging it to daylight against its will. It would be a graver insult to hurt it.”

Braeden doesn’t respond but she draws it closer.

The Gnome is wrapped up in an ivory cloud that acts like bindings. The short tubby character has a great, white bushy beard the length of its body, bright colored clothing, and plump rosy cheeks. It struggles ferociously, mumbling mangled swears under its breath. It’s an amazing thing that it’s not covered in dirt, despite the fact that it was pulled from the ground like a carrot.

“Blast it! Confound you all!” the Gnome screeches. It barely stands as tall as Braeden’s knees. “I’d curse your grandmothers were I as impolite and ill-mannered as you lot are! Or your fathers for spilling his seed in your mother’s womb!”

“My, what a soft heart you are,” Braeden drawls, antagonizing the little creature.

"You insult me, child. Us Gnome-folk know nothing about no soft heart. Our insides are made of metal. Calling me soft is worse than cutting the beard right off my face!”

Braeden rolls her eyes. “We have questions.”

“Good on you to posses such a thing, but what it’s got to do with me, I couldn’t possibly imagine,” it retorts snidely. “Let me alone. An old friend who has finally decided to forgive me of a three decade old grudge has invited me to tea and supper. He’ll not be giving me that chance again if I should miss this appointment!”

“We’ll write you a note,” Braeden replies meanly.

Deaton sends her a sharp look for that and she actually goes quiet, but not without a mutinous expression. “We do apologize,” he says to the fussy creature. “For accosting you in such a way. But in truth, it could not be helped. We believe you may be in possession of some information, as well as a commandeered item.”

The Gnome gives them all the stink-eye and stubbornly shuts its mouth but does not stop struggling
against Braeden’s magic.

“I could feed him to Whit Lee,” Braeden suggests. “Snow Leopards are fond of Gnomes, I’m told.”

At this, the Gnome squeaks indignantly and turns a furious shade of red.

“Brae,” Derek sighs. “Probably not the best thing you could’ve said just then.”

Braeden shrugs carelessly and examines her nails like she’s bored by it all. “He’s the one being uncooperative. If any of you have a better idea, then by all means,” she says.

Stiles doesn’t even think when he says, “What if we could trade you something?”

The Gnome stops struggling enough to send Stiles a considering look. “You want to trade with me?” it questions suspiciously.

"Is that not something you do?"

The Gnome laughs meanly. "Don't you know nothing about Gnome-folk? It's all we do! Which is why it's important I can't miss my appointment! I'll be able to start bargaining for copper plates again. Most say brass is the best, but I know better! Imagine! Three decades without a lick of copper to my name. I've done just fine so far, but I'll not be missing this opportunity, that's for sure! Why, you couldn't bribe a Gnome lass over to entertain with —"

"Ah," Stiles says, mostly to himself. Then he takes a moment to tune out the Gnome's ramblings in order to think. He doesn't really have anything of value on him, and certainly not any metal. But he decides to go with his gut when he asks, "Do you like peppermints?"

"— just laughed in my face when she saw the brass tapestry I had on display in my supper area," the Gnome continues before pausing. It blinks when it realizes what Stiles has just asked. "Funny word, that," it mutters. "Explain," it demands.

Stiles scrambles to pull out one of the peppermint candies in his pockets, and holds it up to the light so that the Gnome can get an eyeful. "It’s really sweet," he describes soothingly. "Do you like sweet things?"

The Gnome just sniffs. "Gnome-folk usually go for bitter and hot."

Stiles nods.


Stiles sends Braeden a look and she stares back flatly before she huffs, freeing the Gnome from her magic. He mutters a quick thanks before carefully approaching the disgruntled little thing.

The Gnome watches him like a hawk, face full of suspicion and apprehension. It snatches the candy from Stiles when he’s close enough and shoves it in its mouth with a wet sound.

Stiles steps back and waits anxiously to see what the Gnome will do.

It doesn’t disappoint. It licks its lips with a satisfied smack and bright eyes. “Not like them, I see. Decent lad, you are. Come on, give us more,” it beseeches.

“Gladly, but before I do, could you answer some questions?” Stiles bargains.

The Gnomes huffs and hides its small hands behind its long beard. “Clever,” it grumbles. “Very
“well. What do you want to know?”

“Mr. Ravenhill,” Stiles starts. “Did you know him?”

“Aye. All us wee folk know him as much as any other woodland creature,” the Gnome reports. “Dead now, isn’t he? Shame, that.”

“Yes,” Stiles manages around a lump. He quickly clears his throat and asks, “Did you happen to see it when it happened.”

“Aye, in a way,” it confirms, looking a little shamed. “It was too late by the time I came up to see the commotion. Made a great, terrible sound, he did. Like a mighty tree collapsing. Our wise Chamber Guard elected me as a Seeker to go an investigate the noise, in case we would need to go down to the deeper vaults of our colonies for safety. So I came up to see him lying prostate on that patch of grass right there. And the wee cat with him wasn’t too bothered to help —”

“What did it look like?” Stiles quickly interjects. “Sorry.”

The Gnome sniffs and waves him off. “The feline looked much the same as they all do, I suppose. Orange tabby fur. Full grown, I’d say,” it recalls.

Claude.

Stiles sends Deaton a look and the older man nods once. He turns back to the bemused creature. “What did you take from Mr. Ravenhill when he died?”

“Didn’t take nothing, did I? Was given to me, willingly mind you,” it corrects, offended. “You know, not all us Gnomes are alike! Sure my forefathers were prone to snatching this and that, now and again, but I’m not like that. I tell you!” The little thing adds, “He spoke to me, you know. Before he died. Mouthed the words, ‘Hide the key’ and I snapped me fingers —” It snaps its fingers with a spark. “And I took this key.” It holds it up with tiny, stubby fingers.

The key glints in the sunlight. It seems like such a large thing in the small creature’s hand. It’s shaped like a skeleton key but it’s made of some kind of translucent crystal.

“Not sure what it does or what it opens, but the wee cat was scratching after it like it was the key to Faerie,” the Gnome goes on to say. “Kept it safe and hidden, I did.”

“And we are immensely grateful for that,” Deaton assures. “But we’ll have to take it.”

“Not going to give it to any of you, I’m not,” it snaps but it settles when it looks at Stiles. “But you I like.”

Braeden rolls her eyes and snorts.

Stiles grins a little. “My name is Stiles,” he introduces. “And I thank you for being so patient and understanding.”

“Welpip is how I am called,” he grunts back and waddles over to offer the key. “You’re a Faerie, aren’t you?”

Stiles takes the key, clutching it in one hand. “Yes. A Virtue,” he clarifies.

“Oh don’t be so modest, Stiles,” Braeden drawls. “He’s a Seven, Welpip.”

“Wasn’t talking to you, was I?” Welpip gives her a nasty glare. “And I also didn’t give you leave to
address me by my given name.” He turns to face Stiles, looking up as if in the presence of a giant. “I gather that makes you royalty then. Now I feel a might bit more sheepish. Not properly dressed. Forgive me of my bad manners. You all took me by surprise.”

Stiles blinks with a frown. “Uh, no, it’s fine. Titles aren’t everything. I’m sure we’re not so different,” he supposes and lowers himself to one knee. “I’ll give you all the peppermints I have on me to compensate for your time. And I bet if you gave some to your friend, they’ll forgive you too.”

Welpip smiles widely, snapping his fingers with a spark and offers the knapsack he just materialized. “Oh you are very generous, Your Majesty,” he croons. “You bring great joy to these woods. Good timing too. Things are getting perilous here ever since Mr. Ravenhill went and got himself killed. There’s rumors of a terrible darkness coming. Many of my kin have fled to the North Eastern Catacombs in fear.”

“We’ll do our best to ensure that won’t happen,” Deaton assures but the tiny creature isn’t even paying him notice.

Welpip refuses to look anywhere but Stiles as he empties his pockets as promised. “I’d rather have your promise,” he presses. “I’m brave when needed, and I’ll protect my Guild with my life, if I must. But it does comfort one to know that it has the support of a Faerie Prince.” He heaves his knapsack over one shoulder. “Do I?”

“You do,” Stiles guarantees. “I’m told that some of the forest is sick and goes unprotected. Have you seen it?”

“Aye,” Welpip confirms. “Won’t mind if you call on me to show you. But I really do have to leave now. Corgrim has a right nasty temper, she does. More than suited to her name, she is. And there’s only so much of this red and white sweetness to soothe it. Give me advance notice, and I’ll take you.”

Stiles nods before standing to his feet.

Welpip turns and glares at the rest of them before he sinks slowly into the soil like quicksand until there is nothing left to be seen of him.

Derek approaches Stiles with an impressed grin. “That was something to watch,” he admits, cheeks a little pink and hazel eyes bright. “I’ve seen Brae in her element,” he continues lowly, pushing close so he can fit against Stiles’s side and whisper in his ear. “But nothing compares to that.”

Stiles flushes and tries to cover his smile by sucking on his bottom lip.

Braeden scoffs and bats her hair over her shoulder. “Are we going to see what the key opens or what?” she asks impatiently.

“It’s the new key I made for Mr. Ravenhill,” Deaton explains and holds out a hand so Stiles can hand it over. “It has magical properties. One of them being that it will put the residence it opens under a special lockdown should something happen to the owner. He came to me in concern that someone was consistently trying to break into his home. I fashioned this to suit that specific need.”

“I’m guessing my uncle was the one trying to break in,” Stiles hazards. “What he might have been looking for, I’m not sure. I doubt that if I confronted him about it, he’d willingly give answers.”

“I have a theory,” Deaton says. “So that will not be necessary.”

“Darn. I’m very good at interrogating,” Braeden quips with a sinister smile. “I would’ve gotten an
answer.”

Stiles frowns when he feels a strangle ripple under his feet and the air becomes slightly off with a disturbance.

Derek snorts. “Yes, you got that Gnome to spill all his secrets,” he mockingly mentions.

Braeden waves him off. “I would’ve if Alan weren’t trying to be so diplomatic about it all,” she complains. “Even Druid Lehuanani condones my methods. She says sometimes brute force is necessary to get desired results.”

“Now that I disagree with,” Deaton states resolutely.

Stiles’s fingers twitch as the river twinkles sharply. “Guys,” he says, frown deepening. “Something doesn’t feel right.”

“What’s wrong?” Derek asks, immediately attentive.

Stiles shakes his head. “I don’t know — I can’t really explain it,” he replies and uses his fingers to whistle sharply, summoning his magic back.

“Try to,” Deaton instructs, taking a moment to look around. “Narrow it down.”

“I am,” Stiles swears as his magic circles in the sky, still in the form of a flock of glittery blue owls. “But it’s just this feeling. It’s coming from the river, I think.”

“Well, we need more than a feeling and a guess to act appropriately,” Braeden forcefully insists.

“Brae, chill,” Derek warns as he presses a warm hand to Stiles’s lower back.

“Oh, spare me,” Braeden retorts argumentatively. “You can’t expect —”

Stiles eyes widen as a colossal tentacle shoots out of the river and heads straights for him.

Braeden moves in a blink of an eye, shoving both Derek and Stiles out of the way, allowing herself to be captured instead. She’s lifted in the air with a shocked cry, caught in the thralls of a flailing monster squid.

Stiles clings to Derek from where they’re sprawled on the ground and he gawks as the creature emerges partially from the depths of the river. He didn’t even know the river was that deep.

Derek jumps to his feet and pulls Stiles with him but he looks shaken. “Braeden!” he yells in alarm. “Whit Lee!” he yells in the next minute.

The massive snow leopard comes stampeding up the riverbank with a mighty roar, springing on to one of the colossal tentacle that emerges from the water. He digs his paws in and begins running up it in order to get to his master. He then viciously claws Braeden free but she goes sailing through the air.

“I got her!” Derek says, running fast and jumping up to tackle her from the air, twisting so that his body can take the impact. They’re knocked a good distance because of it, creating a trail of dirt in their wake.

Stiles’s magic begins to dive down and help Whit Lee, pecking furiously at the monster squid and all its flailing tentacles.
Stiles runs over to Derek and Braeden, falling to his knees as he desperately looks them over, heart in his throat.

“I’m okay,” Derek assures with a groan, attempting to sit up, but he falls flat on his back with a soft sound. “Well, I will be as soon as Brae gets her fat ass off me.”

“Fuck you,” Braeden wheezes out with a laugh, still catching her breath. It takes her only a second longer to collect herself, though she’s dripping wet. “This is the thanks I get for saving your boy?” she complains.

Stiles stands and offers her a hand. “You have my gratitude,” he assures, genuine. He heaves her to her feet when she accepts his hand.

Braeden cracks her neck and summons her magic before manipulating it to take the shape of a bow and arrow. “Better get to it then,” she decides, stalking towards the riverbank with an iron look of determination. She begins shooting magical ivory arrows at the aquatic creature with flawless aim. And wherever they land, the squid’s skin begins to bubble and blister with boils.

Stiles blindly reaches out to grab Derek’s hands to help him up too, but he’s so distracted by the sight, he kind of fails. He snaps out of it when he’s yanked to the ground with Derek.

Derek quickly rolls out of the way of a thrashing tentacle that ends up stabbing into the ground instead of them. He doesn’t stop rolling them out of the way until he has Stiles pinned under him, eyes burning hotly with liquid gold.

Stiles realizes Derek’s starting to shift, and before he can say anything, Derek transforms into a full-fledged white wolf. He suddenly feels very, very small under the towering wolf above him.

Derek barks and darts off to chase the tentacle back into the water by nipping at it violently.

Deaton helps him to his feet and says, “You must help me open up a portal so that we can banish it from this realm.”

Stiles nods, at a loss for words as he watches Derek work in tandem with Braeden and Whit Lee. God, Derek is almost as huge as Kira was when she was a Kitsune.

“Mr. Stilinski, concentrate,” Deaton says sharply as he pulls out a rune stone the size of a pebble, and a switchblade. “I’ll need your right hand.”

Stiles offers it immediately.

“Fae blood works the same way a skeleton key does,” Deaton explains and he pricks Stiles’s index finger with perfunctory effort. It barely even hurts the way he’s done it. “This is the rune for the symbol ‘doorway’,,” he continues and squeezes Stiles’s finger until a good amount of blood appears.

Stiles winces a little but Deaton’s quick about rubbing the stone over his open cut.

Deaton then places it in the palm of Stiles’s hand before closing Stiles's fingers over it, closing his eyes and whispering a quick spell.

The rune stone begins to get warm and vibrates.

Deaton steps back and opens his eyes. “You must toss it in the river and utter the words ‘panta de’ which is ‘open up’ in Faerie,” he instructs.
Stiles nods and sprints to the riverbank, steering clear of any flailing tentacles that try their best to grab him. “Panta de!” he shouts, his hand glowing brightly with his magic and he hurls the rune stone in the water.

“Get back!” Deaton warns loudly.

Braeden marches over to Stiles, yanks him close and drags him a safe distance away.

Stiles feels a firm tug on his navel.

The water begins to thrash and swirl with brilliant light, rumbling and sparking like a hurricane would above the sea. The illuminated vortex widens and dwarfs into a portal, sucking in the monster squid.

Stiles holds up his hand as it glitters with bright blue energy and he concentrates on keeping the portal open. The portal becomes a startling vibrant blue, colors sparkling like the inside of a raw cluster of amethyst crystals. The tug on his navel gets stronger but he blinks past the feeling, focusing with all his might.

The colossal squid fights furiously against the pull but to no avail. It gets sucked in and when it completely disappears, Stiles closes his hand into a fist.

The river settles calmly once more after the portal shuts.

Stiles exhales in relief as he drops his hand and leans against Braeden tiredly as his heart continues it’s restless thudding in his chest. He feels high almost, giddy with the influence of his magic’s power.

It’s a testament to how frazzled Braeden must be that she lets him catch his breath while leaning against her. She’s panting herself from the exertion of it all. “Okay,” she gasps. “I think, or at least suspect, that maybe someone’s trying to kill us.”

Stiles can’t help it. He laughs breathlessly.

Deaton steps into his line of sight and rests a hand on his jaw, tilting his head up and he makes a dissatisfied sound. “I did not mean to push you beyond your limit,” he says, examining Stiles with a displeased expression.

Stiles frowns in confusion, but he feels something warm and sticky dripping from his nose. He reaches up and when he pulls his hand away, he sees blood. “Oh,” he says weakly and lets himself be caught by the older man when his knees give out. His adrenaline washes cold.

“He did good, though,” Braeden reasons tiredly and retrieves a silk handkerchief from god knows where to offer it to him. “I’m not going to want it back,” she informs him and there’s the Braeden he knows.

Stiles snorts weakly and accepts it with a quiet thanks. He begins to dab at his nose as he straightens with the help of his overseer and he looks around for Derek.

“Enormous thing, isn’t he?” Braeden says fondly when she shifts so he can find him, like she knows who he’s looking for.

The said enormous white wolf is sitting on his hind legs, almost a foot taller than Whit Lee, who sits beside him at the edge of the river. He has his head cocked, ears twitching as he stares bemusedly at the still waters with his pink tongue lolling out the side of his mouth.
“Hey, assholes!” Braeden shouts. “It’s not coming back! No point on trying to set the water on fire with your laser beam stares!”

Both Whit Lee and Derek whip their heads to glare at her in tandem.

Braeden doesn’t even bat an eyelash.

“How do you feel?” Deaton asks, grabbing his attention.

Stiles goes back to trying to clean the blood off his face. “A little lightheaded,” he admits. He blinks until his eyes cool when they shift to their normal state. The heightened sight was not helping his headache. “It kind of feels like a hangover.”

“That is common when opening and closing your first portal,” Deaton explains. “You’re suffering the residual effects of having to usher through such a large creature and keeping the gateway open for so long. Any longer and it would have been dangerous to your health. You won’t die from it, but you will collapse into a magical coma for an undetermined amount of time. Something to keep in mind for the future, should you choose to attempt it again.”

“Duly noted,” Stiles mumbles from behind the handkerchief. “So what exactly was that thing? And where did it come from?”

“Pterygioteuthis giardia,” Braeden answers before Deaton has the chance to. “Aquatic soldiers to its Dragon host. They’re found in the great lakes residing along mountains. They’re meant to protect against any unwanted intruders who may fancy themselves brave enough to try their hands at conquering hills of legendary treasures that rests inside the mountains with it’s fire-breathing collectors.”

“Doesn’t explain why it was here,” Stiles points out as Whit Lee prowls closer, nosing at Braeden’s shoulder with a petulant whine.

Braeden pets him distractedly. “I’m fine,” she assures her great cat. To Stiles, she says, “It was obviously sent to us as some kind of an assassin.”

Derek treads over, his fluffy white fur bouncing with the movement as his tail wags happily behind him. He takes a moment to duck his head and sniff at Stiles with a curious whine, ears flickering anxiously.

“I’m all right,” Stiles says gently and reaches out carefully, hesitating when Derek growls, but he just lowers himself to the ground so Stiles can reach him and licks unhappily at the blood on Stiles’s fingers. “I’m all right,” he repeats with a disgruntled laugh because his right hand is covered in slobber now.

His magic lands on Derek’s wide back, perching, hooting, and shaking out ethereal blue wings.

Derek’s ears swivel at the sound but he makes no move to shake them off. He stares determinedly at Stiles with huge amber eyes, rumbling in pleasure when Stiles runs a hand down his snout.

“Aren’t Werewolves usually this big?” Stiles asks as Deaton steps away to collect the gooey tip of a tentacle that had been left behind. “I mean I’ve seen Laura shift, but she never became this.” He makes a sweeping gesture to Derek.

“It’s not an easy thing to do outside of the Full Moon,” Braeden says. “But Derek’s always been an overachiever. He and Cora can do it at will, like Talia.”
Stiles is about to respond but a huge wet tongue swipes over his mouth and nose. He jumps back and spits. “Derek!” he complains. “Ugh, my mouth was open and everything!” He spits some more.

Derek doesn’t even have the decency to look ashamed. He just licks at his front paw lazily as a bioluminescent blue owl settles on the crown of his head.

Stiles uses Braeden’s handkerchief to scrub viciously at his face.

“How long do you plan on staying like that?” Braeden questions Derek as Whit Lee curls his long tail around her curvy waist and tugs her closer to him.

Derek just lowers his head to rest over his crossed paws as he stares blankly at her.

“Is it because you’ll be ass naked when you shift back?” Braeden teases with a smirk. “I’m sure Stiles wouldn’t mind that.”

Stiles chokes on his tongue and does not let his mind wander with the imagery that provides.

Derek barks reprovingly at his ridiculous best friend.

“Fine, you big baby, be like that,” Braeden sniffs haughtily. “Alan, you should give those samples to my sister. Danielle’s quick with singling out any indicative magical properties.”

Deaton returns to them with a thoughtful look. “If she does not find it inconveniencing,” he supposes and hands over both the piece of tentacle and contaminated grass.

“Please, this is her bread and butter,” Braeden assures, waving him off as she accepts the samples. She magic’s it away. “She’ll have the results printed up by Wednesday.”

Deaton gives a short nod and turns to Stiles. “If you feel up to it, we’ll continue on to Mr. Ravenhill’s cabin,” he suggests.

“I’m fine,” Stiles promises, and he really is. He’s still a little shaky and lightheaded, but he won’t collapse. “Lead the way.”

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Mr. Ravenhill’s cabin looks different in the daylight.

It looks like it’s been pulled straight out of a fairytale with a happy ending or a picture book for little kids. It looks like many things. It’s not rusty, old or dusty, but rather welcoming. It crouches low into the grassy embankment, as though it’s trying to hide, but the misshapen slate roof is too large to go unnoticed. Coarse, unevenly sized, grey stones made up the walls. Hedges, vines, and honeysuckles encase the lopsided cabin.

A green gate that Stiles doesn’t ever remember seeing comes into view. It’s settled on the cabin’s outskirts; a narrow dirt path runs from the small door of it with small pebbles.

There’s a tiny pond with lily pads and a few ducks, maybe a frog or two that sits under a glass window. A two-meter hedge hugs the foundation of the cabin. Vines grow up the walls and the arched wooden door with brown planks. The grass is green and yellow, scorched by the hot, blazing sun and a result of being left unattended for so long.

Stiles’s magic swoops down and lands in the yard, the roof of the cabin, and the small pond.

Deaton unlocks the gate and heads straight for the door.
Stiles hesitates at the gate’s entrance when Braeden does. They turn in sync to face Whit Lee and (a still fully shifted) Derek.

“Keep watch,” Braeden commands to Whit Lee. Then she rolls her eyes and adds, “And keep a damn eye on this fool. Make sure he doesn’t run off to chase a rabbit or something.”

Derek stomps his front paw with an indignant sound.

Braeden blows him a kiss before guiding Stiles away.

Stiles manages to escape her grasp by the time they step over the threshold. Then he has to recoil slightly against the smell.

The birds in the cages hanging from the ceiling are dead.

There’s a pained look that passes over Braeden’s face, so distracted by the smell and sight that she bumps into Stiles from behind. Her brow furrows and she says, “That’s not going to do at all.” She rounds Stiles to start opening up the small door to each cage. “Help me,” she demands.

Stiles swallows unsurely but he moves to do so, confused as to why they’re doing it. He tugs up the collar of his shirt to rest against his nose like a makeshift mask.

Deaton has disappeared into Mr. Ravenhill’s bedroom, as if on a scavenger hunt.

Braeden opens the last of the birdcages before she wanders over to the kitchen area. She rifles through the cabinets before making a triumphant sound. “This must be Fate,” she mutters.

Stiles frowns apprehensively.

Braeden straightens with a metal cup in hand, and exits the cabin to take some water from the pond, and returns with it full. She bites down on the skin of her thumb, hard enough to draw blood and she drips it into the cup, mixing it with the water. She spits into it three times before resting her hand over the mouth of it, closing her eyes.

Stiles watches curiously as the air of the cabin begins to vibrate.

“i’ will en’ umbar naa y’ fortified minas;” Braeden chants. “i’ innocent rima a’ ta ar’ naa varna.”

Stiles inhales sharply in wonder as her magic consumes the chalice in ivory flames before extinguishing.

Braeden opens her eyes and they’re glowing brightly. She begins moving around the cabin, dipping her fingers in the metal cup to withdraw some bloodied water and sprinkle the bird corpses. She repeats, “lle shall coia ar’ il-gurtha!” while she does.

Stiles wishes he knew what she was saying, but he can only guess when he watches each bird twitch, and one by one, they spring to life.

They chirp and flap frantically as if overwhelmed.

Stiles assumes coming back from the dead has that affect on one’s system.

Braeden grins weakly and almost keels over but Stiles is quick enough to catch her before she goes toppling to the ground. Blood descends from her nose and her lashes flutter wetly. “Isn’t it wonderful, what we can do?” she says dazedly. “To help them taste and see that Fate is good?”
“Braeden, what did you do?” Stiles asks worriedly. He presses her handkerchief in her hands, even though it’s been thoroughly used; he has nothing else to offer. “I don’t think you should have done that.”

“She should not have,” Deaton confirms, appearing out of nowhere and looking Braeden over with a grim frown. He crouches down and picks up the metal cup before closing his eyes in remorse. “Do you realize what this is?”

“Yes,” Braeden says shortly.

“Then you willfully gambled,” Deaton chastises, sending Braeden a stern look. “You shave years off of your own life. Your body was sown to this Earth by Fate and is perishable. It can only endure so much.”

“They were innocent,” Braeden insists. “I became their Witness before Death. Fate would not have given them back to me if it was their time.”

“And now they will live forever.”

“So be it.”

“It is not for us to decide who lives and who dies.”

“Don’t preach,” Braeden complains, mopping up the blood from her nose with her used handkerchief and she grimaces in disgust. “What’s done is done. The Virtue you should worry about is right there.” She nods to Stiles. “I’m sure he doesn’t color outside of the lines like I do. I know you hate that. You made it clear a long time ago.” She straightens in sheer stubbornness, shouldering past Deaton to stumble out the door.

The birds she’s resurrected follow after her as if she were a real life Disney princess.

Stiles scratches the back of his head, not sure what to do or say next.

Deaton’s grip on the metal cup tightens and his frown isn’t less grim. “Let this be a lesson, Mr. Stilinski,” he gravely states. “We do not go looking for the living among the dead. Bringing someone back from the brink of death is one thing, but resurrection is an entirely different matter and is to only be used to your discretion, if at all.”

“Uh, I understand, but I don’t really think I’m quite there yet to even consider it,” Stiles informs him, twisting his hands together anxiously. “But, um, what happens when it’s done carelessly?”

“Imbalance,” Deaton merely replies. “There cannot be life without death. If the scale tips one way or the other, creating inequality, then it will be corrected. By whatever amount it takes.”

“Oh,” Stiles says weakly. He can get Deaton’s perspective if that’s what the consequence will be. “So since she brought them back…”

“Yes,” Deaton confirms. “Death will not pardon the theft. It will collect to cover its losses. By any means necessary.”

Stiles scrubs his face tiredly and he takes the information to heart. He drops his hands with a sigh. “What can we do?”

“Brace ourselves,” Deaton murmurs before he turns to make his exit.
Stiles looks around at all the empty cages and stands in the silence of being alone. Then he too exits the cabin, closing the door behind him with a click that feels final.

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“I believe this is what your uncle may have been looking for,” Deaton reasons as they stand at the front of his car. He holds up the metal cup Braeden had used earlier. It looks like a cup that a king would drink out of it back in medieval times (only there's rune symbols marked all around it). “It is the Chalice of Resurrection. Its magical property is to revive the dead and whosoever it revives is gifted with immortality. Lethal in the wrong hands.”

Braeden just examines her nails when he sends her a pointed look. If she’s going for casual, it won’t work, what with all the birds perched on her shoulders and hovering around her head and shoulders. Not to mention Whit Lee sitting dutifully beside her.

Derek is nosing his way around Deaton’s Prius as if he’s looking for something, his tail wagging happily behind him.

Stiles smiles a little at the sight before he grows serious. He looks to Deaton and says, “Why would my uncle need it, outside of what’s obvious? I doubt he’d want to kill himself just to be revived by the cup to be a cat forever. He’s very unhappy with his current condition in my understanding.”

“I can think of no particular reason, unless he was assigned the task of retrieving it for the Benefactor,” Deaton broadly deduces. “However, only a Virtue can use it. This once belonged to Abraham, Talia’s first husband. It was a family heirloom of his.”

“If a Vice isn’t able to use the Chalice, then why are they desperate enough to kill Mr. Ravenhill for it?” Stiles questions. “What does the Benefactor want with the Chalice of Resurrection?”

“That’s the million dollar question, isn’t it?” Braeden remarks, lighting one of her magical cigarettes, and seriously where is she pulling this stuff from? “I can hazard a guess. Do you want to know what my theory is?”

“Leverage,” Deaton states before she gets the chance to. “For an on-going campaign. Gerard Argent has been looking for this as well. He thought I was in possession of it at one point.”

“It always comes back to politics,” Stiles complains with a sigh. “So what do we do now to make sure that the Benefactor nor Mayor Argent doesn’t get this leverage?”

“Any magical artifact with great power has to be handed over to the Silver Magistrate,” Deaton announces. “But for now, it will have to be held in the Hale Vault for safekeeping until a representative can be commissioned with the task of retrieving it.”

“Which means you’re headed to the Hale Manor. Awesome. In that case, I call shot gun,” Braeden says, exhaling twinkling purple smoke with the words. She uses her free hands to send of wave of magic towards Whit Lee, shrinking him down to the size of a household kitten.

Whit Lee snarls and growls his complaints at being compacted so.

Stiles guesses it must be an uncomfortable feeling.

Deaton rounds his car to get to the driver’s side. “You will not smoke in my car,” he states, and his tone brokers no room for argument. “Stiles?” He’s looking at the younger man expectantly.

“Uh, I’ll just walk back with Derek. It’s fine.” Stiles shrugs and crosses his arms. “Are we done for
“Yes,” Deaton confirms. “I will notify you of anything important, and you do the same. Until then, I would like a few days to sort out several things and rest, if that works for you. We can get started on your garden by the end of this week.”

“No rush,” Stiles quickly assures. “Take all the time you need to heal.”

“I won’t need very much, but thank you,” Deaton replies before climbing in.

Braeden sucks down the rest of her magical cigarette greedily, gently shooing the birds hovering around her at a distance before hunching low to pick up Whit Lee and cradle him to her chest. She climbs in the car as well.

Stiles watches them drive off (and the birds that still follow after Braeden do so again) before turning to Derek, who’s patiently sitting on his hind legs with his head cocked. “I think all those birds imprinted on Braeden,” he remarks and he wonders if it’s a side effect of the Chalice. He blinks and saves the thought for later. “Uh, well, my internal compass is broken.” He shrugs. “Show me the way?”

Derek huffs wolfishly before he stretches lazily, sniffing before straightening. He trots forward, circling Stiles so he can stand behind him and he nudges him forward with his snout pressing between Stiles’s shoulder blades.

“Okay, okay!” Stiles exclaims with a laugh. “Geez, you’re even pushier like this. Didn’t think that was possible.”

Derek just growls playfully and nudges him along in the right direction.

They trudge through the noisy forest in companionable silence.

Stiles takes a moment to whistle, calling his magic to him, and its a few minutes before he sees the shadows of it circling high above them. One by one, it drifts down, breaking up and falling over him like sparkling snow made of blue stardust before tucking away into his gut.

He glances over to Derek, who has slowed his pace to match Stiles’s, and he finds the courage to say, “So, about that stuff you wanted me to tell you about?” He pauses to swallow. “I think I’m ready.”

Derek doesn’t slow his pace as he studies him with glowing amber eyes and ears flickering curiously. His head bobs encouragingly and moves so he’s closer to Stiles. He exhales, mouth shifting around his pink tongue and somehow that conveys that Stiles has his full attention.

Stiles reaches up with his left hand and threads his fingers through Derek’s soft white fur as his hand shakes with nerves. He clears his throat and starts from the beginning.

He starts by explaining the whole ‘Gerard is a secret pedophile’ business because that’s always the most difficult thing to sort out. Then he talks about what’s going with Parrish and Isaac. He talks about how Isaac’s related to Kate and that Chris knows. He talks about Malia and Jackson, and how they’re actually related to the Hale’s. He talks about Mayor Argent’s other kids who are still out there (Erica, Ricky and Carter, and god knows who else). He just really lays it on him.

With each confession, his mind becomes clearer, more at peace, as if each weight of each secret is being peeled away from him. Even though it’s a one-sided conversation, it still feels better than taking any healing medicine could. He’s no longer lost to the storm of his guilt. He’s unburdened,
When Stiles concludes his monologue, he lets go of Derek’s fur, shaking the hand out so he can get some circulation. He realizes that he’d been clutching Derek’s fur tightly the whole time.

Derek doesn’t seem to mind, but he does shake out his fur, slowing down to hop behind Stiles. Then he swipes his tongue over the back of Stiles’s head with an affectionate yipping noise.

Stiles laughs and spins around so he can walk backwards. “I know you like me, Derek,” he teases. “No need to drool all over me.”

Derek may be a gigantic wolf but he can still pull off a flat stare. Then he falls onto his side, hiding his face behind his paw so that he can whimper dramatically.

“You big faker,” Stiles laughs as he approaches him. “You’re not crying.”

Derek just sniffs but refuses to lift his paw away from his face.

Stiles rolls his eyes and crouches down so he can rub at Derek’s side. “So dramatic,” he murmurs fondly with a grin. "You realize you're almost the size of a horse?"

Derek huffs but refuses to lift his paw away from his face.

Stiles rolls his eyes and continues to pet his side, taking the time to really appreciate how soft his white fur is. "You know, I think you're even prettier like this," he compliments.

Derek lowers his paw and his tongue lolls out the side of his mouth happily. He barks.

Stiles laughs. “Ha, I knew that would get you out of that fake mood. Come on,” he urges. “I’ve finally got my appetite back and I want to eat.”

Derek snorts but he leaps up and licks at Stiles’s left hand before darting off.

“Hey! Wait! Slow down!” Stiles complains and rushes to catch up.

Derek doubles back to playfully circle him, moving in to nudge him roughly and then darting away.

Stiles eventually catches the hint that Derek wants to be chased. “You’re such a dork!” he exclaims but he runs after him.

Derek evades each one of his grabs with an eager woof.

This game of tag lasts up until they have reached the Hale Manor without incident.

By then, Stiles is out of breath, sweaty, and starving. He and Derek part ways at the steps, and he lingers a moment to watch Derek drift to the back of the house to shift in private. He smiles to himself for no particular reason other than because he’s just happy. He makes his way into the house and thanks Derek’s good timing because it looks like lunch is being served.

Everyone is in the dining room, sitting at the long and wide oak table, which has names carved into it.

Nana Hale is at the head of the table with Derek Sr., who is feeding Olive as she sits in her high chair beside him.

Cora waves him over and he quickly settles in the empty seat beside her, wedging himself between
her and Sabrina.

Stiles reaches out and just grabs the first thing in reach, which happens to be a pastrami sandwich on rye bread and a handful of sweet potato fries.

Derek returns sometime during Stiles trying to suffocate himself with his food, fully clothed and grinning. He sits down across from Stiles between his Aunt Emilia and his older cousin Delilah. He begins piling some grilled cheese sandwiches on his plate and some plain chips.

“So how was your field trip?” Cora asks when Stiles stops trying his hardest to stuff his face with sandwich after sandwich after sandwich. “Derek and Braeden wouldn’t let me tag along. Something must have happened if you smell like blood and…sushi for some reason.”

“Oh you didn’t miss much,” Stiles remarks lightly and grins when Derek snorts. “Actually there might have been an unfortunate incident with a squid.”

Cora’s brow furrows in bemusement. “Is that some kind of euphemism?” she questions, puzzled.

Derek laughs even harder.

“I wish it was,” Stiles admits with a weary sigh and chucks a fry at Derek in rebuke.

Derek just catches it with his mouth and snickers.

Stiles gives her a quick run down of everything that happens, and pretends not to feel curious eyes from around the table that stray his way. He knows they’re all eavesdropping and he’s just accepting it.

“That explains why mom left with Braeden and Deaton to go put some kind of witchy cup in the family vault,” Cora supposes.

Stiles huffs in amusement. “Yes, that would be the reason,” he confirms. “Where’s Laura?”

Cora sends him a look. “She moved out, remember?”

“Oh yeah,” Stiles says as a few people snicker. “I’m just so used to seeing her here.”

“Trust me, we all are,” Sabrina chimes. “I’ve asked the same question like six times already.”

Stiles sends her grin because that is consoling to know. He turns back to Cora. “Do I still have blood on my face?”

Cora shakes her head no. “I can just smell it, but you can’t tell otherwise,” she assures.

Stiles is thankful for that.

“Let’s go downstairs and bowl for a bit. I’m feeling neglected,” Cora swears, dragging Stiles to the basement where they keep a small bowling alley. She wins the first two games mercilessly.

Derek eventually meanders down the stairs just as Stiles is begging off a third game. He grins fondly at Stiles before valiantly coming to his rescue by challenging Cora to a few games.

Cora charitably accepts like it’s such a hardship, but she doesn’t stop smiling or laughing with her older brother the whole time.

Cora just sits back and watches them, indiscernible feelings of warm affection floating through him.
He then shifts his attention, fishing his phone from his pocket and goes through all his missed texts and calls. There are none from Isaac, which is worrying, but there is a text from his dad that reads:

**Pick up something for dinner. I’ll quickpay you the money. We’re at the house talking things over with Parrish. Take your time.**

Stiles frowns and chews on his bottom lip as he checks his account, accepting the money his dad sent for groceries. He sighs and sends his dad a confirming text. Then he sends a few texts to Allison asking after Lydia, a few to Scott and Jackson to ask after Danny, and a few to Peter to ask after Kate.

Allison says: *adjusting still – she really wants to see you – breakfast tomorrow?*

Lydia says: *Stop texting Allison like she’s my handler. I’m coming over tomorrow morning and we are going to eat food like normal people. I know we aren’t but we can pretend for thirty goddamn minutes.*

Scott says: *He’s like really lucid but awake. Jackson is totally fretting, wish you could see it, dude! Danny’s rolled his eyes like sixty times already.*

Jackson says: *Come see for yourself, loser.*

Peter says: *She won’t burn the town to the ground but I would not want to be in Kyle’s shoes right now. Your father appears to have everything under control at the moment.*

Stiles smiles at all of them and replies with nothing but affirmative, positive responses. He sighs once that’s all said and done, pocketing his phone.

Cora’s disappeared and Derek is lounging in the chair across from Stiles, gazing at his own phone with a thoughtful frown.

Stiles stares at Derek until the older teen looks up at him.

Derek raises both his eyebrows with a questioning expression, putting his phone away to devote all his attention to him.

Stiles grins shyly at that and says, “How do you feel about grocery shopping?”

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Grocery shopping is, apparently, one of Derek Hale’s favorite leisure activities. He even goes as far as driving Stiles to his favorite store, *Rothschild Kosher Supermarket*, which is located in the heart of Beacon Hill’s metropolitan area. He’s even on *first name* basis with the employees there.

“What?” Derek says as grabs one of the blue shopping carts. “Seriously, what?”

“I’m trying to figure out what to do with you.”

Derek laughs and shrugs sheepishly. “I’ve been coming here with my dad since I was a kid, and I just kind of never stopped,” he explains shyly, “I like the atmosphere as much as I love the food. It feels nice to connect with my people sometimes. I mean, you know, the Human side, I guess. Does that make sense?”

Stiles rests a hand over Derek’s. “I get it,” he promises. “Every year my dad and I attend the Polish
Festivals they hold in Los Angeles every October. Sometimes you just need the association.”

“Exactly,” Derek says softly, looking at Stiles like he can’t believe he’s real. “Now I’m trying to figure out what to do with you.”

Stiles laughs and blushes a little. “I’ll take that as a good thing,” he supposes.

“You should,” Derek states firmly. He twists his hand so he can lace their fingers together. “It’s amazing how much you get me sometimes. Is this okay?”

Stiles steers them towards the fresh produce and flowers because they are seriously kinda blocking the entrance with all their teenage nonsense. “You’re fine,” he says distractedly. “I think that too. That, um, you really get me,” he admits, a little flustered by his confession.

Derek stares at him with that same look he gets when he’s talking about math or space or both at the same time: enthusiasm, bewilderment, and devotion wrapped all into one. Then he blinks, and shifts his gaze away, cheeks as pink as the flowers he’s standing next to. “So,” he says, voice cracking a little. He winces and clears his throat. “Any ideas about what you wanted to make for dinner?”

Stiles studies him closely, wondering at the peculiarity of Derek’s behavior and why he’s suddenly being so shy. He’s usually the brave one, but Stiles knows better than to push or pry. “Homestyle stuffed peppers?” he throws out as a suggestion.

Derek considers it for a moment before nodding. “Sounds good to me,” he says. “Come on. The bell peppers are this way.”

Stiles lets himself be dragged towards the vegetables. He watches in amusement as Derek retrieves everything he lists off from memory like an uxorious husband. It is sickeningly domestic how easy it is to just do things like this with Derek as though it were as simple as breathing. He finds himself just trailing after the older teen and watching him move in his element, thinking over and over about how sweet Derek is.

If Derek notices how quiet and watchful Stiles is being, he certainly doesn’t act like it. He just grabs all the ingredients Stiles needs, being quick about it since it forces him to let go of Stiles’s hand sometimes. But then he’s right back, like Stiles’s hand is a magnet he can’t free himself from.

Stiles is literally contemplating marriage when they hit the checkout and Derek flirts (in impeccable Hebrew) with the old granny (her nametag says Rebecca Rothschild) minding the register.

Rebecca looks at Stiles as the bag boy helps Derek put away the groceries, and she says, “What a nice boy.”

"Yeah, he's polite when it matters."

Rebecca laughs. "It's good that you're honest," she chuckles.

"I keep him humble."

"Good.” Rebecca winks, eyes twinkling as she adds, "In any case, I still think he’s a keeper."

Stiles just flushes and hands her his credit card, knowing full well that Derek will have heard that. It doesn’t matter because he knows that she’s right. But he doesn’t dare say that out loud, wanting to keep that knowledge to himself for selfish reasons. He’s rarely ever selfish, so it feels good to have something to be greedy over.
Derek tips the bag boy because apparently he can’t be perfect enough, and commandeers the shopping cart as he says, “Race you!” before darting off.

Stiles thinks, *I’ve never had anything like you before*, and runs after him, shouting complaints of ‘head starts’ and ‘dirty cheaters’.

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The street lamps are turning on by the time Derek pulls up to the Stilinski house and parks between Kate’s shiny, black Jaguar and Peter’s red Lamborghini. There are two squad cars parked in the driveway.

They grab the groceries from Derek’s trunk and trek towards the house in silence. He kind of wishes he could hear what’s going on inside so he can know what he’s walking into, but then again he’s glad he can’t. He’d probably chicken out and spend the night with the Hales.

He unlocks the door, unsuccessful the first two times because his hand is shaking with nerves, and he pushes his way through the door and over the threshold.

“— something countless times. To tell you the truth.” Parrish voice drifts from the living room. “I just —”

Stiles and Derek dump the bags on the kitchen table where Peter is, for some reason, and the sound garners the attention of the occupants sitting in the living room.

“— didn’t know how,” Parrish finishes weakly. He’s sitting on the edge of the coffee table and facing Isaac, who’s sitting in his favorite armchair.

Kate is leaning against the wall by the TV with an unhappy frown and crossed arms. She’s glaring at the back of Parrish’s head.

Laura is sitting on the long couch on the side closest to his dad.

The sheriff is perched in his favorite armchair, still in his uniform like Parrish is, and he’s watching the exchange with a guarded but grave expression.

Peter is drumming his fingers restlessly on the surface of the table as he stares fixedly at his hotheaded girlfriend. He looks like he’s ready to intervene at any point if necessary.

Stiles glances over and tries to assess just what his brother may be feeling or thinking, but Isaac is a blank wall.

Parrish’s eyes are getting watery and he begins to curl his hands into fists where they’re resting over his uniform-clad thighs. He swallows over and over as his face gets red. “I can — can understand if you hate me or never want to see me again,” he continues hoarsely. “I hate myself for not fighting harder for you,” he admits quietly, lowering his wet gaze. “To claim you as mine.”

It gets quiet. Really quiet.

Then, to everyone’s surprise, Isaac reaches out with one hand and rests it on Parrish’s clenched jaw. Parrish flinches like he’s been struck but stiffens in surprise when he realizes he hasn’t been.

Isaac lifts his chin with an admonishing sound at the reaction, and says, “I forgive you.”

Parrish gapes at him unattractively.
Even Laura and Kate stare with wide eyes.

“I mean, I am pissed that you left,” Isaac admits with a wry half smile. “But I always sort of knew. Or at least, I hoped. Grandma and grandpa were kind of awful people and I always thought, well, wouldn’t it be nice if Kyle were your real dad and not just your brother? And sometimes you smelled like me. Just like me. In a way that the others didn’t, but I was always too afraid to ask or hope to confirm it.” He drops his hand with a shuddery exhale and sits back. “But I’m still pissed about you leaving. That was a shitty thing to do.”

Parrish winces in regret but he doesn’t argue as a tear slides down his handsome face.

“I’m not mad at you, Stiles. So stop fretting. Wasn’t your responsibility to tell me, anyway. Don’t get all moody.”

Stiles blinks in surprise and flushes. “I’m not moody,” he protests but he can’t say he hadn’t been worried. “And anyway, I thought I was betraying you somehow by not saying anything to you or dad.”

“Might have been worse if you had,” his dad reasons.

Isaac nods tiredly in agreement, looking slightly emotionally drained. To Parrish, he says, “So now what?”

Parrish sniffs and dries his face with a confused look.

Isaac clarifies, “Do you want to be apart of my life or not? You said you’d been planning to tell me. Now you have. So, what now?”

Parrish looks a little bewildered and unsure. “Well,” he starts and pauses to think. “I mean — that’s up to your — up to the sheriff. Legally, he’s still your guardian, but I would like to be apart of your life, in whatever way you would have me.”

“I’m not leaving my dad or Stiles,” Isaac says bluntly. “They’re my family now. But I wouldn’t be opposed to spending time with you too.”

“Maybe we can work up to weekends,” his dad suggests evenly. “For now, I think supervised visits are more than generous, given the circumstances.”

“Of course,” Parrish quickly agrees, twisting his body so he can face the sheriff. “Anything you decide. I’m completely fine with.”

His dad just nods stiffly before rising to his feet. “You and I will talk more about this and go over the details later. I think that’s enough for now.” He looks like he has more he wants to say but he withholds it in favor of saying, “You’re all welcomed to stay for dinner. Excuse me. Isaac, can you come with me?”

Isaac silently nods and follows their dad up the stairs and out of sight.

“You got off too easy,” Kate mutters resentfully, pushing away from the wall. “I’m still pissed at you too. Why didn’t you tell me? Or any of us? I can’t believe the first person you told was a kid who’d you’d known all but five minutes!”

“No offense,” Laura is quick to add, directing it at Stiles before looking back at Parrish. “But she’s kinda right. I’m upset you didn’t say anything too.”
“I’m not,” Peter chimes unhelpfully. “I’m more interested in the fact that my dear sister neglected to tell me that we have two unclaimed family members. Now that’s a betrayal worth looking into. Go easy on him, Kate. You’ve just earned yourself a shiny, new brother. I’d give anything for that.” He stands and calmly tucks in his chair as Kate winces guiltily. “Now, if you’ll excuse me — I’m going to have a few choice words with my sister. Laura, are you coming?”

“Yeah,” Laura sighs as she stands too. “Guess we can talk later, Kyle. Call me tonight if Kate doesn’t strangle you. Rain check on the dinner,” she says to Stiles with a grin. She does the stupid finger guns thing at Derek and that’s where he gets it. “See you later, Der-Bear. Bring something useful to my party.”

“I’m bringing a bag of ice,” Derek flatly retorts. “And don’t call me that,” he adds like an afterthought. “You’re lucky you’re even getting that much.”

Laura cackles as she follows Peter out the door.

“You’re taking me out to eat,” Kate decides, directing it at Parrish. “And you’re paying. We have a lot of catching up to do.”

Parrish looks a little uneasy at that but he nods.

Kate scoffs and stomps over to Stiles, pointing a finger at his chest to say, “You and I are square. I really have no reason to be mad at you, but don’t fucking pull that shit again, Tenderfoot. You’re either for me or against me. Got it?”

Stiles just nods dumbly.

“Good,” Kate simply says and snaps her finger at Parrish. “Let’s go. I’ll be back tomorrow to check in on my little brother. God, I better get used to saying that.”

Parrish follows her out the door, and it clicks shut behind them.

Derek waits a few minutes before he says, “Well. That was something.”


“I could flip this table, if that would help?” Derek offers in a mock serious tone.

Stiles laughs and shakes his head. “No, I’ll just count it all joy,” he decides. “You feel up to helping me make dinner?”

“Sure,” Derek agrees easily. “But you have to tell me what to do because I’ve never made any of this before.”

“Don’t worry. I got you.”

Derek’s mouth slowly stretches into an indulgent smile. “I know,” he says softly.

Stiles blushes but he can’t find the will to correct him. He clears his throat and gets to work with unloading the ingredients from the grocery bags. “Okay,” he says. “First things first. We need to brown the meat.”

They work in tandem to prepare dinner, orbiting like planets that are drawn to each other.

The kitchen area gives over to chaos, only because Stiles is teaching Derek everything he knows about making this dish. He can’t really follow his usual pattern of cooking, which would be a lot
neater, but he enjoys spending time with Derek like this that he doesn’t mind.

It’s a good hour before they manage to get the stuffed peppers in the oven to bake for a bit.

By then, Stiles can really feel his exhaustion biting into him, but he’s determined to stay up long enough to eat and see how his brother is doing. Thinking some fresh air might wake him up, he says, “Come meet Nana.” and they exit the house together.

It’s a nice cool night out; an honest relief from the slow burn of the day. The crickets make a crescendo of sound in the trees and in the bushes.

Stiles kicks off his socks and shoes, grabbing Derek’s hand so he can carefully navigate through a cluster of fireflies because his backyard is a happening spot for them.

Derek makes a curious sound as he gazes up at the magnificent tree they’re approaching. “Never seen a tree like this before,” he mumbles in awe. “How can a tree be so pretty? And it has apples and peaches, but I don’t think those naturally grow together — are those roses made out of glass?”

Stiles turns away to face his magical tree with a private smile. He lets his magic light his right hand with a brilliant shine. He reaches up to the engraved triquetra to ignite it with the bluish glow of his palm and the symbol activates.

Nana’s face bleeds through a moment later. “Good evening, dearie. Always such a joyous occasion to see your lovely little face. And you’ve brought company.” Then she pauses and really looks Derek over. “Well now,” she starts, tittering. “I believe I know him. I’ve seen him wrapped up your thoughts, but no wonder when he’s so handsome —”

“Nana,” Stiles admonishes, cutting her off as he blushes. “Behave.”

“Oh don’t be ridiculous. I’m always perfectly polite,” Nana objects. “Go on then. Introduce us.”

“I give you permission to see,” Stiles mumbles, idly wondering if he’s making a mistake.

Derek’s eyes widen in awe but the first thing he says is, “Cora and Laura would absolutely love you.” Then he says, “I mean, hello. Nice to meet you. I’m Derek.”

“I know who you are,” Nana chortles, eyes twinkling in amusement. “But yes, I would be more than happy to meet your sisters.” At Derek’s confused face, she clarifies, “When Stiles calls upon me, I’m able to share a mental link with him that allows me access to his memories and thoughts.”

“Ah, I see,” Derek says and grins. “That’s how you know me. You have to tell me what he thinks about when he’s thinking about me.”

“Absolutely not!” Stiles splutters and can’t believe the gall of these two when they share a good laugh at his expense. “Knew this was a bad idea,” he mutters, crossing his arms.

“Hush, sweetling,” Nana chastises but not unkindly. “I would never share your private thoughts with anyone in or out of this world. You can stop fussing.”

Stiles’s frown just deepens.

Derek chuckles and drags him in closer by his belt loops, bumping their noses together in an eskimo kiss. “You’re so adorable when you pout like that,” he whispers.

Stiles flushes and gently pushes him away. “Derek,” he complains. “Not in front of — wait, I am not
adorable."

Derek just cups his hand over the side of Stiles’s neck and drops a quick kiss to his cheek before pulling away. “Agree to disagree,” he states breezily. “And Nana doesn’t care. She’ll see it anyway. She’s gonna see anything we do.”

“That’s three cheek kisses I owe you now,” Stiles grumbles under his breath. Louder, he says, “And don’t say it like that. I know Nana sees everything.”

“Nana has indeed seen a lot during her lifetime,” Nana interjects, humored. “I doubt you’ll do anything I’ll find scandalous. But I digress. Derek, tell me about what happened at the river.”

“Why aren’t you asking me?” Stiles inquires.

“I’ve already seen it from your perspective,” Nana explains patiently. “There are still a few unclear things. I’m hoping his account clarifies. Now go on, darling.”

Derek smiles at Stiles briefly before he turns to Nana to do just as she asks.

Stiles watches Derek interact with Nana while fireflies dance around them. At one point, he reaches up with an amused grin and holds up his right hand to let each one of them bump and glide across his hands like a strange handshake; their bottoms flickering like lamps. They whisper indistinguishable greetings, which he returns as best as he can without Glitter’s help (she seems to be absent).

He allows his magic to become like a mist over them, and they vibrate joyously at the attention.

“Stiles, dear, come here,” Nana calls and he makes his way over. “Based on what Derek has told me, the squid’s first move was to not only grab you, but it persisted in this action.”

Stiles nods.

“Well, correct me if I’m wrong, but does that not sound like more of an attempt at abduction then assassination?” Nana points out. “It only became aggressive when the others intervened.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” Stiles says, uncertain still. “If it was sent by the Benefactor —”

“See that’s the thing as well,” Nana gently interrupts. “I’m not altogether certain it was a Seven of Vices that sent the creature. They only follow the commands of their Dragon hosts.”

“So…Dragons are trying to abduct me?” Stiles reasons, trying to get the bigger picture here. “Why?”

“In the old days, it wasn’t uncommon. Virtues were considered the ultimate treasure,” Nana explains. “Otherwise, they could be trying to petition an audience with you in the most incorrect manner. But, there is only one way to confirm. We will have to dispatch inquiring parcels to the head of each Dragon dynasty.” She adds, “Derek, darling, I wonder if you can run across the street and convince Mrs. Doyle to meet with me.”

Derek nods and darts off.

“What?” Stiles exclaims. “You’re inviting over that nosey old woman from across the street? Why?”

“Because she’s a Manic Pixie, sweetling,” Nana explains patiently. “And they are the best Couriers there are. They can recite a message word for word without missing a beat because their memory is unrivaled, even by one such as me.”

“Yes, that’s all good and fine, but how do you know what she is? And why didn’t you ever tell me?”
Stiles presses. “This whole time I thought she was just some snooping shut-in.”

“Manic Pixies are harmless when they are alone, so I didn’t think it prudent to point out,” Nana explains. “And my roots grow deep in this earth. It gives me the ability to sense out every magical creature within this neighborhood. There are few in number, but they are all docile.”

“Like who?”

“It’s rude to expose creatures who blend in with Humans for the sake of privacy, dearie,” Nana lightly scolds. “If they want to make themselves known to you, they will. Be understanding.”

Stiles winces guiltily. Before he can apologize, Derek returns with Mrs. Doyle in tow.

Now, Mrs. Doyle is quite aged, but not the kind of old you pity with their frail bones and feeble limbs; but the kind who you can envision running an army kitchen if given half a chance. She stands quite tall and slim, her short grey hair neat and pinned up with old-fashioned rollers (the kind women use to sleep in). Her face is made up with discrete makeup except her lips, which are thin, pink, and slightly chapped.

Were she any paler her mouth would be garish, but against her sun-kissed skin it looks right. She has on a thin cotton nightgown patterned with small roses under a duck yellow bathrobe that matches her slippers. She doesn’t look like some sort of Manic Pixie in the slightest but Stiles supposes that must be the point of it all. When she extends her wrinkled and veiny hand to shake his, he sees the soil caked beneath her fingernails. Not surprising since if she’s not in her house peering out her window, she’s on her knees, elbows deep in her garden. She does have the best front yard on their street for a reason.

“Alyssum Plumwink,” she says, reintroducing herself as Derek moves to stand shoulder to shoulder with Stiles. “But please continue to call me Mrs. Doyle for the sake of Human continuity.”

Stiles shakes her hand, and feels a brief spark of mischief and spirit ignite at the contact. His magic tries to follow the sensation to the source, but he holds it at bay, knowing it would be rude and invasive. “Stiles Stilinski, but you already knew that, I guess,” he greets back in turn. “This is my — this is Derek Hale,” he introduces and tries not to think about his slip or what he might have said if he hadn’t caught himself in time.

Derek glances at him curiously (looking for all the world like he wished he knew where Stiles was going with that sentence as well) before he refocuses his attention to grin politely at her. “Thanks for agreeing to meet with us,” he says.

“It’s not everyday that a Werewolf is sent to my doorstep with a request from a Woodland Spirit,” Mrs. Doyle supposes and lets go of Stiles’s hand. “Let’s get to it, shall we? I just put on some tea, and I’d like to get back to it as soon as possible.”

“I give you permission to see,” Stiles says, stepping back so Mrs. Doyle can face his magical tree.

“Alyssum, my dear, long time no see,” Nana quips with undisguised amusement.

“Xyukx Wrihr Gluewth! As I live and breathe!” Mrs. Doyle exclaims. “Had I known that it was you, I would’ve come sooner!”

“Oh, sweetheart, you mustn’t call me that. I’m not the sprout I used to be,” Nana informs cheekily.

Mrs. Doyle chuckles. “Ah, yes, you’re the Mother Queen if rumors among us Sprites are true. Forgive me,” she says. “How do they call you now?”
“Nana will do just fine.”

“Nana it is,” Mrs. Doyle agrees. “Well you must want something. You always did have awful timing. I was just about to watch my nightly stories on the telly.”

"You always did love drama," Nana teases.

"Ah, well I'm grateful to Humans for their invention of it," Mrs. Doyle agrees with a grin. "In any case, you've called me over for a reason. You're in need of my services, then?"

“Very much so,” Nana confirms. She then looks to Derek and Stiles. “You two can head inside. I'll take it from here. Have a wonderful night, dearies.”

Stiles wants to linger and see where the conversation goes, but he knows better than to argue. So he says, “Goodnight, Nana. Goodnight, Mrs. Doyle. Again, it was nice to meet you.”

Mrs. Doyle offers him a kind smile. “Same here. Pleasant dreams to the both of you,” she replies.

Derek gives her a nod of acknowledgement, waving at Nana quickly as he follows Stiles back inside the house.

Stiles turns the oven off just as the timer chimes, and he uses the nearby oven mitts to pull the tray of stuffed peppers out. He sets it on the burners above, pulling the mitts off and shouting, “Dinner’s ready!” to wherever his dad and Isaac may be in the house.

Derek gets to work with setting the table without being asked.

His dad comes trekking down the steps, still in his uniform, and Isaac is right behind him.

Stiles takes a moment to study his brother, noting his flushed tear-stained cheeks, and swollen eyes. His heart breaks in fractures because that’s a sight he’d never thought he’d see again. “Can you, um, serve everyone?” he says lowly to Derek. “I’ll be right back.”

Isaac doesn’t seem very surprised when Stiles tugs him out the front door and to the top of the porch steps for some semblance of privacy. He sits down and waits until Stiles does the same before he says, “I was crying because I was angry,” he explains before Stiles has a chance to ask. “But I’m okay. Relieved, maybe. Not thrilled that Mayor Argent is my biological father, but that doesn’t have to mean anything. He doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“He never will,” Stiles agrees firmly and hugs his little brother with everything he has in him. He rubs a soothing hand up and down his trembling back. "You're honestly one of the best things that might have come from him, despite the circumstances that led to it."

Isaac rubs his face against Stiles’s shoulder, drying his eyes with the movement. “I’m afraid he’s going to leave me again,” he mumbles a little brokenly as he refers to Parrish without actually saying his name. “Don’t tell dad. I can tell he's already on edge about the whole situation. And you know he worries enough for the both of us.”

“Isaac, I’ll do anything you ask, it doesn't take much,” Stiles admits with a bitter snort. “Are you really going to be okay with everything?”

Isaac rubs his face against Stiles’s shoulder again and Stiles could almost swear he can hear purring. “I think so,” he mumbles. “And if not, I have you and dad to get me there.”

Isaac huffs fondly and finally pulls away. “Why do you smell like sushi?” he asks with puffy eyes and a nasally voice. He looks adorable. “Don’t call me adorable, Stiles. Just answer my question.”

Stiles rolls his eyes. "I didn't even say anything out loud," he denies.

Isaac just gives him a blank stare.

“*Long* story,” Stiles replies, ignoring the look. “Call Cora. I’m sure she’d love to tell you about.”

“I seriously might,” Isaac retorts and pinches his brother’s cheek. “You smell like blood too. Should I worry?”

Stiles swats his hand away, thinking how funny his little brother is when he pretends to be the oldest. “I’m fine. Just overextended myself doing some magic,” he explains. He waits a few beats before adds, “You know I love you, right?”

Isaac wrinkles his nose. “Don’t be stupid. Of course I know.”

"You know, I forget how charming you are."

"Exactly. That's why you've loved me from the moment you set eyes on me,” Isaac says smugly.

Stiles barks out a laugh. “Oh shut up and say it back, you brat,” he complains.

“Nope, sorry. I might’ve but you went and ruined it,” Isaac says with a longsuffering sigh. “I don’t reward insults.”

Stiles splutters and storms after his little brother when Isaac trudges back into the house.

Dinner turns into a pleasant affair after that. The food turns out better than expected.

As Isaac clears the table without having to be asked because he was manufactured in the goody-two shoes factory of perfect children, his dad turns to Derek and says, “Isaac and I are going to a baseball game Thursday night. Does that sound like something you and your dad might be interested in?”

Derek lights up at the mention of sports and ignores when Stiles snorts. He says, “Yeah. My dad loves baseball. I’m sure he’d be up for it. So would I.”

The sheriff nodrs. “Good, good. I’ll call him so we can make some arrangements,” he decides.

Stiles clears his throat pointedly. “Don’t I get an invitation? Or did you forget you had another son?” he jokes.

“Stiles, you made dying noises the whole time during the last sporting event I took you to,” his dad points out unkindly. “You’ll have to excuse me if I naturally assume you’d rather forgo repeating the experience altogether.”

“You always did know me better than anyone else,” Stiles muses. “Still. It's just nice to be, you know, *asked* anyway.”

The sheriff sighs in fond exasperation. “Stiles, would you like to go?”

“Are you kidding? You know I hate baseball,” Stiles gasps dramatically, pretending to be insulted. “It’s like you don’t even know me.”

His dad snorts and rises from the table. “All right, you’re milking it now,” he says. He glances at his
wristwatch with a frown. “Well, I have to get going. I’m pulling a double tonight. I’ll see you and Isaac tomorrow evening. Are you going anywhere?”

“Not as far as I know,” Stiles answers truthfully.

“Good, then your brother won’t be by himself,” his dad determines. “Text me if either of you have company over, or if you’ve made plans to go somewhere.”

Isaac and Stiles nod.

His dad seems satisfied with the response and so he makes his exit.

“I should get going too,” Derek supposes with a sigh. “It’s getting late and the curfew siren will be ringing soon.”

“I’ll walk you to your car,” Stiles offers, scrambling to his feet.

Isaac scoffs and mutters something about Mario Kart before he disappears into the living room.

Derek seems more amused than anything but he keeps any comments to himself.

Stiles grabs his left hand and quickly walks him out the door and down the steps to his car. He’s nervous more than anything about seeing Derek off and what that will entail. He stops when they reach the passenger side and he turns to face Derek with a steadying inhale/exhale. He says, “Come back tomorrow.”

“You’re not tired of me yet?” Derek teases but his hazel eyes are warm and his grin is pure.

"Yeah, it's crazy, isn't it?" Stiles tosses back, if only to hide how anxious he feels.

"Well, you're not always nice to me, so it's hard to tell sometimes."

"Oh I'm not always nice to you?"

Derek shrugs with a sly grin. “I’ll bring Jordan and we can go to the dog park,” he says.

“Bring Cora too,” Stiles suggests and laughs at the face Derek makes. “I just mean, you know, so Isaac can have some company too when we go. It’s only fair.”

Derek’s mouth twists thoughtfully and he looks a little more receptive to the idea.

Stiles gnaws on his bottom lip anxiously as his magic rattles around in his chest overwrought with anticipation. His heart hammers as he steps forward, close enough that he can see the different flecks of green and brown of Derek’s hazel eyes, and he touches shaky fingers to his jawline tentatively.

Derek stands still and watches him closely with an open and honest face that’s both encouraging and intimidating.

“I still owe you,” Stiles remarks nervously, voice cracking slightly. He leans forward to close the distance and gently presses his lips to Derek's right cheek with just the right hint of passion.

Derek’s breath hitches and Stiles feels like he’ll melt when the sound makes him flush from head to toe.

Stiles manages to steel himself as he pulls back and lands another kiss on Derek’s other cheek. He feels practically consumed with how abnormally warm Derek’s skin feels under his lips. The smell of
him is intoxicating (vanilla and jasmine) and it makes Stiles lightheaded. He shifts away again and leans up on his tiptoes to plant the last kiss on his forehead before pulling away completely.

Derek’s hands shoot out and he yanks Stiles into a hug, tenderly brushing his heated lips against the curve of Stiles’s neck.

Stiles shivers and clutches Derek’s shirt in his hands, heart thrashing wildly behind his ribcage like a raging, drunken beast trying to get free. When he feels Derek’s lips settle, not moving but staying right where they are on his collarbone, his whole body grows hot.

Derek tightens his arms ever so slightly, one arm wrapped around Stiles’s lower back while he presses his free hand to the space between Stiles’s shoulder blades. He inhales deeply, as though committing Stiles’s scent to memory before he lifts his head and gently extracts himself like it’s painful to do. He looks a little dazed but very happy.

Stiles feels caught in the gravity of Derek’s cheer, his own lips twitching against an elated grin that wants to spread across his face. Even still, he can’t contain his magic as it bursts from him in a small flock of butterflies, rising from his body unmercifully in a glittery blue swarm. His face grows hot in embarrassment when he can’t control it.

Derek just snickers, watching it all happen in self-satisfaction like he knows he’s the reason why. Stiles silently admits that he is but it’s still embarrassing nonetheless. It’s completely telling and unfair.

Derek just grabs his left hand and kisses the tips of his fingers like he’s reassuring Stiles he has nothing to be embarrassed about because he feels the same.

While that does comfort Stiles, it does nothing about the blush staining his cheeks.

The curfew siren rings in the distance.

Derek jerks and makes an unhappy sound at the interruption. Then he reluctantly lets go of Stiles’s hand. “That’s my cue to leave, unfortunately,” he sighs. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Probably around noon or so.”

Stiles nods with a sigh of his own as his magic evaporates glumly at the announcement, returning to the sanctuary of his gut. “Text me when you get home so I know you made it okay,” he requests. He leans forward quickly and gives Derek another kiss on the cheek before he can talk himself out of it.

Derek beams and says, “That’s four I owe you back now.” Then he playfully tugs as Stiles’s left ear before rounding the front of his car to get to the driver’s side. “I’ll text you when I get home. Later.”

“Later,” Stiles mumbles and hugs himself.

Derek pulls away from the curb in a U-turn, waving one final time as he passes.

Stiles waves back and he doesn’t think he’ll ever get used to the sight. He waits until he can’t see Derek’s car any more before he turns to trek back into the house to join his brother and thrash him at Mario Kart until they both go their separate ways for bed.

He slides into bed with an open window, Derek’s stuffed toys in his arms and his phone pressed to his ear because Derek doesn’t bother texting when he can just call. He listens as Derek divides his attention between talking to him and playing Final Fantasy XIV with a bossy Braeden.
Stiles falls asleep to the sound of Derek complaining about being used as bait without his permission.

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Stiles wakes up to a cloudy Tuesday with the smell of bread and oil sneaking through the cracks of his closed door. Thinking Isaac responsible, he climbs out of bed and goes to investigate. He’s understandably confused when he sees that his little brother is still sound asleep in bed. He also knows it can’t be his dad. He wasn’t due back until later in the evening. He treks down the stairs fully prepared to call the cops but not expecting to see Boyd and Lydia sitting at the kitchen table while Allison mans the burning stove.

Stiles thinks it might be ridiculous, but at the sight of Lydia looking just like how she used to before her life got complicated makes him just a bit teary-eyed. He also might not be fully awake, and he does tend to be emotional in the mornings. Or something. Maybe this is a dream.

Lydia stands and she doesn’t seem to care that she’s just as watery-eyed as he is because she runs to him, clutching him close as if in fear he might disappear like smoke.

Stiles hugs her back without hesitation, noting the way she trembles in his arms as she hides her face in his shoulder and he knows it’s not a dream. He strokes a hand over her shiny hair (which smells like fresh cut strawberries) and he isn’t surprised when his magic worms its way free to take the shape of a blue bioluminescent baby hedgehog.

It then settles on Lydia’s shoulder.

Lydia jerks at the feeling, pulling away slightly to glance at her right shoulder. Then she cocks her head before reaching out to pet his magic. “It’s beautiful,” she compliments and then turns, taking his magic off her shoulder and clutching it to her chest so that she can stroke it. “Come sit,” she says as she settles down at the table across from Boyd.

Stiles makes sure to greet the quiet teen with a wave as he sits down beside Lydia when she wordlessly insists. “Do you want me to wake, Isaac?” he asks.

Boyd snorts. “He’s still sleep? He texted me last night and asked me to come over around this time,” he states and rolls his eyes. “I’ll wake him myself.”

Stiles snickers and watches as he rises from the table to do just that. He twists so he’s facing Allison. “Hey, Allison. Long time, no see,” he jokes.

Allison graces him a dimpled smile.

“So, um, what’s on the menu?” Stiles asks, eyes straying back to the table where there is a sweaty glass pitcher filled almost to the brim with ice, water, raspberry and mangoes on the table. Beside it is a small white basket of freshly cut begonias.

“Allison’s graceful response. “My dad’s having some kind of serious conversation with my mom, so Lydia and I decided it’s better to make ourselves scarce. We took a cab here. I hope this is okay?”

“Yeah.” Stiles glances at Lydia but she’s cooing over his magic still and he’s just so happy to see her. “It’s perfectly fine.”

Boyd returns with a grumpy looking Isaac in tow and they join Stiles and Lydia at the table by sitting across from them.
Lydia’s suddenly filling a tall glass cup with water from the sweaty pitcher, going slow enough that the pieces of fruit inside don’t make a messy or loud splash in conjunction with the ice chips. She pushes it over to Isaac like some kind of peace offering.

Isaac frowns in confusion and looks at his older brother helplessly, unsure what to do about it.

Stiles shrugs because he has no idea what that’s about either.

Isaac shifts his gaze back to Lydia who is watching him expectantly. “Thanks,” he mumbles, and reaches out with his left hand to grab the glass. His aim is off and his knuckles end up knocking it over, sending water splashing in Lydia’s direction.

Lydia jumps up, bringing Stiles with her so they can narrowly avoid the first wave of water as it rolls towards them like a thin tsunami.

Isaac lets out a few mangled swears as he starts throwing napkins at the mess and at Lydia, who skillfully catches each one calmly as they’re hurled erratically.

Allison makes an amused tsking noise as she continues to artfully man the burning stove.

“Sorry,” Isaac mumbles, looking furiously embarrassed with his own ungainliness. He angrily plucks up debris of raspberries, mangoes, and ice chips from under and around a blanket of soggy napkins. He quickly dumps it in the trash.

Stiles is a bit worried because Isaac isn’t usually clumsy.

“It’s not the end of the world,” Boyd assures, tone neutral but his face looks a little relaxed with humor. He’s the only one still sitting. “It should have been placed in better reach.”

“It was less than three inches from me. How much closer could it have —” Isaac cuts himself short when he recognizes the barb for what it is. “Oh. Oh. That’s not funny. We’re lucky there wasn’t any red wine involved.”

Boyd smirks. “I’ve personally survived worse,” he dryly remarks.

Isaac gives him a withering glare.

Lydia just has this sort of calm, dreamy look on her face. She says, “I dreamt about this.”

Stiles pauses in the midst of helping his brother clean the mess. “What?”

“I dreamt this,” Lydia reiterates as she strokes the ethereal blue hedgehog she has clutched to her chest. “It happened exactly like this. And then…” She trails off as she looks at the fridge. “Then she appeared.”

“What?” Stiles repeats, even more confused. “What do you mean? Who is —”

The refrigerator rattles noisily as the whole house shakes in the aftershock of a powerful wave of magic that descends on it.

Everyone grabs onto something to steady themselves, but the quake doesn’t repeat itself.

The fridge rattles noisily again before thrashing against the wall.

Stiles yelps and leaps back, standing in front of Lydia and Allison just in case it explodes.
It really looks and sounds like it might explode.

Isaac presses a hand to Boyd’s shoulder, giving him a look when Boyd tries to step forward to investigate.

The fridge stops all of a sudden and the door goes flying off with a cloud of blue smoke.

Isaac yanks Boyd out of the way when it comes flying his way and it crashes disastrously into the flat screen TV in the living room.

The door becomes wedged into the middle of the TV, sparks flying from the cracked screen.

Everyone turns back towards the fridge at the sound of coughing.

The thick, heady blue smoke rising from the fridge eventually lifts and reveals a middle-aged woman. Her eyes, like the indigo ocean, are pools of iridescent blue, sculpted upon her creamy face like dazzling jewels. Strands of fiery red hair tumbles out of her scalp and cascades down her back like a waterfall. She’s wearing a strapless cocktail dress made of a silky black fabric with a black faux fur mink wrap over her shoulders. She looks like a middle-aged socialite.

“Blast!” she complains, waving away the remaining blue smoke with a cough. “I’m despicably out of practice. Although, I probably shouldn’t have had those cocktails before summoning that portal. This is Barcelona all over again. But with fewer Centaurs. Thank Fate and Peril for small mercies.”

“I don’t mean to interrupt,” Stiles says, exasperated. “But who are you, and why did you climb out of my refrigerator?”

“Well I should hope you recognize me! But wait, yes, wait, I’m remembering now, perhaps that’s asking too much. You were a just a small little baby the last time I saw you. A newborn, in fact. That was Poland, spring of 1999, maybe? Or was it 1998? What year were you born?”

Everyone stares at her.

Lydia leans in from behind Stiles and whispers, “It's Aunt Lorraine.”

It suddenly snaps into place for Stiles and he finds himself recognizing her face from his mother’s childhood photo albums. “Aunt...Lorraine?” he repeats, hollowly. It doesn’t look like she’s aged a day according to those photos.

“The very one,” Aunt Lorraine confirms as she gestures to herself proudly. Then she frowns and says, “Not quite as sober as I hoped to be when I did this whole thing but here we are. And so lucky to be in tact too! Also, side note — emerging from your fridge was definitely not my first choice. I was aiming for the front door and I must’ve taken a wrong turn because I ended up in there instead. But that is the price of inter-dimensional, cross continental traveling, even for a Blue Witch of my caliber. And trust me when I say that I have been around for a very long time to confirm this. It never gets any easier.” She sighs and turns to retrieve her large, expensive handbag from out of the fridge.

“I tried to tell your mother that once when she was a kid, Stiles, but would she listen?”

“No. She wouldn’t. That girl was always stubborn as a mule. I once had to extract her from a very messy situation with a team of Unicorns, which, to be fair, was more or less a cultural misunderstanding than anything. See she tried Inter-Jumping to Prague when she was sixteen but landed on the Isle of Monokeros instead, but lucky for her she was still a virgin at the time or that could have turned ugly. Oh! What are we eating? It smells really wonderful. Oops, did I do that with the TV — yes, it certainly looks like I did. But it’s no problem, I can fix it like new. Or, you know, *newish*. Gently used might be the proper phrasing. Though I’ve only ever done it once before. Not a
big fan of technology, but I am ace at everything else. You need a new tapestry set? I’m your Witch! Trying to get one of those fruit named phones? Better go to a Techno Warlock. My, these are some lovely looking begonias. I just adore begonias! They are my absolute favorite. Does anyone mind getting me a cup? This water looks so very tempting and I am just parched.”

Stiles stares at her and watches as she makes herself at home at his kitchen table. He’s severely stuck between amazement, curiosity, and bewilderment.

And going by the looks on everyone’s faces, he’s pretty sure he’s not the only one.
“You know, I would really rather not have to summon myself something. That journey took quite a bit out of me. But let that be a lesson. No Inter-Jumping while intoxicated. I’ve already wracked up a number of citations from the Mage Border Patrol. Though, the MBP has been on my back for the longest time. I’m like a favorite. On first name basis with half of the officers and everything! Anyway, how are we coming along with that glass? Oh, and I’ll also need some bread to soak up the alcohol still lingering in my stomach,” Aunt Lorraine goes on to say.

She’s either ignoring or completely oblivious to the wide-eyed stares from all around her. She taps her manicured fingernails against the surface of the table as she stares at the white begonias. Her eyes go misty and her expression gets a bit whimsical, as if she’s remembering a distant memory. And just like that, there’s a flicker of sadness that passes over her face before she quickly shuts it down.

Stiles finds himself wondering over what the older woman may be thinking about. He’s familiar with that expression. His mother used to have it on her face when she took the time to look at her family photo album, pausing when she comes across the photo of a dead relative.

Aunt Lydia is suddenly frowning thoughtfully before she cuts her blue eyes to Boyd. “Get me a glass of water, please. Seems I have to be specific with you all. The questions being projected at me are practically stifling me. Lydia, Stiles, have a seat.”

Boyd glances at Stiles as if he’s going to get an answer from him but he ends up shrugging instead since Stiles looks as unsure as he does about what direction this is all headed in. Then, wordlessly, he moves around to find a clean glass.

Isaac frowns, looking grumpy with the fact that this stranger is accosting his best friend, and he takes a seat at the table to frown at her.

Meanwhile, Lydia plops into the chair across from Isaac’s without hesitation, and yanks on Stiles’s sleeve to get him to sit as well (which he does with understandable hesitation).

“Aunt Lydia asks as she narrows her blue eyes in thought at Isaac.

“My friend is a guest here too,” Isaac answers instead and Stiles shoots him a look that gets ignored. “You can’t just order him around like that.”

Aunt Lorraine’s eyes widen at his blunt tone before she laughs. “I meant no harm. It’s just a folly of old age,” she explains. “I assume young people won’t mind if I run them around for little things.”

“I don’t mind,” Boyd adds, still hunting for that glass. “My grams does the same thing every time I visit. I can barely step through the door before she’s asking me for favors.”

“It’s different when it’s family,” Isaac mutters, crossing his arms and still eyeing Aunt Lorraine resentfully.

“You’re right, he hardly knows me. I get too friendly,” Aunt Lorraine agrees in a placating tone. “Jo tê gjithë mund t’i fusësh nê një thes,” she adds (in Albanian).

Isaac jerks in surprise and his scowl completely vanishes. “A flisni shqip?” he retorts in the same dialect.

“Një gjuhë asnjëherë nuk është mjaft,” Aunt Lorraine replies with a private smile. “Si ju quajnë?”
“Isaac Lahey.”

“You’re new to the family,” Aunt Lorraine guesses. “I keep these lineage books, you see. It’s like a family tree that I use to keep track of my bloodline. I would have remembered you in the latest edition.”

“I was adopted.”

“Aah, chosen family is always the best. I’ll be sure to add your name next to Stiles so I don’t soon forget. Very nice to meet you,” Aunt Lorraine says and Isaac nods, and he doesn’t smile at her but he’s not glaring anymore so that’s progress. “And you.” She shifts her gaze to Allison. “I’m sensing something muted…genetic…skips a generation…on your mother’s side…there it is! You wouldn’t happen to be colorblind, would you, dear?”

Allison blinks and looks floored as she nods.

Aunt Lorraine smiles widely and her white teeth are almost blinding. “Tipsy and yet I still haven’t lost my gift of discernment completely!” Then she glances around and lowers her voice as if she’s sharing a closely kept secret with her most beloved friends. “Oh, but you all must know that the best kind of foods are prepared by the colorblind,” she stage whispers. Voice returning to regular volume, she asks, “What’s your name? I’m seeing something with a double ‘A’.”

“Allison Argent,” Allison confirms, looking spooked with a mixture of awe.

“Argent? Hm, there’s a heritage of Huntsmen in that lineage if I’m not mistaken. Allison is a very lovely name by the way. I once knew an Allison who was the purveyor of M.A.B. and the like. Which happened to be the newest discovery at the time, by the by. She always complained her peers never took her seriously, but well, you can bet they changed their tune after that little fact-finding expedition.”

“What’s M.A.B.?” Lydia asks, clutching Stiles’s magic close to her chest (still presenting itself as an ethereal blue hedgehog).

Stiles can faintly feel the curiosity his magic has about his Aunt Lorraine, and it settles at least some of his confusion to note that his magic doesn’t view her as a threat.

Aunt Lorraine replies, “M.A.B. happens to stand for ‘Mood Adjustment Butterflies’. They’re magically enhanced insects that can cure any sort of ill temper disorder. For example, with the right amount of exposure, a person who suffers quite badly from post traumatic stress can become free of the emotional distress prompted by said ailment. When she was alive, Dr. Allison became a renowned 45-L Enchantress of psychiatry. Her research and fieldwork has contributed greatly to the Supernatural community.”

“What’s 45-L stand for?” Lydia presses.

Stiles couldn’t help but to wonder as well. There was a hungry churn in his gut that made him feel so drawn to Aunt Lorraine’s voice. It felt like being in the presence of a walking textbook for all things to do with the otherworldly. He couldn’t quite explain how he knew she must be way older than what she looked, but he knew.

“45-L means ‘forty-fifth level’. Enchantresses are another branch to the family tree of Witches. Now while Color Witches are considered the strongest bloodline, Graded Enchantresses are considered cousins to them much in the same way that Werecats and Werewolves are. Or even Faeries and Mermaids.”
“Wait, Mermaids and Faeries are cousins? But I thought Virtues and Banshees — Lydia and I —”

“Ah, I know what you’re thinking. Yes, you and Lydia are blood cousins, but that is the genetics and familial aspect. In the Supernatural community, there are also things known as Magical Bloodlines. It’s what connects us all to each other as a society, just as Humans are connected by their ethnicities and cultures. We all would’ve had to come from a single source, correct? Like Humans with their theory of the first man and woman. For us Paranormals, there was a tree. The first tree. The Tree of Creation. Where all of what we have, originated.”

“It came from the trees…” Stiles murmurs, and thinks back to the unfinished story Mr. Ravenhill once tried to tell him.

“Yes, correct. Anyway, back to the 45-L business. Enchantresses like to become experts on all things, and they can only track their progress and experience through a number system, much like Faeries do,” Aunt Lorraine continues to explain. “Only theirs is much more vast. Their number system goes all the way up to a thousand. With a thousand representing the least and one being the greatest.”

Stiles doesn’t need to do the math in his head to guess that a 45-L Enchantress isn’t someone to go toe to toe with.

“Right. So. Ms. Allison Argent. Don’t worry about your parents, or your father. That will sort itself out,” Aunt Lorraine declares with a solemn nod in Allison’s direction. “But you do need to forgive if you want the true path to fulfillment to be revealed to you. The happiness in your life will follow, okay? Hand me a sandwich, it smells absolutely divine.”

Allison is motionless for a moment, suspended in disbelief and vulnerable sorrow. It’s few minutes before she’s making a clumsy grab for a paper plate and putting a grilled cheese and egg sandwich on it with shaky hands. She sets it before Aunt Lorraine almost piously before she sits at the other end of the table wordlessly.

Aunt Lorraine wastes no time taking a loud, crunchy bite with all of the ‘oohs’ and ‘ahhs’ that Stiles isn’t entirely sure is staged.

Boyd pours her some fruit laced water in the glass he’s finally obtained without being prompted before he sits to her left on the other side of Isaac. He’s eyeing her curiously like he wants to see what she will do or say next.

“Thank you, dear. What’s your name? I’m sensing something shared…passed down? Are you a fourth?” Aunt Lorraine questions, picking off the crusts from her oily bread.

Boyd has an amazing poker face, so it’s hard to tell what he may be thinking, but Stiles figures that the way he lifts both eyebrows must be an indication of surprise. “Vernon Milton Boyd the Fourth,” he confirms.

“Ah, I thought so,” Aunt Lorraine replies whimsically. She sighs before she glances around. “How about your brother, how is he called? He is the oldest one, correct?”

Boyd nods. “His name is Roman. My mom had a hard labor with them, so she told my dad that if he wanted any more children, he would let her name their first child. She named him after her and I was named after my dad.”

“What about your little sister?”

Boyd’s grin is almost whimsical. “Veronica,” he answers, tone friendly. “How did you know I
wasn’t an only child?”

“You carry yourself like a middle child.”

Boyd says nothing to that but it’s obvious it’s something he’s heard before.

“Your mother and father follow the old gods and the laws that govern their faith,” Aunt Lorraine states, matter of fact. “So in return they have been blessed financially. Everything they touch turns to wealth.”

Boyd does look surprise then. “My mother follows the way of Karma. It was introduced to her by a missionary that came to her village when she was a child. And when my dad married her, he loved her enough to do the same,” he admits. “They always say that everything we have here is owed to Jain Dharma.”

“Certainly when followed properly, yes,” Aunt Lorraine agrees. “I really shouldn’t be the only one eating. Allison, be a dear, and serve the rest. I’d hate for this delicious food to go to waste since you put your heart in it. You cook almost as well as the Scorpion Queen, but between you and I, that golden spatula she uses has magical properties. Cheating, if you ask me.”

“Oh, uh, thank you?” Allison says with a bemused, dimpled smile as she sets plates before everyone. “Actually, I’m sorry but I have to ask. The Scorpion Queen? Who is that?”

“Well she presides over the Mesopotamian tribe of Aqrabuamelu, who protect the Scared Grove of Fruit Trees, which in turn leads to the entrance of Sheol, or by earthly terms, Hell. You know, the bad place where Humans go if judged by the Faceless as lacking in morals.” Aunt Lorraine grins and adds, “The Aqrabuamelu are half women, half scorpion. I believe Hollywood did a sloppy interpretation in The Mummy Returns.”

Dawning expressions of understanding ripple around the table on everyone’s face.

“You must be very well traveled,” Boyd supposes before he starts eating.

Aunt Lorraine’s blue eyes glimmer mischievously. “Yes, that is a fair assumption for someone my age. Go on. Guess it, if you can,” she challenges as if it’s her favorite game.

Boyd doesn’t hesitate as he says, “Thirty-six.”

Aunt Lorraine throws her head back and laughs colorfully, causing the lights to flicker on and off in a hiccupping display of magic. “Whoops, goodness me. I have a bad habit of doing that when I’m tickled,” she gasps, waving her hand quickly before wiggling her nose.

The lights return to their off state.

“Oh, you are very charming,” she says, pointing a finger at Boyd like she’s accusing him of it. “But no. I haven’t been thirty-six for a very long time. My origin of birth is one of my closest guarded secrets. It has to be.”

“Why?” Stiles asks when no one else will. He’s too distracted to eat.

“It’s the source of my immortality,” Aunt Lorraine vaguely replies. “Now, I bet you’re wondering why I’m here.”

“The thought had crossed my mind a few times,” Stiles dryly admits.
Aunt Lorraine finishes up the last of her food before she wipes her mouth quickly. “Family is the most important thing to me,” she says. She looks at Lydia and Stiles with a soft smile. “I try and make it a habit of visiting every generation of my family, if only for a short while. Especially to gage where you are with your abilities, or what exactly it is you’ve inherited from me. Maybe someday I’ll tell you more about who I am and where I come from. After all, I am the source of the magical ancestry in this family of ours.”

“I saw you coming,” Lydia mumbles lyrically. She’s not eating either. “I dreamt it.”

“I’m sure you did, darling,” Aunt Lorraine replies gently. “You’ve inherited my gift of discernment, it seems. I’ll help you master it more efficiently while I’m with you two. Oh! That reminds me. I need to give you your Conduit.”

Lydia begins to look positively thrilled. Certainly a pleasant change from the detached, almost dreamy expression she’s been sporting this whole time.

Stiles feels a bit envious, but he’s happy for his cousin nonetheless.

Aunt Lorraine closes her eyes and mouths a few words silently. Her earlobes wiggle. The refrigerator rattles again, but there’s less smoke and commotion in comparison to before.

Aunt Lorraine opens her eyes with an annoyed sound. “Not the fridge again. I’m sorry, Stiles. I really don’t mean to make that my landing strip,” she promises as she pats him on the shoulder before standing to her feet. She crosses the kitchen to get to the fridge and reaches inside to pull out a full-grown Pygmy Marmoset with brownish-gold fur and black beady eyes. It’s no bigger than her hand. “This is my Conduit. His name is Jatiyashoyumize. But Jay works just as fine if you can’t work your way through that mouthful. Jay, go be friendly with my niece and nephew.”

Jay makes a bunch of high-pitched sounds at Aunt Lorraine, which she rolls her eyes at but nods. Jay seems satisfied before he climbs up her arm and uses her black faux fur to swing to the ground. He sprints over and climbs up Stiles’s leg first, tugging on Stiles’s shirt until Stiles leans down to be at eye level. He makes a few high-pitched sounds before patting Stiles’s nose and moving on to Lydia to do the same.

Isaac, Boyd, and Allison just watch them quietly as they continue to eat their food.

“His way of saying hello,” Aunt Lorraine explains before Jay makes his way back to her. He climbs her body to settle on her shoulder and starts chewing on her hair, though she doesn’t seem to mind at all. “Lydia, darling, he was very nice to fetch you the egg we got for you while we were on holiday in the Bermuda Triangle. One of the best concealed resorts for Colored Witches if you ask me.”

Lydia rests Stiles’s magic on the table so she can accept the turquoise jewel-encrusted egg (it looks like one of those expensive Rosebud Fabergé eggs). She holds it up so that she has it eye level and her hazel eyes grow misty as the egg glows between her cupped palms.

Stiles can’t help but to notice the way her hands tremble in awe when it stops flashing and settles. “What is it?” he asks curiously.

“It’s an egg,” Aunt Lorraine responds with a sly grin.

Stiles huffs. “No, I just mean, like, what’s inside?” he clarifies.

“Well, that’s for your cousin to decide depending on how she cares for it,” Aunt Lorraine supposes. “And it is very important that you take very good care of it, Lydia. Treat it like a seed and it will
blossom.”

Lydia nods solemnly and clutches it close. “It’ll never leave my sight,” she swears.

Aunt Lorraine looks tickled. “That devotion is a good start, but it’s got a tough shell, so no need to fret too much,” she assures. Then she looks to Stiles and says, “Now then. I’ve heard rumors of a tree. If it’s anything like what I helped your mother summon, it should be a sight to behold. Will you allow me the honor of seeing?”

“No time like the present,” is Stiles’s response. “Everyone is invited by the way,” he adds to the rest of the room.

There’s a moment where there’s some slight commotion of everyone standing from their seats to follow Stiles out the back door and into his backyard.

Stiles calls his magic to him before he touches his glowing hands to the triquetra to activate it.

Nana’s face bleeds through a moment later. “My, what an audience you have behind you today, dearie,” she notes with undisguised amusement. “All right then, do what you mean to.”

“I give them permission to see.”

Allison gasps and clutches at Lydia, who stiffens and shifts away but continues to stare in awe at the tree as well.

Boyd looks to Isaac and says, “I thought you were being metaphorical when you said it could talk.”

Isaac just rolls his eyes and starts climbing Nana, muttering something about wanting some fruit before he disappears behind her purple-blue leaves.

Jay makes a high-pitched sound before he climbs off of Aunt Lorraine and chases after Isaac, where he vanishes in the tree as well.

Stiles can’t really see what’s happening, even as he leans against Nana to gaze up to the top of her, but he can hear Isaac fussing at Jay about stealing his peaches.

“I may speak in metaphors from time to time,” Nana says, addressing Boyd. “But I am very real otherwise. What’s your name, dear?”

“Vernon, but I answer to Boyd,” Boyd replies as he looks her over. “My little sister would really enjoy meeting you, I think. She’s obsessed with the tree from Pocahontas.”

“Bring her by and I’ll be happy to talk to her,” Nana vows delightedly.

Boyd laughs. “In theory, yes I would. But that little girl has a mouth on her, and she’d go around telling everyone. I don’t think Stiles would appreciate having some onlookers come to his house on a fact finding mission,” he reasons.

Stiles smiles at his consideration. “Not really, no,” he confirms.

“In any case, I’ll be here until you decide that she’s ready,” Nana says. “What about the rest of you?”

Lydia steps forward and introduces herself.

Stiles is surprised to note that she looks nervous and hopeful.
“Don’t be shy, dearie,” Nana coos. “Stiles thinks on you a lot, so I’m a bit familiar with who you are. Come touch your hands to my face and we’ll get properly acquainted.”

Lydia hesitates and looks to Aunt Lorraine (who appears to be taking notes in a small glittery journal that she materialized out of nowhere), and when the older woman nods encouragingly at her, she walks forward. She pushes her egg onto Stiles without asking and he scrambles to clutch it before it falls. She lifts her hands and blows on them until they glow with a red bioluminescent glow. Then she presses both palms to Nana’s cheeks as they stare at each other almost soulfully.

Aunt Lorraine continues to scribble down some notes as Boyd cups a hand over his eyes to gaze up at her branches, while Allison fidgets anxiously beside him.

Stiles watches as tears begin to stream down Lydia’s face while she presses her trembling lips together. “Nana,” he says sharply, straightening with a worried frown.

“Hush, dearie, I’m not hurting her,” Nana promises. “What a beautiful soul you are. Peril could not have done any better.”

Lydia begins to sob audibly as she sinks to her knees, and Stiles quickly rushes to her side to hold her. She makes an unhappy sound, stiffening under his touch before shying away.

Stiles quietly apologizes, remembering that she doesn’t like to touch unless she’s the one to initiate the contact. So he sits besides her and waits it out.

Allison wanders over and joins them as well.

“The path to healing will be a long journey, but you have a lot of people who love you and are willing to travel with you,” Nana concludes. “Myself included.”

Stiles strokes Lydia’s egg anxiously as it shakes unhappily in his hands. His magic breaks away from his body to form into a small blue hedgehog again and settles in her lap.

Lydia doesn’t smile but she does pet Stiles’s magic as her hands continue to glow. She eventually relaxes and sniffs fretfully. “I want to go back inside,” she says as she grabs her jeweled egg from Stiles, and it finally stops vibrating. “I’m hungry.”

“Your sandwich should still be on the table,” Allison says before looking to Stiles. “I’ll take her in and sit with her a bit. I think she’s feeling overwhelmed. To be honest, I kind of am too.”

“Yeah, sure. Let me know if you need anything,” Stiles says, standing when Allison and Lydia do so. He steps out of the way and watches the two of them venture back into his house and out of sight. Then he turns to Nana. “What was that all about?”

“I did not do much. Not as much as I wanted to,” Nana admits. “She’s never had the time to digest all the changes in her life, or properly grieve her parents. I took on some of those burdens for her.”

“Oh,” Stiles says and feels a little bad for his slightly accusatory tone. “Thank you. That’s — thank you.”

“She’s important to you, and you are important to me,” Nana merely states. Then she turns her gaze to Aunt Lorraine. “My dear, I usually like to know someone to a certain degree before I let them study me in such a way.”

Aunt Lorraine snaps her journal shut with a smile. “Understandable. I am called Lorraine — a Blue Witch that originally hailed from Scotland before migrating to Poland during my first marriage. I’m
Stiles and Lydia’s many great aunt,” she introduces.

“I sensed the magic, but I had no idea you were kin to my young ward,” Nana replies with a speculative tone. “I’d love to know more about you.”

“Absolutely. I have nowhere to be, and I plan on being around for a good stretch of time while I get Lydia attuned to her abilities and her Conduit. I also thought to perhaps help Stiles in anyway he needed as well,” Aunt Lorraine confesses. She turns to Stiles and says, “Why don’t you run along, darling. I think I’ll be out here for a while, and I don’t want to bore you to tears with all this talk.”

“If you’re sure…” Stiles says slowly, glancing between them. Under normal circumstances, he would have begged to stay, just on the chance that Aunt Lorraine brought up his mother or more intimate details about herself. But judging by where the sun was in the sky, it was getting close to noon, and he’ll be expecting Derek soon.

“Go on, sweetling. And take your brother with you. He and that funny little creature are causing quite a stir up there,” Nana says admonishingly.

“I’m on it.” Stiles carefully climbs up in search of his brother.

Isaac is sprawled over the highest branch eating a green and fuzzy peach as he feeds Jay a few bites as well. It appears that they’ve settled their differences somehow.

“Cora’s coming over,” Stiles warns. “Specifically to hang out with you.”

“I know,” Isaac replies with a shrug. “She texted me last night.”

“Don’t you think she’s gonna mind if you’re sleep the whole time?” Stiles asks as he watches him continue to tear into a peach. “You know what Nana’s fruit does.”

“I do,” Isaac agrees calmly. “But Nana told me a long time ago that as long as I don’t anything that’s ripe, I’ll be fine. I mean it’s a little more sour than I would usually like, but it’s still some of the best fruit I’ve ever eaten.”

“Ohhh, okay,” Stiles says and wordlessly files that information away. “Well, come on. They’re gonna be here soon. We should at least make ourselves presentable.”

Isaac follows him as they climb down together. “I don’t care about being presentable. You just want to look good for your boyfriend,” he disparagingly remarks.

Stiles almost loses his footing. It takes him a few minutes before he can even get a response out. “He’s not my — why are you so mean to me?” he exclaims in outrage when they finally reach the ground.

Isaac just smirks as Jay curls up on his shoulder and he takes confident strides toward the house.

“All I do is love you!” Stiles shouts after him in complaint but the slam of the backdoor is his only reply. Stiles grumbles to himself.

Aunt Lorraine, who seems to have materialized a black wicker chair for herself, pauses her conversation with Nana to shoot him a curious look. “What’s this about a boyfriend, darling?” she asks.

Stiles turns red while Nana chuckles. “I don’t have a boyfriend,” he swears.
“Not yet, at least,” Nana chimes unhelpfully and why do the people in his life hate him so much? “He’s such a charming little thing too. A handsome Werewolf no less. From a very respectable Pack.”

“My, my. This sounds more and more intriguing,” Aunt Lorraine says with a sly grin. “Come here and tell your aunt all about this boy whose made away with your heart.”

“No thank you!” Stiles sprints to the house before she can probe any further or before Nana can say anything else embarrassing. Even when he closes the backdoor behind him, it still doesn’t feel like enough distance from the situation. “How’s she doing?” he asks, approaching the kitchen table where Allison and Lydia still reside.

Lydia is still working her way through her first sandwich but she scoffs. “She is just fine. No need to talk over my head,” she interjects before Allison gets the chance to.

“Sorry,Lyds,” Stiles says as he sits down across from them and watches in amusement as his magic noses around her plate like it’s searching for something. “I throw myself at your mercy.”

Lydia gazes at him with an odd smirk on her face. “I don’t understand,” she says pointedly. “I’m speaking nonsense. Don’t mind me,” Stiles sighs and smiles at her but she looks away. “I’m happy to see you.”

Lydia doesn’t look at him again. She stares at her plate. “I’m feeling better,” she says quietly. “Maybe not the same as I was before, but getting there.” Then she says, “You and Aunt Lorraine are the only family I have left, Stiles. Don’t leave me.”

“Never,” Stiles promises without hesitation.

“I won’t smile at the drop of a dime for you,” Lydia warns. Her small fingers are greasy as she rips apart her sandwich with a vengeance. “I won’t even pretend. That’s not who I am anymore. I don’t understand happiness in the way I used to, but I do know satisfaction. I don’t like to be touched, and I don’t laugh much. You can’t always be sarcastic with me because sometimes I won’t understand. I’m very good at mimicking normal behavior but I don’t always understand it.”

“You don’t have to pretend for me.”

“I know.”

Stiles reaches out with his hand, and drags his magic back to him, breathing it in when it comes without a fight. Then he says, “I can’t promise to always be available for you, but I do promise to try. If you have something to say, I will listen.”

“Don’t talk over me then. Or through me. Talk to me,” Lydia says and starts eating again. “Tell me everything I’ve missed.”

Stiles opens his mouth.

“Not now. Later,” Lydia interrupts with another odd smirk. “Isaac is important to you.”

Stiles blinks at the sudden redirection in conversation but he nods.

“Then he’s important to me too,” Lydia decides but she frowns. “How can I connect to him? Friendships are...challenging right now. Sometimes I feel like I don’t remember how to do it. How do I get him to like me?”
“Don’t treat him like a little kid or eat any of his stuff and you’ll be fine.”

Lydia takes what he says at face value. Then she says, “Allison is my best friend. I’m going to have to tell her everything.”

“I thought already knew everything,” Allison admits with a sad smile as she grabs a nearby napkin and rips it to shreds like she needs something to do. “But I’ve missed a lot it seems. You’re a...Virtue? What is that?”

“It’s a type of Faerie.”


“I’ll explain later,” Lydia promises before she stands. “We have to get ready to leave. Stiles is going to have company over soon.”

Stiles laughs, even though he doesn’t mean to. “I never told you that,” he points out.

“You don’t always have to,” Lydia responds as she prims herself. “Aunt Lorraine said it plainly. I have the gift of discernment.”

“Yours is certainly stronger than mine,” Stiles sighs as he stretches. “You think she’ll teach me how to be better at that too?”

“If you ask,” Lydia replies as she tucks in her chair and takes her plate to the sink so she can wash it.

“You guys have any plans for today?” Stiles asks.

“Coming to see you was at the top of our list,” Allison says. “We were going to meet Malia and Scott at Beacon Hills Cinema. Lydia really wants to see Maleficent. Wanna join us?”

“I’ve seen it already,” Stiles admits, slightly apologetic. “And I have some plans. Rain check?”

“Sure.” Allison gives him a dimpled smile.

Lydia has her smartphone out and she’s texting away on it. “I’m going to invite Isaac. I would also like to come back for dinner and stay the night. We have a lot of catching up to do.”

Stiles lifts both his brows at that but he grins. “I have no objections, but I’ll have to run it by my dad to see if the additional company will be okay,” he says.

Lydia nods and, without pausing her texting, walks to the stairs, then up them.

Stiles assumes she’s going to talk to Isaac. He looks at Allison with a smile. “How is Danny and Jackson?” he asks.

“Steady,” Allison replies with a dimpled grin. “Jackson is being a helicopter mom according to Scott. Lydia and I were going to go see for ourselves after the movies. When do you think you might go?”

“I’m not sure. Definitely before Danny’s released. I just have a few things I have to sort out too,” Stiles remarks, though in truth, he’s a little nervous about seeing Danny too. He’s not exactly sure why, but there’s some apprehension there. “I’ll text Jackson and figure out the best time to come.”

“He’ll appreciate it if you do,” Allison confirms. “And...Isaac. How is he?”

“Uh,” Stiles pauses. Not sure if he should break the news to her or not. “Well. Um.”
“I know he’s my uncle,” Allison says with a self-deprecating smile. “My dad told me when he came over this morning. It’s part of the reason I had to bail since it turned into this huge argument with my mom. Now I feel really embarrassed by my past behavior, if not slightly horrified.”

“Ah, well.” Stiles fidgets. “Understandable, given the circumstances.”

“Yeah, but my dad didn’t really explain the circumstances behind my relation to your brother,” Allison mutters. “Though I can hazard a wild guess if he’s my uncle.”

Stiles rubs the back of his neck. “You might want to ask Isaac about that. Or Kate,” he suggests.

“Oh, that’s right. Wow, she must have been pissed when she found out too,” Allison supposes, thinking it over. “My aunt has a temper. I know that much, even if we don’t really spend any time together. But she and Laura moved into our duplex, so that might change.”

Stiles nods.

There’s a knock to the front door.

Stiles excuses himself to answer it, and his heartbeat kicks up a notch when he sees that it’s Derek and Jordan on his doorstep.

Derek smiles widely at him, quickly stepping forward to kiss him on the cheek and stepping back before Stiles can so much as blink. Then he says, “I’ve been texting you all morning.”

Stiles can still feel the impression of his warm lips on his cheek, and his magic is squirming in his gut like eels in a small bucket at the sound of the older teen’s voice. “I’m — I was — I got distracted,” he finally stammers out.

“Clearly,” Derek retorts wryly, eyes sliding down his body with a grin. “Nice pajamas.”

Stiles blushes and squirms under his gaze. He’s wearing nothing but a tank top and a pair of Iron Man pajama bottoms. “Well, I know I said I was for Wonder Woman. But I’m, you know, not against Tony Stark.”

“Oh huh,” Derek replies, amused. He pauses and he goes curiously silent as his head cocks and his gaze drifts around like he’s listening for something. Then he says, “Oh. You have company over.”

“Unexpectedly, yes,” Stiles clarifies. He moves out of the way so he can gesture Derek in. “Where’s Cora?”

Derek steps over the threshold as he says, “Still in the car. I told her this was going to take a minute, but she insisted.”

Stiles leans forward out the doorway to look for Derek’s car as he pets Jordan, who licks happily at his right hand before darting off into the house. “You at least left the windows rolled down, right?” he jokes.

Derek snorts. “Cora doesn’t settle for the breeze if she can have central air.” He adds, “Also, if you’re looking for my car, you won’t find it. I borrowed my Uncle Jonah’s hummer since I knew it’d be a handful of us and my car isn’t big enough to fit four people and two large dogs.”

“Smart.” Stiles spies the large yellow hummer parked in his driveway. He waves to Cora, who gives him the middle finger before she goes back to messing with her smartphone. Stiles huffs. “You sure she doesn’t want to come in while I get ready?”
“Nope. She’s got enough to keep her preoccupied anyway. Our cousin Sabrina introduced her to something called Piano Tiles, and now she’s obsessed. She’ll hardly notice if we take long or not.”

Stiles hums thoughtfully at that with a grin. “Okay then.” He closes the door and walks down the hall to the kitchen. “Uh, I’m not sure if you’ve met Allison. But Allison, this is Derek.”

Allison is on bent knee, rubbing down Jordan with cooing noises as he wags his tail excitedly at the attention and affection. She stands to face them but she keeps one hand rested on the top of Jordan’s head. “We know each other,” she says.

“Kate?” Stiles watches as they both nod. “Figures. Okay. Well. I don’t think Isaac is coming with us after all. My cousin Lydia has plans to steal him away. So.” He shrugs.

“It’s fine by me, but I can’t speak for Cora,” Derek says. He gives Allison a friendly smile. “It’s nice to see you again. Will you be at my sister’s housewarming party?”

“Almost assuredly,” Allison replies with a dimpled grin. “Is Cora here?”

“Yeah, she’s in the car if you want to talk to her.”

“I think I will.” Allison stands and rounds the table to hug Stiles. “Stiles, I’ll see you later if we don’t run into each other again before either of us leaves. We should really do something together soon, though. It feels like it’s been forever. And if Lydia catches me up to everything like she’s been promising, I’m sure I’ll have some questions for you too. Your tree is really amazing by the way, I don’t know if I’ve said.”

“Thank you. She’s one of a kind,” Stiles agrees as he hugs her back and lets her go. “And you have my number. Just text me or call me if you can think of something for us to do.”

Allison nods before she waves at Derek, then she pets Jordan and exits through the front door.

Jordan quickly follows her outside, however.

“Outside of the unexpected company, what else had you too distracted to text me back?”

Stiles scoffs and rolls his eyes as he heads toward the stairs with Derek on his heels. Once they’re in his room, and he closes the door, he starts telling Derek about what an exciting morning he’s had while the older teen makes himself comfortable on his bed.

Derek listens with an attentive ear as he watches Stiles walk to and fro around his room in search for something clean or something that at least is close enough.

“So yeah,” Stiles concludes as he treks to his closet to see what he might have there when his dressers and his bedroom floor are a dead end. “That about sums it up.”

Derek slides off the bed to walk over to his open window and peer out. “That’s your aunt? The one in the chair with the red hair?”

“Yeah.”

“Huh. She’s really pretty.”

“And possibly centuries old if that helps,” Stiles adds, trying to assess Derek’s tone. He wonders if Derek’s attracted to his aunt, and that’s kind of unsettling for Stiles.

“I was just making an observation,” Derek says, like he knows what Stiles is thinking.
Stiles snorts, and then grumbles, “Yeah, but I know how much you like older women.”

Derek barks out a laugh at that. “Maybe. But I’m pretty gone on you,” he cheerily replies. “Still. It’s adorable that you’re jealous, babe.”

Stiles blushes and slams his closet door shut so he can change in peace.

Derek makes a tsking sound. “Completely unrelated but do you think I have a chance with your aunt? You know, if I theoretically wanted to take a shot,” he calls out from the other side of the door. “Very funny.”

Derek chuckles before he makes an annoyed sound. “Why is your room always a mess?”

“You call it a mess but I call it character,” Stiles retorts as he slips into some shoes. He exits his closet and rolls his eyes when he sees Derek cleaning. “This is really going to set us back even more.”

“So help me then. It is your room,” Derek points out, needlessly. He’s making Stiles’s bed with exaggerated movements. “Do you want to deal with your dirty clothes, or should I?”

“Don’t go anywhere near my delicates, thank you,” Stiles is quick to say. He hauls his laundry hamper out of the room and pauses outside of Isaac’s door.

Isaac and Lydia are just exiting, while Boyd remains on the edge of Isaac’s bed with his phone pressed to his ear and Jay settled on his right shoulder.

“I’m going to the movies,” Isaac announces while Lydia stands behind him with a very satisfied look on her face. “I already texted dad to let him know.”

“Really?” Stiles says, a little surprised. “Even though you’ve already seen the movie?”

Lydia’s face changes, and she looks upset at the possibly of having miscalculated. “You didn’t tell me that.”

Isaac shoots Stiles an exasperated look before he quickly turns to Lydia. “I didn’t think it mattered, since I liked it enough to want to see it again,” he promises. “Can you give my brother and I a moment, please?”

Lydia glances between with narrowed eyes, like she’s trying to gauge the situation. It takes a few silent seconds before she nods once and disappears down the steps.

Stiles waits a few beats before he says, “What? What did I do this time?”

“I’m trying to be nice,” Isaac replies, evenly. “I want to — I’m trying to be better with people.”

“How do you mean? I think you’re doing just fine so far,” Stiles admits.

“That’s because I’m trying really hard,” Isaac retorts, almost impatiently but it seems like he’s doing his best to explain what he means. “Listen, before you and dad came along, I was alone. I didn’t really — no one tried to be my friend. No one cared enough to even try, and now I have some of the most popular people at my school asking after me. It’s just — it’s a lot but I — I don’t know. I want to be more like you.”

“What?” Stiles is totally lost now. “Wait, what?”

Isaac sighs heavily in annoyance. “You don’t live in a bubble,” he says, talking very slowly. “When
you meet someone, you engage them. You have a large circle of friends. I want to be more like that. I want to try. Is that any clearer?"

“Not really,” Stiles confesses. “But, listen, you don’t have to make yourself be a people person, or push yourself outside of your comfort zone because what I do seems like what normal should be. Isaac, there’s nothing normal about me. And there’s nothing normal about you either, but I love you for it. If other people can’t, then that’s on them.”

“You’d prefer me to be rude to your friends?” Isaac asks but there’s a teasing lilt to his voice.

Stiles rolls his eyes. “You’re not exactly rude. You’re just blunt. But I like when you speak your mind unapologetically. I’d take that over the days when you didn’t say anything at all.”

“Well, thanks. I appreciate your support,” Isaac remarks, genuinely. “But I still would like to try, okay? I want to step a little out of my comfort zone and see what happens.”

“If you’re sure…” Stiles takes a moment to smile. “Look at you. You’re growing up so fast.”

Isaac huffs and shakes some of his curls out of his eyes (his hair has gotten longer). “Lydia is trying really hard too,” he points out. “She loves you enough to want to create a relationship with me. I can relate to that urge.”

Stiles grins and waves him off. “Eh, I’m nothing special, but I do appreciate you two trying to bond. I think more support is something maybe she could use more of,” he supposes.

“That’s what I was trying to say before, but you put it better,” Isaac says. “I want that too. More support.”

“Ah, okay. Then I’m a little less concerned now,” Stiles says. “I’m not going to hold you then. Have fun at the movies and text me for whatever.”

Isaac nods. “Boyd says he’s staying behind. I’m not sure what he’s going to do but he didn’t really feel like going to the movies. Lydia also insisted he stay for some reason. She said something about him thanking her for it later, but I still feel a little bad for inviting him over and then ditching him.”

“Don’t worry about it. I don’t mind inviting him with us,” Stiles says.

Isaac sends him a grateful smile before turns to wave at Boyd (who gives a distracted wave back since he’s still on the phone). Then he makes his exit, presumably to go look for Lydia and Allison.

Stiles waits for a few minutes to see if Boyd is wrapping up his conversation, but it doesn’t look as if he’s ending the call anytime soon. So Stiles resumes his trek to the basement to dump a load in the washing machine. After he turns it on, he takes a few moments to text his dad and bring him up to speed with several things (i.e. his aunt’s unexpected arrival, Derek’s plans for the dog park, Lydia’s visit, and etc.).

By the time that’s all worked out, he’s switching out his clothes into the dryer and dumping the second (and last) load into the washing machine. With that taken care of, he sprints up the steps, and finds his way to his room again.

Derek is on his stomach on the floor beside his bed as he fishes out all the junk underneath while Boyd is sweeping his floor (Jay is nowhere in sight).

Stiles stumbles into the doorway of his room. “Whoa, uh, what’s all this? Did he trick you into helping?”
“You were taking forever,” Derek says, half of his body is under the bed now as he bats out some shoes and a few empty bags of chips. “I wouldn’t have to rally more people into joining me if you’d just keep your room clean.”

Stiles is a bit embarrassed and completely bereft. He quickly moves to grab the broom from Boyd’s hands and resumes sweeping himself. “I’m sorry,” he says and gestures for Boyd to sit down at his work desk. “He’s a neat freak.”

“Please. It only seems that way because you’re a slob,” Derek retorts from under the bed. His expedition has led to him unearthing a few notebooks and schoolbooks that Stiles has been wondering about for the longest time. “I mean, Mother Moon, who keeps six unopened cups of lime shrimp flavored instant noodles under their bed?”

“Oh, dude. No way!” Stiles laughs. “I forgot about that. I was trying to hide it from Isaac. He powers through those like nobody’s business and never leaves me any. Are they any good?”

“You’re kidding, right? Judging by the date on these, it’s like ancient history.”

“You think I could donate them to the Smithsonian?” Stiles asks and then laughs obnoxiously at his own joke.

“Can’t believe I’m trying to date you,” Derek mutters. “What does that say about me?”

“You have a really sublime taste.” Stiles tosses Boyd a wink.

Boyd seems amused by their antics more than anything.

Derek reappears from under the bed with a wrung out sigh. His hair is kind of messy and he has a blue sticky note stuck to his right cheek. He holds up a handful of used glow sticks and a rubix cube keychain. “What should I do about these?” he asks with a furrowed brow.

Stiles has never found him more attractive than in this moment. He clears his throat and shifts his gaze away, feigning intense concentration on his sweeping task. “Uh, we can toss the glow sticks, but keep the cube. I think my keys are on the nightstand if you want to link it on for me,” he suggests.

“Might as well,” Derek grumbles, but he doesn’t appear to be overly bothered by the request. “Hey, no!” he exclaims, springing to his feet to grab Stiles by the waist and turn him from the doorway where he was sweeping everything out into the hall. “You don’t just sweep the dirt somewhere else and call it done.”

“Why not?” Stiles whines, if only to cover how quickly his heart is racing from having Derek so close. “It’s how my father does it, and how his father did it and so on and so forth. I refuse to break tradition.”

“One, I know you’re lying. Werewolf. And two, you’re just making more work for someone else,” Derek says as he gestures to the dustpan.

“Ugh, why can’t you just let me be myself?”

Derek rolls his eyes but watches with a satisfied grin as Stiles properly disposes of the dirt and dust.

Stiles returns a moment later (after having put the broom away) and sits on the edge of his bed to watch Derek wrap up the rest of the cleaning. He turns to Boyd and asks, “So did you have any plans? I know Isaac invited you over and then fled, but I don’t mind if you wanted to hang out with
me. I know I probably pale in comparison to his company but we were going to go to the dog park.”

Boyd shrugs but nods.

Not even a half second later, Ginger comes sprinting into the room and practically climbs into Boyd’s lap. He laughs at her enthusiasm as she licks at his face.

Cora comes marching in with a thunderous expression. “What’s taking you guys so —” She stops dead in the doorway.

Boyd quickly stands to his feet to face her. “Hi,” he says, voice a few octaves higher than normal.

“Hi,” Cora says back, voice almost a whisper.

They stare intently at each other.

“Uh…” Stiles glances between them as Derek joins him on the bed, pressing the warm line of his body into Stiles’s side. “So...what’s that?” he asks.

Derek’s eyebrows shoot up and he seems surprised himself. “Oh,” he says as his nose twitches and he starts laughing. “No way.”

“What?” Stiles hisses and rolls his eyes when Derek leans on him and begins laughing to an obnoxious degree. “Derek,” he sighs but it’s no use.

Derek is so beside himself with glee that he’s fallen off the bed and is now laughing on the floor.

Boyd and Cora are still staring at each other.

Ginger barks unhappily, seemingly annoyed that Boyd’s attention is elsewhere now.

That seems to snap Cora and Boyd out of whatever daze they’re in.

Boyd looks down at Ginger fondly, dropping to one knee to lavish her with some attention.

Cora’s tucking her hair behind her ears as she runs her hands over the cotton white dress she’s wearing, almost like she’s primping herself. “Sorry,” she says after she clears her throat. Her cheeks are a little pink and there’s this dreamy look in her eyes. “Once she can get you to pet her the way she likes, she’ll keep bugging you for it,” she explains.

Boyd’s mouth curls in amusement. “I don’t mind,” he promises. “She’s very pretty,” he compliments. Then he adds, slyly, “Like her owner.”

Cora’s cheeks take on an even pinker hue. “I’m Cora,” she says, and offers Boyd her left hand.

Stiles’s jaw drops.

Derek has seemed to calm down at this point and takes his place beside Stiles on the edge of the bed once more.

Stiles whispers, “Is she giving...”

“Yup.”

“To him?”
“Yup.”

Stiles speechlessly watches as Boyd accepts the offered hand with his own.

“My family calls me Junior, but my friends call me Boyd.”


“It grows on you,” Boyd supposes, amused. “After a while, maybe.”

Cora nods but she’s still staring into his face and shaking his hand intently.

“Do you mind if I take my hand back?” Boyd asks gently.

“What?” Cora blinks and looks down. She snatches her hand away, looking dismayed for a moment at her social blunder. “Sorry.”

Boyd grins with a shrug. He doesn’t seem too bothered. He actually looks pretty charmed by her.

Cora clears her throat and turns away to finally acknowledge Derek and Stiles. “Are we ready to go or what? It’s been almost over an hour and a half,” she complains.

“Relax,” Derek says and weathers her glare with a smirk. “I have a few things I had to help Stiles with. We can leave now. Boyd will be joining us.”

Cora looks both delighted and horrified at the thought. “Derek,” she growls lowly. “Don’t start.”

“I didn’t say anything,” Derek replies innocently as he stands to his feet, pulling Stiles with him. “We’ll see you two at the car. Take your time.”

“Derek!” Cora’s face is a mess of splotchy red.

Stiles feels a little bad for laughing as Derek bodily drags him out the room and down the steps to the front door. “She’s probably going to murder you in your sleep,” he says, closing the door behind them.

Jordan is lounging at the top of the porch steps, watching the busy neighborhood. He springs to his feet when he sees them and goes to Stiles first to lick his right hand before trailing after Derek down the steps and to the yellow hummer. He climbs obediently in the back when Derek opens the trunk for him.

Stiles climbs into the passenger seat as Derek slides into the driver side, taking a moment to turn on the car and blast the air. “It’s not as hot as it was yesterday,” he remarks.

Derek shrugs as he switches radio stations. “It always feel the same to me,” he admits.

Stiles finds that interesting. “Must be nice.” Then he says, “So that thing with Cora. You want to confirm my suspicions or should I continue to guess wildly?”

Derek snorts as he switches off the radio and sits back. “Yes, Cora likes Boyd.”

“So she is attracted to him,” Stiles marvels. “I didn’t even know Cora found people attractive.”

“We all used to think the same thing too until she came out as aromantic,” Derek says. “Our Aunt
Daphne, on my dad’s side, used to try to set her up with some ‘nice, respectable boys from temple’. Behind our dad’s back of course, and Cora may be blunt, but she’s extremely patient with our Human side of the family because she feels a little guilty dad can’t go visit them as much since he’s with us now. So she let Aunt Daphne set her up once, again behind our parents back. Cora later said it was the worst blind date a person could imagine.

“The guy forced her to help him crash his ex-girlfriend’s little twin brothers’ bar mitzvah. There was this big commotion and the rabbi spit in her eye. Her date tackled his ex into a cake tower shaped like the Torah. She said she was almost stabbed with a Kiddush cup by a toddler.” Derek shakes his head as he thinks on it. “When she came home with bits of matzo balls, brisket and challah threaded in her hair, dad demanded to know what happened. After she told him, dad was on the phone so quick, it was amazing. And he yelled too. Dad never yells. We’d never seen him go off like that. Aunt Daphne said that in her defense, she was only worried that Cora was ‘some kind of lesbian’. My dad went quiet for a few minutes before he calmly told her exactly where she could stick her nose. We haven’t been back to her house for another Yom Kippur since.”

“Wow,” Stiles says, amazed. “There are several things I want to touch on, but first, you said she’s aromantic?”

Derek nods. “If you have questions about that, I can field it as best as I can but talking to Cora directly is better,” he says.

Stiles does have questions but he agrees with Derek’s suggestions, so he puts in his back pocket for now. “Okay, I will,” he says. “About your dad’s side of the family…”

Derek gestures for him to continue.

“You don’t have a good relationship with them?”

Derek shrugs. “It’s not bad but they just don’t really see the big picture when it comes to Cora and I,” he carefully explains.

“But they know you’re Werewolves? That your dad married into a family of Werewolves?”

“Yeah. At least, only the immediate family does. Mom said she and dad wanted to do things right by being completely honest and transparent,” Derek says as he threads a few fingers through his hair in thought. “They…didn’t take it well. But it could have been worse. Our grandparents were fine at first, until they realized we took after my mom and then some of my dad’s brothers and sisters sort of followed. The rest of the family just assume the rift is because my mom didn’t convert to Judaism before they got married. Aunt Daphne is ignorant, but she was the only one that didn’t care about what we are.”

“It must be tough, to be on the outs like that with people you share blood with,” Stiles supposes, tone empathetic.

Derek sighs and drops his hand. “Holidays are awkward, but it’s probably tougher for my dad more than anything. He tries to skip out on any invitations but my mom always pushes him to go. She’s adamant that they’ll all come around some day,” he reasons. “He loves my sisters and I fiercely, and swears he’ll never regret meeting my mom for as long as he breathes, and even yet still while he gives over to what comes after.”

“That’s incredibly romantic.”

“That’s my dad,” Derek says, but he’s smiling fondly. “Mom says I get that from him. He swears I
“get that from her.”

“And what do you say?”

Derek leans over and kisses Stiles on the cheek. He pulls back with a grin, taking a moment to watch as Stiles splutters in surprise and goes pink. “I think I got it bad both ways.”

Stiles reaches out and tugs Derek’s hair. “You’re a menace,” he swears, but he knows his tone isn’t any less fond.

Derek just grabs his left hand before Stiles can tug his hair again and he laces their fingers together. He presses his warm lips to Stiles’s knuckles.

Stiles sighs as his magic squirms happily in his gut.

Cora and Boyd finally climb into the backseat after Cora situates Ginger in the back with Jordan.

“ Took you two long enough,” Derek complains and ducks forward with a laugh when Cora tries to swat at the back of his head. “No hitting the driver. Buckle up so we can leave.”

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Beacon Hills Park District (#1) has beautifully maintained landscape.

The entrance alone leads you up a walkway that curls around a glittering water fountain and separates into two different pathways. One of the pathways lead to the large building made of large cement blocks and huge windows. The entrance is a set of glass double doors that swing open and close with people of all types: families wearing the same color scheme of bathing suits, goggles, inflatable pool floats in the shape of animals, and sunburns; sweaty women in yoga pants dabbing their foreheads with hand towels as they power down their grass wheat smoothies; camp counselors escorting a line of kids with neon purple shirts on, who follow behind them like ducks; senior citizens with bingo cards, or crotchet doilies; young boys and girls adorned with karate or boxing gear.

After Derek parks, the four of them take the other pathway, which coils around the right side of the building, past the basketball and tennis courts (which are fully occupied), past a park filled to the brim with a horde of children; they laugh as they run around with bare feet on the red sand that acts like a cushion, or a bed that is the foundation of the jungle gym themed after the style of Toy Story. Opposite to that, there is a food stand settled under a pavilion (it looks like they sell things like popcorn, cotton candy, loaded nachos, hotdogs and ice cream). The concession stand has a large dining area with tables that have umbrellas in the middle of them, acting as artificial shade.

This park happens to be at the epicenter of what is considered the downtown retail marketplace of Beacon Hills; a metropolis lined with a high concentration of restaurants, bars, cafes, and boutique shops. It’s obvious where all the funding is coming from. The neighborhood and real estate surrounding this area are meant solely for the upper class. He knows for a fact that Mayor Argent lives only minutes away in his intimidating manor; City Hall and the Municipal District Courthouse are literally within walking distance from here. He also knows that Allison and Malia happen to reside down the same street; a charming tree-lined cul-de-sac filled with examples of Victorian-era buildings, showcasing beautiful and diverse architectural styles, with townhouses, duplexes, single-family homes, and condominiums.

Stiles thinks about the last time he was here. He thinks about Deucalion, and before his mind can wander to that fateful encounter, his magic bristles and wraps protectively around his heart.
I failed you that day, but I will not fail you again. No one will cause you any physical harm while I’m active.

I know. I’m not afraid.

You are mine to protect always. I would see the world turn to ashes before you are in the hands of our enemies.

I knew you loved me. And so passionate too! I’m severely touched.

Why do I bother wasting words on you?

I am your diamond in the rough.

Unbearable Faerie.

Dutiful Ethereal.

His magic bristles in embarrassment at that. But Stiles smiles to himself and presses feelings of gratitude and affection towards his magic, which gets volleyed back to him almost immediately.

Ginger and Jordan have somehow wormed their way to the front in their excitement of being here.

“Do they know where to go?” Stiles asks Derek as Cora and Boyd continue a lazy stroll just a few feet behind them. “They seem to know where to go.”

Derek huffs and bumps their shoulders together. “This will be their first time. They probably just sense the other dogs. Our companions are good at tracking,” he explains.

Ginger and Jordan leads them past the picnic and barbeque area littered with a sea of birthday parties, family reunions, and graduation celebrations.

The four of them go further, past a fishing pond with a flat wooden bridge that cuts across the middle of it. It’s a pond full of lily pads and moss, ducks, and fisherman.

The path starts to wind down and curve around an expansive urban dog park next to the park’s second parking lot. There’s an active dog area where owners of all ages interact with their canines, whether that be by tossing Frisbees and balls, or playing tug of war with them. There’s a drinking water fountain where some dogs trek over to and drink out of with wagging tails.

Off to the side there is the passive dog area where canines roam amongst themselves while their owners occupy the benches on the looping pathway. About ten feet away from that, is another, very similar food stand settled under a pavilion, and it looks like it sells just the same kind of food the other does.

Jordan and Ginger sprint to the active dog area, immediately engaging with the other dogs, and sniffing curiously at their owners.

Ginger is halfway to tackling a Chinese couple.

“Ginger! Chill!” Cora snaps unhappily. “Ugh. Unbelievable.” She starts marching angrily over to her exuberantly affectionate dog. It looks like she’s prying Ginger from the laughing couple, which seems to be taking it in good stride.

Jordan is sitting back on his hind legs with his head cocked, watching Cora interact with these
strangers, while a pair of the couple’s Shih Tzu puppies attempt to climb up his back like a mountain.

“So, I forgot to get some of Jordan’s toys,” Derek says suddenly. “I’ll be back.”

“You don’t want me to come with you?” Stiles offers, shifting his gaze away from the scene just as Boyd saddles up to his other side.

“Uh, no. I should be good.” Derek shrugs his mouth thoughtfully and tosses Boyd a look. “Besides I need you two to keep an eye on Cora. Make sure she doesn’t pounce on the locals.”

Cora whips her head in their direction and glares.

Derek just smiles widely and waves before he begins his trek back to the car.

It’s just Boyd and Stiles now.

“So,” Boyd says, breaking the silence. “I don’t like to presume but, you and Derek, huh?”

Stiles snorts and rolls his eyes at himself when he feels a spark of satisfaction at the sound of ‘you and Derek’. “We’re really good friends,” he replies, keeping his answer as vague as possible.

Boyd tosses him a side glance as he smirks and looks back towards Cora’s direction. “If that’s what you call it, then I think I’d like to be really good friends with his sister,” he artfully states.

Stiles snickers and notices, even from this distance, how red Cora’s cheeks begin to get. “Good luck with that, buddy. She’s not the easiest to make friends with. But definitely well worth it in the end,” he praises.

Cora nods at whatever the Chinese couple is saying to her but her mouth is curled into a smile.

Stiles would like to think he’s responsible.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Boyd says. “No time like the present.” He starts walking over to where Cora is at, taking the time to stand close to her as he shakes the older couple’s hand and introduces himself with a charming grin.

Stiles watches it all unfold with deep-seated amusement, and he’s more than ready to invest into following the development of their relationship.

Jordan trots over, sniffling at his right hand before barking.

Stiles blinks and looks down, taking a moment to pet his white fur and he’s vaguely reminded of Derek when he’s fully shifted. “Hey, big guy. What’s up?” he asks, scratching Jordan behind his right ear (his favorite spot).

Jordan’s pink tongue lolls out the side of his mouth while his ears swivel on top of his head. He begins whimpering and growling. Then he bites at the hem of Stiles’s shirt, tugging him forward before darting off.

Stiles doesn’t quite know what’s wrong, but he’s pretty sure that the medium-sized Tibetan Mastiff wants him to follow. So he does, navigating his way through the crowds of dogs and their masters. He didn’t realize until now how busy the park appears to be today. There are a lot more people here than there was the last time he visited.

Jordan seems to always backtrack to find him, making sure he’s following before continuing on again.
Stiles is almost beside himself with curiosity when he’s led to a quiet area on the edge of the passive dog park side and he realizes it’s a set up.

Derek is waiting for him, cross-legged on a large, red and white-checkered picnic blanket, complete with a brown whisker picnic basket and all. Derek grins when Jordan sprints to his side, licking at his face while he says, “Good boy! You did so well, leading Stiles right to me. So clever and handsome.”

Stiles huffs in amusement as he walks over to settle down beside the older teen.

Derek spends a good minute rubbing his dog down while he coos praises with puckered lips that would look ridiculous on anyone else but of course Derek can manage to make it look so dignified and attractive.

Stiles watches as Derek grabs a tennis ball and hurls it further than what should be possible while Jordan barks excitedly and goes dashing after it.

“That should buy us some time,” Derek supposes, staring after his dog wistfully with a fond grin. Then he turns his focus onto Stiles. “So I had a plan. I was going to make some sandwiches and potato salad. You know, get a real traditional picnic menu layout going,” he says as he crawls forward to riffle through the basket. “But then I realized I have no idea what kind of sandwiches you like. Or if you even like potato salad.”

“Only if it took you three days to make,” Stiles replies in a mock serious tone.

Derek snorts. “Spongebob, huh?”

“I’d be disappointed if you missed the reference,” Stiles says with obvious pride.

Derek shrugs with a grin. “I’m not a total lost cause,” he says as he pulls out some white carton containers. “Anyway, the point is that I wanted to do something, so I figured, when in doubt, order spicy Thai wings and French fries.”

“All this for me?” Stiles says, slapping a hand over his heart.

“Well, half for you, if you want to get technical.”

Stiles rolls his eyes and accepts a container of wings when it’s passed his way. “This was almost romantic until you followed it with that comment,” he grumbles.

Derek laughs, looking absolutely delighted. “Good. I like to keep you on your toes,” he admits.

Stiles shakes his head before taking a bite into one of his chicken wings and moaning. “Oh...god...this is amazing,” he praises. “Ugh, I don’t even care that it’s cold.”

Derek flushes but he looks pleased. “Glad you like it,” he mutters, shifting with an intense look on his face.

Stiles hardly notices as he continues to make indecent sounds. “I want to marry the person that made these,” he groans, sucking on his sticky fingers as he tries to also lick the grease from his lips.

Derek choke on a fry as he ducks his gaze. “Would you believe me if I told you that I did?” he asks, voice slightly cracking at the end.

Stiles snorts. “Yeah, right. It’s like against the laws of nature to stand in the way of true love. Just tell
“Me where you got these from and I’ll take it from there.”

“And immediately lose the upper hand I have? In your dreams,” Derek retorts, tossing a fry at him.

Stiles throws the fry right back at him as he chows down on another wing. “Fine then. I’ll just Cinderella it.”

“What, you mean go from restaurant to restaurant and eating every wing until you find the source?”

“Yup.”

“Okay. Good luck with that,” Derek says with a tone that suggests he knows something that Stiles doesn’t. “What kind of sandwiches do you like?”

“Anything but tuna. I like fish just fine otherwise,” Stiles replies between bites. He takes a moment to exhale and fan at his face. The spices are starting to kick in.

Derek grabs one of the juice pouches he has stashed away in the basket and tosses it to him. “Yeah, but if you had to pick a favorite, what would it be?” he presses.

Stiles spends a few seconds draining the juice pouch he’s been handed until the burn on his tongue is a little more manageable. Then he says, “PB&J.”

Derek sighs in a lovelorn manner. “I love PB&J,” he agrees. “It’s like the only thing I’m sure is absolutely right in the world.”

“With a tall glass of milk? Absolutely,” Stiles concurs. “What about potato salad, though? I know we were joking before, but I’m curious now.”

“Eh,” Derek merely says with a shrug. “I never came across any that made me think twice.”

“You should try mine then,” Stiles suggests. “No, I’m kidding. I hate potato salad.”

Derek huffs in amusement. “Good to know.” He then proceeds clear a few wings of it’s meat until there’s nothing left but the bone and he tosses it to Jordan when he reappears with his tennis ball. Jordan drops the ball at Stiles’s feet before trades it for the chicken bones, carrying them off to a nearby tree to sit under the shade and gnaw at them in peace.

“Thanks for bringing all this,” Stiles says as he munches away on a container of fries. “I didn’t realize how hungry I was.”

Derek ducks his head shyly and looks at Stiles from underneath his lashes. “I wanted to do something nice for you,” he admits. “I’m glad you didn’t think it was too over the top or anything. Laura said it would be fine, but you and I have had a few misunderstandings lately. I didn’t want you to take this the wrong way.”

“Oh.” Stiles takes a moment to think. “Well.”

He gets this sudden and unexpected visual of Derek standing in his own kitchen with his phone pressed to his ear (Laura on the other end), agonizing over what might be the right thing to bring to a picnic for a friendship that’s slowly turning into something more, until Laura takes pity on him and offers some advice. Stiles is laughing before he can even help it and he has to quickly hold up his hand when Derek looks at him, startled.

Derek’s brow furrows and at first he looks confused before it bleeds into annoyance when he realizes
that Stiles must be laughing at him. His eye color flickers to gold, and before Stiles can react, he pounces.

Stiles is knocked flat on his back, blinking up at Derek who is hovering above him with an unhappy frown while the sun burns behind Derek’s head, creating a sort of halo around his raven hair. Stiles’s laughter is curbed by the sight, and his stomach is riddled with butterflies, and hummingbirds, and bats, and every winged creature imagined.

You see, Derek’s more than pretty. He’s more than handsome. He’s more than the "boy-next-door", because it’s not just one single feature that makes Derek so uniquely attractive. And while it’s true that Derek is growing into his features effortlessly (bone structure perfectly symmetrical), there’s something more to him than that.

Though if Stiles were forced to decide, Derek’s eyes come close to being Stiles’s favorite part about him. Everyone always places an importance on the color of a person’s eyes, but the thing is that Stiles is so remotely sure that Derek’s would be beautiful in any shade. His are expressive to an almost vulnerable degree, inner beauty shining through like a lighthouse signaling a lost ship home.

Derek’s face changes suddenly, and he goes from looking irritated to flustered to wide eyed and enthralled. “Stiles, why are you — what on earth are you thinking about? I can barely — you smell so —”

Stiles can’t check his behavior then at how overwhelmed and practically wrecked Derek sounds. He reaches out with arms opened wide and tugs as hard as he can until Derek collapses on top of him and he buries his face in the side of Derek’s heated neck. It’s such a risky embrace, holding Derek like this in public, but he can hardly care, unable to stop the natural flow of events as they happen.

Derek rumbles deep in his chest. It’s a lowly animalistic but pleased sound, tinged with something almost possessive yet affectionate. He twists so that he and Stiles are lying on their sides and pulls away so he can prop his head on his fist to gaze at Stiles with a glazed look and pink cheeks.

“I wasn’t laughing at you,” Stiles says gently, when he’s sure that Derek isn’t annoyed anymore. He seems more distracted than anything, and Stiles thinks maybe he likes Derek this way the most. When he’s incredibly docile. “If anything I’m laughing from disbelief,” he goes on to say and, working on instinct, presses his left hand on the side of Derek’s neck, palm growing hot with magic. “I’ve never known anyone like you.”

Derek swallows and presses his right hand over where Stiles is resting his hand on his neck, magic burning a blue handprint there like some sort of sticky adhesive. He seems overly pleased and disbeliefing himself that it’s happening.

“All the things that have happened to me and still you’re what makes me feel lucky,” Stiles confesses before pulling his hand away to stare at the mark he’s left. It gleams like a glittery blue bioluminescent temporary tattoo. Like the kind you can get easily at a carnival or a birthday party. There’s something that shifts then in their dynamic, almost like an understanding. He exhales shakily, even as his cheeks fill with color, and his voice shakes while he says, “I don’t have any prior experience or skills in the field of dating but I think I would like to start trying with you.”

Derek stares at him like he can’t believe he’s real. He seems to be at a loss of words. The blank stare, mixed with his lasting silence, is both maddening and compelling.

“Derek, you have to say something because I’m losing my nerve,” Stiles warns, teasing but truthful as he fidgets under Derek’s intense gaze.
Derek blinks before he leans forward and presses a sloppy kiss on the corner of Stiles’s left eye. “You want to date me,” he whispers against Stiles’s skin. “You want to date me.”

Stiles scowls as Derek’s tone shifts from awed to smug. He lets Derek’s lips linger at the bridge of his nose for a little longer before he pushes him away. “This is a trial run, you know. I’m allowed to change my mind at any time,” he lightly threatens.

Derek laughs, tackling him to the ground again and rolling them off the blanket onto the grass. “You’re never going to change your mind if I have anything to say about it!” he exclaims, stopping their roll so Stiles is the one on top this time. “I wasn’t expecting this, but it’s way better than I imagined. You want to date me.”

Stiles groans, dropping his forehead to rest on Derek’s collarbone. “Why are you like this?” he complains.

“Maybe because the most attractive boy in all of Beacon Hills wants to date me,” Derek cheerily replies, resting his hands behind his head.

Stiles’s cheeks flush hotly before he can kill the reaction and he bites Derek’s shoulder in retaliation. He springs to his feet and runs like hell, knowing Derek will give into the chase. “Jordan! If you love me, you will protect me from Derek!” he shouts, circling back to the tree that Jordan is posted at.

“What’s this?” Derek yelps when Jordan actually tackles him into the grass. “Is there no loyalty?”

Jordan just barks, pressing a large paw to Derek’s chest to keep him pinned as he licks away at his face.

“Okay, okay,” Derek grumbles, sitting up and pushing Jordan away. He uses his arm to scrub his face dry.

Stiles is leaning against a tree as he watches them interact, stomach somersaulting in a pleasant way. He grins affectionately as Jordan returns to his side, looking up at him with big, hopeful eyes. He pets Jordan and calls him a good boy, grin curling into a smile as Derek makes a show of looking annoyed and betrayed.

Derek stands and walks over.

“You have any treats for him? I think he deserves some,” Stiles says.

Derek smacks his lips, looking bereft. “Well now, I don’t know if I want to reward him for double-dealing,” he mutters but he’s already walking back to the picnic spread to grab some.

Stiles squats down so that he’s at Jordan’s eye level, letting the white dog sniff at his hands and his shoulders, and then finally his face (the spots where Derek’s kissed him) with a curious whine. He begins to pet Jordan’s neck and shoulders, before he slowly makes his way up to the top of his head, scratching behind Jordan’s ears.

Jordan rumbles, tail wagging as he melts under the attention.

“These are his favorite,” Derek announces when he rejoins them. The bag in his left hand crinkles as he hands it over and Jordan barks excitedly. Derek smiles and pushes him back. “Hold on. I’m giving them to Stiles, and you can hassle him.”

Jordan barks before latching onto the front of Stiles’s shirt and tugging impatiently.
Stiles laughs and pets him on the head. “Okay, okay. You mean business. I get it,” he swears as he opens the bag and offers a dark sausage link.

Jordan grabs it quickly, chewing on it as he lowers himself to the ground and focuses on gnawing it into nothing.

Stiles holds up the bag in his hand and squints at it.

“It’s the duck and apple recipe from Zuke’s,” Derek says to his unanswered question. He always seems to know what Stiles is thinking before he even has the chance to voice it. “He should only have four. Don’t let him convince you into giving more. He’s good at that when they aren’t coming from me. He knows I’m strict about that.”

“Yeah?” Stiles snorts and looks at Jordan as he tosses him another link. “Crafty and handsome, hm?”

Jordan barks happily before he turns his attention on his treat.

Derek sniffs haughtily and crosses his arms. “He gets it from me,” he says.

“Uh huh,” Stiles replies and straightens.

“Hm. I don’t think I like your tone,” Derek drawls before he turns and walks back to the picnic blanket. “I have some candy if you want in on that.”

“Candy? Geez, you’re already on the path to winning my heart. I don’t think I can take one more fantastic surprise.”

Derek laughs and says, “Shut up.”

Stiles smiles and walks over to join him on the blanket just as Derek is unearthing all different variety of confections. Stiles almost lunges at the bags of sour gummy worms and skittles, making a quick work of combining them and moaning in triumph of his success.

Derek raises both eyebrows at the mixture as he slowly and meticulously unwraps all the pink and red starbursts within reach. “You are so weird sometimes,” he remarks before popping a handful of fruit chews in his mouth.

“You dig it,” Stiles retorts, waving him off.

“For some reason I do,” Derek agrees with a heady sigh that’s supposed to come off as annoyed but just sounds sweet-tempered instead.

Stiles grins to himself when he thinks Derek can’t see and he moves his body at a different angle so that they are sitting pretzel-legged across from each other.

There’s a sea of candy between them.

Jordan trots over, sniffing at Stiles’s ear and licking at his right cheek with a curious whine.

“No worries, big guy. I got you,” Stiles says and twists his body to reach over and grab the sausage links. “What number is this one now? Two? One? Let’s just start over.”

“Watch it,” Derek growls, eyes flashing gold playfully.

Stiles just snickers and gives Jordan two more links before he seals the bag with exaggerated finality.
Ginger comes flying over and she manages to steal one of Jordan’s links before darting off as Jordan gives into the chase.

Stiles is not surprised to see that Cora and Boyd are not too far behind.

Cora drops down to sit to Stiles’s right as she grabs one of the leftover containers of wings and goes to town.

Boyd declines the offering of fries that Derek gestures to but he does get in on the action when it comes to the candy. He tears open a bag of red candy vines and watches Cora eat like he’s witnessing artwork.

Stiles can tell that Cora is pretending not to notice, yet still reveling in the attention. She is funny like that.

“Why do you have blue glitter in the shape of a handprint on your neck?” Cora asks, tossing a newly cleaned bone to Ginger as she and Jordan return from their quick play.

Stiles rolls his eyes when Derek smirks suggestively and shrugs.

“Fine, keep your secrets,” Cora says. “What have you losers been up to? Besides being gross.”

“Reciting sonnets that chronicle your beauty and your good character,” Derek sarcastically replies.

Cora shoots him a withering look and throws a wing at him.

Derek makes a face when it slaps him in the cheek and he tosses it back before using the hem of his shirt to wipe away the smear of grease and chili garlic sauce.

Stiles has to avert his gaze before he starts to openly drool. It slips his mind how unfairly in shape Derek is sometimes. It’s slightly frustrating and intimidating as he thinks of his own pasty, wiry frame in comparison. He sighs before he can help it, and can’t help but to wonder why Derek is crazy enough to settle for him when he can have anyone else.

Sometimes (more often than not) Stiles feels like a radish in a bush of roses.

Cora waves a hand in front of his face. “Hey, space cadet. Did you hear what I said?”

Stiles blinks and turns his head to look at her. “Nope, not at all,” is his truthful reply.

“Well what are you thinking about anyway?” Cora presses with a scowl that manages to be a mix between concerned and annoyed. Her brow is furrowed and she couldn’t look anymore like Derek even if she tried. “You smell upset.”

“I’m not,” Stiles lies and Derek cocks his head with a look that says he knows. “I’m not!” he insists.

“No, you smell like that when you’re unhappy,” Cora corrects.

“Then why do you smell like pineapples that have gone sour?”

“Pineapples? I was told that I smell like bananas that are too ripe when I’m upset.”

“No, you smell like that when you’re unhappy,” Cora corrects.

“It’s sour pineapples when you’re upset,” Derek confirms before popping another pink starburst in his mouth.

Stiles gets a little flustered. “You know, it’s crazy how you guys know what I’m feeling based on
what I smell like.”

“Not too crazy since we’re Werewolves,” Cora responds. “Scenting is like stuff we learn in our preschools and at home. It’s like learning how to walk for Humans. Something that’s natural but also expected.”

“Right, of course,” Stiles says with a sigh as he chews on another gummy worm. “I guess I don’t really get what the difference is between upset and unhappy.”

Boyd interjects, “Common mistake. I actually had to break this down for my little sister the other day. Being upset is a short time feeling caused generally by a single event and causes more immediate responses like crying, sighing, irritation and so on, because your brain is able to process the information and help you sort through it before moving on. Like failing an exam. Whereas being unhappy is long time feeling caused by a series of events which ends up in dissatisfaction, and is usually something your brain has to recycle before it can better acclimate how you respond, leaving it open to you experiencing a range of feelings and emotions that are harder to pinpoint.”

“Like the loss of a loved one,” Derek adds. “So, what’s wrong? Why are you upset?”

Stiles snorts wryly. “What? You mean my plan of distracting you guys by asking questions isn’t working?”

“Goes to show how used to you we are,” Cora replies as she tosses another bone to Ginger before starting on the next wing. “So, spill.”


Boyd looks amused while Cora looks annoyed that she can’t understand.

Derek is grinning excitedly. “Ah, so you do know another language,” he reasons. “I had my suspicions.”

Stiles laughs and says, “Oh yeah? How?”

Derek shrugs but he doesn’t stop grinning like he’s just discovered the best thing. “Sometimes you say certain words differently than a regular English speaker does. It’s not too noticeable, but if you’re looking for it then it can be. Sometimes it’s like, I don’t know, words with shorts vowels, you know?”

“Oh god. Yeah, I do. I thought I grew out of that,” Stiles admits. “My mom’s from Warsaw, so that was her first language, and my dad thought it would be better if they taught me to speak that for the first four years of my life before they weaned me onto English.”

“My parents kinda did the same thing with me,” Boyd says. “But it was tougher to navigate since my dad’s originally from West Africa, and they have like different languages stacked on top. There’s a universal language spoken, like French, and then under that that are the lesser-known languages of the area depending on the city or the village. My mom’s from Haiti and she knows French, Portuguese, Taíno, and Haitian Creole French. While my dad is from Benin but he speaks like French, Portuguese, Fon, Mina, and Goun. So together, my parents had my siblings and I speaking maybe five to six languages at a time, not even including English.”

Cora says something to him in French with a half-smile.

Boyd laughs and replies back in the same dialect. Then he adds, in English this time, “Nah, Goun
and Fon are the languages of Benin. I only use it when I’m talking to relatives on my dad’s side or when we go to visit for the holidays. Mina is just like, I guess you would say the ‘slang’ of the area.”

“That’s really interesting,” Cora says and then says something else in French, pauses with a frown as her mouth wiggles in thought, and then says, in English, “What’s the proper word for, eh...you know, remarkable. I always get it mixed up with like...L’effondrement du bâtiment est imminent.”

“Oh, yeah. You mean more like, uh, if you said...Un éminent personnage.”

“Exactly!” Cora looks absolutely thrilled as she dives back into the French language.

Boyd volleys back the dialect easily with a small grin of his own.

“Do you speak French?” Stiles asks, turning away from them to look at Derek, who is texting on his phone.

“Nope, that’s something only Cora’s learning,” Derek replies before putting his phone away. “I’m studying Greek and Arabic though. But I do know Latin, German, Hebrew, Italian, and some passable Spanish.”

“Geez,” Stiles says, impressed. “I feel way behind. I only know Polish and English. I’m passable with Armenian in dire situations, and I know like maybe six words in French.”

“It’s never too late to pick up another language,” Derek points out. “Is there a language you might like to learn?”

Stiles wants to say Yiddish, but he wonders if that would be too telling. So he says, “I’ll have to think about it, but you’re right. It’s never too late.”

“For sure,” Derek agrees and he looks down before looking around. “You wanna play some frisbee?”

Stiles nods.

Derek says, “Wait here a sec. I have a specific way I like to play.”

Stiles watches with mild curiosity as Derek disappears into the trees with Jordan before reappearing as a small, white Samoyed dog. “No way...” he murmurs.

Cora pauses her conversation with Boyd to watch her brother walk over in his newly shifted form. She snorts. “He’s such a showoff.”

“I thought you could do that too,” Stiles says, question obvious in his tone.

“I can shift into the full transformative Beta wolf matrix, as big or as small as I like, but I can’t imitate other breeds of dogs like my mom and Derek can,” Cora explains as she flips some of her dyed hair over her tan shoulder.

Stiles marvels at this new information as Derek trots over and licks at his face with a curious whine that Jordan imitates. Soon, both of them have him pinned to the ground and are licking at his face. “Oh gross, come on guys. My mouth was kind of open!” he complains, rolling from underneath their hold and to his feet. He uses a nearby napkin to dry his face.

Derek just sits back on his hind legs, head cocked in amusement as his tongue lolls out the side of his mouth.
Jordan seems like a giant in comparison as the white Mastiff sits beside him.


Derek barks and bumps his snout into Jordan’s shoulder before the larger dog barks back.

Jordan wanders over to the picnic basket and manages to tug out a neon orange frisbee.

Stiles takes the frisbee when it’s offered to him, petting Jordan fondly before he turns to Boyd and Cora. “You guys want in?” he asks.

Boyd opens his mouth, possibly to accept, but Cora puts her left hand over his and, voice suspiciously even, replies, “We’re going to sit this one out.”

Stiles lifts an eyebrow with a sly grin.

Cora glares, daring him to make a comment.

Stiles just laughs (even though he’s really tempted) and jogs over to Derek, Jordan, and Ginger as they patiently wait for him to start.

He knows how to choose his battles.

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They leave the park almost three hours later as the day rolls into the evening. It takes them a good ten minutes to decide what their next plan of action is, however.

Derek and Cora mostly banter about going back to their house.

“Look, just drop Boyd and I off there,” Cora says from where she’s sitting behind Derek in the car, tone teetering on impatient. “That way you can swap cars, and take Stiles home.”

“Does mom know you’re bringing a guest over?” Derek presses, glancing at her with the use of the rear view mirror.

Cora scowls. “What’s it to you anyway? Let me worry about that,” she says.

“Cora,” Derek growls, eyes flashing gold. He says something to her in Hebrew.

Cora repeats, pointedly in English, “Let me worry about that.”

“I’m not starting this car until you call her and she says it’s okay. I don’t care if he’s your Match,” Derek insists and ignores the betrayed and outraged look Cora tosses him when she flushes. “No offense, Boyd. I like you just fine, but we have rules to protect our Pack for a reason.”

“Hey, I get it, man,” Boyd promises with a placating tone. “I don’t want to get anyone in trouble.”

“No, it’s not like that,” Cora says quickly, cheeks still pink. “My brother is just being dumb.”

“It’s not dumb to obey our Alpha,” Derek snaps, crossing his arms. “Mom made it very clear about new visitors.”

Cora eyes flash gold and she growls. Then she says something in rapid Hebrew.

They both pause and stiffen.
Cora gets pale. “I wasn’t — I — Derek, I didn’t mean that,” she swears.

Derek is just staring blankly through the windshield, not saying a thing.

“I’ll — I’m gonna call mom, okay? Just — I’m gonna call her,” Cora says as she quickly pulls out her phone.

Derek doesn’t respond.

The car is completely silent and drowning with tension.

Stiles really wants to know what Cora said to make Derek react like that because he’s never seen Derek look that way before, even while he was going through his heartbreak with Paige.

Cora speaks in the next moment when Talia picks up the phone, and she puts her on speaker but she addresses her mother in Italian.

Stiles assumes it’s for some privacy, and whatever is being said, she doesn’t want either Stiles nor Boyd to know. This does not help sate his curiosity at all.

There’s a pause in the conversation between Talia and Cora, and it feels like they’re waiting for something.

It makes sense when a moment later, Derek bitterly mutters, “Sono contento che a te stia bene.”

Stiles would be entranced by the way Derek’s accent seems to cut through the air like a gorgeous steel blade, if he wasn’t too busy being overwhelmingly curious about the conversation itself.

Talia sighs on the other end and replies, “Per favore chev, capisci che non è nulla di personale. Lo so che sei sconvolta... ma ti prego cerca di capire.”

Derek says nothing, and his face is still a blank slate.

Talia seems to sense that she’s not going to get much of response from him. “Come home. Cora, we’ll sort this out when you get here.”

“Okay,” Cora whispers.

“Derek, try not to hold a grudge against your sister, carissimo,” she murmurs, voice soothing and warm. “She loves you very much.”

Derek’s silence remains firm.

Stiles chances a glance to the back and is startled to see that Cora looks about as close to tears as he’s ever seen her. He quickly turns his gaze away, and says nothing. He’ll ask Derek about it later when it’s the right time.

Derek starts the car and goes through the motion of exiting the parking lot.

Stiles’s pocket vibrates a moment later. He pulls out his phone.

Boyd’s text says: **You wouldn’t happen to know Italian would you?**

Stiles snorts quietly and responds: **Dude, I haven’t been more sorry that I don’t know than I do now.**

Boyd huffs from the backseat. A moment later he texts: **Same here**
Man, I’m really nervous. I’ve never met anyone’s parents before

Especially only within a few hours of knowing them

*I mean they’re Werewolves so I’ve learned the same rules we’re used to don’t apply*  
Also the Hales are really nice, you don’t have to worry too much

True, okay thanks. Do you know what a Match is?  

*No clue, it’s the first I’ve heard of it. Tell me when you find out though.*

Word. I got you man ;)

This silence is killing me a little bit. Can you turn on the radio?  

*With pleasure !!!!*  

Stiles puts his phone away and fiddles with the touch screen satellite radio.  

Something called *Timber* by Pitbull feat. Ke$ha begins to play.

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When they pull up to the Hale Manor, Talia is already sitting on the front porch in a rocking chair with a book (*The Kitchen God’s Wife*) and some reading glasses on while Olive is fast asleep over her lap (face down).  

There’s a gang of kids and preteens running around, chasing each other and tackling one another into the grass. Most of them don’t even have their shirts on (or their shoes).  

Cora and Boyd exit the car, making their way up the porch steps as Talia stands to greet them.  

“I’m going to grab my car,” Derek says and Stiles almost jolts in surprise. Derek smiles wryly at the response. “Do you mind letting Jordan and Ginger out and waiting for me?”  

“Yeah, sure. Yes. Take your time,” Stiles quickly replies, maybe a little too excitedly. He hadn’t realized how much he missed hearing the older teen’s voice until now. “Are you — am I getting dropped off?”  

Derek nods. “I might stay over a little for dinner. Is that okay? I don’t really feel like being home right now,” he admits with a sad grin.  

Stiles finds it to be absolutely heartbreaking. “You’re always welcomed at Casa de Stilinski,” he firmly promises.  

“Thanks,” Derek says softly. He reaches out and slides the fingers of his right hand over the pulse point of Stiles’s left and his grin is a little more lighthearted when he watches the way it makes Stiles flush. “See you in less than a minute.”  

Stiles feels a little tongue tied under his intense gaze, so he just leans over and pinches Derek’s right cheek before hopping out of the car in an attempt to flee from any retaliation.  

Derek is nice enough to pop the trunk for him so that by the time he reaches the back, Jordan and Ginger are already leaping out.
Stiles slams the trunk door close and pats the back window in a signal for Derek to head off. When he turns, all of the kids are watching him, golden eyes gleaming mischievously. “Oh no. Guys, give me a break here. Whatever you’re thinking in those devious little Werewolf minds —”

“Let’s get him!” someone shouts.

Stiles widens his eyes and squawks out an embarrassing array of sounds as they all tackle him into the grass like mini-football players. He let’s out a soft *oomph* as they pile on top of him, squirming like worms, and sticking their noses on different parts of his body and *oh god is someone licking him?* Yes, that was definitely a tongue!

Stiles can only lie there in surrender as the little ones squirm against him, hugging each of his limbs to their unnaturally warm bodies as they growl in satisfaction. Some of them stick their nose is odd places like by his ankles or his armpits or his ears. This silent exchange lasts no more than three minutes when Derek pulls up beside the commotion in his lime green Camaro.

“Okay that’s enough,” Derek says and honks his horn with Jordan in the backseat. “Come on. Stiles doesn’t have time to indulge you. Get lost.”

One by one they clamor off of him, satisfied with the scenting, running off with excited yips and yells, and go back to whatever it is they were doing before (blowing bubbles, riding bikes, wrestling, etc).

Stiles stands and dusts himself off before he sends Talia a lazy wave as he climbs into the passenger seat.

“Home before the siren, Derek,” Talia warns as she hands (a still sleeping) Olive over to Cora as she guides her and Boyd inside the house. “No later.”

“Understood,” Derek replies before letting down all his windows and driving off. He doesn’t bother switching on the radio like he usually does. He appears to be lost in his thoughts.

It’s a silent drive because of this, and Stiles feels the need to be considerate of Derek’s feelings by not pressing him to talk about whatever is troubling him.

He spends the silent car ride staring at the blue handprint still glittery and present on Derek’s neck. He wonders if it will ever fade, and he flip-flops back and forth between hoping that it does (so he can do it again) and hoping that it doesn’t.

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The street is quiet and clear when Derek pulls up to the Stilinski house.

His dad is sitting out on the porch with Aunt Lorraine in a pair of white wicker hanging chairs artfully installed on the left side of the porch, in front of the large living room windows. They appear to be chatting over some coffee.

Stiles is the first to exit the car, and he moves to the back to let Jordan out.

Jordan sprints to the stairs to greet his dad and Aunt Lorraine.

Aunt Lorraine appears openly charmed by the white furred dog, and she takes the time to pet him.

Stiles waits a moment so that he and Derek can walk towards the house side by side. Secretly, he’s amping himself up to tell his dad about his decision to start dating Derek. When they reach the top of
the steps, he says, “Dad, I see you met Aunt Lorraine.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” the sheriff admits. “She attended me and your mother’s wedding. And she was there when we introduced you to your grandparents in Poland for the first time.”

“Oh.” Stiles hadn’t known that. Well that makes this a little less awkward then. “Aunt Lorraine this is Derek Hale. He’s my — a really good friend of mine.” He flushes at his almost slip.

Derek smirks but holds out his right hand. “It’s nice to meet any relative of his,” he says with that charming boyish grin of his.

Aunt Lorraine presses her left hand to her cheek as she shakes his right hand with her own. “Ah, so you’re the Hale boy our Nana was speaking so fondly over. Yes, you are as lovely as she said,” she remarks.

Derek’s grin widens, even though the tips of his ears get a little pink.

“But I’m a little confused. I thought Isaac mentioned something about him being your boyfriend,” Aunt Lorraine references, pretending to look confused as the flush Stiles had just gotten rid of returns full force. “Unless he meant someone differently? How many suitors do you have, sweet nephew?”

“Aunt Lorraine!” Stiles exclaims, scandalized and sends his father a betrayed look when he tries to cover his laughter with an unconvincing cough. “That’s not — we aren’t — we just decided to start dating.”

“Oh? This is news to me,” his dad says, voice full of mirth even though he keeps a straight face. “Go on, tell me more.”

Stiles groans and takes a moment to hide his face behind his hands. He takes a deep breath and drops them. “If it’s okay with you, dad. I’d like try,” he asks, fidgeting nervously. “With Derek.”

The sheriff decides that this is the perfect time to take another nice, long sip of his coffee while his son waits desperately for a response. After a few more excruciating moments, he finally says, “Well, I can’t say I didn’t expect it. Hell, Derek already beat you to the punch when he asked me for permission the night you got back to town.”

Stiles looks at Derek sharply in amazement. “We were in the middle of a fight and you still asked my dad if you could date me?” he questions with unconcealed disbelief.

Derek simply shrugs like it’s not a big deal even though it very clearly is. “I would have asked him the night I gave you my letterman jacket if I thought I could get away with it,” he confesses. “But the timing wasn’t right.”

Stiles stares at him.

Derek stares back.

“How well-met,” Aunt Lorraine comments as she gazes at them with an airy sigh. “You two are very compatible. I can tell that now with knowing as little as I do. But, that’s a conversation for a different night.” She claps her hands together with a joyous smile. “I believe you will be happy to know that I’ve got a few things brewing in the kitchen. Derek, love, won’t you please join us for dinner?”

“That sounds great, thanks.” Derek waits until Aunt Lorraine and the sheriff turn to the house and disappear inside before he presses a warm hand to Stiles’s lower back to pull him close. “You know,” he murmurs, lips close to Stiles’s left ear. “If you keep saying ‘my’ when you’re introducing
me to other people, I’m going to start getting all sorts of ideas.”

Stiles shivers as warmth pools in his guts and he elbows Derek while he gets his racing heart under control. “Get over yourself,” is his weak reply. “I keep thinking to call you my math tutor before it hits me that we’re actual friends.”

Derek doesn’t look like he buys it but he pulls away to go into the house without another word.

Stiles sighs shakily and wipes his sweaty, trembling hands against his jeans before looking down to where Jordan is still sitting dutifully at his side.

Jordan’s ears swivel forward as his tail wags happily under the attention.

“I’m going to have my hands full with him, aren’t I?” Stiles asks, knowing all too well that Derek will hear what he’s saying.

Jordan cocks his head.

Stiles smiles and pets him before turning to join the others in the house. He closes the door behind him as his magic begins to stir in his gut. He wanders into the kitchen, just as it begins to break away from him and form into a barrel of Pygmy Marmosets, imitating his aunt’s Conduit.

Speaking of Jay, the small monkey is perched on top of a (newly installed) stainless steel fridge eating through a bunch of red grapes.

His magic (in it’s new form) begins swinging around the kitchen, sitting in the middle of the kitchen table, hanging off of his father, settling on the crown of Derek’s head, running laps through his aunt’s legs while she uses her own magic to see to the bubbling pots and pans over the stove.

“You’ve been up to a few things, I see,” his dad comments with an amused grin as Stiles’s magic perches on his shoulder to peer into the coffee mug in his hand. “How did this become my life?” he asks, but his voice is full of humor and affection.

“You’re that lucky.” Stiles quips as he takes a seat at the table to watch his magic fiddle with the bouquet of begonias, which have found their way into a vase of water. “Hey, Aunt Lorraine. Are you responsible for the new fridge?”

“Oh, my, yes!” Aunt Lorraine opens the stove to pull out a glass tray of what looks like homemade macaroni as Derek settles at the table beside Stiles. “I felt so completely awful about that nasty business this morning. I thought it only fair that I right a few things.”

Stiles looks at his dad, who snorts and sends him a look while nodding towards the front room. Stiles twists his body and gawks at what he sees.

There’s a 110-inch ultra HDTV, complete with surround sound settled against the wall in the living room where their old TV and entertainment system used to be.

“Had to call in a few favors for that one,” Aunt Lorraine continues, unaware of her nephew’s wide eye stare of disbelief. “Like I mentioned before, I’m piss poor with those new age digital transmorphism spells. So, yes, I called in my favors and figured this could also make up for all those missed birthdays and Christmases, which won’t be a future concern as long as I have anything to say about it. Why? Do you not like it?”

Aunt Lorraine grins at him and he realizes she was just teasing him. “Happy to hear it,” she says before she turns to his father. “Jonathan, please be a dear and set the table for six. Here, this should help.” She takes a moment to twitch her nose and the kitchen table trembles before expanding a little further to accommodate the request. “Ah, that should do very nicely from now on. Your son is a very popular boy, and I imagine you’ll be getting a lot of company in the future.”

The sheriff moves to do just as she asks. Then he says, “Besides my youngest, who else is joining us tonight?”

“Alydia, if I’m not mistaken. The two of them should be walking through the door any moment now,” Aunt Lorraine replies as she turns off the stove.

The smells coming from those assorted pots and pans are making Stiles’s mouth water and his stomach gurgle in anticipation.

Derek shoots him an amused look because he must hear it.

True to Aunt Lorraine’s foresight, the front door creaks open and closes.

Lydia and Isaac appear moments later, smelling of popcorn, but also of hospital antiseptic.

Stiles can guess where they must have gone after the movies.

Lydia sits across from Derek (with her jeweled egg resting next to her plate) while Isaac sits across from Stiles.

The sheriff sits at the head of the table when he’s done setting it.

Aunt Lorraine sits across from him at the other end and takes a moment to smile at everyone. Then she wiggles her nose and food appears on their plate from behind a puff of blue smoke. “There now! I’ve made macaroni, smothered steak, stuffed potatoes, sweet yams, and a vegetable medley. Bon appétit. Don’t be shy! Dig in,” she encourages.

No one needs to be told twice.

Stiles hasn’t eaten anything this savory since his mother was still alive. He’s beginning to realize that there is probably more magic at work here than there are spices. He makes a mental note to ask her later about how she does it and if she can teach him (or if she taught his mom).

Lydia, to her credit, waits until the main course has been cleared away and dessert is being served to ask, with a sickly sweet tone (in Polish), “Cousin, how is it that Derek Hale is at your table with a glittry blue handprint that looks suspiciously like yours on his neck? Is this the boyfriend Isaac was talking about?”

Stiles nearly chokes on his first bite of blueberry pie and vanilla ice cream.

His dad and Aunt Lorraine both look equal amounts amused and concerned.

Meanwhile, Isaac and Derek just shoot him confused and concerned looks.

Stiles grabs a glass of water with a shaky hand as Derek gently pats him on the back.

“Lydia, darling, be nice. That was positively wicked,” Aunt Lorraine reprimands in the same dialect.

Lydia shrugs as she gracefully cuts into her own slice of pie. She turns to the sheriff and says, “Sir, can I call you uncle?”
His dad blinks in surprise but replies, “Any family of Stiles and his mother, I consider my own. Feel free to address me however you need, sweetheart.”

Lydia smirks and Stiles feels a sense of foreboding. He nearly breaks out in a sweat when she goes on to say, “Uncle, am I wrong to assume that this is the boy that has won my cousin’s affections?”

“Oh god, why me?” Stiles groans and hides his burning face into his hands. “Why me?” he repeats in English this time.

“At least you can understand what’s being said,” Isaac remarks, shooting them all unhappy looks. “Can we switch back to English please? It’s obvious you’re talking about Derek.”

“He’s right, we’re being rude,” the sheriff says. “I’ll let you three sort this out. I have to hit the sack. I’ve got another double shift tomorrow. Lorraine, again, please feel free to stay as long as you need if you can clear out the basement to make yourself comfortable as you’ve said.”

“Oh it’ll be no problem at all, Jonathan,” Aunt Lorraine assures. “I promise not to wear out my welcome.”

“I doubt you could,” his dad says with a wink and Lorraine giggles. “Goodnight all.”

“Can I stay the night?” Lydia is quick to ask and she turns her gaze to her cousin. “Stiles and I have a lot of catching up to do.”

His dad nods and says, “As long as it’s okay with your guardian. If you need, I can drop you off tomorrow on my way to work.”

“That works perfectly, thank you,” is Lydia’s polite response.

His dad nods once more before trekking to the stairs and he disappears up them a second later.

Aunt Lorraine stands and turns to his little brother. “Isaac, dear, would you mind giving me a helping hand in the basement?”

“Use your magic,” Isaac replies petulantly as he finishes up the last of his (third slice of) pie. “You don’t need my help. You’re just trying to make an excuse so that I’ll have to leave the three of them to talk in privacy. I’d hear it anyway.”

“Very right you are, but this is not a trick. As grateful as I am for magic, it does not always solve all of my problems,” Aunt Lorraine patiently responds. “I truly only mean to spend some time with you as I sort out the mess downstairs. I could use the company.”

Isaac’s mouth wiggles thoughtfully as he narrows his eyes at her. He must see something that changes his answer because he sighs and says, “Fine. But only because I see you got us a better TV.”

“Isaac,” Stiles sighs admonishingly.

“What?” Isaac volleys back, unrepentant. “Cake boss is going to look amazing this season.”

Aunt Lorraine throws her head back and laughs explosively as Isaac follows her to the basement and the lights flicker in response.

The door clicks shut behind them and the lights settle.

“And then there were three,” Derek jokes, looking completely relaxed under Lydia’s hawkish gaze.
“Stiles is not envious of him at all.”

“So,” Derek continues when Lydia continues to stare at him without saying anything. “I don’t think we’ve ever been introduced. I’m Derek.”

“I witnessed my parents brutal murder and was quickly institutionalized thereafter. When would we have found the time to meet, Derek?” Lydia replies, expression blank but voice sharp like a steel blade. She picks up her egg since it’s trembling unhappily without her touch and places it in her lap away from view.

“Lydia. Please,” Stiles hisses in Polish. “I really like him. You don’t have to treat him like the enemy —”

“Still that lovely tongue of yours, Stiles. My cousin has a heart that is worth more than a thousand clusters of diamonds and I need to know exactly who it is he’s giving it to,” Lydia retorts in the same dialect, tone completely even.

Stiles can’t really find anything to say to that.

“What’s your GPA?” Lydia asks in the next moment, switching back to English. “Quickly. We have thirty-six minutes before the curfew siren rings, and you’ll have to leave.”

Derek’s eyebrows lift in surprise that she even knows this information. “I see you’re as gifted as your aunt,” he says, instead of answering or even asking how she knows what she knows.

“You’re wasting my time, Derek. Not a good start.”

Stiles winces but holds his tongue.

Derek reaches out and holds his hand under the table as he keeps his expression neutral. He squeezes Stiles’s hand in a reassuring way before he replies, “Weighted, I average at a five point three two. Unweighted, it’s a four point six eight.”

Lydia lifts a brow and she doesn’t look impressed. “How did you meet Stiles?”

“Through a series of misunderstandings. And I also suspect my uncle had a manipulative hand in it also.”

“What, no love at first sight?”

“Well I can’t say that’s the case for us. We took off on sort of a rocky start.”

“Then what is it? What brings you here now? There must be a reason why you want to date my cousin.”

“There are many reasons why, and I’m still adding to that growing list every day.”

“Any examples you want to divulge?”

“He has a really nice smile, and a very big heart.”

Stiles slowly smiles as he takes that in.

“Plus my dog Jordan really likes him too. That’s always a bonus.”

“Jordan? Like the basketball player?”
“Like the river of my people actually, but a lot of people assume otherwise since I play basketball.”

“Do you? What position?”

“Captain.”

Lydia continues to needle. “Future plans?”

“I’m shooting for a degree in astrophysics.”

“Fond of space?”

“More than fond. I like the stars and I like math. It fits.”

Lydia just hums thoughtfully. “How are you spending this summer?”

“I’ve accepted the job offer from BHU to teach a course in mathematics two times a week starting next week.”

Lydia face changes subtly but it’s enough to compel Stiles to relax. “Riemann hypothesis?” she presses.


“Interesting. Do you suppose I could write some insane mathematical theorem that wins me the Nobel Prize?”

“Nobel doesn’t have a prize for mathematics,” Derek corrects with a grin. “A Fields Medal’s the one you’ll be winning. That was a trick question.”

“I had to be sure,” Lydia sighs like she’s upset it didn’t work. She turns her gaze to Stiles and says, “I see we have the same taste in boys. Almost too pretty to look at, and undoubtedly brainy. I approve. But if he breaks your heart, I’ll personally deal with it myself.”

Stiles frowns, unsure what something like that would entail. He’s a bit worried.

Lydia gives him a razor sharp grin in reply. “Don’t frown, Stiles. Someone could be falling in love with your smile,” she says as she rises from the table, flipping her strawberry-blonde curls over her shoulder, egg still clutched firmly in one hand and goes floating to the stairs like she’s walking on air. She disappears a moment later.

“Sorry about that,” Stiles says when he’s sure they’re alone. “She means well.”

“I get it,” Derek promises and leans over to kiss him on the cheek again.

Stiles gets pink and rolls his eyes with a sigh as he rises from the table as well.

Derek shrugs and stands. “I’ve kind of lost count at this point too. What can I say? I’m just following my heart,” he teases.

“Handful, I swear,” Stiles mutters as he rises from the table as well.

Derek gives a low whistle and Jordan comes sprinting down the steps from upstairs.

Stiles wonders where he’s been and what he’s been doing this whole time. “I feel bad that we didn’t
set something out for him while we were eating,” he says as he follows them to the front door and then out.

“I’ll feed him when we get home,” Derek assures. “Trust me, if he was that hard up for food he’d let us know. I think he just wanted to scent the house and see what might have changed since the last time he’s been here.”

“So that’s what he was doing.”

Derek wirelessly unlocks his car and opens up the passenger side door for Jordan.

Stiles feels that anxious feeling of need creep into his system right on cue at the realization that Derek is going away. “I’m probably going to be with Deaton all day tomorrow. Do you want to come over when I’m free?”

“I doubt I’ll be doing anything else that will keep me from seeing you,” Derek responds as he reaches out and presses the heated palm of his left hand to the left side of Stiles’s neck. “This okay?”

Stiles nods, swallowing dryly as Derek pulls him closer for a few minutes of scent marking. He melts into the hug that comes after and wraps his arms around Derek’s neck as Derek lowers his forehead to his collarbone and rumbles.

“I really don’t want to leave now,” Derek admits quietly. “Do you think your dad will let you spend the night at my house tomorrow night? We kind of need to talk to my mom about us.”

Stiles threads his fingers into the hair settled on the crown of Derek’s head and his heart leaps at the suggestion. “Uh, I’ll ask him and see,” he says. “Is...is this the same kind of talk that Cora and Boyd were getting when we left earlier?”

Derek nods wordlessly.

Stiles is a sudden mess of nerves. “Derek, what did she say to you that had you upset?” he asks to avoid asking what he really wants to know. The word ‘Match’ is burning like a torch in his mind and his magic is beginning to circle them like a cluster of butterflies.

Derek extracts himself from their embrace, looking as dazed and flustered as he always does whenever their hugs come to an end. He blinks and actively focuses on Stiles’s magic in a subtle way to avoid Stiles’s gaze while he says, “She’s not usually so cruel, but I think meeting Boyd made her a little more emotional than she was used to.”

“What did she say?”

Derek’s mouth dips into a frown and it’s a long moment before he answers. “It doesn’t matter. I’m over it.”

“Derek…”

“It’s fine,” Derek insists and he smiles sadly. “She was wrong anyway. I have to go. The siren is going to ring and mom will ground me if I’m not back before that. Then we won’t be able to see each other at all for a while. I don’t know about you, but I’d rather avoid that fate.”

Stiles barely has any time to react before Derek is kissing his cheek one moment and sliding into the driver’s seat of his car in the next.

Derek starts his car and gives a wave. “I’ll text you to let you know I made it home,” he promises.
“Later.”

“Later,” Stiles faintly replies and watches what feels like a piece of himself drive away. His magic sinks back into his mouth when he opens up to receive it in. It twists and folds into itself behind his heart, quelling with dissatisfaction.

He treks back to the house to get ready to settle down for bed. He pauses as he passes the kitchen and takes a moment to marvel at the way the dishes are cleaning themselves as they float over the sink on puffy clouds of blue smoke.

Aunt Lorraine is definitely to blame.

Jay is sound asleep on top of the fridge.

Stiles snorts at the sight but continues on to his room and finds Lydia already there folding the laundry he forgot about.

“How do you let this much laundry pile up and not doing anything?” Lydia asks as she starts tucking the clothes away in his dressers. “I’m surprised that you’re not wandering around naked.”

“You sound like Derek,” Stiles complains as he moves to help her clear his bed of all the folded clothes.

Lydia pauses and lifts an eyebrow. “He talks about you being naked?”

Stiles stumbles but laughs on his way to his dresser. “That’s not what I meant! I’m just saying that he’s always ragging on me about keeping my room clean. Not anything about being naked!”

Lydia hums as she puts the last of his clothes away before rifling through the same drawer for something to sleep in. She borrows one of his sports jerseys and a towel before she wanders off to take a shower (taking her egg with her).

Stiles moves to his window and opens it up, taking a moment to peer out at the swarm of fireflies littering his back yard and swaying in the air around his magical tree. He rubs at his eyes with a yawn and decides to start getting ready for bed himself. He changes into some pajamas and slips into bed with the bible of Virtues and his phone.

He spends the next forty-five minutes juggling his attention between texting Derek and studying the book of Temperance so he can have his questions ready for Nana the next day when he goes out for his study session.

Lydia returns to the room when he’s reaches the end of the book, and he tucks the bible away in the drawer of his nightstand as she climbs into bed with him after she turns off the light. She sighs with bone-deep exhaustion while she puts her jeweled egg on his nightstand and scoots closer.

They are both lying on their sides facing each other on top of his covers as the sweet smell of the summer’s night air drifts into his room.

Lydia clutches his hands between her own and says, “Tell me everything I’ve missed.”

Stiles clears his throat and starts from the beginning. He starts by explaining the whole ‘Gerard is a secret pedophile’ business because that’s always the most difficult thing to sort out. Then he talks about what’s going with Parrish and Isaac. He talks about how Isaac’s related to Kate and that Chris knows. He talks about Malia and Jackson, and how they’re actually related to the Hales. He talks about Mayor Argent’s other kids who are still out there (Erica, Ricky and Carter, and god knows...
who else). He mentions Heather and her situation. He then talks about his relationship with Derek and how it’s developed to where it has thus far. Then he talks about Braeden, and his internship with Deaton, as well as Talia’s offer to him as her Second (and eventually Cora’s). He just really lays it on her because this is what she asked for. This is what she wants to know.

“I’ve been trying to remember what happened that night,” Lydia confesses at the end of his monologue. “With my parents, and the night they died. I know that it was a Were, and I know it happened on a New Moon, but my mind feels blocked somehow.”

“If it’s the trauma of what happened, I wouldn’t be surprised,” Stiles whispers back. “I think that what you saw would help us, but I’m not going to push.”

Even in the dark, the trembling of Lydia’s bottom lip is visible and the tremor in her voice confirms it as she says, “I wish I could be better for you.”

“Don’t say that,” Stiles lightly chastises. “It means more to me that you’re here beside me and that you’re trying as best as you can more than anything else.”

Lydia sniffs and nods. She says, “I’ve been trying to draw everything I can remember. Sometimes it helps. Sometimes it doesn’t.”

“Don’t force yourself. Together, we’ll get there,” Stiles promises and reaches out to tuck some of her hair behind her ear so he can see her face as best as he can with nothing but the moonlight to go off of.

Lydia sighs and says, “My parents, when I was little, when the doctors couldn’t decide whether I had Asperger’s or was atypical, they hired a woman who had won thirty different pageants to teach me to smile. To wear it like a plastic crown and a sash. And you know what?”

Stiles says nothing. He clutches her hands and gives them a comforting squeeze. If she has something to say, he’ll be damned if he doesn’t listen.

“She was good,” Lydia continues, her face pale and her eyes distant. “She was the best. And I could pretend for a long while around the other children so they didn’t notice I had something lacking in me. But the only two people that were able to see through me were Scott and Jackson. Sometimes I didn’t have to pretend as much with them. But for my parents it was important that I was normal. All that money and success but they had an autistic daughter.”

Stiles inhales sharply at that.

“They wanted normal and so I gave it to them. I gave it to them until I had them fooled. But then my dad took me camping when I was nine to break the news to me that they were getting divorced and he was moving to Boston to open up a private practice there.” Lydia’s mouth trembles but her voice is steady and her gaze is determined. “I don’t remember running off. Not really. I was so upset. I found myself being furious. All that practicing. All that pretending. And what did I have to show for it? Still a broken home. Then I was attacked.”

Stiles hardly lets himself breathe as he listens closely. He knows this part from what little Erica told him a long time ago.

“Red eyes like those...you don’t ever forget. It sliced its claws into me like it was trying to get to bone, and it bit into me over and over again like it was trying to shape its own teeth with nothing but my skin and muscles. While I screamed, it just howled at the moon,” Lydia goes on to say. “I woke up in the hospital a little later, thinking maybe it was a terrible nightmare. But Dr. Morrell was at my
bedside. My parents clutching at what was left of me. I don’t think they expected me to survive the night. But I did. That’s when the voices started. I couldn’t face it, but Dr. Morrell wanted me to. She said it was important. What I mistook as therapy turned out to be something different. And when my parents noticed I wasn’t getting better, they pulled me off her treatments.

“They shoved me towards someone who could feed me pills and make the voices quiet. It worked for a little while, and my parents never separated. I think it was the guilt. I became a project for them. Something to fix while they ignored their own broken marriage,” she says. “So they brought back the woman who made me, so that she could make me again. My parents and I never really talked about what happened to me. The fact that all my scars had vanished on its own was largely ignored too. Life pushed forward anyway, and then you came to town. The whispers came back. They wouldn’t be ignored this time.”

“Lydia, I had no idea you went through all of that,” Stiles confesses.

“How could you? We didn’t know each other yet,” Lydia replies and she sounds drowsy now. She gives a bone-cracking yawn. “Take me with you when you go see Deaton tomorrow. I think I can help with the Nymph.”

Stiles nods and watches as she lets go of his hands to roll away to the other side of the bed and grab her egg from his nightstand to clutch close to her chest.

Lydia’s voice is drowsy, and she’s obviously near sleep as she murmurs, “Hold your phone in your hand while you sleep.”

Stiles mumbles in confusion as he drifts off himself.

“I’m not sure why you should either. It’s a feeling I can’t explain. Just trust me.”

Stiles sighs and slaps his hand onto the top of his nightstand. He feels around before he comes across his phone. He pulls it into bed with him and falls asleep with it in hand.

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Stiles awakens to the insistent vibration of his phone in his hand. He blinks blurrily and in confusion at his lit screen but his eyes are too damp with sleep. He sighs and just answers with a scratchy voice, “Hello?”

“Finally,” Kate hisses from the other end. “I was worried I would have to scale your house and climb into your window to drag you out of bed myself. Get dressed and come outside. I need to talk to you.”

Stiles opens his mouth to ask her what the hell is going on but she must anticipate that because she hangs up. He exhales in annoyance and rubs tiredly at his eyes as he tries to mentally talk himself into getting out of bed.

Five minutes later, he’s hunting around in the dark for some clothes, trying to be as quiet as possible so he doesn’t disturb Lydia or anyone else in the house (not even his magic, which is sound asleep between the teeth of his ribcage). He tiptoes out of his room, down the steps and out the back door. He makes his way around the house to the front where Kate is waiting in her shiny, black Jaguar.

“ Took you long enough,” Kate says, and for once she’s not on her phone or fiddling with her radio. Today she’s drowning in a Super Mario sweater that clearly isn’t her own and some black leggings that make her knees look knobby and her legs like baseball bats. Her hair’s a mess and she has no makeup on, but even barefaced she’s beautiful. She looks less threatening than normal.
“What’s going on?”

“I’ll tell you, but not here.”

“It’s four in the morning. I hope this is good.”

Kate doesn’t confirm whether it is or not. She just drives. She takes him to *Little Slices of Heaven*, the 24/7 café, which is located in the heart of Beacon Hill’s metropolitan area, and she gives some kind of secret phrase to a female bouncer.

Stiles finds it bizarre that a *cafe* needs a *bouncer*.

Kate grips his right arm as the bouncer steps to the side to let them enter. It’s pretty crowded, which is surprising because it’s four in the morning on a Wednesday.

But the more Stiles lets his eyes explore, the more he notices that the crowd is mostly what appears to be college kids. Then he takes the time to really look and realizes that there are all different sorts of age groups. People in their late twenties, early thirties, or even middle aged people too. There’s a mix of nationalities and genders, all different colors, much like a crayon box. Some of them sit at the cafe tables or stand around communing with each other over mugs of tea or coffee.

To the very back of the cafe is a platform, almost like a stage, with a light beaming towards a brick wall and a mic on a stand.

Kate wordlessly pulls him to the other end of the room with the best view.

They sit at a booth across from each other as some guy with a bushy beard, thick eyebrows, and sleeve tattoos on both arms pours them a cup of coffee before wandering off to attend to a group of punk chic ladies lumped together, muttering things about feminism and reproductive rights from behind their journals - then they start discussing the economic implications of Valkyries drafting themselves into the US military.

“The salmon burgers here are excellent,” Kate remarks as she looks out the window they’re seated near.

“I’m not hungry.” Stiles downs his cup of coffee before he snatches her mug to down that as well and she doesn’t even blink.

The burly barista descends on them once more and refills their cups.

Stiles takes the time to notice he has a tattoo of a Centaur on his neck, and he starts to wonder.

Kate takes back her mug and sends him a look that dares him to fight her for it.

Stiles doesn’t even try. He takes slower sips of his third cup as he begins to wake. His leg begins to bounce as the caffeine floods his system. “So...what’s going on?” he asks. “Where are we, and why do I feel like everyone here feels familiar to me?”

“It’s a regular cafe by day,” Kate admits. “But once a month some of the Supernaturals gather here to commune in peace and private.”

Stiles feels his knee jerk into the bottom of the table in surprise, rattling everything on top and he curses as the spot pulses with pain. “You mean everyone is —”

“Listening to everything we’re saying? Yes, so choose your words carefully, buttercup. You’re a
new face around here, so they’ll want to eavesdrop to figure out what you are,” Kate warns. She takes a moment to take a nice long sip of her coffee.

Stiles chances a glance over to the crowd, and while some of them are whispering amongst each other, a few of them are glancing his way with un concealed curiosity.

“Relax,” Kate urges. “No harm is going to come to you here. It’s the safest place at the moment. No one steps foot in this place unless management fortifies it with all sorts of security wards and details.”

Stiles is trying to process all this information but he’s kind of still waking up.

“Watch,” Kate finally says. “It’s open mic night.”

“What?”

Kate presses a slender finger to her lips before pointing to the stage.

Stiles turns.

Stepping onto the platform is a light sepia colored woman with cropped black hair that hangs slanted right around her chin. Her brown eyes sit behind thin black-framed glasses, and she looks to be in her mid-fifties. She’s wearing a leather dress with a v-neck opening in the front, which dips scandalously low towards her pierced bellybutton. She is covered in tattoos from shoulder to ankle.

A sudden hush falls over the cafe.

“Hello everyone. As always, it’s wonderful to see such an awesome turn out. Last month we ran with the theme of Presentation, and what our experiences were like when we came into our paranormal inheritance. We heard some lovely stories from Werewolves, and Witches, and Werecats, and Harpies, and so on and so forth. So let’s take the time to give a round of applause for that and to those who participated.”

Everyone claps, and even some people whistle.

“Thank you. For those of you who are new here, my name is Ava. My son and I, the very attractive but surly looking barista who has been serving you drinks named Rosamie, are the owners of this fine establishment,” Ava says. “We moved here from the Philippines to blend in and offer business to Humans, but also to root ourselves in the Supernatural community and act as a bridge between both. The only way we can do that is to make sure that we as Paranormals are in harmony with each other first. Which is why we started these Paranormal Potluck Nightcaps every first Wednesday of the month.”

Everyone claps in agreement when her next pause cues it.

Stiles starts dumping cream and sugar into his coffee this time because he can’t take anymore of the bitter aftertaste.

“Tonight’s theme is ‘death and family’. I have a special guest. One of our favorites, who is going to set the mood before we open the floor to everyone,” Ava goes on to say. “Everyone give a warm reception to Kate Argent as she comes.”

Everyone cheers excitedly and Stiles realizes that Kate must attend these regularly to get a response like that.

Stiles lifts his cup, blows on it and watches as the older woman slides out of the booth.
Kate pauses near him before she passes, looking oddly out of sorts for a moment before she says, “I slept with Parrish the other night.”

Stiles chokes on his next sip of coffee and it spills down the front of his shirt.

Kate leaves him just like that to wander up to the stage as everyone begins to clap again. She runs her fingers through her hair as the stage light shines brightly on her and she adjusts the mic stand to her liking. Then she straightens as she runs her tongue over her white teeth and sighs.

An attentive hush falls over the cafe.

Stiles, still dabbing away at his wet shirt, turns to watch and listen to what she will say.

“Nous chassons ceux qui nous chassent,” Kate says softly in French, slipping into her mother tongue as easy as she could slip on her makeup. “We hunt those who hunt us. Growing up, this was my dad’s lullaby to me. While other fathers were taking their daughters to see Disney on Ice, mine took me to the shooting range to perfect my aim. He said he was preparing me for war. He said a head full of fears has no space for dreams. When I rebelled, he called me spoiled. When I cleaved myself to the Hales in an open act of defiance, he called me naive.

“And when I told him that I planned to marry into a family of Weres someday, he shoved me into his car and took me out into the woods,” she says and pauses, making sure she has every ear. “He pointed out to the nearby path and told me to walk that way. I stepped out onto the gravel road as it cut its way before me like a black river through the grassy plain. I thought this was some kind scare tactic, and I called his bluff. But my confident stride, as I got closer, slowed into timid and careful steps when I noticed the body. Well at least half of a body.”

Someone gasps.

Stiles is on the edge of his seat now.

“My knees started to buckle under me as my heart thrashed wildly in my chest like some drunk and enraged animal bashing against its cage for freedom. I’d never smelt death before, or even seen it, but I knew it was something unpleasant. I didn’t know what it would smell like, but I still cradled my nose behind my hand just in case,” Kate continues. “Once I got closer, I immediately wished I hadn’t walked over at all. The woman was laid out on her side just along the edge of the road. I knew without really knowing that she must have crossed some fatal path with my dad and his goons. I stood in front of the woman with her bloodied breasts and stomach facing my direction. Even as half of a person, she was so small, so still.

“This curve of flesh drenched in chunks of red that darkened the contrast between her pale skin and the blood that was matted against it. Her grey eyes were wide, unblinking and unfocused. To me, it still looked like she was choking on a heap of unsaid words since her mouth sat agape in horror; tongue sagged. The ground underneath her seemed to cry out, intoxicated by the deep and sticky wine that spilled from her gutted middle. The flies and the freckled-sized gnats seemed to join in on the celebration as they jumped from angle to angle, hair to hair, eye to eye. I saw worms squirm their way upwards, as though they had used the long threads of blood that had sunken into the ground as their ropes, hoisting themselves up until it ended at the source.

“They gathered among themselves and danced around the decay in short, erratic movements. The sight of it, so close, made my stomach twist around itself and my throat jerked forward towards the back of my tongue like it was trying to escape. I had no illusions that she would move nor that she would come alive by some miracle if I prayed hard enough. Faith in the goodness of my kind had sifted away in the presence of reality. I couldn’t help but to think, what if this had been my best
friend, or her mom or any one of them? It made me sick. In that moment, I knew that I would never be able to accept my heritage as a Hunter.

“As soon as the thought glazed though my mind, I felt this burning pain in my cheek,” Kate says as she touches her hand to the right side of her face as if she could still feel the pain, even now. “My dad had struck me when he saw the tears. He seemed disgusted in that moment to witness my empathy at work. He told me not to bother feeling sorry for it. He said Weres like her don’t weep over the corpses of the little girls they kill. That they like to eat the hearts of weak-willed children. Like me. See, he was trying to instill fear in me that moment, hoping that it would incubate blind hatred I could grow into and feed endlessly for the rest of my life.

“Your enemies prowl around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour, he warned me when I continued to seek out the Hales as my chosen family, my chosen friends. He sees Supernaturals as monsters instead of the people underneath. He walks around with that contempt thundering above his head like a cloud, while he calls himself a leader of our town. Yet he forgets the most important lesson,” she goes on to say. “That whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process they, themselves, do not become a monster. And that if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you. Thank you for listening.”

Ava engulfs Kate in a hug as she exits the stage while the occupants of the cafe clap boisterously in the background.

Stiles is among those who cheer and he waits anxiously as she makes her way through the swaying crowd.

Kate has to stop a few times to shake hands with people who are eager to pay her compliments for her performance. There are more pats to the back, and verbal praises before she reaches their booth, successfully extracting herself from the fanfare.

“You were amazing,” Stiles commends as they sit down across from each other again. He notices that her hands are shaking when she hides them under the table. “Do you ever write any of this down?”

“Of course,” Kate says evenly, poker face set in place. “My memory is shit otherwise. Laura always said I could spin a tale better than most, and my guidance counselor was always on my ass about taking creative writing courses during the summer when school was out. It seems so foolish to make a career of it, but I’m not good at much else.”

Stiles knows she’s really downplaying her talents, but he foregoes commenting at the moment to say, “Kate, if any of what I just heard is any indication, you have a resonating voice. And everyone here seems to already be invested. You’ll be a wonderful writer.”

Kate huffs but tosses him a wry grin. “Thanks, Tenderfoot.”

Stiles nods and waits a few moments before he follows up with, “So when you said you slept with Parrish…”

“I mean that I rode him until we were both cross-eyed,” is Kate’s crude response, smirking when Stiles gets flustered. “To put things in perspective, Peter slept with him first.”

“What?”

“Well, yeah. You didn’t think Peter was a nun while we were growing up, did you? I wasn’t always the apple of his eye. He had it bad for Kyle way before I was in the picture,” Kate patiently explains.
“We know recently that Kyle didn’t lose his virginity to Peter. But Peter did give his to Kyle, and Kyle had to go and break his heart by running off to the military shortly after. Finding out about what my dad did to him when he was around your age was another blow too.”

“Peter and Parrish used to date?” Stiles reiterates because he’s trying to understand.

“No,” Kate sighs as she shakes her head. “They were best friends since childhood, but the feelings came later. As did the physical things, but like I said, Kyle ran off before they could make it official. When he came back to town, Peter tried to downplay the whole situation but I know that idiot like I know myself. He thought Kyle came back for him.”

“But it wasn’t for him. It was for Isaac,” Stiles realizes and all their past encounters are making more and more sense. “Peter’s devastated, isn’t he?”

“Yup,” Kate says, lips popping sharply on the ‘p’. “I wish he would just be honest with me about how he feels. I told him that I didn’t care, and that I liked Kyle too. Enough to invite him into our dynamic without it getting weird, but I think he thinks that I’m trying to trick him or something. Like I’ll break up with him if he tells me not all of his heart is mine. But I don’t know how many times I have to make it clear until he understands that he’s it for me, and that I wouldn’t give him up without a fight.”

“But you slept with Parrish because…”

“Oh, that.” Kate shrugs as she sits back and crosses her arms. “Someone had to break the sexual tension. And maybe this way Peter and Kyle can stop tiptoeing around me and realize I’m cool with it. Also, I mean, have you seen Kyle? Tell me you wouldn’t hit that either.”

Stiles wrinkles his face into a frown. “He’s my brother’s dad. That’s like...pseudo-incest or something.”

Kate laughs sharply. “If you say so,” she replies. “Anyway, I thought I could talk to you about it before I fessed up to Laura, and that girl can get so judge-y with me sometimes. If I didn’t love her so much, I’d ditch her.”

Stiles snorts. “I’m honored, I guess,” he says, but it’s a really weird situation. “Peter won’t be upset?”

“Only that I beat him to the punch and that he didn’t get to watch,” Kate admits with another carefree shrug. “We’ve had threesomes before. It’s nothing new.”

“Okay, way too much information,” Stiles complains and rubs at his face. Then he realizes something. “Wait, you said it happened the other night. You slept with him when he took you out to dinner?”

“Let’s just say that if I hadn’t swung by to grab you tonight, I probably would have still been in bed with him,” Kate clarifies with a grin. “I’m starting to understand where Peter gets some of his tricks.”

Stiles sends her an exasperated look and shakes his head.

“Now come sit over here with me,” Kate instructs. “I’ll order you a brownie, we’ll finish watching the rest of the performances, and then I’ll take you home.”

Stiles is settling on her side of the booth when she waves over the burly barista and puts her order in (a la mode).

A male, who looks to be around his age group, takes the stage next. He has chestnut skin, brown
eyes, and curly-coily hair that hangs like a massive dark cloud around his oval-shaped face. He has a horizontal brow piercing, and a septum piercing. He takes a moment to adjust the mic, bring it up higher since he appears to be taller than Kate.

“Yo, how’s everyone doing tonight?” he asks with an amused smirk while different people respond. “My name is Octavian for those who don’t know. Originally from South Central, born and raised. Uh, I just turned seventeen, so yes I am as young as I look. Ey, let’s take a moment to give Kate one more round of applause, that was some deep stuff, man.”

Everyone murmurs in agreement as they clap.

“That’s right. That’s right. Cause anyone here can speak to how hard it is to get up here and fucking bare your soul in front of strangers,” Octavian says over the sound of their clapping. “This woman came from a bloodline of people who make it their mission to take us down. But she’s taking a stand, and in these times, we really need that now more than ever.”

The clapping gets louder.

Kate just nods amiably and sends Octavian a thumbs-up.

Octavian laughs and then makes a gesture for the crowd to settle. “Also big props to Ms. Ava and to Rosamie for holding it down and keeping their doors open to us.” Speaking louder, while everyone is clapping, he adds, “Without them, none of this would be possible. I know I’m grateful. I’ve made more connections here outside of my own people than I have anywhere else.”

Ava smiles and tosses him a kiss from where she’s working from behind the counter, peddling coffee and pastries upon request.

Octavian waits until the noise dies down. He says, “Also another reminder. We have our semi-annual Paranormals at the Park coming up soon. Originally it was set for the twenty-fifth but based on last year’s feedback, we’re bumping it back to the first of July. For any of you who don’t know what it is, Ms. Ava and Rosamie reserve the whole of Beacon Hills District Park number three. So bring ya families and ya friends. They rent out bouncy castles for all the shorties, and get food catered so you don’t gotta worry about nothing but showing up, networking, and having a good time. So mark your calendars.”

“You ever been to any of those?” Stiles asks as Kate leans against him.

Kate nods. “I usually bring Laura and Peter with me when I go. It’s actually a lot of fun. They have games and events you can participate in to win prizes and stuff. Why? You interested?”

Stiles is thinking mainly about Isaac and Lydia. He thinks it’ll be good for them too. “Maybe. If you’re going then let me know. I start my driver’s ed classes soon, but I’ll work it out,” he promises.

Kate nods from where she’s resting her head on his shoulder.

Rosamie returns to their booth with their brownies (a la mode) before moving on to the next table.

Stiles has never tasted such rich chocolate before. When he finishes his, he starts pecking away at Kate’s plate.

Kate starts fussing but Stiles says it’s payback for all those lost jello cups.

Octavian, still behind the mic, says, “Alright ya’ll, I been working on this for a hot minute so be gentle with me. This piece is called The Hanging Tree.” He clears his throat and continues, “My
grandma, the High Priestess to the Pegasus Clan of South Central, used to say that a person with no
good manners ain’t worth much more than a pig in a sty waiting for the slaughter. That even if it was
Peril who invited you for dinner, you shouldn’t say no. It was late May, the eve of my thirteenth
birthday, just when I teetered on the cusp of puberty, when Peril’s invitation came in the form of my
best friend Chuno Lopez. Now this was way back before he was gunned down before our eighth
grade graduation…”

Stiles lets himself get lost in the narration of this story, and all the other performances that come after.
Nana once told him that Beacon Hills was flushed with Supernaturals of all kind, but he doesn’t
think he realized to what extent she meant. He certainly does now.

When it’s nearly seven in the morning, and everyone is gearing up to leave, or stay and socialize for
a little longer, Kate walks him around and introduces him to some of her friends.

They all seem amused but unsurprised that Kate is being tight-lipped about what breed of paranormal
Stiles is. They call her a tease but quickly move on to other subjects, not seeming too bothered about
being kept in the dark.

Stiles actually enjoys talking to the people he does meet, and he ends up exchanging numbers with a
few of them, promising to follow up on all the offers and invitations he gets. Things like bowling,
skating, movies, hiking, camping and so on and so forth.

Kate eventually has to extract them since the sun is starting to rise, and they exit the cafe when most
of the nearby businesses are opening for the day.

Stiles waits until they’ve driven a good distance out of hearing range to ask, “Is there any particular
reason why you didn’t want them to know I was a Virtue?”

“Are you kidding? Then they really wouldn’t have let us leave,” Kate laughs. “Stiles, you get that as
a Seven, that makes you like the Beyoncé of the Supernatural community? You tell me what you
think would’ve have happened if they knew.”

“Ah,” Stiles says, rubbing at his eyes tiredly. “Flying under the radar is best then.”

“Exactly.”

The rest of the car ride is spent in silence.

Stiles doesn’t even want to glance at the time when they finally make it to his house.

Kate pulls into his driveway and turns off her car. “You mind if I crash on your couch? I’m not ready
to go home yet and face the music,” she admits.

“Uh, sure, but let me run it by my dad real quick.”

Kate waves him off and they climb out of the car together, walking around the side of the house to
get to the back door.

It’s still quiet when they enter, and Stiles reasons that everyone is still sleep. He quickly jets up the
stairs (leaving Kate downstairs) and to his dad’s room, knocking and waiting until his dad mumbles
for him to come in. He does and drops down on his knees at the edge of the bed.

His dad turns over and looks at him with red eyes. “Where did you run off too? I heard you leave
early in the morning,” he says.
Stiles smiles apologetically. “I was with Kate. She took me to this like open mic thing for Paranormals. It was really nice.”

“I’m sure it was,” his dad says gruffly before leveling him with a sleepy eyed stare. “Your lucky your aunt warned me beforehand about you sneaking out, and that you’d be okay. Even so, run it by me next time. You’re fifteen. This is your only warning.”

“Understood!” Stiles swears quickly. “Sorry. Uh, Kate wants to know if she can stay over?”

His dad sighs before rolling back over. “That’s fine. Give her one of the blankets from the linen closet,” he suggests before going back to sleep.

“Thanks, dad. You’re the best,” Stiles whispers before he exits, closing the door behind him. He tiptoes back down the steps and to the linen closet located next to the food pantry near the back door. He grabs one of the fleece blankets and takes it to the living room.

Kate is already sprawled out on the long couch, fast asleep with her thumb in her mouth.

Stiles huffs and shakes his head, shaking out the blanket and carefully tucking her underneath. He yawns and drags himself towards the stairs, then up them. He grumbling groggily to himself as he climbs into bed beside Lydia, who is still sound asleep.

He doesn’t even bother to untie his shoes as his exhaustion hits him full force. He’s out like a light the next moment.
Stiles wakes up by himself, which is not the least bit surprising since it’s pushing well into three o’clock on a Wednesday afternoon when he next wakes. The world has moved on without him and he’d been so exhausted the night before that he was fine to let it. He doesn’t usually like to sleep past noon (it seems so wasteful on summer break). He gives a content stretch, before resting his hands behind his head as he faces his ceiling.

There’s a certain ache in his bones that he’s not familiar with, but he figures it’s because he might have slept wrong or something. He takes a moment to meditate on what he can hear outside his open window, and he internally gropes for his magic, and finds it absent but still senses that it’s close.

He rolls off his bed and to his feet (not as gracefully as he would have liked). He rakes his long fingers through his messy hair as he wanders over to the window to see (just as he thought) his magic littering his backyard in the form of some glittery blue bunny rabbits. It’s nosing its way through the grass, against the edge of the wood plank fences, around the base of Nana’s tree and over her exposed roots.

His Aunt Lorraine is out there as well, conversing with Nana just in the same way she had been the day before. She’s in a long, royal blue sundress with a big white floppy hat that sits over her shiny strands of fiery red hair, and she’s leisurely sipping on some fruit laced water. She must see him out of the corner of her eye because she shifts in her black whisker basket chair, and tosses him a thousand watt smile with a jaunty wave.

Stiles sends her a slightly more tame one back before pushing away from the window when it appears that nothing out of the ordinary is happening. He decides he should probably shower before getting dressed in some fresh clothes. Which is what he spends the next fifteen minutes or so doing. Scrubbed to the point of being pink, he returns to his hot room to slip into a thin, short sleeved dark blue/black checkered flannel shirt and a pair of dark grey sweatshorts.

It’s not until he’s slipping into a pair of sneakers does he realize and notice how scorching and muggy it feels. Frowning, he guesses that it’s going to be another particularly steamy day. He sighs to himself and goes in search of his phone, which he finds behind his nightstand. He breaks out in a light sweat over the struggle of retrieving it and is annoyed almost instantly.

There are a few texts and missed calls that pop up as notifications on his phone (and it distracts him from his irritation with the temperature). A good portion of them are from Derek, Deaton, Cora, and Scott.

Stiles calls Deaton first because he ranks in importance at the moment. He’s glad that the older man picks up after the second ring. “You’re feeling better, I hope,” he says, by way of greeting.

Deaton responds, “As well as can be managed with the time I gave myself to rest. Thank you for your concern.”

Stiles shrugs, even though he knows the older man can’t see. “Your bruises were pretty noticeable,” he points out. He doesn’t really mean to mention it but he’s still upset about his mentor’s mistreatment by his Dwarven hosts. Especially since he feels partially responsible.

“I’ve endured worse,” Deaton replies, voice steady but vaguely consoling as well. “Though they were hardly gentle, they quickly corrected their temperament when they realized their mistake.”
Stiles just hums and says nothing of it.

“Since I have your ear, I was hoping to drop by later this evening so we can start working on the layouts for your garden. I was able to go to City Hall’s building department and have a clerk commission some blueprints for your front and backyard. Will you be free? I would come sooner but I have to meet with Braeden and her older sister in regards to the test results for the type of poison used on Mr. Ravenhill. I don’t want to presume to take up any of your time if you have other plans.”

Stiles is bubbling with excitement when he replies, “Even if I wasn’t free, I would cancel all other plans. Are you kidding? This takes precedence over everything else in my life.”

Deaton sounds just a touch amused when he says, “Your enthusiasm is appreciated, Mr. Stilinski. I’ll be there within a few hours, or sooner if it can be helped.”

Stiles gives him a distracted goodbye, mind already far and wandering over the possibilities that await him once his mentor shows up. His stomach rumbles, drifting his attention elsewhere, and he makes his way to his kitchen with the bible of Virtues in hand.

The house is blessedly cooler on the lower level (all the windows are open for a nice breeze to float through).

Isaac, Lydia, and Kate are in the living room.

Isaac is curled up in his favorite armchair with a shiny, new red etch-a-sketch Stiles doesn’t ever remember him having. He seems to be outlining an owl with elaborate feathers.

Meanwhile, Kate is still an immobile, unseen lump hiding under a powder purple fleece blanket on the long couch (chest rising and falling slowly).

Lydia is sitting in his dad’s chair on the other side of the coffee table with her legs pretzeled under her and her jeweled egg clutched in her red bioluminescent hands. It looks like she’s feeding her magic to her unhatched Conduit.

A Property Brothers marathon on HGTV solidly has his little brother and cousin’s attention at the moment.

His father is sitting at the head of the kitchen table with the morning paper, looking well rested and cheerful. He also has a stack of tupperware with last night’s leftovers packed up and ready to go.

Stiles figures he must be leaving for work sometime soon.

His dad shakes out the paper, and grunts, “Look who has decided to join the land of the living.”

Stiles rolls his eyes while he dials Cora’s number next. Her texts were a bit on the edge of frantic. “That joke lost it’s charm when I turned six, old man. You gotta find some new material.”

The sheriff huffs in mock offense from behind the sports section.

“Dad, do you think I could go over to Derek’s and spend the night?”

“Let me reach out to Talia first, and I’ll get back to you on that,” his dad decides and Stiles tries to hide his disappointment but his dad gives him a look that says he isn’t successful.

“Stiles?” Cora says after picking up on the seventh ring.

“Speaking,” Stiles replies as he grabs what he needs to make a couple of PB&J sandwiches. He feels
famished. “What’s going on? You don’t usually blow up my phone.”

“Yeah, well that’s because I screwed up. In a major way. I just — I seem to be saying the wrong things lately. First with Derek, and now this,” Cora quickly says. “I don’t know where Boyd is or where he wandered off to but I swear to the Great Mother Moon and on Ginger that I had no idea he didn’t know about Isaac! All I did was mention it in passing. I didn’t think that — I didn’t know ___”

In the living room, Isaac stiffens noticeably before he rights himself on his armchair like he’s been zapped with something. “Cora...what are you talking about?” he says lowly.

Cora inhales sharply in Stiles’s ear through his phone. “Isaac, I’m so sorry. I thought he knew! I thought he knew!” she swears apologetically. “Now he’s really upset. He thinks I’m being mean — that it’s a joke or a prank or whatever. He doesn’t believe me. He swears you would have said something if it were true. I didn’t know what to say. I was confused myself since I know he’s your best friend. Isaac, why haven’t you told him?”

Isaac looks a little pale but also heavily confused. “Why are you talking to Boyd about me?” he asks slowly. Cora’s other words don’t seem to be sinking in fully. He looks a little like he’s in denial. “When would you have...what’s going on?”

The sheriff lowers the paper with his own frown. “Stiles?” he says and looks to his oldest son. The question in his tone is obvious.

Stiles shrugs wordlessly, a little loss himself as he keeps his phone pressed to his ear.

Even Lydia is muting the TV in concern as she glances over in the direction of the kitchen. She’s not looking at anyone or anything in particular, but it’s clear she’s paying close attention to what’s happening.

“Ugh, just — put me on speaker,” Cora hurriedly demands.

Stiles does what she says and puts his smartphone face up on the table.

“Isaac, listen,” Cora sounds frantic now. “I was waiting to go to the park with you, remember? You went elsewhere, and I guess I didn’t see you leave, but Derek was saying that Boyd was joining us in your place. We connected and — I don’t think either of us were expecting it, you know? So he spent the night, after we left the park. Just as a formality. I had to — he needed to be introduced to the Pack. We were going to tell you after we talked to my mom to start the Bonding process with her permission. I know he’s your best friend and —”

“I don’t understand,” Isaac interrupts but his voice sounds shaky. Not like nervous, but leaning towards upset. “Bonding? What bonding? You make it sound like you two — that he’s your —”

Cora grows deathly quiet on the other end.

“Cora. Tell me you didn’t.”

Cora’s response is guilty silence.

“I don’t understand. I asked you if — but you said you would never —” Isaac cuts himself off with a frustrated growl. Then he tries again, saying, “I don’t understand.”

“I didn’t lie to you,” Cora promises, voice nasally and Stiles jolts with the realization that she’s crying. He has no idea what’s going on here but it’s obviously very serious.
Isaac looks thunderously betrayed.

Cora sniffs. “Isaac, please, I swear I didn’t lie. I never thought I would find my Match.”

“He’s my best friend, Cora. Did you even consider that?”

“Of course I did!” Cora snaps. “Don’t be unreasonable. You know things like this aren’t up for us to decide.”

“For someone who backs science and facts and reason so much, you’re sure quick to blame this on chance!” Isaac retorts, tone just as testy.

“That’s because it was! Don’t do that. Don’t toss my beliefs in my face like that,” Cora growls but she also sounds sad. “I had no idea — I thought you would be happy —”

Isaac barks out a laugh and it sounds both cruel and vulnerable. “Happy, right. Like it’s not even enough that you’re trying to steal the only best friend I’ve gotten the chance to know, and then you went and told him about me when I wasn’t ready. You had no right. And I’m supposed to be happy about all this? How could you —” He cuts himself off again with another frustrated growl. His expression goes livid and cold. He inhales slowly before he exhales. “Hang up on her, Stiles.”

“Issac!” Cora says sharply. “Don’t ice me out too! Boyd already isn’t returning any of my calls or responding to any of my texts. And I didn’t know, so you’re being really unfair!”

“I don’t care. You Werewolves are all the same. You see something you like and you have to go and claim it for yourselves for all of eternity. Damn the consequences and everyone else. I can’t believe I thought you were any different,” Isaac replies coldly as he marches over and snatches Stiles’s phone off the table. He hangs up on her himself.

“Uh, son. That was kind of harsh,” his dad says, folding up his paper and pushing it to the side.

Isaac shrugs wordlessly with a prominent frown and moves to hug his dad from behind, ducking his head low. He rubs his face back and forth against his father’s right shoulder as his scarred face grows red, and he sniffs. “I’m sorry,” he mumbles, and he sounds a little ashamed.

The sheriff sighs in concern and reaches up to pet his youngest son on the head in attempt to comfort him. “It’s okay, Isaac,” he assures. “We talked about this before. You’re allowed to get angry and express yourself. It’s healthier to get it out than to bottle it in.”

Isaac sniffs again and he’s shaking a little. “I don’t like the way it makes me feel, dad,” he mutters.

“That’s perfectly normal,” the sheriff promises and pets him on the head again. “Emotions are tricky, but we’ve got to navigate through the good and the bad.”

“Here, here,” Stiles chimes as he pockets his phone. “Dad’s right. Your reaction was harsh but it’s not like you broke my phone or anything. You made it very clear that you were unhappy. Remember when you just wouldn’t say anything at all and it was like silent charades? You’ve come so far.”

His dad shoots him a grateful look as he continues, “You really have. So now what? You think you can call Boyd and try to straighten out this situation? You probably should have told him, Isaac,” he says, not unkindly.

Isaac mumbles and continues to stubbornly rub his face against his father’s shoulder.

“Use your words,” his dad lightly chastises.
“I lost my phone yesterday,” Isaac admits as he pulls away. His blue eyes are a bit misty and his brow is crinkled with his upset. He looks endearingly grumpy.

His dad scoffs and shakes his head. “And just when were you going to tell me?”

“Before you left,” Isaac is quick to say, looking cornered. Then he looks guilty as he adds, “Maybe.”

“That was an expensive phone,” his dad presses with a bothered sigh. “I’ll call the phone company later to see if they can trace it, or see how much money I’ll have to fork over to replace it. I’m tempted to hold off on that as punishment.”

Isaac pouts and crosses his arms but he doesn’t argue. He looks at Stiles and says, “Sorry we put you in the middle of that.”

Stiles grins fondly with a shrug. “For what it’s worth, I really don’t think she knew that you hadn’t told Boyd yet about being a Werecat.”

Isaac mumbles something as he rubs at his eyes with a perturbed sound.

The sheriff leans back to eye him and asks, “So what’s the deal? You seemed disappointed when she broke the news about her and Boyd. You sounded fond of Cora the last time you mentioned her to me. Said you set aside your biological differences.”

Isaac laughs bitterly and it kind of breaks Stiles’s heart to hear the sound. “Cora said she didn’t think she’d ever find who was right for her. She always thought that having a Match was nonsense, and something people made up to avoid the terrifying reality that no one wants to be lonely, and that it’s just some fantasy to find the one. So we made a pact to bond when we got older because we liked each other enough not to have any expectations about a romantic relationship or whatever. But now this…”

Stiles is beginning to understand, and by the expression on their dad’s face, so is he.

Isaac continues. “It was just a stupid kid’s promise. It doesn’t matter now. And I wouldn’t have cared as much if she’d picked anyone else,” he mutters, face going a bit pink with his irritation. “I better go find Boyd. He’s probably pissed at me. I — I don’t want to lose him. I mean I kind of already am but…” He doesn’t complete the thought. He sighs.

“Did you want me to come with you to find him?” Stiles asks, softly.

Isaac shakes his head.

“Now hold on,” the sheriff says. “I get that you’re in a predicament, but understand me clearly when I say that I’m not comfortable with you leaving the house on your own when we have no way to contact you.”

Isaac looks crushed.

“Isaac, stay,” Lydia says as she rises from her seat with her egg in hand.

“Bud out,” Isaac retorts as he glares at her. “This is your fault too, I think. You insisted that Boyd stay behind. Did you know? Did you know what would happen?”

Lydia’s face clears of all expression but she seems defensive. “I just had a feeling. I couldn’t really know. My gift isn’t ‘exact’ like that, but I saw joy in his future, and I knew that for some reason it started here in this house. But if you want to blame me, you can.”
Isaac just frowns at her, but it’s losing some ire.

“Stay,” Lydia insists as she walks over and nods to the sheriff. “Don’t worry. He doesn’t have to leave. I think Boyd’s already on his way here.”

Isaac eyes her and it’s clear he’s wondering if he should even trust what she says but then the doorbell rings. He looks nervous but determined as he walks to the door.

Stiles can hear Boyd’s voice clear as day. His tone is steady but he’s clearly upset. Then there’s the click of the door closing.

“They stepped outside on the porch,” Lydia clarifies when both the sheriff and Stiles frown in confusion.

His dad silently rises from the table and enters the living room to carefully watch things unfold from behind the fluttering window curtains.

Lydia sits at the table and gestures for Stiles to continue what he’s doing. “Make me one too. How did you sleep?”

“Dreamless, but I’m pretty sure I got my recommended eight hours,” Stiles answers as he makes her a sandwich first, before he makes three for himself. He sits down across from her with a content sigh. “How about you? I didn’t even feel you get up.”

“Dreamless. Hasn’t been that way for a long time though. Pleasant surprise, if anything,” Lydia admits, breaking her sandwich apart piece by piece before popping the pieces in her mouth (one by one). “Being near you settles me.”

“I’m glad,” Stiles says around a mouthful of food. He grins when she rolls her eyes at his rude behavior. “Plans for the day?”

“Aunt Lorraine insisted I stay. Uncle Jon was going to take me home but she said she would do it. She says she’s going to teach me about Banshee anatomy, and where my seven main points of Chakra are located since that is where I pull my magic from,” Lydia says, voice tinged with contained excitement at the prospect. “If that goes well, she’ll start showing me how to access all my points through Yoga and Meditation.”

“Cool,” Stiles says because it does sound interesting. “I think I’ll sit with Nana and resume my lessons. Today is going to be about Temperance. And Deaton is coming over to help me map out my garden later.”

Lydia lifts her gaze from her plate and stares at him for a long time before she says (in Polish), “Do what you will, cousin, since it is your territory. But for my sake, make it feel like home.”

Stiles doesn’t let it slip his notice the way she emphasizes the word ‘home’. “I know, Lyds,” he says softly in the same dialect. “I will. I promise. That’s important to me too.”

Lydia nods in approval and, in English, says, “I look forward to seeing how you master it, then.”

“The construction will be interesting,” Stiles agrees between bites. “Is it crazy that I’m nervous?”

Lydia shakes her head. “Stiles, don’t worry. It’ll be perfect.”

“Is that the discernment talking?”
“No, that’s me being proud and confident in my older cousin’s abilities as a Virtue.”

Stiles ducks his head shyly and smiles as he’s overcome by warm affection for her. “It’s honestly strange when I think about home for us. In the back of my mind it’s like a dream, you know?”

“Something just out of reach,” Lydia adds, and it’s clear she understands what he means. “Almost like missing or wishing for something you don’t even really remember.”


“Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before,” Lydia finishes, reading his thoughts. “Poe paints such a vivid picture, doesn’t he?”

Stiles nods as he thinks on the poem. It was always his favorite back in grade school (and still even now), simply because it seemed so familiar to him.

“I think he dreamt many dreams each time the love of his life slipped from his fingers,” Lydia supposes with a faraway look that’s almost chilling to witness.

“I went to this cafe called Little Slices of Heaven, and I heard a rumor that Poe was a Banshee.”

“A Vice, I think,” Lydia corrects as she thinks on it as well. “Of Pride and Wrath.”

“Do you think maybe Poe had ever been to Faerie? Do you think Vices are even allowed?”

“They are Fae as well, so if I can enter into the Great Garden, then why wouldn’t they get the same courtesy?”

“I don’t know, I guess. My experience of Vices so far makes me think that they aren’t good,” Stiles explains as he thinks of the Benefactor in particular.

Lydia says, as though she’s reading his mind, “The Benefactor really isn’t the best example for all Vices. We should ask Nana for sure.”

Stiles nods in silent agreement. He’s no longer hungry, but the ache in his bones is still there, and he feels a little hot, even though he probably shouldn’t be since it’s a really nice temperature in the lower level of the house. Outside of that, he doesn’t feel like he’s sick or coming down with something.

A breeze sweeps into the room and the zoom of a motorcycle echoes in the street, magnifying all at once before shrinking into nothing at the next moment.

Stiles uses the pause to text Scott.

Scott replies: **Dude!!! I’m supposed to go with your dad to a baseball game tomorrow !!! Are you coming? You should totally come !!!**

*Not into baseball. Find it way too boring. I would, Scotty, if I thought I could stand it.*

**Aw rats! Well I’ll see you this weekend at least! I’m looking forward to it, like, it feels like years when we don’t see each other everyday.**

*Haha, so true. Yeah, I’m excited about this weekend too. Dragon Age II and Game of Thrones marathon?*
I’m game! Lydia says you’re dating Derek Hale now.

Of course she did. She’s probably told all of Beacon Hills lol. Yes, it’s true. I was going to tell you.

No worries. Me and Allison beat you two to the punch by a week or so.

Sweet! It was a long time coming. Congrats!

Thanks. :) Same to you. We should totally double date! Anything but bowling or ice-skating!

We’ll see. :)

The conversation ends there. His phone vibrates not even a second later.

Derek texts: It breaks my heart when you don’t respond to any of my texts

Or it worries me

Text S O S if you need immediate assistance or you’re being held hostage!

Stiles rolls his eyes, grinning to himself.

I literally just woke up about an hour ago.

Yeah but it takes like a second to show me some love (:)

I’m rolling my eyes at you. Kate kept me out pretty late last night.

Did she take you to the Paranormal Potluck?

Yeah. Have you been?

Ha, I wish! I’ve begged her only a million times to take me

She only lets Cora and I tag along to the Paranormals at the Park events

Oh, well that’s too bad. It was actually really cool.

Unfair. Sneak me in next time.

Sure, totally. You got it, buddy.

You know, I feel like you’re being sarcastic but it’s super hard to tell through text


Cute. Real cute.

I try.

Just for that, when you get here, I’m not holding your hand

Seriously though. How come you called Cora before you texted me?

I feel cheated
Don’t be such a baby haha you must have heard how *that* conversation went.

I did

I would almost sympathize if I wasn’t already pissed at her myself

Are you ever going to tell me what she said to you?

Nah

Derek come oooooooon.

Did you ask your dad if you could come over?

You’re totally changing the subject, but yeah, I did.

And?

???

???

???

OMG would you chill haha and he didn’t say anything. He said he’s going to call your mom and then let me know.

Uh oh

Maybe I should preemptively let my mom know he’s going to call her

Give her some puppy eyes and beg her to sweet talk the sheriff into saying yes

She’ll totally do it

I’m her favorite kid

I’m pretty sure that’s Olive, not you, but you can try.

I totally am, and trust me, I will. (: 

I’m everyone’s favorite!

Even yours

Someone has been feeding you outlandish info. Isaac is my favorite if anything.

Why are you so cruel to me, babe? ):

Stiles rolls his eyes as he flushes but he smiles and tucks away his phone. He glances at his cousin and says, “What’s your favorite flower?”

Lydia smiles to herself before it disappears just as quickly (almost like it didn’t happen at all). She looks at him slyly, and asks, “Why? What could you possibly do with that information?”
“I have a feeling you already know,” Stiles replies and rolls his eyes when she shrugs innocently. “Come on, Lyds. Go easy on me here.”

Lydia gives him a put upon sigh that he’s so convinced is for show, and she answers, “I don’t care much for flowers but I do like black cherries.”

Stiles makes a mental note of it. Putting her on the list he’s already started compiling in his head. He finishes up his first sandwich, and begins to eat the second.

When Lydia snatches his third right off of his plate and eats it, he pretends that it bothers him but the playful grin on his face probably makes it obvious.

His dad suddenly scrambles back to the table and picks up his paper in an attempt to look casual (not at all like he’d been spying just moments before).

Lydia and Stiles send each other amused looks just as Boyd comes bounding into the kitchen with a grouchy but relieved Isaac tailing after him.

“Mr. Stilinski, I know it’s short notice, but would you mind if I stayed the night? I already okayed it with my parents,” Boyd asks as Isaac fidgets unhappily behind him.

The sheriff shakes out his paper and pretends to mull it over before he nods. “That will be just fine with me, but only if Isaac is alright with it as well.”

Isaac mumbles something that sounds like he’s agreeable before he sighs and says, “He wants to invite Cora over to stay as well.” Then he takes a moment to smirk sarcastically as he adds, “He’s assuming I’ll even want that.”

Boyd sends him an exasperated look that gets openly ignored.

“If it will help clear up this quarrel, and if her mother is agreeable as well, I still don’t mind,” the sheriff assures. “There will be an adult present, so I’m not too worried on having so many teenagers here without my direct supervision.”

“You mean Kate?” Stiles jokes and laughs when his dad sends him a flat look (Isaac also wrinkles his nose). “Oh, you meant Aunt Lorraine. Right. Gotcha.”

His dad rolls his eyes before he stands. “Isaac, I’ll be seeing what I can do about your phone. In the meantime, use the landline if you need me. Stiles, I got a call from Deaton that he’s coming over?”

Stiles nods as he goes to pour himself a cup of milk, and ends up getting two glasses because Lydia makes a gesture that she wants one as well.

“Keep me updated on anything you think I should know. I need to head to work now. I’ll see you boys tomorrow,” his dad announces, clapping Stiles on the shoulder before making his way around the table to ruffle Isaac’s curls. He’s out the door a moment later.

“I’ll call Cora,” Boyd says, breaking the silence. “I really think we all need to talk.”

Isaac crosses his arms, looking completely resistant to it but he doesn’t voice this argument. He wanders into the living room and sits in his favorite armchair so he can sulk and turn up the TV.

Boyd doesn’t acknowledge this behavior as he talks lowly into his phone in rapid French.

Stiles downs his first glass of milk before pouring himself another.
Lydia takes her time with her own. She carries it with her outside once Stiles moves to wander out to his backyard with the bible of Virtues in hand.

It’s hot. Like really hot. And uncomfortably humid too.

But Nana’s clustered purple-blue leaves provide an almost unnatural relief with their shade. Even the air thins out pleasantly like a cool mist once Stiles and Lydia settle on one of Nana’s exposed roots.

“Hello, dearies,” Nana croons as she drops her gaze to them. “What brings you out here?”

“I wanted to pick up on my lessons,” Stiles answers as his magic transforms from bunnies to glittery blue frogs and leaps over to him to settle in his lap, shoulders, and the top of his head. “But Lydia and I also had some questions about Vices.”

“Alright. What did you want to know?”

Aunt Lorraine also looks interested in this line of conversation from where she’s perched on her black wicker basket seat. She wiggles her nose and her fruit laced water refills itself under a puff of blue smoke, and a blue straw also appears. She sips quietly as she watches them.

Lydia is the first to speak, and she asks, “Would you consider Vices to be evil? Do they have permission to venture into Fae like Stiles and I do?”

“Very good question,” Nana replies and takes a moment to consider how to spin her next words. She says, “No one is born inherently evil, dear. It’s our choices in light of circumstances that define us in the long run. Vices are no more evil than Virtues are. Their purpose is simply different. They have the gift of influence that has the goal to antagonize their victim’s moral compass. They are good-natured Tricksters at best. Depending on their field, their task is to use their mischief to be the obstacle that the hero or the heroine must face in order to fulfill their own destiny in this realm. They don’t dish out more than what their victims can handle. It’s not their job to.

“For example, a Vice of Lust is allowed to test the integrity of a bond or a marriage or a coupling for the purpose of giving perspective. However, they must never step out of line by directly involving themselves or making it so personal that it escalates the situation where it acts out of the ordination of the Common Good,” she explains. “So long as a Vice follows the doctrines and guidelines of their chosen field or fields, they will never fall to Acedia and they are allowed entry into the Great Garden, which is paradise for Fae but the Veil for all Paranormal creatures to pass though briefly before they continue on to their own paradise.”

“What is Acedia?” Lydia asks.

Aunt Lorraine is the one to clarify by saying, “It’s like if a Virtue rebelled against their calling and became a Vice. Therefore if a Vice did so too, they would become Acedia, which Virtues can also fall into if they continue to rebel even after being demoted to a Vice. It is the strongest form of apathy, only it’s unshakeable once you fall into it. You stop caring about life, family, friends, and community. All the things you once found pleasure in just becomes a burden instead. It prevents you from performing any duty, and it’s as close to Spiritual Depression as one can get. I urge you two to never find out.”

“Geez, of course not,” Stiles agrees while Lydia nods as well. “That sounds like a purgatory of your own making.”

“It truly is,” Nana confirms. “Did that answer your question?”

Lydia nods but Stiles asks, “There’s one thing you said. Something that I’ve heard before. The
Common Good. What is that?"

Nana responds, “The Common Good is what is shared and beneficial for all or most members of a
given community, or alternatively, what is achieved by citizenship, collective action, and active
participation in the realm of politics and public service. Virtues and Vices are supposed to preserve
the balance for all of mankind and creature-kind; creating a community between the two so that we
can all work towards it.”

Stiles files that away with a nod. “While we’re bring stuff up. You think you can tell me about the
Great Migration now?”

“Goodness!” Aunt Lorraine laughs and looks both delighted and whimsical. “You’re really taking
me back with that one, sweet nephew. How busy those days were.”

“You were *around* during those times?” Stiles gawks, even though he knows he really shouldn’t be
surprised. “Wait, just what times were those anyway?”

“Well the Great Migration itself lasted from 1786 to 1919,” Aunt Lorraine replies. “This is a time
when all Paranormal creatures from across the globe heard about how spacious the North American
soil was, and how Humans were taking advantage of it and it’s Natives already. I only showed up a
few years after the Civil War ended.”

“That’s...like 1865…”

Aunt Lorraine just shrugs cheerfully and resumes sipping her fruit laced water. “After a while, the
years tend to blur together like one long day that never ends,” she merely says.

Lydia stares at her with unconcealed fascination and awe.

Stiles can barely wrap his head around it.

Nana is speaking before they continue this line of conversation, “What did you want to know
specifically about this time period?”

“Uh,” Stiles blinks and tries to gather his thoughts. He rubs at his damp forehead because even in this
shade he’s getting frustratingly warm again, and the ache in his bones is slowly becoming more
prominent.

Aunt Lorraine’s blue eyes flash with something as she eyes him sharply.

“I guess I wanted to know just anything about it,” Stiles finally says as he shifts around for a more
comfortable position that has him sliding down to the soft grass so he can lean back against one of
Nana’s exposed roots instead.

“Ah, well.” Nana takes a moment to think. “Humans were overtaking the land here and once word
spread, a lot of Supernatural kind wanted the opportunity to venture towards unknown territory to
preserve their growing families. The world was getting small, and around this time, a lot of
otherworldly folk had to go into hiding, if they weren’t already. They saw North America as a
chance to begin anew since territory elsewhere was shrinking. But the problem was that there was an
aggressive cocktail being made when everyone quickly traveled here. So many fights over land was
with each other and the Humans.

“The wars instigated by Humans for their own battles bled together with the Territory Wars
instigated by Paranormals, and our kind experienced more losses than the Humans did,” Nana goes
on to say. “This is why they still greatly outnumber us to this day. And this is why back then, all
major representatives from each supernatural culture had to band together to form the Silver Magistrate.”

“What is the Silver Magistrate?” Lydia asks, quickly interrupting before Nana can continue.

“It is a mixed panel comprised of supernatural creatures to ensure fairness, as they play both judge and jury,” Aunt Lorraine answers. “Like how Humans have their Supreme Court, and therefore, so do we.”

“Correct,” Nana agrees. She continues, “They were the ones, when the Territory Wars came to a close, that insisted each otherworldly culture have their own legislature. Which is why you have things like the Alpha Parliament for Werewolves, or the Chamber Guard for Gnomes. There’s the Pacific Ocean Congress for Mermaids, Sirens and the like. Or the Clawed Senate for Werecats. There are more I could name, but I think you get the general idea.”

“That’s so cool,” Stiles says. “What about Virtues and Vices? What do we have?”

“Since you are already ambassadors for balance, you answer to no one but Fate and Peril themselves,” Aunt Lorraine answers. “For the rest of your kin, they must answer to the Lady of the Garden, for she is the Queen of all Faeries. It is who Lydia would answer directly to if she did anything that required that kind of escalation.”

“So you mean to tell me, that if I were in trouble or did anything that would garner further attention,” Stiles says slowly. “Fate would correct me? Like we’re talking about the same omnipotent being, right?”

“Yes, dearie. But why would you have to do something bad or extreme to garner Fate’s attention?” Nana volleys back. “You are never separate from Fate, who is your Mother-Father. You already have Fate’s attention. Is it not obvious by how abundant your life is, or how much favor you have with anyone you cross paths with?”

Stiles doesn’t know what to say to that. He doesn’t really stop to think about how good his life actually is — how amazing, really, if he were being honest.

“You meditate on that, and be sure to be thankful. It’s important for you to know that you are always under Fate’s watchful eye. For what could separate you from their love? Nothing,” Nana asks and answers within one breath. “You should pray more too.”

“I try to,” Stiles swears, a little annoyed and he doesn’t know why. The ache in his bones is getting to him and he’s breaking out in another sweat. “I feel so...foreign to it though. Like I don’t know what I’m doing. Like I’m talking to myself with no results. I don’t really know what I’m doing. Or what I should be asking for.”

“It’s not always about requests, sweetling,” Nana gently corrects. “Before you even open your mouth, Fate already knows what it is you desire. You see how you speak to me and ask me questions? That’s what prayer is. It’s an open ended conversation and Fate can’t wait to talk to you.”

Stiles never thought of it like that. He always viewed it like a ritual he could never get the hang of. “I’ll try it that way,” he decides, even though it’s strange to talk to someone or something you can’t see. “Also, I finished the book of Temperance.”

“Good, tell me what you thought of it,” Nana requests as Lydia slides down on the ground beside him to lean against him with her jeweled egg clutched close.

“It’s about practicing self-control,” Stiles supposes. “For a Virtue it’s important to continue to be sure
I’m thinking clearly, and that my actions are lining up with my words.”

“Hypocrisy is dangerous thing,” Nana confirms. “The mantle of Temperance ensures that you ‘practice what you preach’.”

Stiles nods. “In the second book, the writer was a South African woman named Ngantou who was sold into slavery by her older brothers out of jealousy. She was given to the Rain Queen, who put her in charge of her entire household and tribe, and because she had favor, she convinced the woman to abolish slavery. Most of the Rain Queen’s riches came from investing in slavery, so Ngantou had to promise she could find a different way to keep the tribe as one of the most abundant ones in all of Africa. So she told everyone to invest in rice and sure enough, they made much more than they ever did. But years later, the very brothers who sold her into slavery, were themselves being offered to them.

“There was a sickness and famine that swept over the tribe, killing most of their field workers, and harming the crops. Ngantou was tempted to accept the offer the slavers were giving since she was still angry, but she bought their freedom and offered them jobs instead,” Stiles goes on to say. “What stuck out to me the most is when she said that the hardest thing about Temperance is being able to know and understand you want to do the wrong thing because it’s what easy or more appealing but saying yes instead to the very decision you don’t want to make instead. So how do I gain this mantle?”

Nana looks highly amused. “You seem so sure that you haven’t already,” she says.

Stiles blinks. “But...I would know. Wouldn’t I? Wait, what?”

Nana chuckles. “Stiles, you already have the mantle for Temperance. And for Patience, Diligence, and Kindness too. Think about how you helped Paige, even after her mistreatment of Derek. Think about your encounters with Braeden, and yet while even with her sometimes harsh behavior, you still act as a friend and listen to any feedback she gives. Think about the loving kindness you have shown to Isaac. Think about how you helped free those children from the clutches of those dreaded Ghouls when no one else took it seriously. You already stand firm in your beliefs, even when others take the easy route by dismissing it all. The only mantles you haven’t been given is Humility and Charity. It used to be Chastity included into that as well, but I’ve guided you into gaining that already.”

“Oh,” Stiles says shortly as his cheeks heat from flattery. “Why didn’t you tell me, then?”

“I’m telling you now since it’s clear you hadn’t already known, which I assumed,” Nana replies. “I still think you should go through each of the seven books to make sure you have a firm understanding of all the fields. We’ll leave the added books in the different languages for when you get your Conduit so you can get the help you need to translate the reading.”

Stiles nods even though his mind is tinkering away. He starts a bit when he feels Lydia’s head drop to his shoulder, and he realizes that she’s fallen asleep. He shifts so he can arrange for her head to rest in his lap, and she doesn’t stir.

“She’s feeding her magic to her egg,” Aunt Lorraine reasons as she peers down at her niece. “It’s taking a lot out of her. Which is why I had hoped to show her all of her Chakra points so she doesn’t overextend herself. Summoning, fostering, and birthing forth a Conduit is just as exhausting and laboring as actual pregnancy.”

Stiles takes the information to heart, wondering what the experience will be like for him, and he feels that strong and desperate desire to know rise up in him again.
His magic begins to fuse together and becomes a small, glittery blue rhinoceros. It headbutts him before curling into his side as if to console him.

Stiles smiles and sends it waves of affection, which it volleys back almost instantly.

Jay, Aunt Lorraine’s Conduit, comes sprinting out into the backyard and playfully tackles his magic.

His magic bristles and gives into the chase, shifting into the form of a hawk and diving low to use it’s talons to sweep the Pygmy Marmoset up by it’s brownish-gold fur.

Aunt Lorraine watches the display as well, tsking but looking very tickled while she does it.

“Stiles, my dear, we need to discuss your next plan of action for obtaining the mantle of Charity,” Nana says.

Stiles pulls his gaze back to his magical tree and nods.

“Since it is the third book, I want you to go ahead and have it studied by next week,” Nana instructs. “Be sure to prepare some ideas of how you might want to tackle this task. Sound good?”

“Yeah, I can do that,” Stiles promises as he strokes Lydia’s hair. “Deaton is dropping by to help me with my garden.”

“That’s wonderful news, little one,” Nana croons. “You must be excited.”

“Practically vibrating with it.”

Nana laughs and it makes her purple-blue leaves shake and the ground tremble.

Stiles smiles in return because this type of laughter is his favorite of hers.

Kate comes strolling out of the house a moment later, looking bothered and rumpled from sleep. When she reaches him, she gives a quick cursory nod to Aunt Lorraine and then turns to him to say, “Why are you smiling at your tree like that?”

Stiles realizes that she hasn’t been formally introduced. Before he does, he decides to mess with her. “I’ve gone insane. Can’t you tell? There’s a lady in my tree that I’m talking to.”

Kate gives him a dry look for that. “Nice try. What’s the truth?” she presses.

Stiles just shrugs and says, “I give you permission to see.”

“Good afternoon,” Nana says and Kate doesn’t even blink. “My name is Nana. I’m Stiles’s spirit guide.”

“You must be Isaac’s older sister,” Nana guesses.

Kate actually stumbles verbally at that, and it takes a moment for her to collect herself before she says, “We have a...blood connection, yes. He’s actually part of the reason I’m out here.” She looks to Stiles, “I think you better mediate. He and Cora were yelling at each other. Woke me up from a perfectly good dream.”

Stiles sighs but nods. He glances down at Lydia and tries to think of the best way to extract himself without waking her.
Aunt Lorraine solves his dilemma for him by wiggling her nose and making a hammock appear under the puff of blue smoke. Then she wiggles her nose again to levitate Lydia from off the ground before settling her into the hammock without stirring her once.

“Thanks,” Stiles says, climbing to his feet and dusting himself off.

“Think nothing of it, sweet nephew,” Aunt Lorraine says with a grin. “Now go and help your brother with his affairs. You have more company coming over soon, though I feel it’s not you they’ll be looking for.”

Kate ignores the look tossed her way and urges Stiles to hurry inside the house. Once they close the back door behind them, she whispers, “Something is off about that woman.”

Stiles pauses at that. “My Aunt Lorraine? What do you mean?” he asks slowly.

“I can’t put my finger on it, but she seems like she’s waiting for something,” Kate attempts to explain. “I don’t know. She’s not like giving me ‘major evil’ vibes or anything. But...I don’t know. When did she come?”

“Yesterday.”

“How often does she visit?”

“Uh, actually this is the first time I’m really meeting her.”

Kate gives him a dry look for that. “Just watch her, Tenderfoot. You’re almost sixteen and now she decides to make a house call? She has that look in her eye that my dad gets when he sees an investment no one else has picked up on. Watch her.”

Stiles swallows his disappointment but nods nonetheless. He and Kate continue on into the kitchen.

“You’re acting so irrational!” Cora is shouting. “You would have introduced him to me anyway!”

“You don’t know that!” Isaac snaps back. “You think you know everything! I bet you just bullied him into this whole thing like you do with everything else!”

Cora looks outraged. “I’ve never forced you to do anything you didn’t want to!”

“Yeah, well I’m not so sure anymore.”

“Isaac, stop. You know she’s not like that,” Boyd calmly interjects.

“Know more than you do. You guys know each other all of, what? Twenty-four hours? And suddenly your experts on each other’s behavior?”

“We connected and I don’t expect you to understand that,” Cora gripes. “But hey, maybe it is like you said. Maybe I’m succumbing to my pea-brained biological cavemen instincts. Guess I don’t know right from wrong.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised. I don’t know why I’m ever surprised by anything you Werewolves do.”

“Werecats have been scientifically proven to be more moody than Werewolves are, thanks very much.”

“Whatever. You and your brother have been nothing but a pain. He’s trying to take my brother and now you’re trying to take my best friend!”
“I’m not trying to take anyone!”

“Bite me!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Stiles sprints the rest of the way into the kitchen to stand at the head of the table. “Let’s everyone just relax, and talk about this rationally. Sit down.”

Boyd takes a seat at the lower end of the table while Cora slowly sits to his immediate left.

Isaac sits across from her to Boyd’s immediate right.

“Good. Thank you,” Stiles says with a sigh and sits at the head of the table.

“Where’s your bathroom?” Kate asks from behind him.

“Upstairs, past Isaac’s room,” Stiles says and takes a moment to watch her disappear up the stairs. He turns back to the three younger teens.

Isaac and Cora are glaring daggers at each other.

Boyd seems a bit upset himself, but he’s calmer than Cora and Isaac are about it.

Stiles appreciates that for the moment. He says, “Let’s open up the floor for clear and respectful communication. Isaac, why don’t you go first?”

“I said what I needed to say,” Isaac mutters and crosses his arms.

“Okay. Cora?”

“I’ve said what I needed to say,” Cora deliberately mocks.

Stiles shoots her a warning look.

Cora scowls and hunches down in her seat.

“Boyd,” Stiles says. “Did you have something you wanted to say?”

“Yes, actually,” Boyd says and divides his gaze between bouncing from looking at Cora to looking at Isaac. “While you two are so busy being frustrated with each other, neither one of you asked me how I felt or what I thought.”

Stiles silently thanks him for making such a valid point.

“You keep saying I’m your best friend, but you never told me about being a Werecat,” Boyd points out. “Not saying you owed me that explanation, but it did hurt, man. It felt like you didn’t trust me.”

“That’s not it!” Isaac exclaims. “I just...I didn’t want you to look at me any differently.”

“But you are different,” Boyd retorts, not unkindly. “I celebrate your differences, Isaac. Just as I’m sure you would for me. I’m black, so I know how to embrace diversity from personal experience.”

Isaac nods sheepishly. “Sorry,” he mumbles.

Boyd sighs and shakes his head. “You don’t have to be sorry. I just want you to know that I’m not going to judge you for anything other than you lying to me. No need for secrets.”

Isaac swallows and nods again.
“Now why are you so against me being with Cora?”

Isaac glowers and crosses his arms again. “I’m not like...against it,” he reluctantly admits.

“What is it then?” Boyd is saying. “Do you have feelings for Cora? Is that it?”

Isaac goes pink in the face while his arms remain stubbornly crossed. He mutters, “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

Cora gives him a wide eyed look as her scowl falls away as her jaw drops.

Boyd doesn’t look surprised by this response. If anything, he appears even more determined when he asks, “Do you have feelings for me?”

Isaac swallows and, voice a little shakier, repeats, “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

Cora glances between them as her own face goes pink with disbelief.

Isaac suddenly gets defensive. “Look, I just can’t — I don’t understand how I feel. You both know it works differently for me,” he confesses. “I don’t think it’s...love or anything, or maybe it is, I don’t know. It could be something close to it, and you know, it’s not like I want to kiss either of you or hold your hand. But the thought of you two being together and leaving me behind makes me want to cry.” He exhales shakily. “So yes there are some feelings.”

“Oh…” Cora is staring at Isaac and any traces of animosity that were present before are completely gone now. “Oh. Oh, Isaac. You absolute butthead. You should have just said that.”

“Don’t call me a butthead,” Isaac weakly argues, growing flustered at her affectionate tone. “I’m still not sure I even like you.”

Cora just grins as her shoulders fall into a relaxed line. “Out of anyone, you should have known that I would have understood what you mean. You think I would try so hard to make things right and apologize if I didn’t care about you?” she says as she sends Boyd a look.

Boyd starts to grin with a slight nod, as he adds, “Cora and I would never leave you behind. We don’t expect you to conceal, and don’t feel. You’re our forever too.”

“Right, because some people are worth melting for.”

Isaac makes an exasperated sound as his flush darkens. “God, I hate you both. I really do,” he lies. “Don’t think for a second that quoting Frozen will win me over either. That wasn’t even gracefully done.”

Boyd and Cora smirk at each other, and they have a six second conversation in French before they nod in agreement and stand to their feet.

Isaac looks horrified when they approach him with open arms.

“Only true love can thaw a frozen heart,” Boyd and Cora sing simultaneously as they engulf Isaac in a hug.

Stiles smiles as he rises from the table and quietly slips away to the front porch.

Isaac is loudly complaining about this mistreatment but it’s obvious that he’s doing it all for show.
Dear Stiles,

Attached you will find some awesome pictures of me and my cousins successfully sneaking into the Short Shorts Film Festival and Asia. We even met Ryuhei Kitamura! It was so cool! I felt like I was going to throw up all over him, I was so nervous! I realize I could have texted all this, but I figured since I was going to email you anyway, I might as well make you a powerpoint! So I did. Enjoy.

Kira xoxo

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Stiles is swaying lazily in one of the white wicker hanging chairs with the bible of Virtues spread open across his lap (Kate’s in the other chair eating some week old watermelon) when Laura and Peter roll up in his hotrod red Lamborghini.

“Guess my holiday has come to an end.” Kate sighs, licking the juices from between her small, thin fingers.

“Ah, so you were avoiding us!” Laura exclaims with an amused grin as she and Peter climb the steps. “What’d you do this time?”

“Parrish,” Kate casually comments.

Peter stumbles on the top step and sends her a sharp look when she laughs.

Stiles snorts and coughs when Peter tosses him a glare.

Laura just sighs and steals the rest of Kate’s watermelon as she sits down by her dangling legs.

“When?” Peter asks as he stares intently at his girlfriend.

“Monday night.”

“Venue?”

“His place. I wanted a hotel but he fought against it. He lives in such a shitty, out of date house.”

Peter runs his fingers through his hair as he makes a vague sound of agreement.

“I told you I was okay with it. Okay with him. Okay with us.”

“You have an amusing way of driving a point home,” Peter mutters dryly.

“Actions speak louder than words, as they say.”

Peter doesn’t respond. He’s already pressing his smartphone to his ear.

“Are you mad?” Kate asks, but she doesn’t sound worried. More intrigued and excited if anything.
“Do you want to spank me?”

“Both of you actually,” Peter replies as he turns his back to all of them. “Kyle. Don’t hang up. My girlfriend just told me some interesting news. Seems the three of us are long overdue for a conversation. Why don’t we meet for dinner at the Rainbow River Hotel downtown?”

Kate’s grin turns wicked as she quickly climbs to her feet.

“Hang on,” Laura protests as she climbs to her feet. “You two aren’t about to ditch me to go bang Kyle, are you?”

Peter doesn’t confirm or deny and Kate just blows her some kisses as they trot to Peter’s car. She says something to Peter before she doubles back to climb into her own car.

“Ugh,” Laura groans and shakes her head. “You’re paying for my Uber!” she shouts at them.

Their response is the screech of tires against the asphalt as they both zoom out of sight.

Stiles closes his bible and rises to his feet. “We have leftovers from last night’s dinner if you’re hungry.”

“I’m always hungry.”

Stiles snorts and watches her disappear into the house. He doesn’t quite follow yet, he has this indescribable urge to let himself linger for a moment longer. He walks forward until he’s standing at the very top step of the porch stairs and he squints his eyes as he peers out to the end of the road up ahead.

The curfew siren rings loud and clear in the distance.

Three minutes later, Deaton’s white Toyota Prius is rolling down the street.

Stiles is giddy with excitement and he all but runs up to his mentor’s car when he parks it in the driveway.

Deaton exits shortly after, and though his face is neutral, there’s something in his eyes that says he’s amused by Stiles’s enthusiasm. “Mr. Stilinski,” he greets. “Would you care to lend me a hand with retrieving your blueprints?”

“I do not care at all,” Stiles swears. He senses his magic vibrating somewhere in the upper part of the house. “Take as many of my hands as you need!”

Deaton gives a short nod as the corner of his mouth quirks for less than a second. He gestures to the back seat after he opens the door. “Easy,” he lightly rebukes when Stiles practically leaps in his car to snatch up as many of the rolled up papers he can.

“Sorry,” Stiles mumbles, face a bit pink as he slides out of the car with his arms full. “This is all I can manage. I’m guessing you’ll grab the rest?”

“You are correct. Go ahead and take them inside. We’ll decide which ones you want to keep and which ones will be returned.”

Stiles nods and treks back to his house before venturing inside to lay everything on the kitchen table. He’s never been more grateful that his Aunt Lorraine has expanded it.

Cora, Boyd, Laura, and Isaac are in the living room watching the latest episode of Kitchen
Laura is sitting in his dad’s chair, balancing a plate of microwaved leftovers from last night on her right knee as she uses her left hand to text away on her smartphone.

Isaac is curled up in his favorite arm chair with his etch-a-sketch again, drawing what looks like a comic worthy version of Gordon Ramsey.

Cora is sitting on the floor beside him, hugging her legs to her chest as she leans slightly towards him with her left shoulder grazing his hip.

Boyd is seated in the middle of the long couch with his arms spread out on the back of it while he snickers at something Isaac points out.

Soon Cora is snorting as well while she says something that makes both Boyd and Isaac laugh explosively.

Stiles is glad to see they have completely worked out their issues enough to be at least on friendly terms again. He glances around some more before heading to his back door to peer out into his backyard.

It’s empty, save for the cluster of fireflies swarming under the dusty pinkish orange sky.

Stiles frowns and closes the door before returning to the kitchen.

Deaton is just in the middle of dropping the rest of the blueprints onto the kitchen table.

“Be with you in a sec,” Stiles says before he approaches the living room. “Hey guys, have you seen Lydia?”

“She’s in the basement with your aunt,” Isaac says as he hands Cora his etch-a-sketch when she insists on taking a picture to save for later. “Don’t put that on Instagram.”

Cora snorts. “I’m putting it on Snapchat.”

“What’s a Snapchat?”

“You’re kidding, right? Where have you been?”

Isaac rolls his eyes and looks to Boyd. “What’s a Snapchat?” he asks again.

Boyd smirks in amusement. “I’ll show you later if you ever get your phone back,” he promises.

Cora twists so she can stare up at Stiles. “Do you have a Snapchat? Add me if you do.”

“I honestly don’t even know what you’re talking about,” Stiles admits.

“Not you too,” Cora complains, wrinkling her nose. “Next you’ll say you don’t know what Tumblr is.”

“I don’t know what Tumblr is,” Stiles laughs.

Laura cackles from across the living room as she says, “Don’t be fooled, Blue. Cora wasn’t in the know about it either until a few months ago.”

“Shut your big mouth or I’ll unfollow you,” Cora mutters.
Laura scoffs between bites. “With my ample fanbase? Would I even be able to tell you had?”

“Ouch, major burn,” Stiles chimes before he turns to rejoin Deaton in the kitchen while Cora continues to fuss at her older sister. “Sorry, I’m totally ready and my attention is completely yours.”

Deaton doesn’t comment on the apology but he does begin to unfold the first blueprint within reach. “Have a seat. This may take a while,” he warns.

Stiles sits across from him while Deaton pushes the first blueprint over to him. He takes a moment to eye the layout of the whole property (with the house excluded).

“This model is a copy just for you, so whatever diagram key you want to write in the corner here to indicate what you would like to put where, I will mirror it,” Deaton says as he hands him the appropriate writing and measuring tools to do so.

“Uh, well, I mean I’m really not talented when it comes to drawing,” Stiles confesses. “Not like my little brother is. I got stick figures down, but everything else is a lost cause.”

“You don’t have to draw anything extraordinary, Mr. Stilinski,” Deaton assures. “You can use shapes to represent what you would like to plant where. For example, here you can draw circles to represent the Mother Queen’s solidified placement in the landscape.”

“Ah, okay yeah, that’s definitely doable,” Stiles says before taking a moment to draw a leaf to mark and represent Nana before adding it to the diagram key.

Deaton mirrors the placement exactly.

Stiles drums his knuckles against the table for a moment as he thinks. “So, if memory serves correctly, the fences are here and here and here,” he supposes as he uses a ruler to draw the lines.

Deaton nods in approval as he mirrors that as well on his own copy. Then he says, “We’ve got the basics out of the way. You’ve done good so far. Now let’s focus on the areas left over.” He leans over to grab a few blueprints. “I brought some examples of other gardens to assist in giving you an idea of which way you might want to go about your own.”

Stiles nods and watches Deaton unroll the first sample.

“This is a basic Human garden. Note the position of the bushes, the walkway, the arches and the lawn furniture. It has the intention of giving comfort to the home owners and their guests,” Deaton points out. He swaps out the blueprint for another. “Now here we have a Deer Woman’s garden. Note the placement of the gazebo to the lily pond. There absence of grass where sand has replaced the walkable area. This design has the intention of being only exclusive to the person who tends it...”

This line of conversation continues for the next two hours, with Deaton showing him samples of other gardens to influence his own inspiration. In the midst of all this, Laura orders several pizzas (that everyone partakes of in the living room since the kitchen table is thoroughly occupied). Stiles is too distracted with drawing in his final placements (with Deaton mirroring everything he does) to really make himself eat.

Meanwhile his Aunt Lorraine and Lydia reappear from the basement (Lydia looking a lot more settled and at peace). She announces that she’s taking Lydia home shortly after, offering to drop off anyone else if needed but everyone else shakes their head. Lydia juggles between feeding her jeweled egg more of her magic and giving Stiles a loose armed hug over his shoulders.

Stiles returns it distractedly before erasing a mistake on his blueprints that Deaton is kind enough to
point out (making sure to offer an alternative suggestion).

Lydia and Aunt Lorraine are grabbing each other’s hands before disappearing under spark of white
light, a rumble similar to thunder, and a puff of blue smoke.

While Cora wanders over to demolish the last of the pineapple and chicken pizza, she sends Stiles a
look he almost misses and asks, “Is your aunt a witch?”

“I thought Isaac would have told you.”

“Why would I be asking if he did?” Cora replies as she sends him an exasperated look.

“Yeah, she is but how did you accurately guess that?”

“Her smells like ozone and hot metal,” Cora responds simply before hauling the pizza box to the
living room. She starts fussing at Laura when she flips the channel to watch the premiere of
something called *Catfish*.

“I think this is enough for now,” Deaton announces as he glances at his watch briefly while he stands
and begins to gather his things, as well as the leftover blueprints. “If you’re satisfied with the layout,
I’ll get it laminated and have it ready for you to take home tomorrow.”

“Okay, thank you,” Stiles says with a satisfied sigh. He’s feeling pretty good about things by far. It’s
like he’s just completed a challenging project, and he’s on the path to getting rewarded for his efforts.
“When should I stop by?”

“ Noon, exactly,” Deaton instructs and gives Stiles a grateful nod when he starts helping him carry
everything to his car. “We’ll talk about my findings for the Nymph, and we can discuss how my
conversation went with Braeden’s older sister went. They may be stopping by tomorrow. I also want
to get you started on studying botany charms and enchantments.”

“I’m on board with all of that,” Stiles says as he stretches (even with his arms full) and winces while
he follows his mentor outside. The ache in his bones is returning and a flash of heat zaps through
him. He stumbles a bit down the porch steps but he makes it to the white car parked in his driveway
without injury.

Deaton places the blueprints in his arms in his backseat and watches as Stiles struggles to do the
same. He frowns thoughtfully and says, “Come here, Mr. Stilinski.”

Stiles ventures closer to him and stands directly before him.

Deaton lifts both hands and keeps them hovered over Stiles’s temples. He closes his eyes in
concentration, his eyes moving rapidly under the lids.

Stiles fidgets but doesn’t question it as the ache in his bones thrums under his muscles like a low
simmer. It’s cool out since the sun has long set but he still breaks out in a sweat.

Deaton drops his hands with a thoughtful sound. “I suspected this may happen, but you’ve
developed such an abnormally strong bond with your magic already that I assumed you may never
go through this stage in your development,” he says as he steps back, gazing intently at Stiles
calculatingly.

Stiles fidgets with uncertainty. “What do you mean?”

“The Changing Fever,” Deaton explains plainly. “To be rather blunt, it’s puberty for the
supernatural. It’s the phase where you gain your paranormal inheritance.”

Stiles uses the back of his arm to wipe the sweat from his forehead. “Should I be worried?”

Deaton shakes his head. “It’s normal, but I believe the term ‘late bloomer’ applies in this situation. A high percentage of the paranormal go through this phase around twelve or thirteen,” he clarifies. “It’s still early stages yet. You have a few weeks, give or take, before you’ll be incapacitated for a couple of days as your body gives over to the adaptation. I’ll talk to your father so he can be prepared to nurse you through it.”

Stiles nods with a yawn and attempts to stretch again. It doesn’t really help but he feels the urge to do something because his skin feels too tight over his aching bones.

“Try and get some rest,” Deaton continues. “You did well today, Mr. Stilinski.”

Stiles grins sheepishly but he’s secretly pleased to hear the older man say as much to him. “Have a good night,” he replies, stepping more into the grass and out of the way so he can watch his mentor give a short nod before climbing into his car.

Deaton’s starting up his car one minute and then backing off before he drives out of sight the next.

Stiles closes his eyes as he lets the cool night air settle around him before he shivers when the ache in his bones disappears completely. He jumps when his pocket vibrates and when he pulls his phone free, he sees it’s his dad calling. “Hey, dad. What’s the word?” he asks, carefully concealing his anticipation.

“I didn’t forget about you,” his dad promises with fatherly amusement. “Talia and I had a long discussion about what this relationship between you two kids will mean going forward. She enlightened me about a few things, and vice versa. That being said, we have a good understanding now. So, I know it’s late, but if you still wanted to spend the night, you have my permission. Talia said she can pick you up if you needed her to, so just call her if so.”

“Okay,” Stiles says and he can’t hide his excitement now. “You’re the best dad, you know that right?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. You just watch yourself. I trust you and Derek to make good decisions.”

“Dad…”

“Goodnight, Stiles.”

“Night.”

His dad ends the call.

Stiles wanders over to the house with a grin as he texts Derek.

So no big deal but I’m on my way over.

Derek’s quick response is both funny and sweet.

Yeeeeeefes! Come to me!

Ridiculous.

Yeah fine whatever you say just hurry up!!!
Stiles laughs as he sprints up the steps, pocketing his phone just as the house trembles with Aunt Lorraine’s reappearance. His grin falls as he thinks of Kate’s earlier words and he feels awkward when she shoots him a genuine smile while he closes the front door behind him.

“Shall I make you something, sweet nephew? You haven’t eaten,” Aunt Lorraine says as she gestures him closer to rest a cool palm on his cheek. “How about some soup?”

“Uh, no thanks. I’m on my way out the door,” Stiles says and scans her face for any signs of malice but there’s nothing but warm affection to be found. Her touch isn’t sending any warning bells to his gut either.

Aunt Lorraine grins fondly and her expression is whimsically sad. “Yes, I was afraid you might say that. Very well. We have plenty of time to catch up, I suppose,” she promises before turning away with a cheerful facade. “Who’s up for some homemade gooseberry tarts?”

Cora and Isaac, who are still in the living room fighting over Isaac’s etch-a-sketch, pause with evident interest.

Boyd politely declines while he accepts the remote from Laura when she hands it over before wandering over to Stiles.

“ Heard we might be headed in the same direction,” Laura slyly comments as she follows him up the stairs and into his room. She settles on his bed as she watches him pack an overnight bag. “We can share an Uber. It’s Kate’s treat after all.”

Stiles nods distractedly as he stuffs his backpack with things he things he might need.

Laura crosses her legs and leans back on her elbows. “So...you and Derek?” she presses.

Stiles rolls his eyes as he zips up his bag. “Obviously you were eavesdropping, so just ask what you want to,” he replies.

“Oh I already know, I’m just teasing,” Laura cackles as she uses her smartphone to summon the Uber. “I’m happy for you two. I really am. Mother Moon couldn’t have paired a better Match.”

“Thanks. I think. What exactly is a Match?” Stiles asks as he turns of his light and exits his room.

“Oh you’ll soon find out,” Laura promises and watches him pause at the top of the steps to summon his magic from its frolicking with Nana and the fireflies in the backyard. “Uber is pulling up in a minute.”

Stiles nods as he opens his mouth and swallows his magic down. It settles anxiously in his gut and he gets the impression that it’s way more excited than he is about seeing Derek tonight. He hugs his brother goodbye before he leaves, and Isaac gives him that unhappy look he always does when Stiles goes elsewhere.

Isaac likes to keep him close.

Cora rolls her eyes and manages to remove the etch-a-sketch from his slack grasp while he’s distracted. “He’s not leaving forever,” she wryly comments.

“Bud out. You let me worry about my brother,” Isaac complains but shifts over in his favorite armchair so she can share it with him. “Also, that’s not how you draw a banana.”

“That’s not how you draw a banana,” Cora mocks.
Boyd rolls his eyes at the two of them before twisting from where he’s seated on the middle of the long couch to do a quick handshake with Stiles. He says, “Take it easy, man. Thanks for your help earlier.”

“I really didn’t do anything,” Stiles replies with a shrug.

“If you say so, but I know different,” Boyd confidently states before he turns away to up the volume on a rerun episode of *Wild 'N Out*.

“The driver is here,” Laura says, already halfway out the door.

Stiles is soon to follow when he waves one final time to his Aunt Lorraine (who is elbow deep in dough and gooseberries).

Laura gestures for him to climb into the backseat of the rumbling minivan first before she joins him.

Stiles leans back after he buckles up and idly listens to Laura and their driver make small talk with each other while he flips through the powerpoint Kira sent him in her latest email.

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From: stilinski_kid99@gmail.com
To: mskirathunderkat@outlook.com
5/7/14

Kira

*Your pictures in the powerpoint were awesome. Can I reiterate how jealous I am?*

*Things are picking up fast for me. I went to Chicago recently. Did I mention that? I should have. Well maybe not Chicago, but we went to Six Flags for Laura’s birthday. It was pretty amazing. It was only a few days ago, but I can’t help but to think back to the beginning of this year when I had literally no friends to speak of and most of my time was spent indoors by myself. Time certainly flies, but I feel like I want to remember everything, you know?*

*Sometimes I think I should make a video time capsule and address it to myself for fifty years from now, or to my future kids, or grandkids. I mean, these can be just as good as home movies and you can do a range of things. I might go nuts with this video. Maybe dress up in seventies attire or wear a dress made entirely of Doritos bags.*

*It’ll give my future kids or grandkids something to laugh about. I think I would mostly complain to them just how embarrassing I used to be. Or I think I could be serious enough to talk about the issues of today and my hope for the future. Like beneficial environmental changes, or excellent breakthroughs with medical technology.*

*I, for one, would selfishly hope that WiFi will be free someday in the future. This is a simple pleasure. Anyway, I took an Uber with Laura and she and our driver got on this big debate about the value of a bucket list. Everyone has a bucket list, I think. Even those who think they don’t but do.*

*Honestly, I believe a bucket list doesn’t always have to be confined under the umbrella of things you want to do before you die. Sometimes it’s a list of things you want to do before you reach a certain age, or move to a certain country or state. Sometimes it’s a list of things you want to do before you get married or have kids.*
What would your bucket list be?

Stiles

The Hale Manor is dark and abnormally quiet by the time Laura and Stiles roll up to the house. Laura exchanges a few parting pleasantries with the driver before she sends him on his way and grabs Stiles’s right hand to lead him around the house to the garage. They enter through the door there, and into the kitchen (the only lit room of the house at the moment), where Talia and Derek are already conversing over some cups of hot cocoa and s’mores.

Derek, like the ridiculous person he is, is outfitted in a dark blue wolf pajama onesie. Talia is wearing a long, dark red silk nightgown with her hair tied back in a low ponytail.

Derek’s face instantly brightens and he quickly slides off his stool to engulf Stiles in an enthusiastic hug that has Stiles’s heart hammering like a jackrabbit while his cheeks turn pink under Talia and Laura’s watchfully amused gazes.

“Laura, I’m surprised to see you,” Talia murmurs as she gazes at her oldest daughter over the rim of her cup. “Understandably so, when you made it very clear you planned to never return.”

Laura walks over with a shrug as she takes a moment to stand between her mother’s knees, leaning forward to steal one of her s’mores while casually baring the line of the left side of her neck. She says, “It’s exhausting being mad at you. I don’t even know why I bother.”

Talia snorts but uses her free hand to press a prominent scent mark to the back of Laura’s neck before she pulls away just as quickly. “As frustrating as you are, my door will always be open to you, luce dei miei occhi,” she murmurs before gracefully flicking her fingers like a queen dismissing a fellow courtier. “Now run along. I need to have a private talk with your brother and Stiles. I’ve already given your room to Delilah, so you’ll have to stay in Cora’s tonight. Braeden’s been sharing her room but tonight she’s away visiting her older sister.”

Laura just shrugs before she snatches up another s’more and with a wink and an impish grin, she says, “Have fun.” She does that stupid finger-guns thing at Stiles and Derek before she prances out of the kitchen with a snicker.

Stiles shakes his head as Derek finally pulls away from their elongated embrace and makes a show of grabbing his left hand, like, right there in front of his mother with no shame.

Derek uses the grip to drag Stiles over to the island counter.

Stiles scrambles to sit on the stool beside Derek as they both sit across from Talia.

“Stiles, can I offer you some hot chocolate?” Talia asks as she pins him with an eagle-eyed stare. “I want you to feel at home here. I have a feeling that if my son gets his way, as he often somehow seems to, your visits will be increasing in number.”

Stiles turns pink again, and he knows without really knowing that she’s teasing him somehow. “Uh, no. I’m okay,” he manages to mutter.

“Mom, stop,” Derek groans and rolls his eyes as he picks up his own steaming cup. He pauses when he hears Stiles’s stomach gurgle. “So you are hungry,” he accuses.

Stiles crosses his arms and he means to look defensive but he just ends up hugging himself instead. “I
kinda...got sidetracked earlier. I meant to eat but then Deaton came over and we started working on the layout for my garden. I mean Laura ordered some pizzas but like I said, I was too distracted to eat. And then my Aunt Lorraine offered to make me something but you were rushing me, so like, this is kind of your fault, I think,” he rambles.

Derek shoots him an exasperated look but he’s already sliding off his stool to round the island counter for the fridge. He says, “I think we still have some leftovers from dinner. Do you like shepherd's pie? It has lamb in it.”

Stiles’s stomach gurgles again as his mouth waters. “Nope, no complaints from me. I'll even eat it cold if you wanna go ahead and hand that over,” he partially begs.

“You can wait like two minutes, Stiles,” Derek retorts as he pops the porcelain bowl in the microwave above the stove.

“Now that you’ve put the idea in my head, I really don’t think I can.”

Talia smiles behind her cup of hot cocoa in amusement.

Stiles fidgets and fiddles with Derek’s plate of s’mores shyly. He kind of forgot she was present for a second there.

A moment later, the savory smelling dish is being set before him and he uses the spoon he’s given to dig in immediately. He groans in pleasure and just goes to town on the pie.

Derek returns to his place at Stiles’s side as he watches him devour his food with red ears and a satisfied grin.

“It’s very good, isn’t it?” Talia says as she reaches for a s’more and eats it. She politely places a hand over her mouth as she continues, “Derek and his father are responsible, if you must know.”

Stiles shoots Derek a look at that. “Another thing to add to the list of things you are unfairly good at making, huh?”

Derek gives a humble shrug but he seems really pleased otherwise.

Talia waits until Stiles takes his last bite before she speaks. Calmly, voice low like a murmur, she says, “Anyone listening and is open to the sound of my voice, I’m giving you five minutes to put in your ear plugs or some headphones. This conversation is to be kept private.”

Derek pushes his plate of s’mores over to Stiles in silent offering while they wait out the next five minutes.

Stiles takes about two or three s’mores and tries to patiently wait as his magic squirms in his gut in thrilled anticipation.

Talia waits an extra minute, cocking her head as her gaze wanders aimlessly for a moment while she listens. Finally, she nods in satisfaction and continues, “I’m under the impression that you two have decided to move forward in your friendship and escalate it to dating?”

Derek and Stiles nod.

“Okay,” Talia simply says. “Let’s get a few things out in the open, then. Stiles, do you know what a Match is?”
“No idea. I mean I’ve heard Cora and Derek say it a few times recently but before yesterday I’d never even heard of it.”

“Thank you for your honesty. I will be happy to explain,” Talia replies. “Matches are a very private subject, and it’s not something to discuss socially with outsiders on a whim. It is a very versatile term, being defined differently by different individuals, as it is related to the concept of love or soulmates.”

“Ah,” Stiles says weakly. He’s not really surprised, he kind of had his suspicions, but it’s a bit overwhelming to have it verbally confirmed. “How do, uh...how do Matches work? Is this normal for everyone in the supernatural community?”

Talia appears to expect this question. “It’s exclusive only to Werewolves. I’m sure other paranormal cultures have their own defining terms when it comes to relationships, but this one we have claimed as ours.”

Stiles nods as he fidgets and his cheeks heat with his next question. “Um, Derek is — I mean am I — how can we tell?” he stammers.

“It’s something we, as wolves, can tell right away. Though deny it we may try in some occasions, instinct always prevails,” Talia explains. “To put it in perspective, the sensation is as certain as knowing that you’re hungry or thirsty. The feeling itself ranges widely and cannot exactly be pinpointed. Werewolves can have many Matches throughout their lifetime, or they can have one True Match. No matter which is which, you can find yourself feeling ‘completed’ by the other person. It is a connection that is about mutual evolution rather than instantaneous harmony. All relationships take a bit of work, but with a Match, things move more fluidly.”

Stiles takes that all in and allows himself a moment to think back on how his relationship with Derek has evolved over the months. Sure there was a rocky start, but the forward momentum of it never felt forced or counterfeit. He’s already honestly thought to himself more than enough times about how easy he thinks it would be to spend the rest of his life with the other teen. Despite his initial reluctance, he thinks he’s always known he’s wanted it all to end up this way.

Seriously, he can sit here and try to fantasize about a life where he and Derek don’t end up together somehow and all it does is registers different levels and variations of wrong in his mind. He thinks of his staggering lack of relationships in the past and he wonders if he’d been unintentionally waiting for Derek this whole time.

His magic decides that this is the best moment to gloat.

**Did I not already tell you? His wolf calls to us. He is what we desire: free spirit, wild heart.**

*Yes, yes, geez I know I’ve been slow on the uptake but maybe things were meant to happen at this pace.*

**Do not misunderstand me. Why should I care about the journey as long as we reach the destination? He is our Twin Flame, but this you’ve always known, even if you never wanted to acknowledge it.**

*Twin Flame? What’s that?*

**It’s the closest Human term to ‘love’ that equals the expression in the language of the Faeries. It is someone you burn for, who in turn, burns for you. An all-consuming fire that is without end.**

*Matches and Flames. God, this is a lot to take in.*
“Take it in, Princeling. Truth bends for no creature.

I’m sure it doesn’t. But still.

“Did you have any other questions?” Talia probes, mistaking his silence for confusion.

Stiles blinks and presses his magic down before he replies, “Oh, well, I was just thinking over everything you’ve said so far.”

“Yes, I imagine,” Talia responds knowingly. “It’s sometimes hard for outsiders to grasp if they did not grow up in a Werewolf household. If you don’t have any other questions, we can move on to the next topic, which is the stages each Match goes through.”

Stiles shakes his head and eats another sticky s’more. The soft graham cracker breaks easily under the pressure of his teeth.

“There are four stages,” Talia goes on to say. “The first stage is the Primary Compatibility, which is based on personality, a basic connection, and scenting. Do you believe that you two share common interests and values?”

Derek glances over to Stiles and lifts his eyebrows but Stiles gets the message being relayed to him, so he’s the one to respond confidently with, “Yes, we do.”

Talia nods as she folds her hands over the surface of the island counter. “And Derek, how has the scenting been? Any complications, or warning indicators?” she asks.

Derek fidgets as a flush rides up the back of his neck to the top of his ears. “Yeah, uh,” he pauses to clear his throat. “It’s been really good. Really good,” he admits. “Sometimes I get carried away.” He quickly adds, when Talia lifts an eyebrow at that, “But not too carried away.”

“I see. Thank you for your honesty,” Talia replies, voice lilting with humor. “I trust you, Derek, to control your actions. It’s perfectly normal to slip now and again, but if it becomes an issue, you need to let me know. I don’t want you to give him a claiming mark before the appropriate time.”

Derek flushes harder but he nods.

Talia shifts her gaze over to Stiles. “And you, Stiles? How has the scenting been? You can be honest. Derek can handle anything you have to say, I’m sure,” she assures and gives her son a warning look that urges him to prove this statement to be true.

“Mom, I won’t say anything,” Derek dryly states as he grabs a piece of chocolate and a marshmallow from a nearby bag.

Talia just makes a thoughtful sound as she gestures for Stiles to speak.

Stiles licks his lips nervously and says, “He’s...I mean it’s okay. Or no, that’s not fair. I’m kind of downplaying it. It’s really good, like Derek says. Just — he seems to always know what he’s, ah, doing?”

Derek scratches the side of his nose, which is his way of hiding a self-satisfied grin.

Stiles blushes and knocks him in his side with his elbow.

“Thank you for your honesty,” Talia repeats. “Scenting is very important for Werewolves. It expresses things like territorial marking, mood, and attraction. It’s also a social responsibility that
opens the door to giving and receiving respect. In this aspect, since we do have specific dynamics and ranks within the Werewolf community, it helps outline in the best way possible how we define ourselves and our place among others. Does that make sense?"

“Yeah, I think so,” Stiles responds. “What you’re saying, I believe, is that scenting is almost like another underlying way of communication to others of what your intentions are.”

“Exactly,” Talia confirms. “I know it can seem invasive at times, but it really is our way of talking to each other without words. Derek will be very interested in committing to this act with you more frequently than others since he considers you his Match. It’s instinctual more than anything, but you are allowed to refuse if you don’t want to. Scenting is also about social cues, but since you were not born a Were, we make sure to emphasize consent in this matter as well but it’s not normally an issue.”

“Mom’s right,” Derek agrees and gives Stiles an earnest look. “I feel like I’m pretty good at reading you but I’m open to the possibility that I can get it wrong sometimes, so if I’m making you uncomfortable or if the scenting doesn’t seem right or well-timed, you can let me know.”

“Okay,” Stiles acknowledges shyly.

Derek gives him a smile and grabs left hand with his right one, squeezing briefly before releasing. He nods at his mother.

Talia continues, “The second stage would be Kinship, which is where you form a fellowship with each other’s family, friends, and the like. This makes sense because if you two are going to be with each other for the foreseeable future, it’s best to explore how well you’re able to integrate yourselves in each other’s lives. Stiles, you’ve spent a very large amount of time with us. Do you feel as if you’ve gotten a glimpse of Derek’s lifestyle and interaction with his packmates and family?”

“I think so, yeah. Of course there’s always more to see or learn.”

“Very true.”

“But,” Stiles adds. “I think I’m pretty close with everyone here. I’m still working on Braedan, of course. Other than that, it always feels like a second home whenever I come over. That’s — I can’t say it’s ever felt like that anywhere else.”

“I’m very flattered,” Talia teases and Stiles huffs. She smiles and goes on to say, “All joking aside, you are always pleasant company. I know everyone here is fond of you as well. I once told you that you share a connection with our family that goes beyond the rationalization of Human relationships. I couldn’t pinpoint it at the time but I’m getting the full picture now. I look forward to officially solidifying your link with us someday.”

Stiles’s cheeks go pink when his eyes get a little watery, but it’s just that her prominent acceptance of him strikes such a deep chord within him, and he stammers as he says, “Thank you. I — yeah, I’m very fortunate to know you all.”

Derek rubs a heated palm up and down his back.

Stiles laughs wetly as he accepts the napkin Talia hands over. He feels a little embarrassed by his emotional response.

Talia doesn’t comment on it, but she addresses Derek next, if only to give Stiles a moment to gather himself. “How is your relationship with Stiles’s family and friends?”
“Pretty good,” Derek answers. “I haven’t met all of his friends yet, but the few I have, I mean, we’ve gotten along just fine. And I think Isaac and the sheriff like me well enough too. We’re all supposed to go to a baseball game tomorrow. I don’t know if dad told you.”

“He did,” Talia confirms. “I think that’s very good. It seems to me that family is important to you both, which is an excellent thing to share in common.”

Derek nods as he shifts his stool closer to Stiles’s and rests his arm over his shoulders.

“The next stage,” Talia continues. “Is the phase you should be in now, called the Settling. This is where you two will focus on developing an interpersonal relationship with each other. It’s the only way you can decide if you’re absolutely certain about spending the foreseeable future together. This means you will do different things to connect with each other on a deeper level. This is exercised by finding the right balance between individual time versus time spent together. You can learn how you are able to support each other and your dreams. Making sure that you feel safe to be open and honest, and more importantly, being able to properly navigate conflict and handle each other’s stress.

“When it comes to Matches, back in the day you would have to get express permission from each member of your household before you were allowed to transition into Settling. However, times have changed and the way we do things have evolved. Permission from the Alpha of the Pack is enough of a green light to go forward.” Here, Talia purposefully pauses, as though she’s building suspense. Finally, when she gets both Derek and Stiles to fidget with uncertainty under her eagle-eyed gaze, she says, “After everything I’ve seen, and after everything I’ve heard tonight, I am more than confident about the progression of things. So, yes, you have my explicit permission to continue on until you get to the Bonding stage.

“It’s the final state of the relationship. It’s marriage, if you need simpler terms. Should you and Derek decide to make the commitment an eternal one, you would accept his claiming mark during a ceremony attended by family and friends. It usually happens the night of a Third Quarter Moon, when the left side is most visible. Call us romantics, but we don’t do things in halves.”

“That’s something to revisit way in the future,” Derek quickly assures. “We’re not really near that point.”

Stiles scoffs and grabs the wrist of the arm Derek has draped over his shoulders. “Obviously,” he replies. “We’re like fifteen.”

“Fifteen and a half.”

“Oh gross, no, please tell me you’re not one of those.”

“He really is,” Talia chimes and chuckles when Derek shoots her a look of betrayal. “I’m going to bed now,” she announces, rising from her stool and tucking it close to the island counter. “Stiles, I think it goes without saying but make yourself at home. Be sure to clean up all this before you go, boys. I want to see your face before you leave tomorrow, Derek. Try not to sleep in too late since you have plans.”

Derek nods and jams another s’more in his mouth while she kisses the top of his head before pulling away. He grins behind the back of his hands.
“Tired?” Derek asks as he starts cleaning off the counter.

Stiles sighs as the ache in his bones starts to return in low waves. “Yes. No. I don’t know,” he replies. “Want me to help?”

Derek shrugs. “You can, but I’m fine otherwise.”

Stiles slides off his stool to help regardless because it’s what he needs to distract him from his physical discomfort at present. He works in silence with Derek, helping him by wiping down the counter once the other teen has cleared away all of the dishes and loaded them in one of the three dishwashers they have on hand.

Derek turns all three of them on before cutting off the lights and grabbing Stiles’s left hand to guide him through the dark to the stairs, up them, and into his room. He closes the door behind them as Jordan perks up from where he’s perched in the middle of Derek’s bed.

Stiles grins and crouches down when Jordan hops off the bed excitedly to run up to him. He spends a moment lavishing the dog with his attention, paying him compliments and rubbing him in some of his favorite spots. He catches Derek grinning to himself while he messes with his entertainment system out of the corner of his eye as he does and it makes one spread across his own face.

Derek puts the volume low as he straightens and doubles back to one of his dressers while he says, “I forgot to tell you not to bring any pajamas. I have something for you.”

Stiles straightens but barely has enough time to catch the matching dark blue wolf onesie. “You are so extra!” he exclaims and shakes his head. “Did you buy this so we could be identical?”

Derek laughs, leaping on his bed and situating himself against the pillows at his headboard. “Nah, I always had an extra one. I have this habit of buying three of everything when it comes to my clothes,” he admits before shifting his gaze to his smartphone.

Stiles frowns thoughtfully as he tucks away in the bathroom to strip down before hopping and wiggling into the onesie. He zips up the front opening and runs his hands over the soft short hairs. It feels really nice. “Why?” he asks when he exits.

“Why what?” Derek says, glancing up from where he’s texting on his phone.

“Why do you always buy three of everything?”

“I don’t know. I just like to be prepared in case of anything,” Derek supposes as he starts flipping channels, and pauses when he lands on a rerun of *Golden Girls*. He puts his remote down on his nightstand before patting the space beside him. “Come on. I’ve been waiting all day to see you.”

Stiles rolls his eyes and gnaws on his bottom lip to hide his fond grin as he treks over. He slides into bed and begins to purposefully putting up a wall of pillows between them while Jordan settles at the other end of the bed.

Derek makes an annoyed sound, knocking the pillows out of the way and using one to swat Stiles in the head.

Stiles laughs as he gets whacked in the face and dragged closer before Derek plants an apologetic kiss on his temple. He patiently allows Derek to rearrange them where he’s comfortingly propped up against the pillows lined against the headboard while Derek lies his head on his lap so he can face the TV.
Derek rumbles in pleasure when Stiles starts running his long fingers through Derek’s dark hair, lightly scratching at his skull. Under the collar of his onesie, he still has Stiles’s glittery blue handprint resting across his left collarbone.

Stiles is internally pleased to see it withstanding.

Derek huffs at something Sophia says to Blanche as he rubs his hand up and down Stiles’s leg. He waits until the episode ends and it cuts to commercial to say, “Do you want to tell me about your day? What kind of things did you get up to?”

Stiles takes a moment to think as Derek twists onto his back so he can stare up at him. Strangely (or really not so strangely) enough, Stiles feels completely comfortable with the attention as he rambles on about his experience at his first Paranormal Potluck Nightcap. He talks about the people he met and the numbers and invitations he got as a result of him networking. He takes a few minutes talking about his admiration of Kate having the courage to share what was probably one of her most intimately private memories.

Ultimately that reminds him of the bombshell she dropped on him about sleeping with Parrish but Derek huffs and rolls his eyes like he’s not even surprised. He’s probably not given the fact that he unfortunately has had the room under Peter’s for a number of years now. He also brings up Kate’s unsettling comment about his Aunt Lorraine.

From there he starts talking about everything he learned today about the difference between Vices and Virtues. He also brings up what Nana told him about the Great Migration, and the Territory Wars. He ends up asking questions about it and Derek is patient enough to answer him because, he admits, his Uncle Peter was always tasked with teaching him, Laura, and Cora about supernatural history and culture since none of them attended any of the private Were academies.

He spends the next moments after that discussing his work with Deaton and how they got through making viable landscaping plans for his backyard. He tries to downplay how much it meant to him but Derek seems to see right through his facade, smiling and asking the most clever and frustratingly accurate questions that Stiles can’t help but answer with an elated and anxious tone. This pattern continues until Stiles has laid all his plans bare and Derek has nothing else he can absolutely ask without already knowing the answer.

Sometime around midnight, Stiles eventually gets to talking about the whole mix up with Isaac, Cora, and Boyd, and how they were able to resolve things in the end. Of course at any mention of Cora at all, Derek gets this complicated neutral expression he puts on, and it reminds Stiles of the days when Derek would do the same each time someone inadvertently mentioned Paige after their messy breakup.

Stiles threads his fingers through Derek’s hair when Derek’s gaze grows distant, and he becomes quieted by his upset. “You know,” he murmurs lowly. “I wish you would tell me what she said that’s making you slip away from me right now.”

Derek blinks out of his thoughts and shifts his hazel green eyes up to him. “Huh?” he says with a furrowed brow.

“It’s very unsettling when you won’t tell me what Cora said that has you upset,” Stiles probes with a dry joke. “Did you just catch what I did there? I said ‘unsettling’ since we’re in the Settling stage.”

Derek rolls his eyes and makes an exaggeratedly wounded sound when Stiles tugs his hair gently like a reprimand. “I guess I’m just trying to convince myself that what she said wasn’t a big deal and I’m trying to not let it get to me. Like I said before, she’s not usually so cruel. I keep thinking that it
wasn’t really her talking, but the side effects of the Match. When you first encounter a potential True Match, your emotions kind of go on the fritz.”

Stiles thinks back about his first encounter with Derek and how bizarre it was to be cornered by someone he had initially considered to be laidback and friendly. He wonders if that’s what it was for them and he says as much aloud.

Derek stares up at him for a moment before he laughs softly. “Yeah, geez, as embarrassing as it is to admit, you’re right. I was hoping you wouldn’t connect the dots because that honestly was not one of my more charming moments.”

“Trust me, I know.”

Derek snorts. “If it makes you feel any better, I’ve regretted it ever since,” he confesses.

“Your attitude has vastly improved since then so I guess I can’t really hold you to it.”

Derek scoffs and grabs his left hand so he can kiss the fading bruise still resting on his inner wrist.

“Still waiting for you to tell me what she said.”

Derek groans and uses Stiles’s left hand to cover his eyes. “Pushy,” he mumbles. But louder, he says, “She accused me of being jealous, which, okay, whatever. No big deal normally, but what made it worse was when she followed it up by adding how it wasn’t her fault that I let my True Match slip through my fingers and now I’m just on the rebound.”

Stiles pauses at that, fingers twitching with his upset over Derek’s face and he knows it’s probably noticeable. “Oh,” he finally says and swallows. “I, uh, I’m sure she didn’t mean that.”

“That’s what she says.”

Stiles gnaws on his bottom lip as his magic swirls in his gut with rising agitation. It doesn’t help that the ache in his bones appear to be returning in consistent waves that makes it hard to ignore.

“Now you see why I’m not so quick to forgive her yet,” Derek gruffly states. He moves Stiles’s left hand from his eyes so he can stare up at the younger teen. “Anyone who insults you, insults me. There’s no separation with that.”

Stiles feels the corner of his mouth kick up slightly as his magic calms to an alarming degree at the words. “Oh yeah?” he challenges and watches Derek nod over his thighs. He leans down, when he can’t help himself, and he kisses the space between Derek’s eyebrows. Pulling away, he says, “Same here, big guy.”

Derek flushes in pleasure, and Stiles is pretty sure he’s mirroring the expression when Derek grabs his left hand to kiss at his fingertips.

“So, uh, I guess Paige was your True Match, huh?” Stiles asks carefully, keeping his tone neutral and braces himself for the disappointment that will shortly follow.

But Derek looks at him like he’s the craziest weirdo on the planet and, yeah wow, it’s been a long while since Stiles has seen that expression.

“What?” Stiles says defensively. “It’s — I don’t — I’d understand because — I’m just saying — uh. Look, it’s fine or whatever. Even though it wasn’t in your control how things ended, I get that there was — that you still have a part of you that cares about her. Which, I get, I do. Because it’s not like
you can forget what you felt —”

“She’s not my True Match.”

“— and she’s not your True Match.” Stiles pauses his ramblings as the words sink in. “She — what?”

“Paige isn’t my True Match,” Derek repeats slowly as he stares up at him calmly. “She never was. You’re the one I — seriously, babe, are you going to make me say it?”


Derek snickers, looking entirely at ease with the situation and he knocks a loose fist against Stiles’s jaw. “I’ve gotta use the bathroom,” he announces cheerfully as he rolls off the bed and goes to do just that.

Stiles exhales shakily as his shoulders slump in relief. He’s glad that his magic is sound asleep, otherwise he’s sure he’d be subjected to some merciless teasing in a heartbeat. He slumps down and grabs a pillow so he can attempt to smother his red face as he replays Derek’s candid words over and over in his mind. He squirms when his attention is caught by the ache in his bones and the heat searing its way through his muscles. He groans and presses Derek’s pillow harder to his face.

The bed dips a moment later and Derek is gently tugging the pillow away so he can hover over him with a concerned frown. “What’s wrong? Your heartbeat is doing that thing it does when you’re in pain,” he says.

“Will I ever stop being surprised by the things you notice about me?”

Derek smiles with a shrug before it vanishes again, replaced by a frown as he rubs his fingers over Stiles’s damp forehead. “You definitely shouldn’t be sweating,” he reasons.

“Maybe it’s this onesie you gave me. Also, you’re like a living furnace too.”

“Stiles, we have central air on as low as can be bearable for the Humans in the house.”

“Well you got me there.”

Derek looks like he wants to shake him but he just asks him again what’s wrong.

Stiles is reluctant to share (just out of embarrassment of being labeled as a ‘late bloomer’) what he’s recently discovered thanks to his mentor’s perceptiveness over identifying his paranormal growth spurt.

Derek is nothing but empathetic. “I remember what that was like,” he acknowledges. “Definitely don’t miss those days, but we all had to go through it. Mine struck pretty early on. Like when I was eleven, which isn’t unusual, but it’s not common either for males. Till this day I maintain it’s Cora’s fault because she was going through hers and we’ve always been so close that no one seemed surprised we were hit around the same time.”

“Did you feel like you were stubby?” Stiles questions as he stretches in such a ridiculous way that makes Derek laugh as he sits up. “What?”

“Your skin feels tight, you mean?” Derek snickers.
Stiles snorts as he settles down and folds his hands over his stomach while he lies flat on his back. He exhales in annoyance when another wave of ache sinks into his bones and a flare of heat has his skin and muscles tightening up.

“Hang on,” Derek says after a moment of watching him in slight worry. “I’ll be back. You can pick something to watch.”

Stiles accepts the remote Derek passes over while he climbs out of the bed and quietly exits the room. He shifts onto his side, scooting over because he honestly always prefers the right side of the bed, and so he can face the TV properly.

Jordan is snoring softly at the end of the bed.

Derek returns with a long, blue popsicle and a cool washcloth. He climbs into bed and hands over the popsicle while he lays the moist cloth over Stiles’s damp forehead. “The summer between sixth and seventh grade was pretty brutal, but my mom always stayed up with Cora and I at night during those particularly excruciating stretching blocks. She fed us popsicles and covered our forehead with cool washcloths until the pain passed,” he explains without prompting. He strokes the back of his hand over Stiles’s pink cheek. “Better?”

“Yeah,” Stiles sighs gratefully as he sucks on the cold popsicle. “God, you’re so good to me that it’s almost annoying. You’re like the curly fries at the bottom of the bag.”

Derek laughs softly as he rearranges Stiles so that he’s the one resting in his lap this time. “I’ll take that as a compliment, I guess. What are we watching?”

“Jumanji,” Stiles mutters around his popsicle. “You haven’t missed anything, it literally just started. Fair warning though, I might fall asleep halfway through.”

“I won’t mind,” Derek promises. “Never seen this movie before. I’m probably gonna watch it until the end.”

Stiles makes an exasperated sound. “Seriously? You’ve never seen Jumanji? How is that even possible?”

“It just is. I mean I know of it, but I haven’t watched it before,” Derek replies distractedly. The movie appears to already have his attention.

Stiles wants to pester and tease him more about it but he decides to be nice and just leave him be. True to his word, just as Alan Parrish meets the gaze of his old friend, Karl the police officer, in the rear view mirror and confesses his identity, Stiles drifts off with Derek rubbing absent-minded circles into his back.

With the smell of vanilla cloying to the inside of his nose and curling in his lungs, he sinks into the awaiting abyss of sleep.

He still has the popsicle stick in his mouth.

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Stiles jerks awake early Thursday morning to the noise of laughter, unnamable thumps and thuds, running feet, and streaks of sunlight pouring through the closed blinds landing on his face. Jordan’s resting heavily on his back, pressing his wet nose behind Stiles’s left ear with soft, quick breaths. He shifts and Jordan snuffles, sits upright, head cocked and tail wagging happily as he pulls back to let Stiles shift onto his back.
Stiles shoots the dog a small, grateful smile as he stretches contently with a yawn before looking over to where Derek is lying on his stomach with his head resting against a pillow cradled between his arms and the side of his face. His full bladder urges him to slip away and use the bathroom quickly. He doubles back to fish for his toothbrush in his backpack and ends up running into Laura in the bathroom.

Laura’s hair is wild from sleep but she still manages to pull off a particularly award winning pageant smile when she meets his gaze through the reflection of the mirror.

Stiles returns it when she scoots over to give him space at the double sink and they share some toothpaste between them as they brush their teeth together.

“I was on my way down to catch breakfast,” Laura announces after she spits and rinses. She takes a moment to brush out her hair. “Care to join me?”

Stiles nods and glances back in the room where Derek is still sleeping, internally debating whether or not he should wake the older teen.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t even think about it. Derek’s super grouchy when he’s forced to be awake against his will,” Laura warns, as though she can read his mind. She steers him out the bathroom, and they wander through Cora’s room to get to the hallway. She lets Jordan trot ahead of them when he trails after them. “He’ll come around if he smells the food and decides he wants in on the action. Otherwise, it’s best to leave him be.”

Stiles nods again and takes her words to heart. He realizes too late that he’s barefoot and that he’s still in Derek’s wolf onesie as he follows Laura down a flights of steps. He doesn’t feel like turning back at this point so he bravely ventures forward until they’re in the dining room.

It’s presently swarmed with young Hale children of all ages and sizes. Most of them are outfitted in the uniform of their academy: the boys are wearing red polo shirts under a dark blue blazer, with the insignia of the triskelion on the left breast pocket, and khaki shorts, which are belted at the waist with a leather belt; and the girls have the same, only they’re wearing plaid skirts with no belts and knee high socks with mary jane shoes.

It doesn’t look like any of their parents are around, and Stiles figures that most of the adults have already left for work since it is still a weekday after all. The kids only eat at the long oak table with names carved into it when most of the adults aren’t about.

Stiles settles between Laura and Delilah at the middle of the table while everyone passes around the servings of breakfast. He slides the tips of his fingers over the indentions of any name within reach while he waits for the platter of waffles to make it’s round to him. He secretly hopes that one day he’ll be given the permission to add his own name into the mix.

Talia is seated at the head of the table between Nana Hale and Derek Sr. (who is feeding Olive as she sits in her high chair).

The table fills up quickly and the dining room is abuzz with excited chatter, mostly over the events they’re expecting to do at their schools today. They swap homework sheets, and copy from each other, or fight over bottles of blueberry syrup, or Mickey Mouse shaped pancakes loaded with chocolate chips.

“You guys are still in school?” Stiles asks as he drowns his banana pancakes in vanilla cheesecake icing.
Delilah responds, “School doesn’t end for us until the first of July. We only get a month break before we start up again in August. All of the Were schools are strict about the length of time they let the students stay out of school. It’s viewed as a waste.”

“Wow, I don’t know if I should be impressed or sympathetic,” Stiles replies and grins when it makes Delilah laugh.

“Both, I think,” Delilah says. “Derek and Cora are the envy of the house during summer vacation. You guys go back in September right?”

“Middle of August,” Stiles corrects between bites.

Delilah nods and quickly snatches up the last tapioca pudding cup floating around.

Stiles grabs a couple of turkey sausages and bacon as he humoredly thinks about how everyone seems to pounce on food like they’re hunting in the wild for game.

Talia announces, “This is your six minute warning. The bus will be here soon to pick you up. It won’t wait.”

There’s a sudden flurry of movement as some pick up the pace to clear their plates, while others sprint from the table to locate their scattered bookbags or their shoes. Eventually they all evacuate the house at the sound of three warning honks coming from outside.

Derek Sr. and Talia go out of their way to come and talk to him for a moment while Olive tries to climb into his arms.

Stiles takes her with a laugh as Talia shakes her head in amusement. He knows what she must want when she claps her chubby baby hands over his cheeks with throaty, demanding, gurgly sounds. He pulls a bit of magic from his chest and forms a small, glittery blue duckling for her to play with while he continues exchanging pleasantries with her parents.

“I don’t really feel like we’ve had the chance to properly know each other,” Derek Sr. says with a kind smile. “Though my son talks about you extensively and enough for me to feel like we have already spent enough time together.”

Stiles flushes and laughs a little self-deprecatingly. “He doesn’t really do that, does he?”

Derek Sr. shrugs with a slight smirk and, yeah, wow, Cora and Derek are so his spitting image.

Talia scoffs and swats at her husband’s shoulder. “You know Derek would have a fit if he heard you teasing him like this.”

“Ah, but it’s my right as a father, I think,” Derek Sr. supposes with a playful grin as he wraps an arm around her waist and kisses her quick while she pretends to be annoyed. He bumps their noses together until she laughs and pushes his face away.

“Behave,” Talia implores.

“If I must,” Derek Sr. sighs before turning back to Stiles with a cheerful smile. “I was told that you share the same love I do for the sci-fi and fantasy genre.”

Stiles brightens as they begin discussing the latest Supernatural episode where Dean confronts Abaddon alone and succeeds in killing her with the Mark of Cain. They debate in great lengths about the effect the First Blade is having on the oldest Winchester sibling and their speculations about what
may happen in the next episode.

The conversation ends with Stiles making plans with Derek Sr. to attend Beacon Hills annual Fannibal Fantasy Convention happening next Sunday.

Derek Sr. and Talia carry off Olive (who fell asleep in Stiles’s arm, clutching his magic close) and travel elsewhere in the house while Laura and Stiles stay behind to help Nana Hale clear the table and load up the dishwasher.

Stiles downs about three glasses of orange juice just as Laura loads the last of the silverware and cups.

Nana Hale kisses the corner of Laura’s mouth with a murmured thanks before she turns to Stiles. She says, “Congratulations on your Match with Derek. I always had high hopes for you two.”

Stiles flushes as she kisses the back of his right hand and pats it sweetly (as she always does). He scrambles to say, “Thank you.”

Nana Hale merely smiles before she turns to Laura. “Since I know you have some time to spare, why don’t you help an old woman complete a quilt for the upcoming Assembly. I heard your cousin Cecilia plans on finalizing things with her Match and I want to give this to her as a gift for the bonding ceremony.”

“I’m a bit rusty, but I don’t mind lending a hand,” Laura assures. She hugs Stiles before they both exit the kitchen to settle in the living room.

Stiles talks himself out of and then into getting another glass of orange juice before he ventures back upstairs. By this time it’s about eight in the morning and Derek is still sound asleep when he returns to the room. When he walks closer, it’s just as he thought.

Derek has on those dark green heavy duty construction silicon ear plugs.

Stiles turns away to fish out his phone and his charger before returning to the other side of the bed to settle in again. He lets his phone charge as he idly checks his emails, his missed calls, and returns a few missed texts. When there’s nothing left to do, he puts his phone face down so that it can continue juicing up in peace and he shifts onto his side as he slides under the covers with his back to Derek. He spends a few moments staring at the light filtering through the blinds while he prays, trying out the advice that Nana gave him the other day and talks to Fate like he would to any other friend.

He gets distracted a few times and has to fight his way back to his original train of thought, but it feels a lot more fluid and organic than all the other previous times. He ends his prayers on a light note by being grateful for all that he has, and he hums to himself while he begins to drift off to sleep. He jumps a little when he feels the bed shift and he looks over his shoulder to see Derek removing his ear plugs and setting them on his nightstand.

Stiles shoots him an annoyed look as he attempts to get his heartbeat under control.

Derek makes a sleepy sound of amusement as he drags Stiles closer and presses his forehead between his shoulderblades, holding him by the waist. “You smell like you’ve been rolling in bananas,” he murmurs.

“What?” Stiles laughs quietly and instantly forgets his annoyance. “I mean, yeah, I just got back from breakfast. You missed out. There was waffles.”

Derek just mumbles something nonsensical before going right back to sleep.
Stiles rolls his eyes but he falls asleep shortly after too.

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Derek is kissing the knuckles of both of his hands the next time Stiles wakes. He gazes up at Derek with sleepy confusion as the other teen smiles down at from where he’s sitting on the edge of the bed (fully dressed in a pair of dark jeans with a San Francisco Giants jersey and a matching hat).

Stiles yawns and rubs at his eyes tiredly. “What time is it?” he asks from behind his hands.

“Quarter past eleven,” Derek replies as he watches him. “Your dad and your brother are here with Scott. So if you want to see them before we leave, you should get dressed now. Plus I know you said that you have to meet up with Deaton at noon, and as much as I like having you in my bed, I don’t want you to be late.”

Stiles groans, too tired to blush but he still shoots a hand out to swat at Derek’s face. “Ugh, and I was just about to thank you for your efforts,” he complains before he rolls over onto his other side with his back to the older teen.

Derek snickers and crawls after him, sitting close and begins to poke Stiles in his sides until he jerks with a laugh. “Why are you annoyed with me? I do like having you in my bed,” he insists as he keeps poking Stiles.

“Stop saying it like that,” Stiles complains between laughter.

“Like what?”

“Like you mean something different then what you mean.”

“I meant sleep, but yeah, if you really want me to be honest, sometimes I do think about all the things your mouth can do when I’m alone.”

“Derek!” Stiles squawks as he gets hot all over. “Jesus, I’m not even fully awake to entertain this conversation.”

Derek shrugs and goes back to tickling him. “The point is that I’d have you here everyday with me if I could.”

“Okay! Okay!” Stiles begs as he gasps out his laughs. “God, okay! Mercy! Uncle! Whatever!”

Derek grins but he eases off of him. “You sure you don’t want to come with us?” he asks.

Stiles makes a face that has Derek laughing.

“Fine, but I think this is a serious conversation we should revisit because I really like sports, and I’ll want to go to events with you in the future,” Derek warns as he slides out of the bed. “I’m going to go find my mom. I’ll meet you downstairs.”

Stiles just hums and waits until Derek closes his door behind him before he climbs out bed to get dressed. He takes a minute to account for everything before he tosses his backpack over his shoulder and exits the room. He can hear his dad’s voice floating up the steps from the foyer, and when he gallops down the stairs, sure enough, his old man is conversing cheerfully with Derek Sr. while Isaac and Scott talk amongst themselves.

Scott is the first to spot him, and Stiles barely has enough time to lift his foot from the last step before
he’s being ambushed by an enthusiastic hug.

Stiles laughs and returns the hug with equal vigor.

Scott pulls away with his trademark sunshiney smile and says, “Jackson texted me earlier. They’re going to release Danny tomorrow.”

“Really? That’s...good, yeah. I should see him today,” Stiles supposes. That nervous feeling returns and he still can’t quite place why that is. “You look...is that face paint?”

Scott nods proudly as he points at his face. There’s a one on his right cheek, and a six on the other cheek while his forehead reads ‘Pagán’ in black and orange. “He’s my favorite infielder,” he explains.

Stiles glances over Scott’s shoulder to see Isaac, his dad, and Derek Sr. dressed similarly as well (sport’s jerseys, hats, and all), but Scott’s the only one with face paint.

Isaac wanders over and he gives Stiles a quick hug before he says, “Dad is trying to make me wear one of those finger foams.”

Stiles laughs because he knows all too well what his little brother means. “Sorry, buddy. It’s like a rite of passage. My dad did it to me when he took me to my first game. I don’t think there’s any getting out of it,” he admits, voice tinged with humor and apology.

Isaac sighs as he crosses his arms. He mutters, “Yeah, I didn’t think so.”

“I like finger foams,” Scott declares with a happy grin.

“Scott, that doesn’t surprise me,” Isaac replies with a lifted brow and Stiles snorts but makes a sound of agreement. “You can wear mine then.”

“Oh, no need to be so generous, son,” the sheriff says, pausing his conversation with Derek Sr. (who looks on in amusement). “I plan on buying enough for you, Scott, and Derek.”

Isaac looks so comically devastated that Stiles almost chokes on his own spit in his haste to laugh.

“Dad,” Stiles chokes out as Isaac glares meanly at him. “Dad, please take pictures.”

“Oh don’t worry. I will.”

Scott’s attention gets snagged by the sight of Laura and Nana Hale still diligently working on a wide and long quilt with different, meaningful patchworks to them in the living room. He wanders over to question them about it and both Laura and Nana Hale seem charmed by his wide-eyed curiosity, answering his questions with endeared patience.

Derek gallops down the steps as he twists his hat to rest backwards on his head. “Hey, dad, mom wants to know if you can take Olive. She says she’s pumping some milk now to take with you if you can, and it should keep her under for most of the game,” he announces, draping an arm over Stiles’s shoulder and leaning into his side.

Derek Sr. exchanges some quiet words with the sheriff before he turns to disappear up the steps, presumably to grab his youngest daughter. On the way up, he says, “Derek, do me a favor and put her stroller and her car seat in the minivan. Both of them should be in your mother’s truck.”

Isaac perks up, going from annoyed to excited at the prospect of being able to spend some time with
the littlest Hale. “Do you need help?” he asks.

Derek nods with a grateful half-smile, and he’s pulling away from Stiles to trek through the dining room towards the kitchen with Isaac on his heels.

Stiles takes a moment to wander over to his dad and give him a one armed hug. “So where’s Cora and Boyd?”

“Last I saw, Boyd’s mother had swung by to pick them up. If they aren’t here, I’m assuming they went elsewhere,” his dad reasons. He rests a calloused hand on the crown of Stiles’s head as he looks him over with his normal amount of fatherly concern. “How are you feeling?”

Stiles scoffs. “Deaton must have talked to you,” he says.

The sheriff nods but waits for him to respond to his question.

“I’m fine,” Stiles assures as he pulls away. “For now. I mean the aches don’t feel nice when they hit, but it’s not like unbearable, you know?”

“Well I need you to tell me when it is,” his dad urges. “From the way that Deaton made it sound, I should be prepared to take off a few days of work.”

Stiles shrugs but he doesn’t try and tell his old man to do otherwise.

“Stiles,” his dad presses.

“Sorry. Yes, I will tell you if it gets to be too much.”

His dad nods in satisfaction before he glances at the watch on his wrist. “I think we’re going to be hitting the road soon. Did you want us to drop you off at home?”

“No, that’s okay. I’m headed to Deaton’s anyway. I think I’ll just like Uber there or something.”

“You be safe then. Let me know when you get there, and where you go after.”

Stiles nods and watches his dad gesture for Scott to follow him outside where Derek Sr.’s minivan is already parked and waiting.

Derek and Isaac are both wrestling to put Olive’s pink and black/white polkadotted Minnie Mouse car seat in the back. It looks like they’re trying to make sense of what straps go where.

Lucky for them, his dad wanders over to offer some of his veteran advice.

Stiles steps out onto the porch when Derek Sr. comes passing over the threshold next with Olive in one arm, and her baby bag in the other. He pauses long enough to say goodbye to Stiles before he moves to get his daughter situated in the car.

His dad waves at him before sliding into the passenger seat.

Stiles waves back, and tosses a few more to Scott and Isaac but rolls his eyes while he grudgingly laughs at the obnoxious way Derek sends him a few smacking air kisses with an exaggerated pout. He lingers out on the porch a while longer to watch them drive off and disappear into the trees.

He’s running short on time but he makes it a point to double back in the house and exchange a few goodbyes with Laura and Nana Hale. Before he can move to look for Talia, she’s already wandering down the steps with her two older sisters, Rosemary and Meredith.
“We’re heading into town,” Talia says. “Stiles, I can drop you off at Deaton’s on the way. Laura, what will you be doing?”

“I’m gonna stay with Nana for a little while longer,” Laura replies, pausing her needlework to give her mother her full attention. “Kate’s supposed to be picking me up later so we can get ready for our party tomorrow night. You know, just go over the final touches and tidy up the itinerary.”

Talia nods and walks over to give her a kiss on the cheek, before she turns to Nana Hale and does the same thing.

Rosemary and Meredith follow her lead and they do the same before wandering towards the kitchen to get to the garage.

Talia approaches Stiles and presses a heated palm over the back of his neck, using the gentle grip to guide him after the others.

Meredith and Rosemary are already chatting idly in Italian from where they’re sitting in the back.

Talia encourages him to take the passenger side seat as she climbs in to take her place behind the wheel of her BMW X1. She’s reversing out of the garage expertly in one moment, and steering her way through the forest preserve the next moment.

Lydia sends him a text that says: **Send me Deaton’s address. I’ll meet you there and help you like I said I would.**

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Stiles is not surprised to see that Violet and Garrett are parked across the street in that black Chevrolet Tahoe, watching him blankly. He doesn’t even want to waste his time entertaining them. He just stands out in front of the glass window with painted gold letters that say **Alan’s Old Antiquities** and waits for Lydia. She shows up in a cab within a few minutes, clutching her jeweled egg close.

She’s wearing a sleeveless romper in a dusty rose color paired with some white sandal wedges. She has on her silver septum nose ring and her strawberry blonde hair is in flowy beach waves. She looks just as beautiful as she did when he first met her.

Stiles watches as she pauses to peer at the adopted Argents.

Lydia stares at them for a long time before she shifts her gaze away. “How are you?” she questions as they walk into the dusty, poorly lit shop while the bell chimes overhead to announce their arrival.

“I’ll be with you in a moment,” Deaton calls out from all the way in the back.

“I’m fine,” Stiles says to Lydia while they approach the glass counter. “How are you?”

Lydia shrugs, but she’s got that dreamy expression on her face again. She takes a moment to sit down in the nearby rocking chair. After a while, she says, “They’ve been following you for a while now, haven’t they?”

Stiles doesn’t know who she means at first until he realizes she’s referring to Violet and Garrett. “Yeah, but I’m getting to the point where I’ve decided not to let it get to me,” he supposes.

“But if it could stop, you would prefer that?” Lydia probes a bit obscurely.
“In a perfect world,” Stiles passively verifies. “But they’ve already informed me that even if I wanted to do something about it, there would be no use. So don’t sweat it, Lyds. How are you doing?”

Lydia spends a few seconds rocking the chair slowly before she replies, “I keep dreaming that you and I are standing on a small island made of white sand. All around us is a raging sea of black water, but then we hold hands and you speak to the North Wind while I speak to the South Wind until everything settles, and there is peace.”

Stiles finds both of his eyebrows lifting at that. “Well, I’m not much for dream interpretation so I can’t tell you what that means.”

“I know. I think Peril is trying to tell me something. I’ve been praying before I go to bed every night, and I think this is Peril’s way of communicating back,” Lydia reasons with a whimsical tone. “You already know the answer, you know.”

“I do? Wait, let’s back track because I think now you mean something else.”

Lydia gives him an odd smirk like she doesn’t understand his tone but she shrugs. “The Nymph. You’ve been trying to figure out her affliction, but you already know.”

“I do?” Stiles frowns and tries to think back but nothing comes to him. “I really don’t think I do.”

Deaton appears from behind the doorway of hanging beads with his Grimoire in one hand, and Stiles’s newly laminated blueprint for his backyard’s layout. It’s been shrunken down and is now roughly the size of a kid’s menu at a restaurant.

Stiles loves it, and he’s proud of himself when he doesn’t snatch it from Deaton’s grasp out of excitement. He looks it over with a sense of fulfilled awe, and when Lydia makes a gesture of wanting to see, he does not withhold it from her.

Lydia stares fixedly at the blueprint and continues to rock the chair gently.

Deaton sets the Grimoire on the surface of the glass counter, successfully catching Stiles’s attention again, and he says, “Do you remember I told you that Mermaids need a natural stream of water in order to travel between their aquatic realms?”

“Yeah,” Stiles says as he accepts back his blueprint when Lydia hands it over. He tucks it away in his backpack before he puts it on the floor at his feet. “You said the safest way for them to travel and protect their kingdoms is to go through portals they activate and will only accept the passage of a pureblood Mermaid.”

“I also reasoned that if Heather cannot do that, then the problem must lie in her blood. I assumed she had a parasite.” Deaton pokes at the cover of the Grimoire as he continues, “I’ve read this from cover to cover, and I cannot pinpoint any such parasite that would cause this particular affliction.”

“That’s because it’s something of her own doing,” Lydia chimes from the rocking chair, and easily shoulders their gazes when they slide over to her. “Stiles, I told you. You already found the answer. You just didn’t know it. What did you first do when you couldn’t figure out how to make tea like Mr. Deaton asked you to?”

Stiles stares at her while he feels his mentor’s gaze shift to him with calculating focus. “I mean I couldn’t really make it and I tried to pull on my magic to help but it wouldn’t. But it just led me over to the bookshelves and I found this book…” He pauses as his magic floats up to his mind with smug glee, unraveling the memory for him with such startling clarity. That’s when it suddenly occurs to him what she means. “The Garden of Hesperides and the daughters of the evening.”
“Find the book again, and you’ll remember the answer,” Lydia instructs.

Stiles looks to Deaton with uncertainty but the older man says, “Your cousin is offering you wise counsel. I would heed it.”

Stiles releases his magic and it swirls to the ground before transforming into three glittery blue, adult-sized mountain gorillas. He implores one of its copies to retrieve the book and it trots off to do so, no questions asked. Meanwhile, one of the other glittery blue gorillas stays by his side while the third one wanders about the inner perimeter of Deaton’s shop, as if to test the integrity of the security of the building.

Lydia folds her legs under her as she uses her own red colored magic to feed her jeweled egg, which seems to have grown almost three sizes bigger in a span of a second to the size of a cantaloupe.

His magic returns with the book and Stiles gives it a murmur of genuine gratitude that makes all three versions of the glittery blue gorillas preen and puff up in pride as they glow a bit brighter under his attention.

Stiles smiles to himself at the sight before he quickly flips through the book to double back to the passage he knows he needs to look at again. His eyes run over it until he stops on one particular sentence. He reads it at least five times before he’s absolutely certain of the answer he finds.

“Is there anything of interest?” Deaton asks from where he still stands behind the glass counter.

“Yeah, but Heather really, really isn’t going to like what I have to say,” Stiles admits with a sigh as he slides the book over to his mentor, and points to one particular sentence. “That’s pretty much the whole problem in a nutshell.”

“I see,” Deaton murmurs as his eyes quickly surveys the passage. “That does present a problem.”

Stiles snorts because that’s putting it lightly. “She’s going to be furious,” he reasons as he closes the book. “But I think I’ll ask Nana if she can get Mrs. Doyle to send a message to Heather’s family about the situation.”

“That would be very wise,” Deaton agrees. “In the meantime, until Heather returns to confront you about your findings, there are a few things we should discuss. Braeden’s older sister was able to identify the poison given to Mr. Ravenhill. She found traces of Porcelain Mushrooms.”

“Porcelain Mushrooms? What are those?”

Deaton opens the Grimoire to a specific passage, and points to the illustration of a portobello shaped mushroom the color of alabaster white. “Porcelain Mushrooms are magical funguses that are only found around Mayan Ruins. The Werepanthers in the Mayan culture grew and used them as inhibitors. A lot of Human recreational drugs are based off of the euphoric side effects of this fungus. In small doses, it has the same effects as an entire bottle of vodka or an ecstasy pill. But in larger doses, as we’ve already seen, it can be fatal.”

Stiles tries to swallow down his upset in order to motion for him to continue.

Deaton gives him a look that could almost be categorized as sympathetic as he adds, “Based on the sample I gave her, she ultimately concluded that the poisoning had been happening over a long period of time.”

Stiles blinks very quickly as his eyes get wet and he exhales shakily to get himself under control when the lights flicker overhead and the glass counter between him and Deaton begins to tremble.
When his thoughts tilt towards violent fantasies, his uncle the main star of them all, he has to quickly think on more pleasant things because something very dark in his mind blindsides him for a moment and he knows instantly that he does not want to go there.

He thinks about Derek with all his might and all his will. He thinks about how sweet, and kind Derek is, and how differently the older teen would look at him if he acted on those cruel urges. It’s enough to make him feel sick and he’s able to let go of his anger. Mr. Ravenhill is among the stars now, at peace, and no amount of revenge will bring him back. But Stiles can do this right. He can still get justice.

The lights settle, as does the glass counter.

Stiles murmurs a quick apology to his mentor and turns to do the same with Lydia, but she’s sound asleep in the rocking chair, her jeweled egg pressed to her stomach as her hands continue to glow with the bioluminescent red of her magic.

“I understand how upsetting this news is, Mr. Stilinski,” Deaton remarks and waits until Stiles turns his gaze to him again. He goes on to say, “But you must never use your magic to harm or lash out on another. Doing so opens up a doorway for Peril to come in and claim you for it’s own. If you become a Vice, I can no longer be your handler.”

Satisfied, Deaton adds, “Though sorrow may last for the night, joy comes in the morning. Remember that it’s always darkest before it’s dawn. You are doing very well so far, and I would hate to see you forfeit your destiny. I see great things for you.”

Stiles swallows dryly but nods to show that he understands.

Satisfied, Deaton adds, “Though sorrow may last for the night, joy comes in the morning. Remember that it’s always darkest before it’s dawn. You are doing very well so far, and I would hate to see you forfeit your destiny. I see great things for you.”

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Stiles nods again with tired resignation.

“’If Fate is merciful, perhaps one day you will find a cure to counteract such a poison,” Deaton states, and though his voice is monotone, it comes off as encouraging somehow. “Shall we begin studying the botany charms and enchantments I mentioned before? We can start with the plants that are best for protective wards.”

Stiles feels a bit more cheered by this subject. “So, does this mean I can start studying from the Grimoire now?” he asks, voice edging upward with hope.

“You may take notes, but as far as borrowing it, that’s still out of the question. You aren’t quite there yet,” Deaton replies rather candidly. He flips through a few pages and shows him a passage about rose bushes. “Since you have yet to select a landscaping design for the front and sides of your house, may I suggest starting here?”

Stiles unearths a notebook from his backpack (along with a blue pen) and starts taking some notes on the combined magic of roses and immunity charms.

Lydia sleeps all the while, and his magic (still in the form of three mountain gorillas) treks to and fro around Deaton’s shop, messing with different knick knacks to be found.

While Deaton and Stiles are making plans to get started on the groundwork this coming Saturday, Lydia jerks awake with a gasp before fishing out her phone and staring at it for a long time.

“Something wrong?” Stiles asks in concerns.

Lydia mumbles incoherently as her phone suddenly pings loudly with the arrival of a text message like she’d been waiting for it (expecting it). She reads it quickly before she scowls and climbs to her
feet. “That idiot,” she mutters. She looks at Stiles. “I have to go. Jackson’s done something very foolish and I — I have to go. I’ll tell you later when everything settles,” she promises. She crosses the room and she’s exiting the shop within the next moment.

Stiles hopes it’s nothing too serious, but it’s hard to say with as little information about the matter presently. He just looks at Deaton and shrugs as his mentor begins handing him some extra books to study in preparation for Saturday. He’s packing it all away when the bell of the front door chimes. When he turns, he sees someone who he didn’t think he would for a long while.

It’s Journey from the college frat party back when he was helping Kate and Parrish locate the Heather and her brothers, and she’s sending him the same bewildered wide-eyed stare he must be sending her.

Braeden nudges her forward out of the doorway with an annoyed scowl. Whit Lee is nowhere to be seen but she still has Mr. Ravenhill’s birds perched on her shoulders and hovering around her head and shoulders like a Disney princess. “Can you not crowd the doorway like that?” she complains. She pauses when she notices the way she and Stiles are looking at each other. “Ey, what are you looking at him like that for?”

Journey blinks and says, “Remember that white boy I told you about some weeks ago?”

“Yeah? So?” Braeden frowns when Journey gives her an exasperated look. Something seems to click. “No. Oh no. Not him. This was the guy you wanted to take to a buffet and then bang twelve ways to Sunday? Please don’t tell me you meant him, Danielle.”

“Yes, Pookie, this is the very same him.”

“Goddess, the things you told me you wanted to do to him,” Braeden says as her face twists with displeasure. “I’m about to lose my breakfast.”

“Uh,” Stiles says, unhelpfully as he flushes. His magic, sensing his distress, fuses itself together and swirls above his head like sparkling blue clouds (but also like a warning to the newcomer). “So I meant to call you but...things happened.”

“I’ll say. You kinda lied about who you were, I’m realizing,” Journey retorts, not looking amused at all by this fact as she gazes up at the magic hovering over his head. “When my baby sister told me she was bringing me to meet the Seven who was dating her best friend, I didn’t think she meant the skinny guy who managed to charm me some time ago.”

“I didn’t know you two were related,” Stiles admits unnecessarily and they send him twin looks of displeasure. “If it makes a difference, I really felt awful about lying to you.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Journey replies as she waves a hand at him dismissively. “You can make it up to me by treating me to lunch. Just me though, aight? I ain’t trying to make you pay for this ugly brat.”

“Bitch, who you callin’ ugly?” Braeden snaps as she crosses her arms. “I know you really not talking, Ms. Big Booty Judy.”

“Nah, I’mma stay on that with you.”

Stiles quickly jumps into the conversation and says, “I’m done here, so we can go to a sitdown
restaurant and I’ll explain what I was doing there that night if you want.”

Journey nods and Braeden just sighs impatiently.

Stiles turns to Deaton, who has been watching the whole commotion with silent regard, and he says, “Should I come back tomorrow or are we just meeting up Saturday?”

“I have an appointment with Talia and Cora tomorrow, and then I have to consult with the Calaveras before we give them permission to have an open audience with you.”

Stiles isn’t surprised by this information. “So, Saturday then?”

“Saturday.” Deaton gives all three of them a parting nod before he picks up the Grimoire and disappears in the back with it.

Stiles turns and approaches Journey and Braeden to ask, “Where did you want to go?”

“There’s a cafe we passed around the corner. It’s walking distance. I don’t really feel like paying for the parking over there,” Journey admits as they all exit the shop. She walks ahead of them to lead the way.

Braeden presses a folded piece of paper in his hand. “Here. I wrote down a translated version of what was on the scroll that Lei Shěn gave to us.”

Stiles mumbles his gratitude as he quickly unfolds it and reads:

I have thought on everything you’ve said Deucalion, and have decided to join your cause. However, can a country [dominant race] be born in a day or a nation [species] be brought forth [rule over another] in a moment? We must start somewhere, so I will use what [tools] you have given to me and give it to the idiot boy [man of the law] whose heart I have in my hand, and he will give it to the girl. This sacrifice [mercy killing] will be like the beginning of birth pains. We will expose what we are to them [Humans] who are blind and boast of themselves [outnumber us], so that when they rise up against us, we will fight back. Every banner [Paranormal] will rally together and become one body, regaining the inheritance [North America] which was stolen from us. Above all, you must understand that the days are coming when we no longer have to wait in secret for the Children of Men [Humans] to remember us again. Though certain forfeits [death] will have to be made, I will gladly give up my firstborn daughter [Gurnee Pack] to be able to step into the light again.
In the daylight hours (during the lunch rush), *Little Slices of Heaven* looks like a normal cafe with a hard 90’s grunge mixed with a soft pop style to it. It's kind of like a *Wayne's World* meets *Clueless* sort of vibe.

No one would ever suspect that two Filipino native Centaurs disguised in Humanoid form own it. Yet this is the reality that Stiles has come to know as of two days ago thanks to Kate.

They, the three of them flexing into their personal strides, mindful of each other’s personal space, walk through the glass double doors, the bite of heat nipping at their backs as if chasing them into a cool sheet of artificial air.

Stiles feels himself relax into the thick blanket of it, this relief of cool washing over him like a tidal wave he wouldn’t ever fight. He realizes that the muggy weather has kept him tense, on edge, and sweating with confusion as he thinks on the translated letter with a weighty concern.

The shop is very busy with patrons that could either be Human or Paranormal, but it is hard to tell. And Stiles isn’t exactly looking for anything specific, going solely off of Nana’s advice and respecting their privacy (unless they chose to make themselves known to him).

The cafe is a symphony of glinting silverware, twinkling like stars at the mercy of the hands controlling them. There’s a pulse of different, intermingling conversations filling the air. The voices of the people seem to reach high, as if to overtake the volume of the classic rock music playing from the ceiling. It smells sweet and savory all at once. It’s the smell of fresh bread, coffee, and deli meat.

Braeden, before they had even entered the cafe, managed to find a way to hang up a bird feeder on a nearby street lamp to persuade her court of feathered friends to remain outside while she eats.

Stiles thinks it’s a clever solution to her current problem, but he wonders how she means to deal with it going forward.

It doesn’t seem as if the birds are ready to be parted from her anytime soon, if the way they linger and dote on her is anything to go by. He’s also noticed that they had a habit of picking up shiny things and gifting it to the brown skinned girl. And to his surprise, Braeden keeps every single thing she’s given, even going as far as murmuring a quick ‘thanks’ with the sort of appreciative sigh that he’s only heard her aim at Whit Lee.

Currently, Journey has decided to have mercy on her younger sister by making sure they are seated at a table near the windows so that Braeden can watch her newly acquired winged companions.

Stiles does his duty, since he’s sitting on the inside of the booth next to the windows across from Braeden, by passing out the thick menus. He flips through a few pages, going back and forth before he settles on the ‘BRUNCH’ section. He’s kind of in the mood for something sweet and savory, the smell of the cafe nagging at his appetite in all sorts of interesting ways. He also thinks this helps buy him some time before he has to answer Journey’s question.

Speaking of, half of her comely face is tucked close to her menu while she squints with a grin that Stiles feels like is because she knows that she’s the reason he’s squirming nervously beside her.

Now, comfortably settled, Braeden is the first to speak up, though she does it behind her menu. “Danielle, why aren’t you wearing your glasses?”
“What an interesting question,” Journey replies instead. “Why everyone who don’t have to wear glasses, always wanna say something to those who do?”

“Oh, well you know what they say about those who can’t,” Braeden drawls, her retort still as sharp as ever in it’s sedate delivery.

Journey just says, “Forehead.”

The air crackles ominously around Braeden, face darkening almost to a purple as she lowers her menu with shaky hands, absolute rage smoldering in her brown eyes.

Stiles has never seen Braeden so out of sorts, usually calm and composed and verbally lethal. He begins to wonder at what sort of importance or power just one word has over her.

Braeden looks like she’s about to shout the whole place down, but Journey cuts that off at the root by adding, “You better think real careful about what you got to say to me, Braeden. Fuck it up if you want to. But I’ll tell Stiles here your favorite story from junior high.”

Now Stiles is really wildly curious but he says nothing as Braeden glowers at her older sister but she doesn’t speak a single word.

A few minutes later, Ms. Ava, the owner, makes a show of personally taking their orders, eyeing them all with apparent interest and slight concern. She nods to Journey first, and gives a smile to Stiles before she looks at Braeden seriously. “I was not told of your coming,” she says with a low murmur.

“Aren’t your customers usually in the habit of phoning ahead? Since when did you start taking reservations?” Braeden replies, looking as composed as ever, and not like she was about to lunge across the table at her older sister.

“We both know you are unlike my usual customers. Enough games.” Ms. Ava looks at both Journey and Stiles as she says, “Forgive me for this.” She snaps her fingers, a white spark appears and just like that, everything stops.

Everyone becomes frozen in time, with the exception of Stiles and Braeden.

Ms. Ava gives Stiles a startled look when she notices he is unaffected by her particular brand of sorcery. “What is this? Are both of you Virtues?” she asks with slight alarm. “Has there been a complaint made against me? What wrong am I accused of that it should draw the ire of two Virtues? The audacity of the Silver Magistrate to do such a thing with no warning is —”

“Be at peace, Ms. Ava,” Braeden quickly says, her expression easing into something more neutral and away from dry amusement. “We come to be fed, not to correct some imagined blight. I know your son is on probation, but I haven’t heard anything about a follow up. His assigned Proxy, Amoss Lovejoy, says Rosamie is doing well since you both moved here — not once has he missed a summons. The transition here might have been the best thing to happen to him with all things considered. And I do believe that the Commissary of Centaurs considered all things.”

Ava’s shoulders slump a little but she still appears to be a bit nervous. “Rose is a good boy. It’s been a matter of circumstance, I always believed. The boy never knew his other mother, and you know the way those types of things go when hatchlings only know half of a Coupling. I’ve done my best raising him alone, but yes, you’re right. Beacon Hills is a special place, and the others have been so kind and accepting of him here. Which is more than I can say about our kind back home,” she rambles.
“Yes, you did mention during Rosamie’s hearing that he was only reacting as a product of his environment,” Braeden diplomatically agrees, and Stiles realizes she using affirmation as a means to sooth and subdue the older woman.

Something about the way she does it strikes Stiles as a sort of tactic she uses frequently. A sort of means to an end in order to get a response perhaps more suited to her favor. Oh, he thinks; and that’s when it hits him. She’s always on. As a Dominant, she’s always on — and perhaps the only other people who realize it are Derek and Journey.

And now me, Stiles thinks, and something about that makes his magic shiver with glee, quickly slithering up to his mind and massaging the receptors in his brain that are responsible for logistics and tactics. Then just like that, Stiles feels more predator than prey as he gazes thoughtfully at Braeden, watching her work in an element she refuses to let go. He carefully stores what he sees towards the back of his mind and starts formulating a hypothesis.

“...such a sweet boy,” Ms. Ava is saying. “Proxy Lovejoy is very pleased with his progress.”

“Good. That’s very good, Ms. Ava. I’m happy for you both. But I need you to put us back into time now,” Braeden patiently instructs.

“Oh, right! Sorry.” Ms. Ava snaps her fingers and the world resumes its pace as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. “What can I get you? On the house, of course.”

“Ms. Ava,” Braeden sighs, displaying a look of disappointment. “No bribes.”

“Yeah, let me go ahead and interject there,” Journey says and she lifts a finger to her little sister. “Ms. Ava, anything you want to give my sister and she rejects, I will gladly accept in her stead. I’m not too proud, nor too full to refuse such a blessing.”

Braeden rolls her eyes.

Meanwhile, Ms. Ava laughs heartily. “On the house,” she insists, nodding her head as though it’s final, and yeah, maybe it is. “It’s no bribery. I’m in no trouble, as you said. This is my business and I’m allowed to give good will gestures where I see fit, and when I see fit.” The set in her jaw shows that this isn’t something she’s going to budge on. “What can I get for you?”

“Toast and grapefruit will do just fine,” Braeden says. “I’ll have tonic water with cucumber slices as well.”

“It amazes me that you can live like that — why do you eat like that? You always order stuff you can make yourself,” Journey complains and Braeden just waves her hand dismissively. “Okay, unlike her peapod head, I’m gonna have some salmon croquettes. Fried twice, please. And some broccoli and cheddar soup.”

Ava’s head bobs agreeably as she jots the order down. “Anything to drink?”

“Mimosa,” Journey replies, flashing her id before stuffing it in her back pocket.

Ava turns to Stiles, looking at him with a sort of glint in her eye he places as ‘now I see you, and know what you are’ — but the look is in no way threatening so he relaxes under her patient silence.

“I’ll have the waffles, and some salmon croquettes as well,” Stiles responds. He’s grinning as he shuts his menu because Journey makes a show of applauding his choice.

“See that? He knows what’s up,” Journey nearly sings, wiggling her eyebrows at her little sister in a
taunting manner.

Braeden just bears her teeth sarcastically, looking more like a shark than a human attempting to smile. She leans back, looking out the window at her feathered friends.

Ms. Ava just gathers up the menus after assuring them that their food should be out shortly.

Journey decides now is the time to be confrontational. She angles her body towards Stiles and says, “Start talking and at the end of it, I’ll decide whether or not to be generous.”

Stiles stutters through most of his explanations, tripping over words to replace them with something different, the back of his neck pink with his efforts of keeping an air of mystery in a cafe full of eavesdropping Paranormals.

Journey, being as brilliant as she is pretty, appears to read between the lines easily enough, and she seems more amused than annoyed by the end of it all. “Yeah, I still like you,” she decides and laughs when Stiles makes a show of sighing in relief. “You’re nothing like how Pookie was making you sound.”

Braeden tosses them the middle finger without even looking away from the window.

Rosamie descends on them the next moment with their food, looking both sheepish and pleased when Journey is quick to compliment the food before he could properly slink away. He mutters a quick thanks, looking for the entire world like he wasn’t expecting anyone to say something even remotely friendly to him.

It makes Stiles wonder as he watches the older man retreat and he gets lost to his thoughts over it. He’s struck by the thought of how much the older man reminds him of Isaac, and the way he can be sometimes with putting up such an indifferent front, if only to protect the vulnerability and loneliness lying in wait underneath.

If his past is as checkered as Ms. Ava and Braeden implied, then a new start in a foreign land is probably working better than expected.

The food is amazing though, truly.

When Stiles is able to come back to himself, he realizes that Journey was not exaggerating. Yet he isn’t really all that shocked, since he was here not too long ago, enjoying the best brewed coffee he’s ever had (not to mention that decadent brownie a-la-mode that followed soon after as well).

The waffles taste sweet in a nostalgic way, crisp at the edges with butter. The fish tastes fresh as well, as though caught the same day. Stiles would know firsthand, his dad’s fishing hobby makes sure of that.

His pocket vibrates.

Derek texts: Hey we’re doubling back to Scott’s house - meet me there?

Game’s over already?

Ohhhhh yeah, Giants won by a landslide (: )

Good thing, I’m assuming.

Your indifference to sports is painful babe.
Take me as I am.

Believe me, I’m trying (;

Stiles flushes and rolls his eyes before he replies: Out with Braeden and her sister, doing a late brunch but I’ll be over when we’re finished here.

goodgoodgoodgoodgood

Stiles huffs and he smiles to himself before he pockets his phone.

Braeden is reapplying lipstick with the help of a compact mirror when she says, “The letter. What did you think?”

Stiles takes note at how she’s talking at him and not to him, and his mind tinkers away with the information from earlier. She’s never really pleasant with him — offensive would be the right word as well (in more ways than one). His mind flashes back to the handful of times that she was actually almost kind to him (when he was near to being emotionally compromised, if not already). With such limited evidence, he’ll have to go with his gut and reenact that specific behavior.

So, he ducks his gaze, as if contrite, fists one hand in his hair while he uses the other hand to flatten the letter against the sticky table as if to reread. He doesn’t need to; he’d already done it on the walk over. “I — I think I understand. I just...since it’s translated, you know, it’s hard to tell for sure unless I can somehow understand the original copy.”

Braeden nods, looking satisfied with herself as she replies, “It would probably do you more good than harm to look at the original. I did have to find the right Human words to best fit the translation.”

Stiles sighs wistfully. “If I had a Conduit, it wouldn’t be a problem,” he supposes, and he doesn’t have to try hard to fake the frustration in his voice.

“I’ve poured over quite a few Were texts in my day,” Braeden continues as she looks out the window again, as if she can’t keep herself from checking on those birds. “In that language, well, it’s all very Biblical.” She pauses before she adds, “Most things in the Wild Kingdom are.” She suddenly looks at him. “The part about ‘birthing pains’ — tell me what you think.”

Stiles heeds the demand, makes his voice small, and says, “I don’t know.”

“Were s equate war to pregnancy. Issues over power and territory gestate for a time until it yields forth either a good child or a bad child,” Braeden replies, responding like Stiles hoped she would to his distress, and she becomes gentler for it; thinking herself benevolent in a way, which only confirms Stiles’s theory about her. She enjoys what she can control, and condemns what she cannot.

“If you put it that way, then I assume that the good child is peace, and the bad child is war,” Stiles deduces, like it’s just occurred to him, even though it already has before this conversation.

Braeden seems pleased with his theory, and she says, as if to reward him, “I see you’re not completely lacking in the absence of a companion.”

Stiles pretends to preen at the backhanded compliment and internally rolls his eyes when she responds favorably to it. Yeah, he’s cracked her code all right. This is definitely a conversation to have with Derek about later. For now, he comments, “Thank you for translating.”

“I’m known to be kind,” Braeden merely says, grinning as if something amuses her about the way she says it.
Journey snorts and shakes her head. “Oh yeah, you’re just about as sweet as a scorpion,” she adds.

Braeden flips her middle finger again. “Are we done here? We should get back.”

Journey shrugs and slides out the booth, pausing when she reaches the door for Stiles and Braeden to catch up. She tugs Stiles closer as if to give her sister a wide berth when her feather friends flock to her immediately.

“That’s going to take some getting used to, you think?” Stiles murmurs as they walk a few paces behind her.

“I give her a month before she fries them for barbeque,” Journey loudly declares and laughs all the way to her car when Braeden curses her out in fluent Dutch.

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Journey is nice enough to drop him off at Scott’s house once they locate her car. He doesn’t get far from the car before he’s being called back.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” Braeden asks, and it’s the first time she’s ever asked instead of just demanded.

Stiles takes note of that and responds, “Nothing I can’t rearrange if you really need me for something.”

By the agreeable expression that Braeden wears, he knows he chose the right words and it amuses him to no end to discover it really could have been easy this whole time if he’d figured this out sooner. “You seem to have an excellent rapport with the woodland folk. I think it would be in everyone’s best interest that we follow up on their invitation to give us a guided tour through the infected areas,” she explains.

“What time? I have my internship with Deaton in the mornings but after that I’m free,” Stiles says. He’s actually free all day but she doesn’t need to know that. He wants to make her wait just because he can.

Braeden hums thoughtfully. “I’ll stop by if you can text me when you’re wrapping things up with Alan. See if he wants to join us. I’m sure his insight as well will be valuable,” she supposes, almost bitterly.

“I’ll text you,” Stiles agrees and Braeden nods to her sister, signaling that it’s time for them to venture off. He hangs back a little longer before he makes his way towards his best friend’s house.

Stiles rings the doorbell once he reaches the front door, thinking on how he can smell rice and fried pork wafting from the open windows.

It’s Melissa who greets him, ushering him in cheerfully like she couldn’t be happier to see him. He likes how warm and pleased it makes him feel, feeding into that sense of validation he keeps stowed away deep inside where he yearns for his mother. He nearly trembles when she hugs him, as though on instinct, and kisses his cheek before pointing him Scott’s way.

Stiles knows his face is burning when he passes the kitchen (where Talia and his dad are sitting at the table with Derek Sr.) and he notices the adults are in the middle of playing an intense round of dominoes. The four adults look like long time friends, incredibly comfortable with each other, enough to tease, big grins and mock scowls on their faces as they chat over the carefully arranged game pieces.
Stiles makes sure he says hello to everyone before he moves on to darken Scott’s doorway. The first thing he notices is that Isaac is curled up together on one of Scott’s bean bag chairs with Olive, both of them fast asleep and practically drooling on each other. Stiles can’t resist taking a picture of it and storing it for nostalgia’s sake.

Derek and Scott, however, are on the floor among a sea of Scott’s comic books and mangas. They’re also eating their way through, what looks like, a box of crackers, a can of spray cheese, and a few cans of sardines.

Stiles also notices, after he declines Scott’s offer of some, that Scott has to keep a roll of paper towels nearby because the fish Derek and he are eating make things terribly oily, and it can’t be good for any of his comics or mangas.

“How was the game?” Stiles asks and doesn’t it make it far before Derek gets ahold of him and is tugging him close. He ends up practically in Derek’s lap, laughing through his exasperation and exclamations of “Derek! Come on — ah! You smell like fish — ugh, gross!”

Derek cruelly ignores his complaints and keeps an arm on Stiles’s waist to keep him as close as possible while he uses his other hand to continue to eat sardines, crackers and canned cheese. “I’m feeling touch starved,” he swears after a swallow of food. Fate forbid he should ever talk with his mouth full.

“Oh, and I just so happen to be your remedy,” Stiles retorts sarcastically pretending to struggle a little more before he gives into it, relaxing into the warm line of Derek’s side, soaking up the contact gleefully (still amazed that he can even have this).

“Howm, yeah, I don’t think I like your tone,” Derek replies and Stiles laughs, elbowing him playfully before turning his attention to Scott, who’s pretending that he’s not eavesdropping but that amused grin he’s trying to hide behind a mouthful of crackers says enough.

“So, the game?” Stiles repeats.

“Oh, dude. Super fun! I wish you could’ve been there. Derek and I went head to head on a hotdog eating contest,” Scott boasts joyfully.

“Only because it was obvious halfway through the game who the winning team was going to be,” Derek adds, as though defending the juvenile behavior.

Scott nods vigorously before he continues, “Derek won of course, but it was a close thing.”

“You eat like Were,” Derek compliments.

Stiles laughs at the way Scott pretends to preen over it.

Derek asks about his time with Braeden and Journey, to which he is more than happy to share the whole story behind how he had already met Journey. That of course gets him talking about Heather, and how he’s discovered what exactly is holding her prisoner on dry land.

Scott, with increasing interest, begins asking questions, not only about the difference between Mermaids and Nymphs, but about the cafe that seems to be one of the town’s main stomping grounds for Otherworldly beings.

This lasts until Melissa comes to collect them for a late lunch.

Stiles follows, not really hungry, his appetite already satiated just an hour before. His bones begin to
creak, heat flushing through his body like a flash, making him feel suddenly fatigued. He’d been doing so well for most of the day, but now his body was falling to the mercy of the impending signs of his paranormal growth spurt. His magic has been oddly sedate since his time at Deaton’s shop.

Stiles decides to get to the bottom of it by first taking Olive from Isaac so he can join everyone at the table and eat with the grace of a groggy preteen rudely disturbed from a good nap. He cradles Olive close so they can sit in the living room and it’s clear the nap she had with Isaac worked in her favor (she’s in better spirits about the results than Isaac is, that’s for sure).

He knows what she must want when she claps her chubby baby hands over his cheeks with throaty, demanding, gurgly sounds. He pulls a bit of magic from his chest and forms a small, glittery blue duckling for her to play with while he interrogates said magic.

*You’ve been keeping to yourself. What’s that all about?*

**Am I to assume you find it abnormal, Princeling?**

*Uh, when I’m in close proximity with Derek and you don't leap all over him, yeah, I find that really strange. I know you’re not tired. What gives?*

*You’ve been running hot and cold. This transition is just as uncomfortable for me as it is for you. I’m trying to establish several reserves where I can store extra energy while being careful not to overextend myself.*

*But...why?*

*Foolish, Faerie. When we go through the Changing Fever, we’ll need each other to get through it, and I want to be at my best while I’m there for you. What good am I to my host when I can’t be there for him should he become vulnerable?*

Stiles feels touched. Plain and simple.

*And me? How should I protect you?*

His magic grows silent, as if not expecting that sort of kindness in turn.

*By taking care of yourself. Eat and rest as much as you can. If you're spread thin, so am I.*

*Understood. Thank you.*

*It’s in my nature. I have no need for appreciation.*

*Too bad. You’re mine to appreciate and protect.*

Stiles suddenly feels the impression of surprise wrapped in the yellow paper of mortification. This time, however, he’s expecting it. He’s determined, though, to get his point across about this.

*I used to think it was me by myself, you know? That it would always be me by myself, and now I have you. You’re better than what I could have expected, and more than what I would have wished for. You have to know that I’m terrified to become as I once was, to be that Human again. Being alone again would be a worse fate for me at this point. To lose you, well, it would feel like death, I think.*

*Death will never touch you. It should go through me first.*
So, not me before you, huh?

Yes, not you before me. You are mine to appreciate and protect.

Guess that means we’re stuck with each other.

Until the other side of infinity should pass, and even beyond that.

Stiles could almost cry, but he resists, knowing it’s neither the place nor the time. He puts on a happy face for Olive as he situates them both on the floor so they can crawl around after the ethereal blue duckling he conjured (which waddles back and forth to instigate the chase).

Talia eventually joins them by settling on the couch, and Olive nearly zooms to her when she notices, crawling with single-minded focus to her mother’s ankles. The older woman picks her up, and signals for her husband to bring over her nursing blanket, accurately assuming that her daughter is ready to feed.

The two parents do a bit of a dance with the blanket, helping each other to get Olive situated in the most comfortable way. When all is said and done, Talia has Olive latched under a thin blanket that has yellow ducks crocheted into the material.

If Stiles had to guess, he would say that Nana Hale is responsible, but to confirm, he asks while he settles in one for the single armchairs adjacent to the coffee table.

“Ah, yes, she had a slight hand in it, but this is Peter’s handiwork.”

Stiles spends a couple of moments blinking through that bit of information while Derek Sr. gives Talia’s cheek a smacking kiss before he returns to the kitchen for seconds.

Melissa sits down at a respectable distance on the couch with Talia, looking curiously at Olive’s little chubby legs peeking out from the bottom of the nursing blanket. She has this look on her face that says she’s getting nostalgic about the days when Scott was a baby.

Talia continues, “It was made for Laura, but since I’m rather sentimental, I’ve kept it while nursing all my children. Perhaps one day I’ll give it back to him so he can have when he has a whelp of his own.”

Stiles marvels at the thought. He hasn’t known Peter to express the desire for children. Though he certainly has a fondness for those he considered his own. But outside of that passing comment he threw to Kate during one of their heated arguments, he’s never talked about being a father. It makes Stiles want to ask, and at the same time never ask.

“Melissa, dear, I’m thoroughly perplexed that we are only now getting to know each other,” Talia announces with undisguised delight. “Your food and hospitality alone has won me over.”

Melissa smiles widely and waves her off. “It’s not exactly a ‘small town’, and sure gossip spreads like wildfire as if it were, but most of us go our whole lives without really getting to know our neighbors. And with your circumstances, I can understand.”

Talia cocks her head slightly, angling it in such a way that it makes her seem more predator than prey. She says, “Excuse me, Melissa, but I don’t know what you mean.”

Melissa flushes and stutters a bit before she says, “I-I just mean that I couldn’t imagine the...lengths you must go to, uh, to keep privacy.”
“What do I need privacy for?” Talia presses, gaze going sharp.

It makes Stiles squirm, even when he’s not at the other end of that look.

“Because...” Melissa says slowly with a dry swallow. “Of what you are.”

“And what exactly am I?” Talia probes, voice and face neutral as ever.

“A,” Melissa lowers her voice, “...a Werewolf.”

Talia doesn’t say anything for an excruciating long time. And then she does. “I’m kidding, I know you know.”

“Oh, how awful,” Melissa laughs as she fans at her red face.

Talia smirks and Stiles can see the resemblance of Laura’s mischievousness in it. Actually the more time that he gets to know Talia, he realizes how startling alike she and Laura are. He assumes that’s why they bump heads so much.

“Tongue-in-cheek aside, please know that I would never say anything to anyone,” Melissa promises as Scott trudges over and sits down by her feet. She places a comforting hand on the crown of his head as she continues, “Even at the threat of death.”

“While my family and I do admire such loyalty, I assure you that it shouldn’t ever have to come to that,” Talia remarks, smiling warmly at the other woman while Derek Sr. slips into the space between the couch arm and her right side. She hands Olive over to him so he can burp her as she gathers herself under the blanket. “Why don’t you join me Sunday for Beacon Hills Bookies’ monthly book club meeting? We’ll be picking a new book, though I think the lot of them are angling towards Sharp Objects.”

“That’s...really nice of you to offer, uh, but, I don’t think I fit in with that crowd,” Melissa declines delicately.

Talia looks far too amused to be offended. “Oh?”

“Well it’s just that, everyone knows that the only people who attend those meetings are, and excuse my phrasing, elitist dicks,” Melissa says and it causes a ripple effect of everyone coughing to disguise their laughter.

Talia throws her head back and cackles. When she’s got ahold of her glee, she replies, “I couldn’t agree more, darling. It’s actually a great source of amusement, but a necessary one for me. When you’re a Were, you have to find ways to integrate yourself in Human society, as to avoid causing any suspicions that may lead to a panic. Since I’m the Headmistress to a couple of private schools, it’s expected of me to rub elbows with, what was it you said? Elitist dicks?”

Melissa’s face gets red at having her words parroted. “It’s a nice offer, but I feel like they’ll chew me up and spit me out,” she says, earnestly.

“Oh come now, I’ll protect you from all those wolves,” Talia promises, finding great enjoyment in the whole thing. “There will be enough finger foods and wine to help you through the whole ordeal. You simply must join me! You are so very refreshing. I’ll beg if I have to. Send you flowers, and chocolates...”

“Ay, Dios mío! Please don’t. I get enough of that from Jon,” Melissa begs and all the adults seem to laugh at that. “Okay, okay. I will go with you just this once, and if it’s not anything like I think it will
be, I may continue to join you.”

Talia looks both charmed and pleased. Whatever she’s about to say next gets lost in the sound of her phone vibrating on the kitchen table.

Derek fetches it for her and brings it over before he makes himself comfortable on Stiles’s lap.

Stiles grunts unhappily at the weight. “Really?” he complains, mostly for show.

Derek just grins. “There’s nowhere else to sit.”

“And the floor?”

“When your lap is right here? Unacceptable. I won’t have you bringing this up again.”

Stiles laughs and knocks his forehead into Derek’s shoulder over and over again. “Really sealed my fate with you, didn’t I?”

Derek’s response is to grab his left hand, tangle their fingers together, and kiss at his knuckles, turning his head to watch Stiles’s response.

Stiles squirms at the tenderness of it, feeling trapped where he’s taking all of Derek’s weight as the back of his neck blooms with a bright pink color and Derek just drinks it in with no mercy, warm lips curling in a cocky way against the skin of his knuckles. “I hate you, I really do,” he croaks.

Derek ducks his gaze to snicker and has enough mercy to lower their combined hands and hug it close to his chest where his heart is.

Stiles takes the time to hide behind him, pressing his forehead between Derek’s shoulders and silently willing his heartbeat to slow down.

Derek suddenly stiffens above him just as Talia hisses, “You should have called me first, Peter! How could you let this happen? No — no — I don’t care. I’m coming home now. Just keep everyone there until I can clear this whole mess.” She ends the call abruptly and stands. “Melissa, Jon, please forgive me. It appears something very serious has come up and demands my attention.”

“Is everything alright?” Melissa asks as she stands too.

“That remains to be seen, but no one is gravely injured or anything of that sort,” Talia assures and gestures for Derek to get ready to leave as well.

Derek stands and presses a hand to Stiles’s cheek briefly as he says, “I’ll text you.”

“Do you need any help keeping the peace?” his dad asks, using his best ‘sheriff’s voice’.

“Yes, thank you,” Talia agrees. “Sweetheart, why don’t you ride with Jon, and I’ll take Derek and Olive with me.”

Derek Sr. nods and helps her gather up all of Olive’s things. “Derek, get your sister’s car seat and help your mother put it in hers.”

“Yes, sir,” Derek replies and squeezes Stiles’s hand one final time before he goes to do such.

Stiles really wants to know what’s going on. It has him worried.

His dad approaches him with Isaac in tow. “Why don’t you boys stay here, and when we’ve got
their situation worked out, I’ll swing by again and come pick you up.”

“I have no problem with dropping them off at home,” Melissa interjects. “One less worry for you. Just call me.”

The sheriff nods, grateful, and kisses her on the cheek before following Talia and Derek Sr. out of the house.

“What’s that all about?” Stiles asks, looking to Isaac, whose brow is furrowed. “I know you know.”

“It’s Jackson,” Isaac says. “He seems to have come to the same sort of revelation I have.”

Stiles’s eyes widen. “You mean he knows who are real parents are — his real family?”

Isaac nods. “He’s not taking it well.”

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From: mskirathunderkat@outlook.com
To: stilinski_kid99@gmail.com
2014 May 9

異体同心 — “Different body, same mind.”

Dear Stiles,

I’m glad you enjoyed my presentation! I’m happy to share my culture with a friend. You can send me pictures too, you know. I find that I miss home. I know I haven’t been there long enough to miss it as much as I am, but I do. Don’t get me wrong, I love being here amongst my kin, but, well you know what they say about small doses.

I’ve only been to Chicago a few times for archery competitions. The Museum of Science and Industry was always a great source of entertainment for me every time. Oh! And there is this restaurant they have in Logan Square that’s so good and savory. It’s called 90 Miles Cuban Cafe, and it deserves more publicity than the Sugar Factory gets.

Anyway, you raised some really good points for the time capsule. We should totally do that, you know, leave something for our kids maybe. Also, yeah, I do have a bucket list for things I want to do before I reach 19.

1. Get a handle on being a Thunder Kitsune
2. Trounce everyone in the Archery World Cup Final
3. Catch up on Naruto/Bleach/Inuyasha
4. Get my mom to try a 7-Eleven slurpee at least ONCE because she’s such a food snob
5. Visit every Disney Park in the world

That’s what I got so far. It’s a work in progress.

How’s everyone doing? Isaac? Scott? Cora? Catch me up! What have I missed? If it’s a lot, we can probably work out a time to video chat? I started playing Batman: Arkham Origins Blackgate and I wanted to talk to you about that anyway.

Let me know!
“They’re mostly just shouting at each other — well, Jackson and his adoptive parents, as well as Malia’s adoptive parents, are shouting. My mom and your dad are trying to play the voice of reason. Trying to get everyone to calm down.”

It’s late when Derek calls to check in with him about the whole situation.

Ever since Melissa dropped them off, Stiles has been pacing the whole house, trying to get Lydia to respond to his frantic texts about what’s going on. She must have known. She must have been the first one that Jackson called to break the news.

Stiles thinks that all the pacing he’d been doing must have drove Isaac up the wall. He thinks Isaac might have texted Derek about it, and of course Derek responded in kind.

He’s outside now, leaning against Nana and letting her stay dormant. He didn’t have the heart to disturb her just so that he could vent. His aunt is nowhere to be seen, and that’s just a whole can of worms he doesn’t want to address.

His magic divides itself into a group of ethereal blue rabbits, hopping to and fro across the back yard.

Anyway, he didn’t let his phone ring more than three times before he picked it up once Derek’s name appeared.

Derek explains that the way it happens is that Chris Argent approached Jackson while he was leaving the rehabilitation center Danny got transferred to. The older man had apparently gotten impatient about waiting for Talia to help him break the news to Jackson, and of course things spiraled from there.

“I’m not exactly sure, but from how I’m understanding it is that Jackson went to Malia’s house first and confronted her adoptive parents, and in the middle of that, his adoptive parents were called over in hopes to smooth things over.”

“Wait, why would Jackson go there first?”

Derek is silent for a few moments before he explains, “Because Chris Argent didn’t just tell him who his real family was. He told him that he and Malia were twins. He went to Malia’s house to confirm it. When they did, Jackson still refused to believe it and wound up coming here. So, since my mom wasn’t here, my uncle pretty much took it upon himself to confirm what they all knew. Jackson’s absolutely furious about the fact that he’s been lied to his whole life and Malia...she hasn’t said word. I don’t think she’s said anything since she’s found out.

“Things are pretty hectic down there from the sounds of it. Everyone is talking over everyone else.” Derek sighs. “Most of my family is upset too that they didn’t know, and that it was kept under wraps. I mean, I get why my mom might have kept it a secret but not everyone is willing to forgive. Mom’s doing her best, you know. But there’s no way really to soften the blow.”

Stiles hums in agreement as he takes that in. He pushes his own curiosity aside to ask, “How are you feeling?”

Derek snorts bitterly and instantly Stiles knows he’s done the right thing by asking. “I hate when my
family is at odds like this. It feels...wrong. But, when you think about what this whole thing is concerning, it makes sense that not everyone wants to be rational. I’m upset.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

Derek seems to ponder the offer gravely before he replies, “I’m better when I have you close, but that’s not going to happen tonight, I can already tell. Your voice will have to do.”

Stiles smiles to himself as he looks up at the dark night sky through Nana’s purple-blue leaves.

The next few minutes are spent in silence, them being more than content to listen to each other breathe and a part of Stiles wonders if that’s a sign of true love before he laughs to himself over the silliness of it.

“What’s got you so amused?”

Stiles just snickers some more.

“Share the wealth.”

Stiles will do absolutely no such thing. He says, instead, “Just thinking about something, a quote really, that I read once from my mother’s favorite Stephen King novel. My dad gave it to me as a present when I got really sick during Christmas when I was like 12 or something.”

“What’s that? The book I mean. And the quote.”

“It’s The Body. It still blinks in the back of my mind like a beacon to this day.” Stiles thinks on the words as he repeats them, verbatim, “Love isn’t soft, like those poets say. Love has teeth which bite and the wounds never close.”

Derek makes a thoughtful sound. “You still believe that?”

“It’s all I could think about when I thought about how my mother died,” Stiles admits quietly. He’s never said this out loud to anyone before. It makes him feel vulnerable in a way he isn’t sure he likes. But, he trusts Derek with his secrets, and can hardly believe that it’s just this easy to share this side of himself with the older teen. “I think about how unfair all of it is. How robbed I feel. What she left behind. The anger and abandonment I still struggle with. I know I have no right to it but...”

Derek waits to see if he will pick up the end of his sentence, and when Stiles doesn’t, he confesses, “Sometimes I feel guilty for not having the same kind of sadness the older members of my family have when we honor the anniversary of the fire that killed the core of our family. I’ll watch my mom, Peter, my aunts or uncles and older cousins from that generation shed some tears in anguish and I’ll feel so disconnected to it. But, you know, it’s like...I wasn’t even old enough to really know my grandparents or lost family members that way. The only impression or sense I get of them is through the stories I’ve been told, or the photos I’ve seen. I can’t really say I know what it feels like to lose someone like that, not the way Peter does, or the way you do. But I still wish I could take on the pain so no one else has to. Is it stupid that I wish I could?”

“Before, when you told me that you understood why Peter used to set Henry’s sock up for Christmas, and I said it wasn’t the same for Humans, I was wrong. I’m sorry I tried to downplay how you felt. That was inconsiderate of me. I don’t want you to feel like you’re alone.” Derek murmurs, sounding like he wishes for the entire world he was there in person with Stiles. “I think I’m the one that didn’t really understand. But you make me want to understand. I — you make want to be softer. Not like, sensitive or cowardly or whatever. But, I don’t know, like sentimental. Like I wanna bottle up all our conversations and come back to them later. I find myself wanting to take
pictures of you, and watch you change...become something more...grow up, I — I get so excited when I think about all the things we can experience together.” He pauses to laugh shakily like he’s embarrassed. “Is any of this making sense? Am I being stupid?”

Stiles hadn’t even realized that he’d been crying until a few tears hit the hand resting (twitching with nerves) on his lap. He sniffs and tries to dry his face, as he says, “No, Derek. It’s not stupid.” He clears his throat. “Not at all. Thank you for saying that.”

“I mean it though.” Derek adds, “I find myself thinking about what Victoria Erickson said. How soul mates aren’t the ones who make you happiest. They’re instead the ones who make you feel the most. Burning edges and scars and stars. Old pangs, captivation and beauty. Strain and shadows and worry and yearning. Sweetness and madness and dreamlike surrender. They hurl you into the abyss. They taste like hope. You’re hope to me.”

Stiles feels like he’s burning alive, his face as hot as the rest of him, so dizzy with emotion he can't describe. He shivers against the wave of it, the rush, the high, and has to close his eyes to keep a clear head. This is probably one of the most intense conversations they have ever had by far.

Derek says nothing for a while, seeming to sense or at least know on instinct that Stiles needs a moment to really let everything settle. Then, of course, he confirms it by remarking, “That was too much, wasn’t it?”

Stiles laughs, voice a little raspy as he replies, “Maybe if we were face to face, but, no it’s…okay. I — I hope you know it’s the same for me. You just have a way of saying things better. I’m more demonstrative, I guess. But that’s why we work so well.”

“Very well,” Derek agrees. “Never thought I’d ever get to have anyone like you. I mean Paige was...that was what it was. Hard, painful, and exhausting. Not to say things were never good. We had our highs with it all, but there were more lows than I would have liked. We were okay in the beginning, but people have a way of growing apart. Things happen for a reason though.”

“Yeah, I suppose that’s true.”

“Is it weird for me to talk about her to you? Or about our relationship?”

Stiles runs his fingers through his hair. “Oh yeah?”

“After my first letter, she replied with a postcard that had an email address. So we’ve just been emailing each other,” Derek admits, and does some shifting on the phone. “Lately she asks about you. About us and what we have.”

Stiles rubs his knuckles along the edge of his jaw while he watches his magic frolic in the grass and he says, “No. You can talk to me about anything. I mean, it’s weirder to not talk about it, or pretend that you and her were never a thing. Do you still write to her?”

“Yeah. I told her you were my True Match.”

Stiles flushes and has to pull the phone away for a moment so he can get ahold of himself. When he brings the phone close, he hears Derek laughing softly. “You do that on purpose, don’t you? Just to get a rise out of me?”

“Maybe.”

“So cruel.”
Derek makes a sound of disagreement before there is more rustling on his end. “Don’t worry. In the midst of our back and forth, we realized that it was okay for Paige and I to talk about how we’re moving on with our lives, Paige said she realized how toxic our relationship was too. She says rehab is really yielding some good results, and part of the recovery is confronting all the negative outlets in her life. I think we both knew she was never my Match, and we both kind of admitted, or rather, took responsibility that we let things go on as long as we did when it wasn’t right for either of us. She also apologized to me for how she treated me in the end and for anytime she may have forced me to hide parts of myself.”

“She knew about you being a Were?” This is news to Stiles, though it shouldn’t be surprising for a relationship that had lasted two years.

“She did. It complicated things instead of helping.” Derek doesn’t really sound like he wanted to talk or think about it.

“Well I’m glad you guys worked that out,” Stiles says and listens to more rustling from the other end of the phone. “Derek, what are you doing?”

“Hm? Oh.” Derek pauses to laugh. “I’m working on a star chart. You can hear me, huh?”

“Little bit,” Stiles teases. “What’s the chart for?”

“One of my biggest projects for the summer. I’m outlining the donut-shaped asteroid belt located between the orbits of Jupiter and Mars. I want to get it framed in time for my mom’s Moon Day anniversary.”

“Okay, explain.”

Derek huffs but says, “Moon Day is basically the date when she came into her Alpha inheritance, or given her Rites officially. It’s like having two birthdays. Every Were has one, but some people are unlucky enough to have it fall on their actual birthday, so it’s still combined into one instead of two.”

“That’s really cool. When is Talia’s Moon Day?”

“It falls around the same time as the Assembly. It’s on July 20th but we usually celebrate it the weekend before.”

“And when’s your Moon Day?”

“Cora and I became a Beta at the same time, so we share one. It’s July 10th but we usually celebrate it during the 4th of July weekend.”

“Cool,” Stiles casually remarks, filing this information away for later.

“It’s gotten quiet downstairs,” Derek comments. “I can hear...Laura and Kate are here now. I think mom’s gonna call a Pack meeting to introduce Jackson and Malia to everyone. Things seem to be calm.”

“Is Lydia there?”

“Yeah,” Derek confirms and then pauses for a few moments before sighing. “Yup, mom’s just put out the signal for everyone to come downstairs. I’ve gotta go, but, I’ll see you tomorrow hopefully. There’s kind of something I want to talk to you about, and I’d rather do it when we’re alone.”

“Sure. Text me later on and we’ll work out how we’ll meet up.”
“Okay. Later.”

“Later,” Stiles echoes, issuing their usual parting words, which feel more and more like an unspoken promise these days more than anything. He lets the connection severe before he stands to draw his magic back into himself and make his way inside.

Isaac is in the living room using the Wii to sign up for something called DramaFever when Stiles goes looking for him. He says, “Spend time with me.”

Stiles smiles at the way Isaac says it and jumps over the back of the couch to land on it without much flair. “What are we watching?”

“Boys Over Flowers. Kyle recommended it.”

Stiles glances at him curiously. “So you and Parrish talk?”

Isaac’s focus is solely on the big screen as he shrugs.

Stiles decides not to press about that specifically, so he switches gears by asking, “I guess you must have heard me talking to Derek.”

Isaac wrinkles his nose. “Trust me, I didn’t want to. I'll be happy when dad can get me a new phone so I can make use of my headphones again.”

Stiles throws one of the couch pillows and is disappointed when it gets swatted in a different direction mid air before making impact on its intended target. “You know that’s not what I’m getting at. I know you understand that Jackson and Malia have discovered their...parentage.”

“What’s your point?”

“Isaac, come on. You’re far from oblivious. You’re like the smartest Werecat I know —”

“Haven’t fully gotten my inheritance,” Isaac mutters as pulls his knees up to his chin so he can hug his legs.

“— and I can’t imagine what you must be feeling or what you think about the fact that you’ve gained at least three other half-siblings seemingly overnight,” Stiles continues, ignoring the interjection. “I just want you to know that I’m here for you if you want to talk about any of it.”

“I don’t care, that’s how I feel,” Isaac says, keeping his gaze on his own two feet. “Doesn’t really matter, does it? Jackson, Malia, and Kate never cared about me before they knew what we were to each other, so why should they care after?”

Stiles is struck by how matter of fact his brother sounds about the whole situation. As if he refuses to believe that any good could or should come of them discovering the truth. “Yeah, but, Isaac...they’re still family. Still blood.”

“They may be blood, but they’re not family. They didn’t choose me and I didn’t choose them,” Isaac insists, finally lifting his gaze to stare at Stiles dead on. “You and dad, that’s family. You chose me, and I chose you. We’re more Pride than I’d ever be with anyone else.”

Stiles is a little loss for words, save the warm feelings of validation washing over him at the statement. He clears his throat and says, “You’re the most important thing to me too.”

Isaac gets red and huffs like he can’t believe he’s getting sentimental over it. “I know that,” he
boasts. “I just wish you and dad would stop trying to shove me at the people I’m related to like I’d pick them over you guys. I wouldn’t.”

“And we know,” Stiles is quick to clarify. “No, that’s not the point of it. Dad and I...we want you to be happy. I know I would feel like I was robbing you of a potential connection if I didn’t at least encourage you to try. And besides, maybe I think it’s more healing for Kate or Jackson or Malia than I think it is for you.”

Isaac grins a little at that, ducking his head to hide the smile it turns into between his knees. “You really think I could be a help to them, and not the other way around?”

“Honestly, at this point, you’ve done so amazing with your recovery process, I think the last step is to eat your psychiatrist, absorb all of his power, and then therefore become the psychiatrist.”

Isaac choked on his next words, too busy laughing uproariously at his brother.

“Well I think that’s the first time I’ve ever made you laugh that hard.”

“You make me sick. Who says stuff like that with a straight face?” Isaac gasps. He lowers his feet to the ground, relaxing completely in his chair and Stiles counts that as another win. “I don’t think I could eat Dr. Graham, we’ve only had three sessions together.”

“Right, cause it’d be too impersonal?”

Isaac splutters. “No! Because then he’d have me committed for trying to eat him alive to ‘steal his life-force’!”

“Oh, yeah. Good point.”

Isaac snorts. “He’s better than Dr. Morrell. Less creepy and impersonal. We play games sometimes.”

“What kind?” Stiles shifts so he can be facing his brother completely. It makes him feel happy that Isaac feels comfortable enough to share these personal details.


“Does he let you win?”

“Surprisingly, no,” Isaac laughs like he’s fond of this fact. “Dr. Graham is super competitive, but I think I’d prefer it that way instead of him treating me like a baby or something. I think he thinks it makes talking about the tough stuff easier when we keep our hands busy.”

“Does it?”

Isaac turns away and angles his body more towards the TV. “Sometimes. Not always,” he admits quietly. “I kinda told him what I was during our first session, just to see how he’d respond. But he smiled and said that his wife was a Werecat, and that their kids might be someday as well when they reach maturity. He then asked me to give him a chance, and if I felt like I couldn’t trust him, he’d refer me to someone else.”

“Oh, you like him,” Stiles realizes. “Bet that makes a difference when it comes to talking about the tough stuff, huh?”

Isaac shrugs and says, “It helps.” Then, after a minute pause, adds, “We do role-plays sometimes. To get me used to knowing how to go about expressing myself with my friends and family.”
Stiles tries not to sound too hopeful when he asks, “What for?”

Isaac smirks like he knows what Stiles isn’t saying. “So I can talk about the tough stuff with you.”

Stiles smiles, completely caught. “You know I’d wait forever to hear what you had to say about your past.”

“I know,” Isaac simply replies. “And that’s why I’m trying. Not because I think you deserve it or have earned it. But because you want to know me at every angle, just like I hope to know you and dad.”

“You can ask me anything,” Stiles quickly points out.

Isaac shrugs like he knows. “Yeah, but that kind of stuff is a two way street. We’ll get there,” he decides, and then turns on the show.

Stiles thinks about how much he looks forward to it before he loses himself in the drama that is *Boys Over Flowers*.

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Stiles and Isaac are helping his Aunt Lorraine make soda bread and Irish stew for dinner by the time the sheriff makes his way home. He looks exhausted and weathered by his time helping Talia make heads or tails of the whole ‘Found Hales’ situation. If he didn’t already look like he was trying to take his mind off of things, Stiles would have bombarded him with questions. But as is, Stiles senses that it’s probably not the best time, and goes back to kneading the dough like how his aunt had instructed using the aid of his magic.

His dad disappears up the stairs to pack for his weekend trip with Melissa after checking in with them and saying his hellos.

Jay, his aunt’s Conduit, is lounging on top on the fridge, eating some grapes.

Isaac is at the stove stirring a wooden spoon (clockwise and then counterclockwise) in a simmering broth bubbling in a copper pot.

Aunt Lorraine divides her attention between them evenly, regaling her days as a Gaelic Apprentice in Ireland during the English Reformation.

“How old are you?” Stiles asks, marveling at the way she just grins coyly.

“What’s to say, dear heart? It’s been like one long day to me,” Aunt Lorraine admits before wiggling her nose so that she can summon a baking pan for the bread. “One stays alive long enough to ensure the survival of her line.”

That makes Stiles pause as he reigns his magic back in. Something suddenly dawns on him. “Did you have children?” he asks, watching as she puts the pan of dough in the oven so it can rise.

“Yes. A boy, and a girl,” Aunt Lorraine says, a sad faraway look in her eyes. “Not without consequence.” She looks at him with a gaze so deep and sharp in the most unfathomable way. “You and Lydia remind me of them.”

Stiles feels like there’s something she’s not saying, and he wonders about what Kate said to him the other day. “Why do you make us call you Aunt Lorraine?” he questions smartly.
Aunt Lorraine grins, like she’s been caught. “It’s easier than stumbling over all the greats you’d have to go through in order to call me grandma. Plus I imagine the shock you’d feel if you knew just how many was required.”

Stiles feels a bit dazed regardless with this new information and he has to sit down because something else occurs to him. “You didn’t choose the immortality, did you?”

Aunt Lorraine looks at him evenly before she wiggles her nose, causing the spoon that Isaac’s holding to stir on it’s own. “That’ll do, I think, Isaac. Why don’t you go and check on your father? See if he’s feeling peckish.”

Isaac glances between the two of them, obviously sensing that he’s being sent on a fool’s errand. He surprises Stiles by going along with it and disappearing up the stairs.

“He only listens to me because he knows I’m not really trying to hide anything. That I’m being sensitive to your feelings,” Aunt Lorraine explains, picking up on his thoughts through his facial expressions. “Let’s go sit outside for a moment, shall we? Fresh air always does me some good. Makes talking about the past less stifling.”

Stiles follows her to the front porch where they sit on the white wicker hanging chairs. The neighborhood is awash in the soft yellow colors of the streetlights, making the trash bins sitting at the end of everyone’s drive gleam like plastic Legos.

Both of them take their time getting settled in their seats, unhurried and languid with contemplation. The windows of each house are glowing with either the flickering light of a television or the solid white of a ceiling light.

It always amazes Stiles how the arrival of nightfall brings with it such a universal hush in sleepy towns such as these. Back in Los Angeles, the chaos of sound never ceased, day or night; it was a thriving, unceasing cycle.

“I was supposed to die on the birthing bed,” Aunt Lorraine spoke, breaking the peaceful silence. She keeps her voice just above a whisper, but louder than the crickets chirping away noisily in the trees and bushes. “You have to give up your magic, you know, when you want to have children. There’s no other way for Witches. You can’t possibly sustain both a life and the magic at the same time. The magic works just the same as growing a child does. You’re a host for this living thing and it depends solely on your life force. It’s an awful and unfair choice to make. It’s cruelty more than anything, you understand. Like choosing between children, picking only one to survive and watching the other slip away.”

Stiles thinks it must be devastating to have to do such a thing. It forces him to put what his mother must have gone through in order to have him in startling perspective.

“A lot of Witches adopt so they don’t have to make the choice. But women like your mother and I, we crave the blood connection, and sometimes find a mortal man we love so dearly, so truly, that we find the courage to make the sacrifice.” Aunt Lorraine continues, “And I did love him so, my mortal man.”

“I’m sorry,” Stiles says, because truly he is. “If this is painful for you to talk about, I won’t ask you to. I just wondered why you showed up after all this time. You were being too nice, I guess.”

“Makes perfect sense to me,” Aunt Lorraine assures. “I am a mysterious woman. With all these years behind me, it’s hard not to come off a certain way. You and the Argent girl were right to question my motives. I’d be more disappointed if you didn’t. A little suspicion is healthy.”
Stiles flushes as he realizes she heard what Kate said about her. “You have, uh, really good hearing.”

Aunt Lorraine just winks. “Sometimes you become more when you’ve lived through many lifetimes,” she confesses. “But, I think you should know the truth of things. Yes, I was supposed to die on the birthing bed, but that’s not what happened. The mortal man, who I so loved, and who loved me so in turn, refused to give me back to the Faceless, and so in his desperation sought out the Old Crone of the woods who could do terrible but powerful magic. And such an unsightly creature she was, living in filth and doing unspeakable things with dark magic. She was the village outcast for a reason.

“My mortal man marched into her territory and begged for my life.” She sighs with such remorse. “She agreed before she ate him. Then, using what she consumed as glamor, returned to me with his face. I was so weak and near blind, I didn’t know the difference, though I would have if I had the strength I needed to. She nursed me through the labor, and even some time after. Taking advantage of my weakened state, she fed me bewitched food, laced with spells that would bind me to her. She showed me her true face once I was on my feet, and once I realized something was wrong with my mortal man. She said, with the utmost glee, she’d done exactly what was asked of her. However, by saving my life, it was owed to her. I was cursed, and she made sure the whole village knew it too. I had to give my children to my mother and follow the Old Crone into the woods as an outcast as well.

“She made me a slave, forced to be at her every beck and call. Sometimes she would test some of her concoctions on me to watch me spew blood and guts or breakout in hives or leprosy. Or sometimes she would hex me to watch me writhe with pain and agony,” she says. “Little by little, I studied the books she had. Searching for an answer to my escape. I found one. It wasn’t pretty. I had to poison her little by little with a crippling potion, and when she became paralyzed, I ate her. Took me 7 months to get through her, bones and all, even after she’d become spoiled. It was the only way I could win my freedom, and as a consequence, I absorbed all the power that came with her life-force.”

Stiles is horrified at the outcome. “I’m...so sorry that you...that it had to be that way.”

Aunt Lorraine reaches out and places a hand over one of his, as though she means to comfort him. “Do you think ill of me now?”

Stiles laughs wetly and scrubs his face dry with his free hand. He’s always been sensitive to other people’s emotions, and he can’t help but to pick up on her anguish. “Of course not,” he swears. “Inheriting someone else’s magic must feel more like a curse than a gift. Why should I punish you more by judging you?”

Aunt Lorraine smiles sadly. “I returned to the village, you know. I was eager to be reunited with my children, only to find that they’d been sent away. It was my mother who told me as she lay on her deathbed, amazed to see my face unchanged after all those years. Imagine my shock when I learned that 30 years had passed since I’d been banished to fulfill the sadistic whims of the Old Crone. So I had to track them down.”

“Where did you find them?” Stiles asks.

“The girl was in Scotland. She’s responsible for Lydia’s lineage,” Aunt Lorraine says. “The boy was in Poland. He’s responsible for your lineage.”

Stiles wonders why she avoids saying their names. He wonders if maybe it’s too painful. “Did you name them when you had them?”
“I did.” Aunt Lorraine grows quiet for a moment. Then she says, “Do you believe in reincarnation?”

“I’m open to the concept,” Stiles carefully responds.

“I visited both you and Lydia when you were so very small, and it amazed me how much you looked like my boy and my girl,” Aunt Lorraine admits. “Now that you’re near to being fully grown, the likeness of you two is uncanny. They were fraternal twins, you know. My boy and my girl. My boy took after my mortal man, and my girl took much after me.”

Stiles isn’t sure what to say to that, so he says nothing at all.

“I consider it a gift,” Aunt Lorraine says. “All this time I’ve been trying to find peace by ensuring the survival of my lineage and I consider you and Lydia a sign that perhaps it’s time for me to move on.”

Stiles looks at her sharply. “And you helping us is settling your affairs?”

“In a way,” Aunt Lorraine agrees vaguely. “No one is meant to last as long as I have, but before anything can be settled, I will be sure to hand over all my connections to you and Lydia as well, so that they may help you both thrive as you both take up the mantle of your respective destinies. Eventually, my life-force will have to pass to someone else so that I can be laid to rest with the rest of our kin.”

Stiles doesn’t like what she’s implying.

“I believe,” Aunt Lorraine continues as she stands. “That you and Lydia will decide between yourselves who gets to show me that mercy.” And with that, she goes back inside.

Stiles just stares out into the neighborhood, mind swirling in dismay. He realizes that Kate was right. Only it’s in the worst way possible.

Was it not merely two hours before that he’d been joking with his brother about this very subject? The irony was ruthless.

---

Dinner is an awkward affair to say the least.

What with Aunt Lorraine pretending she didn’t all but admit that she’s scouting Lydia and Stiles to see which of them is the strongest to take her out. And what with Stiles pretending that it’s not all he’s able to think about while he forces himself to eat.

Honestly, what could anyone do when they find out their being groomed by their many great grandmother to take her down?

Isaac is nice enough to act like he didn’t hear every word of the conversation either, though it’s clear by the way he keeps glancing at Stiles, it is something he wants to talk about.

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The only one that’s oblivious to it all is their dad. He’s consuming Aunt Lorraine’s food with gusto, giving Stiles and Isaac earnest compliments for the part they played. He converses with Aunt Lorraine about really simple things, like how the game went that morning, and his excitement for the upcoming weekend. He declines dessert, saying he should hit the sack now since he’d have to be up before sunrise to make good timing on the road.

Aunt Lorraine sees him off with well wishes before she disappears into the basement with the soft
Stiles and Isaac work together to get the kitchen clean, and Stiles doesn’t have to wait long before Isaac brings up the unspoken thing.

“She’s crazy,” Isaac says as he puts away all the food while Stiles works on the dishes. “Tell me you don’t think it’s crazy.”

“I don’t think it’s crazy,” Stiles echoes flatly and pretends not to see the glare aimed in his direction. “Okay, it’s...an unusual situation.”

“I can’t believe how much you’re trying to downplay it.” Isaac hisses, sounding more frustrated than Stiles is used to hearing from him. “You can't live as long as she has and gone what she’s gone through and just retain your sanity. It’s unthinkable what she’s asking and you should tell dad so he can make her leave.”

“I don’t know,” Stiles says and holds up a hand to finish his train of thought when Isaac opens his mouth in outrage. “I think I should talk to Lydia first and see how we want to handle it.”

“Well you should do something.” Isaac slams the fridge door shut with more force than necessary, making the whole thing shake and disturbing Jay.

The Pygmy Marmoset screeches in reply but Isaac is too busy storming up the stairs to his room to notice.

Stiles sighs, finishes what he’s doing, and then carries himself to bed.

That night he dreams he’s sitting at a banquet table in the middle of the forest, Lydia across from him as Aunt Lorraine rests in a disfigured array of dishes, her decapitated head acting as a centerpiece. When he wakes up, he’s drenched in sweat, a gnawing hunger gurgling in his stomach, and his hands shaking as he tries not to think about how he reached out to eat her heart first.

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It’s early Friday morning (close to 4 am) when Melissa and Scott show up with bags packed; Melissa for her weekend getaway and Scott for his weekend stay.

Stiles is already awake anyway, sitting in the kitchen with a cup of hot chocolate to soothe the damage of his nightmares. He watches the fuss his dad makes about deciding who’s car they’re gonna take, before they settle on Melissa’s. He watches the fuss Melissa makes about ensuring that the boys have enough money and food to sustain them until their return (double checking that Scott has his inhaler, and his backup inhaler), refusing to leave until Scott and Stiles recite all the important contacts they need to know out loud.

Isaac, still in bed, doesn’t have to go through the trouble of it.

The sheriff has to assure Melissa over and over that the boys will be fine, and Scott seems almost horrified when she hugs the both of them, tight enough to bruise, with glistening eyes.

Eventually his dad is able to pry her away and get her out the door, sending them a fond but confident look as he says, “I trust they will make nothing but good decisions while we’re gone.”

Stiles nods vigorously and elbows Scott in his side so that he’s doing the same. They relax when the sound of the door locking follows their parents’ departure, and they breathe a little easier at the sound
of the car pulling from the curb to navigate to its intended destination.

“M’tired,” Scott yawns and rubs at his eyes. “Where should I put my stuff?”

“My room,” Stiles says and they quietly make their way up to it.

Scott tosses his bag by the closet door before he collapses on Stiles’s bed, muttering something about how he hopes Stiles doesn’t mind that he snores.

Stiles doesn’t get a chance to answer either way because Scott is out like a light the next moment, snoring very softly. He smiles, throws some of what he can of his covers over the younger boy and leaves his best friend to it, unable to find it in himself to go back to sleep. He opens all his windows before he leaves, in case Scott should overheat, and he lets his feet guide him wherever.

He ends up in his backyard, barefoot in wet grass, looking at the morning dew as it clings to the grounds and to the back of his throat. He thinks about what Scott said long ago. About how it never rains, and how nothing but a blanket of mist settles over Beacon Hills from where it travels from Mount Hebe.

Stiles tries to imagine what it must be like there, thinks it could just look like some ordinary foothill and knows without knowing it would be too simple if that were the case. He paces the length of his backyard in no particular order, giving himself over to the repetition of muttering prayers of sanctification over the area and unsurprised by how quickly it becomes crowded with fireflies.

Finished with his morning reflections, and feeling at peace, he makes his way to Nana and climbs her, loving the way the moisture on the bark feels on his hands and feet. The fireflies continue to float around but circle him once in a while as though they want him to acknowledge him. He goes as high as he can on Nana, which is impressively high, and sits on the branch like a kid settled on the shoulder of their older relative.

He takes in the sight of the early morning sun peeking from behind the veil of a dark curtain that's bleeding into a powder blue.

It looks like a bright yellow cookie being pulled out a sea of violets and oranges.

His magic begins rising up in him like a hot spring before covering him with an ethereal flush of spiraling symbols he still doesn’t understand. His eyes warm with honey gold and the colors of the sunrise intensifies into precious metal threads that spread out to the world to the houses he can see and the ones he can’t like a gilded spider web.

He feels even more calmed and settled as he sits amongst a curtain of purple-blue leaves, plump apples and peaches, and roses with translucent petals. He lets his thoughts go quiet for a moment before he lets them pick up again. He thinks about his mother, and what she looked like the last day he saw her. The way her hair fell around her shoulders in thick waves, the moles that marked her pail skin and the softness of her eyes when she smiled just for him. It makes him want to cry.

Stiles surprises himself when he doesn’t and he realizes that the pain he used to feel is a little bit less than before. He misses her deeply. Wishes he could still hear her voice. But above all else, he knows that what she would want for him, more than anything in the world, is to not dwell on what was lost, but on what can be remembered and cherished.

With that thought in mind, he avoids contemplating the inevitable conversation he will have to have with Lydia.

Instead, he thinks about his garden and how he’ll start with the rose bushes first. Those are the best
for upholding protective wards, and he wants nothing more than to keep his family safe.

Struck by that inspiration, he climbs down and returns to the house to get ready for the day, the sun gleaming in encouragement behind him.

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From: stilinski_kid99@gmail.com
To: mskirathunderkat@outlook.com
5/8/14

Kira

_Things are great here. I don’t think you’ve missed much really. Of course I may be too close to the situation to say for sure. Actually, yeah, I think us doing a video chat is a great idea. I find I have more to say face to face than through emails. I know we have a time difference working against us, but I’ll follow your lead if you want to work out when doing this would be best._

Stiles

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Stiles leaves the house before anyone is really up and about (but he leaves a note to let them all know where he plans on being).

The bike ride to Deaton’s shop is simple enough as always. He’s happy to see that there isn’t a truck parked out front waiting for him.

He unlocks the front door, and lets the bell overhead announce his arrival, even though he’s sure Deaton is already elsewhere like he said he would be. When the man in question doesn’t appear within moments of him being there, it just confirms what Stiles already knew.

His magic floats away from him and morphs into a very large group of dragonflies, zipping to and fro through the shop, from one end to the other.

Stiles is browsing the shelves to see if he can find out more about Old Crones and what can be changed about his Aunt Lorraine’s situation. That of course also leads him to seeking out books on life forces and different types of immortality (in all shapes and forms). He’s sitting deep within the shop’s gut, in a random aisle with books spread all around him as his mind tinkers away for a better solution than what his aunt already seems resigned to.

He is only a couple of hours into it all, and it doesn’t look good. He’s about to put all the books back and go back to prepping for his garden when his nose suddenly twitches with the thick scent of sea water and his ears are flooded with the sound of crashing waves and seagulls. He can feel the sunlight on his skin, even though he’s far away from the shop window, and the soles of his feet feels like he’s standing on a mound of sand.

The doorbell chimes, and a wind sweeps into the shop, curling around him like a siren song.

Stiles already know who it is. He sighs and stands to his feet before making his way to the front of the shop.

Tall and willowy as always, she stands in front of a grandfather clock with her chin held high, and
the soles of her feet black as night since she refuses to wear shoes. She’s wearing a satin dress that falls to her knees, and her hair is in two messy pigtails.

“Do you have an answer for me?” Heather asks without turning around to face him, knowing that he’s there.

“Not one you will like,” Stiles admits and watches as she does turn at that. He waits a few moments more as his magic circles him protectively, still in the shape of bioluminescent dragonflies. “Were there no rules you were taught about the surface world?”

Heather sends him a scathing look that says she would flay him alive if she thought she could get away with it. “Are you truly going to waste my time by critiquing my knowledge of Walker etiquette? Tell me what I need to know,” she demands.

“But I am,” Stiles replies calmly and takes one step forward to watch her cringe and match the move by taking one step back. “Were you ever taught any rules about the surface world?”

Heather scowls and speaks through gritted teeth as she spits out a ‘yes’ like venom.

“What was the number one rule?” Stiles presses.

Heather glares at him, eyes alight with fury and confusion before it washes cold and she becomes pale. “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...” She looks as though she wants to vomit.

“What did you do?” Stiles asks.

Heather is shaking at this point. “I broke bread and consumed the beasts of this land.” Stiles continues to gaze at her evenly until she breaks and clarifies, “I had one small bite of a thrice damned burger! How was I to know it would seal my fate in such a way? Am I cursed for curiosity? I haven’t eaten anything else since!”

“I’m sorry, but I think you know that you can never go home now,” Stiles confirms, and watches as her glamour begins to ripple, hinting to the frightening creature she really is underneath it all. “Do you want to send a missive to your family?”

Heather’s eyes are glazed over with a faraway look, as the space around her begins to vibrate. She lets out this gut wrenching screech, using sharp claws to rip and tear into her own skin until most of her arms are bloody.

Stiles almost gags at the violence and gore of it but he barely has time to intercede before she’s slithering out of the shop with the fury of a hurricane, causing the entire building to tremble. And because of that dramatic exit, he has to spend the next two hours going from object to object in order to ensure that nothing was broken in the aftermath.

Nothing is, thankfully.

Confident that Heather would be back sometime or another, he decides to turn his focus on reviewing the notes he took on the combined magic of roses and immunity charms. That eats away at the rest of his time and he decides to jot down a few questions about what he’s learned before leaving it on the glass counter for Deaton to discover while he draws his magic back to himself.

As Stiles is locking up, while it’s edging past noon, Scott and Isaac are rolling up on their bikes. He says, “Hey, I wasn’t expecting to see you two until later.”
Scott and Isaac share a look.

Stiles immediately knows something is up. “What happened?”

“Nothing happened,” Scott hedges carefully. “I just wanted to come and check on you. I heard you had an interesting talk with your aunt last night. Do you wanna talk about it?”

Stiles shoots Isaac a pointed look before he responds, “It’s nothing you should worry about, Scotty. Don’t get bent out of shape over it.”

“But, well, it’s kinda a big deal isn’t it?” Scott presses, looking concerned.

Isaac, on the other hand, seems annoyed by Stiles’s nonchalant and evasive attitude. “She practically asked him to eat her,” he remarks. “It’s a very big deal.”

Stiles is starting to get a headache, and his bones are grinding under his skin. He doesn’t want to argue. “Look, I really don’t want to get into this right now. I have to patrol the woods and figure out what’s going on.” He pulls out his phone from his pocket to call Braeden.

In a few words or less, Braeden agrees to meet him at the bridge near where Mr. Ravenhill died.

Stiles unlocks his bike and straddles it. “Come on,” he says and leads them in the direction of the preserve. He spends the time it takes them to reach the bridge to catch Isaac and Scott up to speed with the situation.

Scott asks a few questions, but Isaac seems content with the information he’s given.

Stiles thinks that’s because he probably already talked about this with Cora.

Braeden is waiting on the other end of the bridge with Whit Lee.

Scott nearly has a heart attack when he first sees the snow leopard, and Stiles doesn’t blame him. The Conduit looks as big as a full-grown polar bear while it sits in a dignified manner on large fluffy paws, his long fluffy tail swishing lazily behind him.

“You never said anything about having an entourage,” Braeden says as she stares all of them down from over the top of her aviator sunglasses while she sucks down the rest of her magical cigarette greedily, gently shooing the birds hovering around her at a distance. Her hair is in box braids today. She’s also wearing a dark purple romper with hiking shoes.

Stiles wonders if he should have worn better shoes but he knows it's too late to make any changes. “I didn’t know I needed permission,” he replies, fine-tuning his tone so that it’s unclear whether he’s being sarcastic or expressing genuine curiosity.

Braeden cocks her head like she’s trying to decide what to do about that statement before she overlooks it. “It’s fine. You don’t owe me anything.” She glances at Isaac and Scott before she turns her attention back to Stiles. “How should we do this? I can send my magic after your little dirt friend.”

“Oh I could send mine,” Stiles suggests. “I think he might respond better. But you have more experience with all this than I do. I’ll go along with whatever you think is best.”

“We’ll send yours since he likes you. You’re right, we need him on our side for this,” Braeden says, responding just as Stiles figured she would. He wonders if she even realizes she’s being played. “His name is Whit Lee and he’ll take it as an invitation to eat you if you keep giving him that bug-eyed
“stare,” she says to Scott.

Scott’s eyes widen further and his right hand twitches like he wants to reach for his inhaler.

Isaac glares at her and moves so he’s standing in front of Scott protectively.

Braeden smirks.

Stiles sighs, turns away from them, and sits down with his legs folded under him like a pretzel. Then he concentrates on summoning his magic to the surface. It pours out of him like a condensed bioluminescent fog, pouring into the earth and sinking down, down, down.

**Where are you sending me so forcefully?**

*I don’t mean to be forceful. There’s a Gnome hidden away in the ground, and I need to speak to him. Can you help me?*

**How nice of you to ask. I’ll see what I can do.**

Stiles rolls his eyes as it give over to the warmth of his enhanced sight and the forest suddenly comes alive around him. He closes his eyes against the vibrant wash of colors and he thinks back to the page he snuck a peak at in Deaton’s Grimoire about astral travel. He goes through the incantations silently and slowly in his mind until he manages to transport his consciousness away from his physical body, sending it into the earth to follow closely on the tail of his magic.

The journey is long and deep, and it seems almost endless.

*Maybe I should turn back.*

His magic sends him an impression of amusement wrapped in the lilac paper of mirth.

**Poor little Princeling. You must be so frightened by the dark.**

*Don’t be an ass. This is deeper than I was prepared to go. I don’t like being so far from my body.*

**Do you not trust me to protect you? No matter. We’re almost there. Be silent.**

Stiles makes sure to volley some of his annoyance at his magic but it gets ignored.

They break through to a large cavern carved with high ceilings that have different scraps of copper spread across its expanse like a sky of stars. There’s an orb of white light hovering in the middle of this faux sky acting like a moon to the kingdom that lies in wait below.

It’s a city of gleaming precious metals of all colors and designs. There were statues and monuments, working fountains and a functioning river that ran along the outer perimeter of this underground kingdom. There’s even a large castle made of stone that sits higher up than the rest of it’s metallic territory.

There are dirt roads that cut through this metallic city like veins, and working street lamps that were plotted were most needed. It also seems that the mode of transportation they use are carts strapped to (clearly magically enhanced) naked mole rats.

Stiles has never seen anything like it.

His magic takes the lead, glowing like a beacon as though to announce their arrival, and it does what
it’s meant to.

There’s a commotion that starts below. The Gnome-folk pause their actions to gesture to the sky as they speculate amongst themselves over the shining apparition paying them a visit.

Stiles and his magic make their landing beside the statue acting as the kingdom’s centerpiece; it’s a bearded Gnome holding his pickaxe proudly, and when Stiles reads the nameplate he realizes that this is their founding father.

The oncoming crowds of spectators are harder and harder to ignore as they surround Stiles and his magic at a safe distance. It becomes so thick that Stiles is afraid he may be giving off the wrong message.

“Uh, hello!” Stiles greets to no one in particular. “Could any of you point me in the direction of Welpip?”

The crowd just echoes the name with surprise and confusion.

Wait, can they even see me?

His magic begins to give off waves amusement and mirth again.

_They see me. Your consciousness has no form._

*Great. So they think some invisible thing is talking to them?*

_Correct._

Stiles could almost face palm if he thought it was possible.

*If I could make a suggestion?*

*What?*

His magic cycles him before completely blanketing his consciousness. The next thing he knows, his magic is acting as a skin for him (outlining his actual physical form).

He’s basically just a blue sparkling, bioluminescent figure.

The crowd gasps and the voices exhilarate in excitement and wonder.

Stiles doesn’t really get why they are making such a fuss, and starts scratching his head out of reflex when his fingers bump into a crown shaped thing on his head. He stiffens in irritation.

*Hey, that’s not funny.*

*Whatever do you mean?*

*Get rid of this crown.*

*Why? You are a Faerie Princeling.*

*You’re making things weird. They will treat me like...like...*

*They will treat you like your station demands.*
Stiles is about to argue how titles aren’t everything, and how this is going to make him seem like some sort of Christopher Columbus when Welpip darts through the crowd to get to him.

“Ah, Your Majesty!” Welpip is panting by the time he reaches them. “You should have sent a missive to announce your arrival. Would have saved you the trouble of such an unsavory greeting. Look at them, staring at you with cow eyes. Oh, don’t think any less of us for our bad manners.”

“It’s alright. I was just going to send my magic ahead of me to ask after you, but my curiosity got the better of me as well. I’m sorry for any trouble I’m causing,” Stiles apologizes earnestly.

“Trouble? No, you’re a blessing to us wee folk,” Welpip assures and his chest puffs up as he strokes his long beard. “Aye, your timing is quite spectacular. No one believed me when I reported back about my time on the surface world. Chamberlain Vorpip called me a liar. Said there hadn’t been a Seven of Virtues in nearly a century! Imagine that! My own cousin insulting me so. But he’s acted more stranger than kin ever since he got that fancy position with the Chamber Guard.”

Stiles nods, finding it curious. He explains. “Well, sorry they didn’t believe you. At least my unexpected arrival will benefit you in that way. I actually came to take you up on your offer.”

Welpip’s eyes become alight with pleasure. “You certainly have my services, Your Majesty. You honor me so.”

“Make way! Make way!” some soldiers from the crowd yells. “Make way for the King!”

The crowd parts while they bow.

The soldiers flank a Gnome with a great bushy beard, thick eyebrows, and a metal crown that’s as luminous as the robes he’s wearing.

Stiles assumes this is the King.

Welpip bows. “My king,” he acknowledges. “May I introduce you to His Majesty, Seven of Virtues, Stiles of Beacon Hills.”

Do not bow. You are nearly equals.

Well what am I supposed to do? What do I say?

Say ‘good day’ and let him flaunt his title.

Stiles kind of fumbles with his greeting and says, “Good day.”

“Welcome, Majesty,” the King greets, fisting his right hand and placing it over his heart in respectful recognition. “I am King Falconine, twenty-sixth of my name, Fatherly Counselor to the Catacomb of Beacon Hills, and ruler of the Pacific West Catacombs.”

Address him as Majesty and say ‘well-met’.


“Please, call me Falconine,” the King insists.

“Then you must call me Stiles.”

“Well-met,” the King compliments with a smile that says he’s pleased to be given permission to be more formal. “Seeker Welpip did not share the good news of your upcoming arrival.”
Welpip huffs in disagreement.

Stiles rests a hand on Welpip’s shoulder to calm him before he replies, “The blame is completely mine.”

“No, the blame rests on those who didn’t believe me!” Welpip remarks.

The King looks curious by that and ignores the fact that Welpip’s unrightfully assuming himself into a conversation between two royals. “Who received your report?” he asks.

Welpip grins, almost vindictively, and points a stubby finger to the barefaced Gnome who, while lacking in facial hair, made up for it by having thick, long hair atop his head. He’s standing off to the side at the front of the crowd and Welpip makes a quick work of singling him out. “Why that would be Chamberlain Vorpip,” he says with great relish.

Vorpip goes pale when the King gestures for him to join them. He bows to Stiles first and then to the King. “How may I be of service?”

“Chamberlain Vorpip, Seeker Welpip has told me something rather unsettling. Do us the justice of clearing up the confusion,” the King says, almost magnanimously. “The report he submitted — what was done?”

Vorpip starts squirming while Welpip looks delighted by how things are going. He says, “It was deemed...unsuitable for archiving and was...dismissed. There was some doubt to the authenticity of his findings.”

“They thought I was lying,” Welpip clarifies with unapologetic abruptness.

“That is troubling to hear, indeed,” the King decides. “How many other reports, I wonder, did you deem unsuitable and dismiss. You realize that had you followed protocol by escalating it so that it could be reviewed further, we would not be unprepared to host a visiting royal. You have embarrassed us.”

Vorpip squeaks and begins to turn bright red, matching his long hair almost completely. “Many, many, many apologies,” he begs, collapsing to his knees and fistling his right hand over his heart.

“I should think so,” the King remarks with wry amusement. “You shall show your penance by stepping down and returning to your original post as Seeker. Welpip appears to be more suited to your job than you are, would you not agree, Stiles?”

“For as little as I know, I think I agree,” Stiles offers and grins at the way Welpip practically vibrates out his skin with satisfaction.

“As it was said, so let it be done,” the King declares. “Chamberlain Welpip, I trust you will see after Stiles.”

Welpip fists his right hand over his heart. “Aye, my king. Your trust is not misplaced. We’ll be on our way to address the sick parts of the forest.”

The King nods, lips twitching slightly as he gives a parting nod to them both. “Safe travels,” he says before he’s lead away by his soldiers.

Welpip takes a moment to watch his cousin stumble after the King to beg his forgiveness and that he reconsider his decision. Then he says, “Shall we go up?”
Stiles nods and lets his magic propel him towards the surface as Welpip follows by his own magic.

Scott and Isaac are sitting on the edge of the riverbank with their legs submerged up to their knees when Stiles fully returns to himself.

Braeden is leaning into Whit Lee’s side as he lounges in the grass with his eyes close, ears and tail twitching with each sound that breaks through towards the clearing. Her birds are circling high overhead.

Stiles shakes out his hands and wiggles to get a good feel of himself in his physical body. Satisfied that he’s good to go, he says, “Welpip will lead the way.”

Welpip takes a moment to take stock of everyone. “Good day,” he greets (mostly ignoring Braeden).

Braeden smirks meanly at him like she sees what he’s doing.

“T’m Isaac,” Isaac says.

“Well-met,” Welpip greets.

“Uh, h-hi,” Scott stammers as he stares at Welpip with wide eyes. “My name is Scott.”

“Well-met.” Welpip looks more amused than offended by his reaction. “You look like you have questions.”

“No!” Scott denies. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to stare.”

“Never seen a wee thing like me before, ey?” Welpip guesses, smiling under his long beard. “Bit of a shock for a sprout like you, I imagine.”

Scott nods silently.

“Well you’ll get no trouble from me if you give me none,” Welpip assures and shoots a pointed look at Braeden. He turns to Stiles. “This way, Your Majesty.” He starts walking north.

Isaac and Scott flank both of Stiles’s side while Braeden follows at a distance with Whit Lee and her feathered friends.

Scott remarks, “Your life is unreal, dude.”

Stiles gets why he would say that. “Scotty, I think that every single moment of every single day.”

Welpip leads them to an area full of bluish-black trees with spiky branches that are barren with no leaves. Wilted and dead flowers are everywhere, and the greying grass and bushes are covered in a film of brown slime. It smells sours and Stiles is upset to realize that there is no sign of woodland life to be found anywhere around here.

“This is much worse than what I was imagining,” Braeden comments, sweeping past the three of them with Whit Lee, expression thunderous.

The area seems ominously quiet. Not much can be heard outside of their own footfalls and the gusting wind whistling through the crippled trees.

Stiles doesn’t have to pretend to agree this time. He most certainly does. He rubs at his nose as though to get the smell of decay from festering the way it is in the back of his throat. He veers to the left to walk over for a closer look.
“What kind of magic could do this, you think?” Isaac asks when he joins him.

“What kind of magic could do this, you think?” Isaac asks when he joins him.

“Not magic,” Welpip corrects, joining them as well. “I’ll wager you’re looking at the effects of a spoken curse, and a most assuredly foul one at that. Whoever did all this has a rather nasty temper.”

Stiles’s brow furrows curiously at that as he steps back from the rotting tree. “You think this is the result of a temper tantrum?” he asks.

Welpip folds his hands together behind his beard and replies, “Aye. There’s poison in this kind of rage. It looks like the one responsible walked through this area and took their time cursing every tree, every blade of grass, every flower.”

Stiles shifts his perspective to get a better understanding of the logic. He imagines what it takes to cause this kind of destruction and can feel nothing but a fury laced with deadly intent that’s so crushing that it nearly gives him vertigo. He shakes it off when the edges of his vision start spotting with shadows.

This isn’t just a spoken curse.

“It’s an anti blessing,” Braeden voices his thoughts out loud. “I recognize this hex. It’s the Stable Witch Curse.”

Welpip spits three times and turns in a circle, as if the superstitious act itself will offer him protection. “We Gnome-folk call it the Evil Eye. Terrible curse, it is. The sort that would steal the life of a sprout or make the legs of a horse go lame,” he bemoans. “I must return to my kin and report this. We’ll need to take measures to protect our world. This...this is the sort of sickness that spreads.”

“Thank you for bringing us here. I’m sure we can find the rest on our own,” Stiles assures. He quickly reaches in his backpack and retrieves a shiny, new bag of Sour Patch Kids. He hands it over. “For your time.”

Welpip accepts it with vigor, looking close to tears. “Bless you and yours, Majesty.” He nods his goodbyes to Scott and Isaac, and even (reluctantly) to Braeden. He sinks slowly into the soil like quicksand until there is nothing left to be seen of him.

Braeden steps up to Stiles and says, “This was done with a Profane Tongue.”

“Demon,” Stiles pinpoints and Braeden looks pleased with his conclusion. “Someone in high rank. It’s not a far outbreak but it’s expansive enough.”

“Looks like there’s a Demon in the service of our Seven of Vices,” Braeden adds thoughtfully. “You have any idea who it might be?”

Stiles doesn’t hesitate to say, “Jezebel.”

Braeden pales instantly. Then she rushes off to brace herself against a rotting tree as she vomits into a bush.

Stiles is definitely not expecting that reaction and it’s worrisome.

Whit Lee reaches her side first, offering his comforts where he can as Braeden gathers herself.

Stiles hands her a bottle of water from his backpack and she graciously accepts it. “So...are we going to address that?” he asks deftly.
Braeden keeps her focus on using some water to swish around in her mouth before spitting it out and drinking the rest. When she’s emptied it, she says, “After I didn’t pass Deaton’s little test, he referred me to Druid Magnus. I was under his mentorship for only six months when we encountered Jezebel’s handiwork in New York. She’d been responsible for agitating the rise of a cult who followed the ways of the Gold Horned Goddess. She appeared to them just as they had imagined, with frightening beauty, disguising what she truly was, and had every man and woman steal infant children from their cribs, pry their chests open, and feed their hearts to her.

“She didn’t need the hearts, Stiles. They didn’t do anything for her. She just liked it for the anguish.”

Stiles is horrified.

Scott mumbles something about not having the stomach to listen so he walks far enough that he can’t overhear and Isaac follows to at least offer company.

Anyway,” Braeden weathers on. “Druid Magnus was on assignment by the Silver Magistrate. He was able to help them disperse the cult, and handed those guilty of their crimes to the Human legal system. When he found her…” She exhales shakily and he can tell this is hard for her to talk about. “She was in the middle of ripping open another baby, but Druid Magnus intervened the best way he could. He saved the child, but that Demon jinxed him. Made him skin himself from head to toe using nothing but a potato peeler, and didn’t let him die until he had finished.”

Stiles is afraid to ask, but he does regardless, “Were you there? When it happened?”

Braeden smiles, and it’s chillingly hollow. She looks defeated. “What could I have done with only six months of training under my belt? That’s what they asked me when they found me from where she had me pinned to the ceiling in perfect view of everything. She spared my life because she said I wasn’t even worth her time being as weak as I was. At least my mentor was a challenge, but me, she said it would have been like attacking a baby, and she laughed like it was a fucking ironic joke or something.

“Jezebel had disappeared like smoke by the time backup came,” she says. “Though I don’t quite know what difference it would have made if they had gotten there in time to capture her where she had us trapped in that room with all those baby bodies. She answers to no one but herself.”

“And a Seven of Vices,” Stiles points out, looking at Braeden in a new light. “She’s on assignment here. For what reason, I don’t know, but she’s here. Somewhere.”

“This is bigger than what I thought it was,” Braeden says and summons a cigarette with shaky hands. “It makes sense now why things are the way they are. And to think I was giving you so much shit about being lazy. Goddess, I’m a stupid fucking asshole.” She begins to suck away at her enchanted cigarette with rattled desperation. “I’ll have to report this to Druid Lehuanani. It’s a wonder that Alan hasn’t escalated this.”

“I never named a Demon to him,” Stiles explains, defensive of his mentor.

Braeden exhales twinkling smoke. “You’re gonna need help, Stiles. You and I can’t take this on our own like I thought. I need to get home and see if I can convince Druid Lehuanani to get the Silver Magistrate to agree to come here to assess the situation.” She rubs at the bridge of her nose as her face scrunches in a frown. She straightens and says, “Look, be careful. You don’t need to be in these woods by yourself. I don’t think Jezebel would kill you, but she won’t be nice. Get it?”

Stiles nods.
“Let’s just leave this for now,” Braeden decides and continues to smoke away at her enchanted cigarette with twitchy gusto. “I think that it’s best we let Talia and Alan sort this issue out. You focus on your training. They’re gonna need you on your toes around her.” She whistles sharply and her birds flock to her obediently, just as Whit Lee does.

The snow leopard looks annoyed and discontent to share Braeden with the other animals.

Stiles makes a gesture to Isaac and Scott so they can catch up.

The four of them double back to the bridge so the boys can grab their bikes before Braeden leads them out from this end of the preserve.

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The Hale Manor is a welcome sight after the roughness of the last 24 hours.

Everyone is poured out around the front porch, talking amongst themselves with loud exclamations and affectionate gibes.

The younger kids come running out from the side of the house, immediately stripping down, kicking off their shoes as they chase each other into the backyard, or into the woods. Huge fluffy wolfish looking dogs with black, white, and grey fur come galloping after them, following closely to engage in the play.

Some girls call out to Isaac when they catch wind of his scent and see his face.

Isaac looks to Stiles but he shrugs and says, “Go for it. If there’s food, I’ll put you a plate aside.”

Isaac nods before he goes sprinting after the shrieking girls who give chase with excited whooping cheers.

Braeden leaves in a flurry, saying something about packing so she can catch the earliest flight out tonight; Whit Lee and her court of feather friends flocking closely after her.

“What’s Jackson doing here?” Scott questions after they enter the house (they leave their bikes on the porch). He gestures to the living room where Nana Hale and Laura are, once again, working on the quilt from the other day while Jackson sits on the floor next to the sewing kits.

Jackson appears to be in a deep discussion with Nana Hale. He pauses once and while to fetch whatever thread or needle Nana Hale indicates to in the sewing kit.

If Stiles concentrates enough, he can kind of single out the conversation, but with the few words he can pick up, he begins to realize that Jackson is asking about his birth mother. Feeling bad for eavesdropping on something that’s obviously personal, he focuses his attention on Scott. “It’s a long story. You’ll have to ask Jackson about it,” he finally responds.

Scott seems to mull it over before he nods and takes Stiles’s advice at face value by wandering over right then and there. He settles down beside Jackson, startling the other teen and making him defensive.

Nana Hale and Laura look delighted to see Scott again, taking turns to kiss him on the cheek and cooing at the way he flushes because of it.

Stiles veers towards the dining room where Kate and Peter are sharing an entire key lime pie between them at the lower end of the long oak table. He sits across from them and grabs whatever’s
in reaching distance, feeling famished from not eating all day. His bones are starting to grind and creak under his skin, which usually happens when the late evening hits. Or so he’s begun to notice.

“What’s up, buttercup?” Kate greets, watching in amusement as he tears his way through a burger. “No one feeding you these days?” she teases.

Stiles just mumbles and jams some plain tortilla chips into his mouth. He takes a moment to build a plate for his little brother, and he takes it into the kitchen where he uses a local marker to write ‘Isaac’ before storing it in the fridge. He returns to the long oak table to demolish some waffle fries.

Peter eyes him fondly, lips twitch with mirth as he asks, “Back so soon from your adventure with Braeden? I’m almost offended you didn’t ask me to join.”

Stiles rolls his eyes and takes huge bite of his burger with a pointed silence.

“And what did we find out there in the woods?” Peter drawls as he lowers his fork with the grace of a nobleman and aims a fixated stare on him.

“Nothing good,” Stiles says after a swallow. He shivers through the quick onslaught of hot flashes and uses the back of his arm to wipe the sweat from his forehead. “Demonic activity. That’s what’s out there poisoning most of the areas.”

Peter doesn’t comment on it as he watches him closely. “Are you becoming ill?” and it’s amazing how he can sound both hostile and concerned at the same time.

“Not exactly,” Stiles sighs, leaning back so he can quickly mutter the rest of his explanation.

Peter face gives over to confusion before it clears in understanding and he’s back to grinning with humor. “Ah, they do grow up so fast,” he comments to Kate. “It seems like a lifetime ago when I went through my change. I’m sure you feel like your body is betraying you.”

Stiles makes an exasperated sound. “Can you stop? You’re making it weird and it’s not a big deal okay? Okay.”

Kate smirks and cuddles up to Peter as she says, “Leave him alone, Peter.”

“Thank you,” Stiles says as he pops open a can of orange soda.

“I mean, it’s perfectly natural to be a late bloomer,” Kate adds, in true form, turning her face to she can continue to laugh at Stiles’s expense into Peter’s shoulder.

“You’re both dicks,” Stiles retorts dryly as he wipes his mouth clean and reaches for the rest of their key lime pie.

Peter allows the theft without complaint. “Who’s the source of the demonic activity?” he asks instead, going back to the original strain of their conversation.

“Give me a ride to the airport and I’ll tell you all about it,” Braeden interjects from where she materializes out of thin air besides Stiles, who jumps and nearly falls over in fright. She smirks at the response and appears to be proud of herself. “Hey, now. Look at that. I’m getting pretty good with Inter-Jumping.”

“Leaving so soon?” Peter cocks his head curiously. “You two really did stumble into something. I’ve never known you to turn tail and run.”
“Oh, fuck off, Peter,” Braeden snaps. “Are you going to take me to the airport or not?”

Peter leans over to kiss Kate very suddenly and very deeply, leaving her in a slight stupor when he pulls away to stand. “Shall we?” he drawls, making a wide gesture towards the direction of the garage with a cutting grin.

Braeden returns it with a sharp smile of her own and thanks him curtly when he helps her with her luggage.

Kate, still looking a bit dazed from that kiss, says, “Where’s my darling little brother?”

Stiles decides to be mean and replies, “Which one are we talking about?”

Kate throws a waffle fry at him. “Isaac Lahey, you little twerp.”


“In Peter’s bed,” Kate replies with great relish, drinking in the way it makes Stiles blush. “I was going to go give him a wake up call. Peter and I have been selfishly wearing him out. But out of respect for Isaac, I’ll take you downstairs to Derek instead.”

Stiles quickly shovels the last of the key lime pie in his mouth before he follows after Kate, pausing to accept a kiss from Nana Hale, a hug from Laura, and a vague nod of acknowledgement from Jackson.

Scott just aims a sunny smile at his best friend from where he’s nestled between Nana Hale and Laura; both women guiding his hands with the quilt and teaching him how to sow since he’d all but begged to be included.

Stiles has never been more fond of the younger boy than he is in that moment. He smiles back and continues on with Kate as they trek down the stairs into the bowels of the house.

Cora, Allison, and Lydia are playing, what looks like, the French version of scattergories in the game area on the other side of the bowling alley.

Stiles makes a beeline for Allison. “Hey, I didn’t expect to see you here.”

Allison stands so they can hug, and when they release each other, she explains, “When my dad told me about what happened, I had to come. So I had my mom drop me off this morning. Jackson and I got to talking, you know, to clear the air and figure out what it would mean for us going forward. Next thing I know, I have an invitation to stay. So I’ve been lounging with Cora and Lydia. I tried to get Malia involved, or rather, tried to get her to talk to me but she hasn’t said a word since she found out.”

“I told Jackson to say something to her because, hello, that’s his twin sister,” Cora chimes from where she’s adding up all their scores. “But he’s been super bizarre about it all. Kinda cagey.”

“He’s just freaked,” Allison defends as she tucks her curly hair behind her ears. “It’ll take some time before everyone adjusts. I mean, can you blame him? The whole thing is twisted.”

“Don’t disagree on that front,” Cora replies. “Lydia wins, by the way. Again.”

Lydia’s response to that announcement is to take a long sip of her tea with prim precision while she cradles her bejeweled egg close.
It’s grown twice the size from when Stiles last seen it, nearly identical in size to a watermelon. He walks over to really get a good look. “It’s getting big,” he points out.

“Aunt Lorraine thinks I’m doing very well with the incubation process,” Lydia boasts and that only reminds Stiles of what they have to talk about.

He skims his fingers over the top of the egg.

The egg vibrates with a reddish tint.

“He recognizes you,” Lydia simply says, purposefully gendering it. “He doesn’t do that for everyone.”

“I must be special.”

“Must be,” Lydia agrees.

Stiles grins before he grows serious. “I think we should talk,” he suggests lightly.

Lydia lifts an eyebrow as she stares at his chin. She nods and stands.

“I’m taking her place,” Kate announces and gets situated in Lydia’s seat. “Where’s Derek? I thought he was down here.”

Cora shrugs. “He was for like a minute. Then he went somewhere else like a while ago.”

Allison remarks on something in rapid French.

Cora laughs and responds in kind.

Kate snorts, adding something as well in the same dialect.

By the time Stiles and Lydia reach the stairs, the three females become embroiled in a passionate French banter as they start a new game.

Lydia takes the lead by setting the direction of their walk. She takes them through the dining room, into the kitchen and out the side door that leads to the garage.

From there, they exit the garage to walk past the swing set and start walking into the forest. He gets a feel for his magic and senses it circling overhead as a flock of bioluminescent hawks.

Lydia, with a pensive tone, says, “Last night I had a dream I was sitting across from you at a banquet table.”

Stiles glances at her sharply. “What was being served?” he asks, a slight tremor in his voice.

But Lydia refuses to say and remains fixated on the trees directly ahead of them as she clutches her egg close.

“We need to talk about Aunt Lorraine.”

“What’s to discuss when it’s been decided? She wants me.”

Stiles quickly steps in front of her and she’s forced to come to a halt before him. “She would have never let me do it...is that what you’re saying?”
“How could she when she realized you were a Virtue and I was a Banshee? The choice would have been obvious enough.”

Stiles curses and looks up towards the top of the trees. He knows she’s right, and he’s probably always known but was too afraid to acknowledge it. “Lydia, I don’t think it’s fair for her to demand that of you. Why choose you?”

“Such questions cannot be answered. You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess: not for power or wisdom, at any rate,” Lydia quotes, echoing Gandalf, and it throws Stiles, which he thinks may have been her intention. She’s staring at something past his shoulder. “I think it was always going to be this way for me. I’m much like she was when she was this age. And I have seen horrors that can revile her own.”

Stiles finds that unsettling and he tries to find his footing in the conversation again. “She told you about who she really is? How she got like this?”

Lydia nods as a dreamy expression crosses her features. “I broke up with Jackson,” she announces. Stiles gawks, thrown. He loses his footing in the conversation once again.

Lydia finally looks him directly in the eye and it makes him pause. She doesn’t usually enjoy maintaining eye contact unless she’s trying to either intimidate or make a point. She says, “He has issues he needs to get through. I refuse to be his rehabilitation center.”

“Oh. Okay, yeah. Of course,” Stiles agrees earnestly. He feels less off balance with that explanation.

Lydia sidesteps him so she can continue to be the one directing their hike. “You can relax, you know,” she says. “It might take me years before I learn what Aunt Lorraine needs me to know in order to make the trade.”

Stiles supposes that’s a fair point. “I don’t like it any less,” he admits.

For some reason, that gets Lydia to do something that nearly resembles a smile. “How did Heather take the news?” she asks.

“Of course you know she confronted to me. Why do you get all the good psychic genes?” Stiles pretends to complain.

“If you want my nightmares, you can have them,” Lydia replies with a morbid sense of humor. “Peril knows, they do me no good. Maybe you should come stay with me tonight. I seem to sleep better with you near.”

Stiles sober when he notices the bag under her eyes. “If you need me, you have me,” he swears.

Lydia shrugs just one shoulder. “I know,” is all she says.

The rest of the walk is spent in silence, the two of them lost to their own thoughts until they reach a small clearing where the dogs usually come to play.

Derek is sitting out in the middle of it with Malia sprawled halfway across his lap. He waves them over.

The first thing that Stiles notices when they draw closer is that Malia’s sleeping fitfully from where half of her is curled into Derek’s lap, and with the way she’s spooning Jordan close, she appears to have a deep seeded need for affection at the moment.
Jordan is licking the inside of Malia’s right hand in a comforting manner.

Stiles also notices that’s probably because Malia’s cheeks are red and wet, as well as the tip of her nose, from what looks like the aftermath of perhaps bawling her eyes out. She seems to be hiccupping in her sleep and only settles for a few minutes at a time.

Derek is stroking her hair tenderly like an older brother looking after his fussy younger sister. “She seemed kind of overwhelmed by everything, so I brought her out here and she spent the next hour crying into my shoulder,” he explains lowly.

Stiles sits on the other side of Derek as he clucks his tongue sadly. “Poor Malia,” he mutters. “It must have been suffocating trying to keep all that in. Was she trying to look brave and strong about it all?”

Derek nods in confirmation and reaches out to pull Stiles close, taking the time to skim his nose along the back of his ear to scent him.

Stiles shivers, hyper aware of their proximity.

“Missed you,” Derek mumbles before kissing his burning cheek. He pulls away to say, “How’s it going, Lydia?”

Lydia makes a broad gesture and shrugs.

Derek laughs. “That good, huh?”

Lydia shrugs again before she takes the seat on the other side of Stiles. She fixates on the river that lies before them as she strokes her trembling egg.

“She reminds me of Cora,” Derek says after a while. He’s looking down at Malia as he says it, stroking her hair gently when she hiccups fitfully in her sleep again. “I mean, she’s way friendlier. Still abrasive and rough, but sweeter.”

“I can see that,” Stiles remarks, looking down her at her as well. She still favors Jackson when it comes to looks, which only becomes obvious if you know what to look for. “Do you think they’ll get their paranormal inheritance?”

“I think Malia will. We talked about it. She described the common indicators she’s been experiencing,” Derek says. “But I think Jackson will have to ask for the Bite, though. He’s Human.”

Stiles contemplates these details before he says, “Listen, I don’t know if you heard but Braeden and I found something in the woods that has her pretty spooked. She’s going back to New York.”

Derek looks surprised. “Did she already leave?”

“Yeah. Peter’s taking her to the airport as we speak,” Stiles confirms. “I don’t think she plans on being gone long. She’s essentially calling the cavalry.”

“Oh. It was that bad?” Derek questions and makes a thoughtful sound when Stiles nods.

“Sun’s getting real low,” Lydia comments, ripping up grass and sprinkling it across her legs and over her egg.

Stiles feels brave enough to hug Derek’s left arm, and is rewarded with a smile that makes his heart do a funny dance in his chest.

Derek ducks his head so that he can press a heated kiss between Stiles’s brow.
Stiles flushes and quickly bites Derek’s shoulder.

Derek rumbles, a pleased sound that vibrates into Stiles’s body, making him quiver. Derek’s eyes flash gold and his stare is bright with the desire to chase and claim.

Stiles feels like game in that moment, like prey, and deep down he thinks if Malia wasn’t asleep in his lap and curled around Jordan, Derek might have tried to corner him somewhere out there in the woods.

*I think I would let you,* Stiles says to himself in the safety of his own mind as a blush burns it’s way across his face, and the truth of it is both scary and thrilling.

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**Eight Years Earlier**

**MAY 2006**

The building is so gaudy and obnoxious that Claudia grimaces the moment her taxi pulls up to the curve. She thanks the driver, pays her fair with a tip, and pushes forward to step onto the sidewalk. Wiping sweaty palms against the skirt of her dress, she considers what a terrible idea this is and teeters on the indecision of hailing another cab to return home to her husband and their son. But desperation wins in the end as she holds her head high, chin jutting out, and she pushes through the glass double doors as the bell rings overhead.

“I will be there in moment, darling!” a heavily accented voice (Romanian) shouts from the back of the shop. Footsteps soon follow, and there’s the sound of the curtain of beads cackling together as an elderly woman with an impressive hump limps through them. “Now, what can Miss Patra do for - oh, it’s you.”

Claudia blinks in surprise at how quickly her honeyed tone switches to something more cold and callous. Claudia is just grateful for the switch from English to Polish. “Hello, Cleopatra. I hope you are well. You seem to be…doing well,” she replies.

Cleopatra scowls with an old face. “Oh as well as I can with my lifestyle,” she merely states. “Is this a social call?”

“What do you mind revealing your true face?” Claudia questions patiently.

Cleopatra sighs with an eye roll as she waves a dismissive hand in front of her face and removes the glamour. It takes her mere seconds to transform back into a tall, leggy brunette with mahogany skin in her late twenties. She materializes a cigarette and wiggles her nose so that the sign behind Claudia flips from ‘OPEN’ to ‘CLOSED’.

The grace and ease of it makes Claudia momentarily sick with envy before she shakes it off like she’s done so many times before when she misses her magic. But for her son, she would not do it differently.

Cleopatra takes a seat at the table holding a fake crystal ball as the centerpiece. “You have got some nerve, Claudia, showing up like this.”

Claudia doesn’t say anything until she joins the younger woman at the table. “I know I have no right to ask, but I need your help.”

Cleopatra nearly chokes on her next inhale of twinkling silver smoke. “You? Need my help? Is this
“some kind of joke?” But when she sees Claudia’s unwavering expression, she sobers immediately. “You are not joking. Wow.” She shakes her head as she inhales another puff from her enchanted cigarette. “For what possible reason would Claudia J. Wojtanek need to degrade herself by visiting a demoted Silver Witch like me?”

“It’s Stilinski now,” Claudia corrects as she crosses her legs and her arms.

Cleopatra snorts through her next exhale. “So you have gone and gotten married. At least the rumor mill got that right. Everyone said you left Poland on short notice and cut all ties with anyone who wasn’t family. What’s his name then? I bet it is someone we went to boarding school with right? Or someone on the Silver Magistrate? Everyone always assumed you’d do great things with that pretty face of yours. Enchanting Kings and seducing Demigods.”

Claudia shakes her head slowly. “No, I haven’t...it’s no one like that.”

Cleopatra narrows her gaze before she straightens as though zapped by an invisible lightning bolt. “By Peril...you’ve married a Human? A Human, Claudia? The very thing you and your terrible brew of bitchy witches used to tease me about?” The laugh she gives is as cold and sharp as ice, and the lights flicker with her glee. “Oh how I prayed for justice, and now it seems to have been delivered.”

“Make no mistake, Cleopatra, I’m a changed woman now. I’m not the stupid, horrible girl you once knew during our schooling days overseas. Those prejudices no longer matter to me anymore.”

“Ugh, spare me. This humble side of you makes me sick.” Cleopatra summons an ashtray so she can flick some of her glittery ash into it. “You told one stupid little lie about me, and it cost me my livelihood, and my right to graduate as a White Priestess. I was forced to migrate to California and perform parlor tricks like a disgraced Crone.”

“From the bottom of my heart, know that if I could right the wrongs —”

“But you can’t, can you?” Cleopatra interjects, eyes alight with her rage, and it’s enough to make the table between them tremble with her indignation. “We both know that once the Sovereign Sorceresses pass judgment, it can never be undone. Get out. You’ve wasted enough of my time. Whatever trouble has chased you here, I want no part in it.”

Claudia pulls out a picture and puts it on the table. “I have son,” she says shakily, voice nearly cracking. “I ask that if you cannot stand to do it for me, then for this child.”

Cleopatra refuses to look down at the picture, instead holding Claudia’s misty-eyed gaze.

“I have no magic. I’m blind to the future but I feel...this dark shadow pressing towards me. I need to know that my family is safe and I would humiliate myself a thousand times over if it meant that you would help me protect them from whatever this is.”

Cleopatra’s gaze remains unwavering before she sighs and glances down. She picks up the photo and observes it. “He looks just like you,” she merely states, switching back to English. “I hope you’re raising him to be better than you were. My god, Claudia, you were a nightmare.”

Claudia laughs with an agreeable nod, causing the tears lining her eyes to finally fall as she relaxes with relief. “Yes. I know. I am very sorry.”

“Boys don’t often favor their mothers,” Cleopatra remarks before she hands the photo over. “You gave up your magic for him?”
“Well then,” Cleopatra sighs again before summons a bowl made of dark wood. She pushes it towards Claudia with a knife. “Good thing you have no magic and are neutral, I’m assuming. This definitely would warrant a citation.”

Claudia knows she is right but makes no move to agree. Visiting Oracles were forbidden. Using their services were unthinkable. But again, Claudia is desperate, which is the only reason why she slices open her palm over the bowl.

Cleopatra waits until she’s collected a substantial amount of blood before waving a dismissive hand to heal Claudia. “Bottom’s up, yeah?” She drinks the blood down before she collapses backward, bowing over the back of her chair as she twitches.

When she straightens, all that can be see is the white of her eyes. Her head moves rapidly from angle to angle as her mouth whispers fiercely as though there are a thousand voices speaking at once. Then she freezes before passing out again.

Claudia waits it out. She’s familiar with this part of the ritual, as distasteful as she finds the whole process.

Cleopatra shudders as she comes to. She straightens, the wash of her looking decidedly paler as she summons another enchanted cigarette with shaky hands. “Do you want the good news or bad news first?”

Claudia grimaces. “Good.”

“That boy of yours is creating a lot of positive chatter in the Beyond already. The Faceless all have their eyes fixed on him, and Fate can be heard boasting from the heavens. He’s meant to do great things.”

“This, I know,” Claudia replies, and she does not mean it arrogantly.

Cleopatra seems to take pity on her and offers her a taste of her cigarette. “He will have a long life ahead of him. Full of love and children. It is written.”

Claudia accepts the cigarette, though she hasn’t smoked in years, not since her teens. She ignores the taste of her own blood that’s lingering around the place where Cleopatra’s mouth once was. She inhales deeply, lets the smoke settle in her lungs before she grits out, “Bad news.”

“The boy has a terrible equal,” Cleopatra warns. “And they will steal many precious things from him. Starting with you.”

Claudia exhales shakily as her eyes grow misty once more. A part of her knew that the shadowy presence she’s felt lately was Death. She thought confirming it would make things easier. In Polish, she asks, “How much time do I have?”

Cleopatra looks on at her with pity. “Not long. It is fixed...whatever dark dealings your son’s equal has made, makes it that it can’t be undone. I’m sorry.”

Claudia takes that in, lets it digest as she continues to commandeer Cleopatra’s cigarette. She hands it over after a few more beats of silence while she nods with finality. “Do you have pen and paper?”

Cleopatra sniffs out the cigarette as she goes to fetch some supplies and return with them. She watches Claudia make use of them right away. “Who are you writing to?” she asks.
“Someone will need to seal my grave once I am laid to rest in my mother country among my kin. My brother will attempt something, I’m sure of it. We are still not on speaking terms.”

“Interesting,” Cleopatra murmurs around a cloud of twinkling smoke. “But who are you writing to?”

Claudia pauses as she stares at what she’s written so far. She musters up enough courage to admit, “Instructions... for my daughter.”

Cleopatra chokes on her next inhale of smoke, and coughs. “Holy shit! So that thing about you and the Isle of Monokeros?”

“True.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Claudia. Is that why you up and left all those years ago?”

“Yes.”

Cleopatra looks like she’s bursting with questions, but she’s kind enough not to press any deeper. “When you finish that, I know a Manic Pixie we can give it to.”

Claudia thanks her, and goes back to writing.
The peace and quiet of the clearing is disturbed by a sonic boom.

From where Stiles is sitting between Lydia and Derek, leaning into the warm line of Derek’s heated side, he looks up and is struck by a familiar sight.

It’s those goddamn military planes.

“They’re back again,” Stiles mumbles, narrowing his eyes as he peers up and into a darkening watercolor sky to watch them circle each other in a wide arc like birds at play. He silently calls out to his magic in concern and it descends on them, still in the form of bioluminescent hawks.

They land on the ground around them as a flock, shaking out their beautifully blue feathers, which glimmer with the lowering sun.

“What’s back?” Derek asks distractedly. He’s watching Stiles’s magic with a fond amusement.

One of the birds are pecking at his feet playfully before fluttering off to land around Lydia.

Lydia looks at glittery blue hawks with solemn affection, taking time to pet each one of them, and compliment their hue.

His magic brightens in pride, heads bobbing as a ripple of self-esteem passes over the shimmering flock.

“Stiles, what’s back?” Derek repeats.

“Huh? Oh. Right. The military jets,” Stiles says, eyeing the side of Derek’s face as the older teen takes the time to look up into the sky with a curious frown.

Malia whimpers in her sleep again, and Jordan quickly licks at the inner palm of her right hand to soothe her until she settles down.

Lydia says, “He can’t see them.”

Stiles turns to look at her, watching as she feeds her magic to the watermelon sized egg in her lap; his magic has moved on to perch beside the edge of the river. “What do you mean?” he asks.

“Do you think a man with no mouth could swallow the sea with a broken straw?” Lydia counters instead. “Whenever you pointed it out in the past, has anyone ever been able to say the same? That they see them?”

Stiles thinks back to every instance, and he’s a little astonished to find that, no, no one has ever confirmed each sighting he’s witnessed. Wow, that’s...a pretty big thing he should have noticed.

“Yeah, I don’t see or hear anything, Stiles,” Derek agrees, finally bringing his gaze down to look at him. He places a hand on the crown of Malia’s head when she hiccups fitfully for a split second, her upper body still curled over his thighs. “They wouldn’t be allowed to fly through here without express permission. My family purchased the air space over the preserve generations ago.”

“So...I’m hallucinating it? I’ve been this whole time?” Stiles questions slowly, a lick of panic rolling up his spine and his magic shudders with concern in the distance. His magic flutters closer as if to comfort him by being within closer proximity.
Lydia snorts, which is saying something because she doesn’t find much amusement in practically anything. She says, rather dryly, “It’s called a Vision. You’re not the crazy one of the family, remember?”

Stiles flushes, relieved, but also embarrassed. “Lydia, you are not crazy,” he protests but when he looks at the small smirk on her face, he understands she was making a dark joke. “Oh, yeah, okay. Uh, what’s...this now? You think I’m getting Visions? Like That’s So Raven?”

“Near enough,” Lydia vaguely confirms. “You and I have the gift of Foresight. I work in prescience with calculated estimations. Sometimes discernment is a lot like math, and life usually mirrors equations that can be easily followed if you know what patterns to look for. But the way you see things is different. You’re more tactile with your predictions. You can literally see the future. I have to look at the world around me to come to my conclusions. You get a sneak preview.”

Stiles simply says, “Oh.” Then he adds, “But it feels so real sometimes. How am I supposed to understand the difference?”

“Aunt Lorraine is better at explaining how to define and recognize premonitions,” Lydia replies, and draws her magic back into herself since the egg in her lap is now dormant.

Stiles isn’t very comfortable with talking to her right now. “Maybe I’ll bring it up later,” he mutters.

Lydia gives him a long, knowing look, but she says nothing.

“Also why am I having visions about military planes doing drills?”

“I think the better question would be, why are you seeing them do drills out here?” Derek retorts with a concerned frown.

Stiles finds it troubling as well. It makes him think about to all those trends he found in the news some months ago, about military formation, and how they have been training themselves as if they are expecting the president to decree Martial Law.

Lydia doesn’t seem to have anything to say about that either. She simply chooses to take her time getting to her feet. “We should head back now,” she announces. She breaks out in a sweat in her efforts to heft her abnormally large egg up with her as she stands.

Derek hums thoughtfully. “You’re right,” he agrees with his head cocked, face twitching as if he’s listening to something in the distance. “There’s some kind of commotion going on back at the house.”

“Is everything okay?” Stiles asks, already on alert.

Derek just leans over, skimming his nose over the shell of Stiles’s left ear, chest rumbling. “Hard to tell at this distance. You okay?” he says softly, voice low and intimate. “You smell anxious.”

Stiles shivers, once again hyper aware of their proximity. “Yeah, little anxious,” he admits.

Derek pulls away before lowering his head to whisper gently in Malia’s ear. It’s unclear what he is saying to her, but whatever it is makes her twitch in her sleep before she yawns and buries her nose into Jordan’s fur.

It takes a few minutes, but Malia sits up, rubbing tiredly at her eyes before blinking wildly at her surroundings.
Stiles notices that her eyes are flickering from hazel to gold like a light switch. He remembers something of the same happening to Laura right before she became an Alpha. He wonders if Malia is getting close to having her Moon Day.

Jordan trots over to him, giving his cheek a wet kiss before sniffing around his shoulders as Stiles rubs him down. When the white dog is satisfied with the results of their interaction, he wanders over to sniff around Lydia’s ankles before sitting on his hind legs beside her.

Malia gives another wide yawn, showing over her impressively straight teeth, which seem sharper than usual, before she climbs to her feet. She’s wearing some dark brown overall shorts with a white crop top while her dirty blonde hair falls in loose, waves around her shoulders. She’s barefoot and seems very content to stay that way. She pauses suddenly and her eyes widen as she takes notice of Stiles’s roaming magic, waddling and flapping glittery wings wherever their perched in the grass.

“Hey Malia,” Stiles greets, letting Derek pull them both up so they can stand like everyone else is.

Malia looks at him, eyes finally settled on dark brown, and looks pointedly at the way Derek laces the fingers of his right hand with Stiles’s left. “Huh,” she says, head cocked. “That explains why Derek reeks of you.”

“Be nice,” Derek snorts, shoving at her shoulder playfully. “I get enough of this from Cora.”

“With good reason too,” Malia supposes plainly as she bats his hand away. “What’s with the...are those hawks? What is all this?”

Stiles gets that she’s probably out of the loop. “Yeah, so that would be me, actually. It’s my magic.”

“Magic?” Malia huffs bitterly. “Right. Cause if there are Werewolves, then why wouldn’t there be magic?”

“If it makes you feel better, I have thought the same thing every time I’ve discovered a new Paranormal Find.”

“Paranormal Find?”

“I made up the term myself. It’s like when you discover something within a specific group that confirms the theory that there is a more expansive world outside of the one you already know,” Stiles explains, hoping it makes even a lick of sense, his fingers twitching between Derek as he tries to get his point across. “So far, on my list I have: Weres, Gnomes, Mermaids, Trolls, Dwarves, Centaurs, Witches, Virtues, Vices, Demons, Dragons, Shapeshifters, Wendigos, Banshees, Sirens, Woodland Spirits, Manic Pixies, and yeah, if there are more, and there are more, I just can’t think of them.”

Malia takes that in before she gives him a long, hard look. Then, cleverly, she asks, “And which one of those are you?”

Stiles smiles sheepishly. “Fae.”

“As in a Faerie?” Malia blinks widely and her nose twitches like she’s trying to scent him out. “You do smell like wildflowers and nectar.”

Stiles has definitely heard that before.

“Guess you know about me then.” Malia’s looking at Stiles almost warily. “About what’s going on.”

“I only know what I need to. Anything else is up for you to decide whether I should know or not. I
won’t ask questions,” Stiles promises and when Malia relaxes a little, he knows it was the right thing to say. “Sorry, I lied. I will ask one question: how are you?”

“Pissed off. Surprised. Adjusting.” Malia shrugs and her eye color starts flickering again as if to confirm the truth of her words. “They lied about my birthday, you know. Jackson and I share his, but mine was made up. Turns out I’m actually 14 and not 12 like I originally thought, and I’m the oldest of us two.” She scowls as her shoulders begin to shake, her facial features sharpening in an almost animalistic way. “My mom...adopted mother, says she wanted to keep me from asking questions until ‘the right time’, and the only way to do that was to be sure that Jackson and I were never in the same grade level. Makes sense why she always looked nervous whenever Jackson and I were in close proximity, or when we would hang out in our small group of friends.”

Stiles thinks that’s pretty messed up, and obviously she feels the same way too. He’d be pissed as well to learn he was being held back in his schooling because of circumstances beyond his control. “It’s like a nightmare Parent Trap,” he comments before he can stop himself, fingers twitching anxiously again between Derek’s.

Before any apologies can be given, Malia is laughing, hand to chest like she’s shocked that she still knows how despite things. “Jackson said the exact same thing to me,” she confesses, and just as quickly as she winds down, there is moisture lining her eyes. “I don’t think he likes me. Well, I don’t think he’s ever liked me. He always looked at me like I was some wild kid he had to put up with because of who our friends were.” Her bottom lip trembles. “Probably thinks I’m his payback for something he did. When they told us we were twins, I was actually a little happy, you know? Can’t really explain it, but, it felt like this void I’d been feeling was starting to make sense. But, Jackson...oh, he was so mad.” She quickly and roughly wipes away a few tears that escape. “He looked at me and was...he smelled disappointed.”

“Jackson is an asshole,” Lydia states, wandering over to the teary-eyed teen. She unceremoniously dumps her huge egg in Malia’s arms without asking. “He’s always been mean. But maybe give him time. He can learn how to soften up if he’s around good people. He only knows what he’s seen growing up. The Hales can show him there’s more to family then what he thinks there is.”

Malia just stares at Lydia, and then looks at Derek and Stiles as if they can explain what’s been put in her arms.

“You’re not alone,” Lydia promises. “That void you described? Jackson has it too. Maybe now that you both know where you come from and start to learn who you are, you can start filling it. Together.”

“What are you? A psychic now? What is this?” Malia questions defensively, still looking raw from the shock of it all. “What would you know about what I’m going through?” She sniffs, groaning under her breath as more tears fall, and her eyes begin flickering.

“Walk with me and we’ll talk about it,” Lydia merely replies, linking their arms together. “I’ve always been your friend, Malia. I’ll always be your friend.”

Malia seems to be dazed by the vow, utterly at a loss for words. Something hopeful, yet vulnerable, makes her face twist with wonder.

Lydia tugs her along towards the direction of the Hale Manor.

They disappear through the trees together, voices shrinking as their distance from the clearing widens.
Jordan barks when one of those bioluminescent hawks land on his head. He shakes it off and begins chasing after the whole flock playfully.

Stiles watches with a fond smile and turns to make a joke to Derek about it but whatever he’s going to say shrivels up when he notices the way the older teen is looking at him.

Derek is hugging their clasped hands to his chest and his hazel eyes are alight with a kind of complacency that both deep and searching.

Stiles squirms, the back of his neck heating up again, and he tries not to twitch under that gaze. “What?”

Derek shrugs like it’s no big deal, and says, as casually, “Just trying to remember the details of your face like this. You look different in a sunset, your face full of softness and your eyes bright with wonder.”

Stiles knows there will be no way to avoid concealing the warmth blooming across his face. “You can’t just say I’m pretty like a normal person, can you?” he complains.

“Pretty? Yeah. You are. More than that, I think. But there’s no Human words I can use to explain it,” Derek replies.

“And what about you?” Stiles demands, rather obnoxiously.

Derek smiles widely like he’s thinking the same thing, “What about me?”

Stiles just takes a moment to really look at him. The way his lashes fan out over his hazel eyes. The arc of his cheekbones, and the curve of his nose. The gentleness of his mouth, and the curve of his smile pushing into his laugh lines. The pinkness of lips as they stretch over his perfect bunny teeth.

Stiles swallows dryly, and hopes what he’s thinking isn’t blatant in his expression; though his staring might be giving a few things away. “Come on, Derek. You’ve got to know that your face has the same energy as a Botticelli painting.”

Derek looks greedily impressed with the comparison, and also a little something else that can’t be pinpointed. “Keep talking. I like where this is going,” he encourages with audible cheer.

Stiles laughs as his blush deepens. “No, that’s not — that wasn’t the point of — you don’t need me to tell you how hot you are.”

“Ah, so you do think I’m hot,” Derek teases and savors the way Stiles stammers. “And what’s the point of needing your boyfriend to compliment you? I don’t need it, but I like to hear it just the same. It matters when it comes from you.”

Stiles gawks. Then, mouth flapping open and close like a fish, he squeaks, “You called me your boyfriend!”

“I think of you in a lot of different ways,” Derek confesses as he wanders closer, a heat in his gaze that makes Stiles’s toes curl in his shoes. Their intertwined hands are the only thing keeping their bodies from being pressed completely together from where they rest sandwiched between their chests. “But yes, boyfriend is on the list. You disagree?”

Stiles nearly chokes on his own tongue when Derek brushes their noses together unexpectedly, smirking all the while. His heart rate is accelerating, fluttering in his chest like the wings of a hummingbird. “I didn’t think you — I mean yeah it fits — I just thought — I didn’t know you’d be
okay to just label this as *that* so soon? Or is it even too soon? Was it not soon enough? I —”

Derek rudely interrupts by kissing him. *Kissing* him. He swallows the rest of Stiles’s sentence in the warm press of his lips as it to drink them in and absorb them physically in his body through the connection of their mouths. The touch of Derek’s lips *burn* and the sensation of it sets his mind on *fire*.

Stiles is more surprised than he will ever be able to describe. He flounders a bit before he leans into it, clumsy with inexperience. He cups his hands around Derek’s warm neck and kisses him back like it may very well be the last thing he gets to do, as if at any moment Derek could change his mind. He tastes like the glory of the stars bursting to life in clusters, constellating together to form a milky way of beauty and life and *promise*.

His heart careens as his fingers grip the short hairs at the base of Derek’s neck and he’s is mildly taken by how soft it feels under his fingers, and wow, Derek’s lips are way softer than he imagined (and sometimes, late at night, in the dark, he *imagined*), but they are certainly as warm as he assumed.

It’s like kissing someone with a fever.

A thrum of electricity rides up the length of his spine and sparks into the expanse of his mind, reaching into the connection he has with his magic. And there is a definite response on the other end.

His magic bursts in delight around them, like blue, sparkling fireworks in an evening sky colored with deep oranges and purples.

Stiles would be embarrassed if he wasn’t so damn busy trying to keep his feet on the ground. Because the world goes sideways on him until it feels like it's disappearing altogether and it becomes the most wonderful feeling he’s ever felt. When Derek tilts his head just *so*, there are full out flashes of luminescent sparklers that dance behind the lids of his eyes (hard to say if it’s his magic or because the kiss is just that amazing).

Stiles melts because Derek is wonderful and good and knows just what Stiles wants, even when Stiles doesn’t know that he wanted it. Derek begins rumbling softly into the kiss when Stiles slumps against him, giving over to the kiss, the sound vibrating through his own body and making warmth pool into his gut. He thinks of how Derek’s lips taste of something sweet and rich, of a future, maybe even of a lifetime; the sensations that follow are full of bright colors and echoing happiness that spirals through him as he moves his lips with Derek’s.

He thinks he could get used to this, and wonders why they didn’t just do this the first time they met and the thought nearly sends him into a fit of giggles. He must do a bad job of containing it because Derek snickers and pretends to take little bites from Stiles’s bottom lip in reproach.

It’s a *terrible* punishment that does nothing but make Stiles gasp in surprise at the way it causes his hips to jerk forward as a nice sum of blood waterfalls down into his gut with a throbbing echo of want. Stiles feels dizzy with it almost and — *Jesus*, it's not even an open mouth kiss either. He doesn’t know how he’ll cope with anything else they may do if he can barely handle a closed mouth kiss.

Derek puts his hands on Stile’s waist and gentles the pressure of his lips before he tilts his head until their foreheads touch. He breathes heavily, and Stiles is relieved to know he’s not the only one affected by this. He says, "Talk about a first kiss, huh?"

Stiles makes an incoherent sound and laughs.
"Was that okay? I know I said I wouldn’t unless I knew you wanted to but you had this look on your
face,” Derek confesses as he closes his eyes and furrows his brow. He looks as if he's desperately
trying to sort his thoughts. "Like you really wanted me to. And I knew if I didn’t kiss you, if I didn’t
at least take the chance, I’d probably die."

"Oh," Stiles says weakly as his knees shake. “That’s — I did. I do — want it. Please. Please kiss me
again because I might go crazy if you don’t.”

Derek doesn’t need to be told twice. He reels Stiles back in again, smiling against his mouth like he
can’t help it. He presses their lips together once, twice, five, eight, and ten more times because it is
his joy to do so, because Stiles has given him permission, and also because each time before feels
short and they both need more.

It takes even longer than that before they slow down, when the closed mouth kisses aren’t so frantic
or desperate.

Stiles wraps his arms around Derek’s neck and hides his burning face into the heated curve of the
older teen’s neck. He shudders pleasantly when Derek’s arms wind around him and the older teen
presses his nose into the side of his face.

They stay like this for a while; maybe two lifetimes, or maybe an eternity. Stiles feels weak and
elated — it could all be a dream. It would be so horrible if this were a dream. He wants it to be real,
and he wants kiss Derek again so badly that it scares him.

He’s never wanted anyone like how he wants Derek.

“What had you so anxious earlier?”

Stiles blinks, lifting his head as he processes the question. “Not a question I was expecting,” he
replies, pulling away (not completely) but and tugging at the front his shirt to cool down.

Derek is only sincere as he explains, “I worry about you when you seem upset. It makes me anxious.
I won’t stop wondering until I ask.” He reaches out to grab Stiles’s hand. “So what upset you?”

“What, you mean you didn’t hear the conversation Lydia and I had out there in the woods?” Stiles
retorts, if only to conceal how touched he is at Derek’s consideration.

“You two were speaking in Polish.”

Stiles jolts with awareness at that and he pulls away completely. “Were we? I hadn’t even noticed the
switch.” And he sincerely hadn’t. That’s probably mostly Lydia’s doing — she has a way of doing
things so fluidly that you don’t know what’s she’s doing until it’s too late. Though, it makes sense
she would choose to change up the language if she didn’t want anyone eavesdropping on that
particular subject. “I really hadn’t noticed,” he repeats.

“It’s okay. Whatever you guys were talking about had your heart doing that upbeat tango it does
when you’re anxious and upset.” Derek cocks his head as if he’s listening to it now.

Stiles slaps a hand over his chest, as if to hide his already unseen heart even further. “Hey, no, stop.
You know I get self-conscious when I think you’re listening in!”

“I like listening to it.”

Stiles mumbles something that has Derek laughing and it makes him begrudgingly grin in turn. He
rolls his eyes at himself. He can’t be annoyed with Derek for even more than five minutes. “So,
sparknotes, right? My Aunt Lorraine isn’t really my aunt but my many times multiplied by many
great grandmother who was cursed with immortality, and is convinced that Lydia and I are the
reincarnation of her children and considers that a sign that her time in this world is coming to an end.
All she needs is one of us to, you know, murder her and absorb the essence of her life force,
therefore becoming immortal and powerful. Lydia is convinced that it has to be her since she’s a
Banshee and I’m a Virtue.”

Derek looks absolutely stumped. “Everything about you and your life is wildly unbelievable. You do
know that right?” he manages to say after a while.

Stiles manages to wiggle his hand free from Derek’s grip just so he can flail with unintelligible
(vaguely agreeable) noises.

“Okay, okay,” Derek laughs, raising his hands to make a consoling gesture. “You’re not convinced it
should be Lydia who makes that...exchange?”

“Of course not, but Lydia isn’t letting me talk her out of it,” Stiles says as he combs his fingers
through his disheveled hair. “I spent all morning researching, you know, trying to see if there is an
alternative option but that led to nothing but dead ends.”

“I feel like this goes without saying, but you can always rummage around in our library too,” Derek
points out and steps forward to plant a kiss on the corner of his mouth. “Knowing you as long as I
have, I can confidently say that you’re not the type to just give up.” And with that bit of
encouragement, he whistles lowly to draw Jordan’s attention before walking over to him.

Stiles turns and watches them meet in the middle, giving each other affection in a way that makes
Stiles smiles softly at the sight of it. He calls to his magic, and it comes to him without hesitation. He
breathes it in, it goes sliding down his throat like a fog of vapor before settling in his guts like hot
soup.

Derek returns to him with Jordan in tow.

Stiles takes a moment to dote on the dog himself once again, very pleased at how it’s accepted with
audible enthusiasm. He straightens and starts walking side by side with Derek towards the trees in
the direction of the Hale Manor. He says, “What did you want to tell me?”

“Hm?” Derek is smiling, seeming lost to his thoughts. “Did I have something to tell you?”

“Yeah,” Stiles says with an amused grin. “Before we got off the phone the other night. You said you
wanted to tell me something when we had a chance to be alone.”

“Ah.” Derek sighs and shakes his head. “Too many ears still. We need to be alone alone for this
conversation.”

“Geez, well I’m not curious at all,” Stiles remarks sarcastically and then stumbles over an exposed
tree branch.

Derek just reaches out and helps him find his footing, looking unsurprised. “I promise it’s not like,
anything too serious or bad. I just...I’m considering something and I want to know how you feel
before I make a final decision.”

Stiles thanks him after he finds his footing and doesn’t complain when Derek opts to just hold his
hand. “Okay. I’ll try to be patient and not speculate,” he supposes.

“Maybe we can talk about it on the way to Laura and Kate’s housewarming party tomorrow night.”
“Oh yeah. Yeah, maybe. Actually, no. I’m pretty sure Isaac and Scott will be joining us. My dad and Melissa are away for the weekend, so it’s just us three and Aunt Lorraine at the house right now.”

Derek nods. “It’s cool. We’ll talk when the timing is right.”

Stiles silently agrees, trying not to let his curiosity get the best of him.

The forest feels alive around them, even as the dip of the sun casts long shadows against the trees and the forest floor.

Stiles tells Derek about his day without being asked (even about his discovery with Braeden, which Derek is so amused by they have to stop so he can lean against a tree as he laughs); and he takes the time to describe his confrontation with Heather. At the end of it all, Stiles asks Derek to show him the star chart he’s been working on.

Derek lights up in such a way that Stiles is tempted to make out with him again, and even feels confident enough to consider adding some tongue and, well, once he starts thinking about that, he really starts thinking about that.

But Derek coughs, turning a little red, and the daydream is gone. He says, face still colored and eyes shifting to gold, “Stiles, I don’t know what you’re thinking about, but I really want to find out what’s making you smell like...that.”

Something about the way Derek says that like a warning makes a pleasant thrill ghost through Stiles. Instead of being embarrassed, he feels emboldened somehow. “Oh it’s nothing,” he says like a sigh. “Just curious about the way the French kiss.”

Derek must understand the innuendo a little too well because he chokes on any reply he might have given and he runs right into a tree.

Stiles is delighted.

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Unfortunately, nothing happens the way Stiles would have hoped, but he thinks that they might have been walking a little faster to reach Derek’s room in record speed, Derek all too happy to satiate Stiles’s curiosity about the French and their kisses.

But by the time they reach the front door (Jordon darting towards the garage to use the dog entrance there), the commotion Derek referenced from earlier is still going on.

Jackson is facing down his adoptive parents.

Everyone else is indoors, and presumably getting ready for dinner because it’s leaning towards that time of day.

Talia is standing beside the front door with Malia to her immediate right and Kate to her immediate left. They (all three of them) are silently observing the Whittemore family.

Derek and Stiles step off to the side some feet away and, instead of going in the house to mind their own business, wordlessly look at each other and come to a silent agreement to linger.

Jackson is standing at the top of the porch steps while his adopted parents are standing at the bottom. His hands are balled into fists and there is a scowl on his face. “I’m not going home with you. You lied to me,” and oh he sounds furious.
Mr. and Mrs. Whittemore are exchanging very tame but concerned looks with each other.

Stiles wonders how much deeper the ‘eye conversations’ get the longer you stay in a relationship. He kind of silently hopes that he and Derek will get to the point where they can share an entire conversation with each other by just one look, no matter the distance that may be between them at the time.

Mrs. Whittemore speaks up to say, “Jackson, sweetheart. We know that circumstances are...less than ideal at the moment. You’re father and I just feel —”

“You’re not my parents!” Jackson snaps.

Mr. and Mrs. Whittemore both take a step back, as though they have been physically struck.

Mr. Whittemore places a comforting hand on his wife’s shoulder. “Jackson, we love you. We care about you. We are deeply sorry we lied, but you have to come home. We can talk more about what we can do going forward once we all calm down.”

“Yeah, sure,” Jackson scoffs meanly. “You’ve got that humble yet demanding tone down to an art form. If I didn’t know you, I would almost believe it. But that’s what makes you a good lawyer, right? It’s always been easy for you to lie through your teeth.”

“Do not talk to your father that way!” Mrs. Whittemore says in outrage.

“He is not my father, remember?” Jackson nearly shouts. “The sick bastard you both voted for and have been supporting for years now, sitting behind a desk at city hall is!”

Mr. and Mrs. Whittemore wince again, this time Mrs. Whittemore goes green but Mr. Whittemore is livid. He says, rather loudly, “Now that is enough. We have been more than patient and accommodating to your behavior, but you will not stand there and embarrass this family. You were born with Hale blood but you carry the Whittemore name and you will behave like one. Get your things, and let’s go.”

Jackson looks obstinate. He laughs coldly as he replies, almost with glee, “You’re not my family. They are.” He points at Talia, Malia, and Kate. “So, I’m not going anywhere with you.”

Mr. Whittemore is fuming. “Talia, would you please say something? You can’t be okay with him staying indefinitely!” he demands. “You seem to have more than enough people running around that you don’t need the extra stress.”

Talia steps forward and places a hand on Jackson’s shoulder. She calmly says, “We have more than enough space here, David.”

“Regardless! He isn’t staying. I won't have it. He’s our son,” Mr. Whittemore retorts, indignant.

Jackson opens his mouth to correct him, but Talia subtly squeezes his shoulder gently and quickly. He frowns deeply but he says not a word.

Talia continues, “Many years ago I came to you for help. You and your wife wanted another child, and my sister, Jacqueline, was too young to take on the responsibility of motherhood. And I am very grateful to you for the kindness you have shown to my nephew. But let’s not forget that you betrayed us as well. Let’s not forget that betrayal fanned the flames to a fire that took the life of many of our own, including Jacqueline’s.”

Mr. and Mrs. Whittemore, at last, look shame-faced.
“She told me about the deal you made with Mayor Argent,” Jackson adds, shaking with righteous anger. “I hope your private practice was worth it.”

Mr. Whittemore says nothing to that. But after a while, he huffs bitterly and shakes his head. “Fine. You want to live with a bunch of savages? You want them to turn you into an animal too? I’m not going to stop you. But you’re choosing a losing side. At least I had the guts to recognize that years ago.” He turns and storms back to his shiny, expensive car without waiting for his wife.

Stiles feels his hackles rise at the insult, at the audacity of it, and by the way Derek squeezes his hand comfortably, even with a perturbed expression, he knows he’s not alone in the feeling.

Mrs. Whittemore is in absolute tears. She looks up at Jackson, like he’s her whole world, and says, “I know, there’s nothing I can say that will make you less angry with us. But, please understand, we only wanted what was best for you. For our family.” She sniffs. “He was going to kill you, Jackson. The Mayor. You were just a baby but he treated you like a loose end that needed to be tied up. I told David to accept the deal. The Hales...they were already dead. What would he have done to us, do you think, if we had testified? If your father had represented the Hale family? We were barely making enough money to support your older brothers, and taking the risk was unthinkable. When he made us choose: your life or our own practice — what would you have done?”

“You should leave,” Jackson suggests lightly. He’s kinder to her than he was to his adoptive father.

Mrs. Whittemore sobs. She grimaces when her husband honks on the horn impatiently but stubbornly ignores it. She looks to Talia and says, “It was cruel of us to put a restraining order against you, Talia. But you understand, don’t you? We had no choice. We couldn’t risk you saying anything, or that we were taking your side. We would pay the price for it. We had no choice.”

“Sounds like you had plenty of choices,” Kate says, stepping up to stand on the other side of Jackson. “You chose the easiest option. You’re practically spineless. No wonder my old man just ate you both up.”

Mrs. Whittemore continues to weep. “Jackson, I’m begging you.” She inhales shakily. “I swaddled you when you were a baby. Clutched you to my breasts. Soothed you when you had nightmares, kissed every skinned knee, and fielded every tantrum. Don’t I deserve something for that? If you stay here, your father and I can’t protect you!” she pleads.

Malia moves so that she’s standing directly in front of Jackson (just two steps below). “You’re right. You can’t protect him.” She grabs Jackson hand and moves to stand beside him with Talia directly to her right. “But we can.”

Jackson looks at Malia like he’s seeing her for the first time, and something vulnerable yet hopeful passes over his face before he hides it. He turns back to face his adoptive mother with a set jaw.

Talia cups her right hand over the back of Jackson’s neck, scenting him in a pointed way.

Kate puts a hand on Jackson’s left shoulder, as if to confirm her stance on the matter as well. She nods to Mr. Whittemore, who is still silently stewing behind the wheel of his flashy car. “Don’t keep your husband waiting.”

Mrs. Whittemore rushes to the awaiting car, practically in hysterics as she climbs in and her husband drives off.

Jackson’s shoulders lower a bit. He shrugs off Kate and Talia’s hands and shakes away Malia’s with a curt, “Thanks” and quickly disappears into the house.
Malia looks deeply upset at being dismissed, but Kate pats her on the cheek with a shrug and says, “Boys are stupid, little sister. Don’t take it personally. You’ll be overwhelmed if so.”

Malia’s frown twists with contemplation but she says nothing, looking almost disappointed when Kate pulls her hand away. She seems to be starved for contact, but Stiles is only guessing and he hopes he’s wrong if only to avoid what it would mean if he were right.

“Why don’t we all head inside? I believe dinner is ready,” Talia suggests, cupping her right hand over the back of Malia’s neck, guiding the younger girl inside. “You know you can stay too, if you wish,” she says to Malia before they disappear indoors.

“Come on, lovebirds. Show’s over,” Kate calls to Derek and Stiles. “Laura and I will take you and your brother and that other kid home when we leave.”

“His name is Scott,” Stiles corrects. “And thanks. We’d appreciate it.”

Kate shrugs like it’s no big deal before heading inside as well.

Derek presses a warm hand to the small of Stiles’s back to urge him forward as well. He says, lowly, “That was pretty intense.”

Stiles snorts wryly. “Putting it way too mildly,” he replies as they enter the house, the door closing softly behind them.

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Dinner is a lively affair, but with the Hales it always is.

Tonight’s meal is all about pasta (vegetable and regular), seafood, and homemade bread.

All kids under the age of thirteen have been shepherded into the kitchen where the kiddie tables are.

Meanwhile, everyone else sits in the dining room around a long and wide oak table (still marked with carved names but looking as polished as ever).

Stiles sometimes likes to slide the tips of his fingers over the indentions; he wonders when he’ll get the honor of adding his name. It’s practically a sure thing that he will be aligning himself with the Hale Pack at some point, whether by his relationship with Derek or his expected role with Cora. Maybe he will ask Derek about it later.

In the meantime, he begins the ritual of piling food on his plate (crab ravioli, shrimp zucchini noodles with lemon pepper sauce, and an obscene amount of breadsticks drowning in alfredo sauce). He’s wedged between Cora and Derek at the upper end of the table where Talia, Nana Hale, and Derek Sr. sit at the head.

Across from Stiles, Laura and Kate have Olive between them in her floral high chair, clapping her chubby hands together every time Laura feeds her mushy food that’s been pre-chewed for her by her oldest sister.

Further down, Lydia is sandwiched between Malia and Allison. Across from them, to Derek’s immediate right, Jackson is sandwiched between Delilah and Sabrina.

Isaac and Parrish are sitting at the lower end of the table with Aunt Rosemary and Uncle Jonah, and they sit clustered with all the other aunts, uncles, and older cousins.
From what Stiles can see of the two, it looks like Parrish is trying to encourage Isaac to eat more vegetables and Isaac is not having it, if the stubborn frown twisting his scarred features is any indication.

In the middle of dinner, Peter reappears from the kitchen and takes his place beside Kate.

“Everything okay with Braedden?” Derek asks, cutting out an obnoxiously sized square of lasagna from the glass tray, and adding it to his plate before he drowns it in ranch.

“Ugh, again with the ranch,” Stiles complains. “I was willing to overlook it when you were adding it to salmon spaghetti, but now it’s getting to be too much.”

“Don’t judge me,” Derek says before he looks back over at his uncle for a response to his question. Peter shrugs. “She’s putting on a brave face, but insisted on leaving behind White Lee and her feathered friends. She believes they can help us by offering extra protection while we work on a patrolling rotation for the preserve.”

“She believes we need to start up with reconnaissance?” Talia chimes from the head of the table. She seems focused, all at once, on this specific side conversation between Derek and Peter (when she obviously can hear every single one being had).

Stiles wonders how she can handle it, how any of them can handle it. He would be so overwhelmed.

Talia presses, “Is that what she said exactly?”

“More or less,” Peter confirms as he cuts into his food with the utmost poise. “It was a rather strong suggestion on her part. I’m inclined to take it at face value.”

“As am I,” Talia murmurs, her beautifully aged face twisting with thoughtful concern. She sighs and says, “We will bring it up during tonight’s Pack Meeting.” She looks directly at Stiles as she adds, “I would have you linger a little while longer for that.”

Stiles nods, actually a little curious and eager to experience such a thing.

“Mom is it cool if Boyd comes over tonight?” Cora says as she pushes her (7th) empty plate aside. She seems both fretful and optimistic for some unknown reason Stiles couldn’t even begin to guess or pinpoint.

Talia looks faintly amused, and she murmurs something to both her husband and Nana Hale before they all nod in agreement. “We will be serving s’mores at our campsite in about thirty minutes or so. See if his family would like to be included, and I will discuss sleeping arrangements between you two with his parents if they are open to joining us.”

Cora nods, already up on her feet and pushing away from the table as she wanders into the kitchen to use the house phone for this task.

Stiles is distracted from imagining how the conversation will go when he notices Derek is sneaking some of his crab ravioli. “Dude!” he complains and tries to shelter his plate. “You know how I feel about you taking — hey, no! That’s my breadstick. Don’t — seriously?”

Derek is laughing between bites. He joyfully weathers Stiles’s glare and, after a swallow, explains, “There’s no room on my plate.”

“So? And? So? Get another plate!” Stiles exclaims and pinches the back of Derek’s hand when he
tries to steal more of his food. “You can just ask me, you ne — nethan — neand —”

Derek laughs. “Neanderthal,” he pronounces with great amusement.

There is a ripple of laughter that floods through the room and an echo of the word gets tossed around the table from person to person. Some people being able to accurately pronounce it on the first try, while others have trouble just the same. Eventually, this leaks into the kitchen, and the everyone at the kiddie table can be heard trying to say the word as well. This causes almost everyone at the oak table to start laughing again.

Stiles flushes and tries to kick Derek under the table. “See what you’ve done,” he mutters, highly annoyed.

“I’m not the one that can’t say it. You should stick to something you can actually say,” Derek simply replies, swatting Stiles’s hands away when he tries to pinch him again.

Stiles gives up and switches their plates so he can eat all of Derek’s food while the older teen finishes his. “It was so naive of me to believe that you’d be nicer to me once we started dating,” he says with a put upon sigh.

“Not sure I know what you mean. I was plenty nice in the woods not too long ago,” Derek volleys back, looking completely innocent as he says it. “Maybe later I can treat you to that kindness again.”

Stiles immediately knows he’s talking about their impromptu make out session and his face begins to burn. “That’s — you can’t just —” He pauses to clear his throat. “Definitely not interested. I don’t reward bad behavior,” he insists lowly, hoping no one has any idea what they are talking about.

No one really seems to be paying them any attention, but it’s hard to say amongst Weres if they selectively eavesdrop or tune out what doesn’t concern them.

Derek hums thoughtfully, cocking his head slyly as he rests his arm on the back of Stiles’s chair, crowding into his space. “But you do reward good behavior, is what you’re saying?”

“I’m saying you should stop taking my food without asking,” Stiles counters, pouring from one for the large pitchers in hopes it will cool him down. He cannot start thinking about kissing Derek because it will all he can think about, and there are too many sensitive noses around for him to willingly die on that hill.

“You’re right, I’m sorry,” Derek simply says, almost in a distracted manner. He’s watching Stiles in a manner that could be considered publicly indecent, and he has the audacity to grin smugly when Stiles places a hand over his eyes. “What?”

“Stop watching me like that.”

Derek laughs, removing the hand over his eyes before skimming his warm lips over Stiles’s knuckles. “I can do a lot of things but not being interested in you is definitely off the table at this point.”

“Ugh, stop being disgusting,” Cora complains as she returns to the table. She starts piling more food on her plate.

“Well clearly we’re making you lose your appetite,” Derek remarks sarcastically as he watches his younger sister.

Stiles snorts when Cora presses a hand to the middle of his chest to push him back and out of the line
of fire when she begins lobbing Derek with a dry breadstick.

Derek jolts mainly from surprise than pain. He slaps his hand over his head and ducks back when she continues to try to brain him. “Hey! You’re getting garlic and oil in my hair. Rude.”

“Karma,” Cora corrects and she shifts her focus back onto her plate.

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The Pack Meeting, to Stiles’s surprise, takes place behind (and a few paces out) the manor where there is a large, rectangular fire pit surrounded by felled trees repurposed as log benches of cairned wood with beautiful designs.

It’s a mark of truly artistic carpentry.

The women band together to get the fire pit going while the men pass out bags of marshmallows, bowls of chocolate pieces, and boxes of graham crackers.

The seating arrangement is a lot more particular this time.

Talia’s immediate family sits nearest to the fire pit, which is why Stiles finds himself sitting between Cora and Derek again, while Laura, and Peter sit to Derek’s immediate right. Talia, Derek Sr. (his hands full with a squirmy, impatient Olive), and Nana Hale are to Cora’s immediate left.

Stiles is particularly interested in why Talia insisted he sit on her bench and not elsewhere like all the other guests or visitors. It’s not like he and Derek have bonded yet or anything, but he wasn’t too confident about asking the meaning of his placement so he hadn’t. He’ll of course ask later when curiosity gets the best of him.

In the meantime, he looks around and observes the commotion of everyone dividing themselves to cluster with their immediate family onto their designated benches as well. It’s easy for Stiles to see how they go about it since he honestly has the best seat of the enclosed area (perhaps a perk of having a seat on Talia’s bench).

Off to the side, a few feet away, the dogs are clustered together around a feeding station that seems to rely on threads of ropes the dogs can tug or manipulate to get more food or water.

It’s very clever and considerate.

Stiles wonders who made it, and if it’s the same person responsible for the benches or the oak table in the house.

The seating arrangement around the fire pit goes something like this:

Aunt Rosemary and her husband Phineas (his hair shining a vibrant red with the help of the growing fire from the pit), sit amongst their children: Tina (22), Andrew (19), Taylor (16), Sabrina (14), Madeline (9), and Artemis (2).

Behind them is Uncle Leonardo and his wife Kehlani (a beautiful brown skinned woman with waist length dreads), sitting amongst their children: Zoe (15), Zach (13), Zane (11), Zen (9), Zephaniah (7), Zola (5), and Zee (3).

These logs are directly across from Talia’s on the other side of the fire pit.

Adjacent to them is Uncle Jonah (spitting image of Talia but with more harsh age lines) and his
husband Ricardo (who Stiles only recently discovered was a Werecat), sitting amongst their children: Miguel (19), Manny (15), Regina (14), Angelica (10) and Tamara (8).

On the log bench behind them is Aunt Emelia (a single mother with no want or need for a partner), sitting among her children: Emelio (14), Eunice (12), Erin (10), Eve (8), Emma (6), Esther (4), and Ella (2).

Adjacent to Talia’s log, to the right, is where Kate and Parrish are sitting on a log bench with Isaac, Allison, Malia, Jackson, Scott and Lydia (lap full with a fat bejeweled egg).

On the log bench behind them is Boyd and his family: Ramona, Vernon Sr., Roman (17), and Veronica (8); all of them watching with inquisitive but friendly eyes.

Adjacent to Talia’s log, to the left, is a cluster of older cousins, and these are the ones who have lost their parents to the great fire many years before. They no longer live in the Hale Manor but have chosen to live together in a three-story house only about six miles away. They still show up for dinner as often as they can (or as often as either their jobs or college career can allow).

This bunch includes: Alicia (32), Julio (32), Jasmine (27), Kasey (27), Leon (27), Jeremiah (26), Stina (26), Penny (25), Luke (25) Kayla (25), Annabeth (24) and Constance (23).

Aunt Meredith stands on a small podium made of the same kind of wood as the log benches. To her lower left, her younger wife Celine and their children: Max (19), who is holding a stack of papers for his mothers, Tyson (12), and Gracie (7).

Stiles looks around and he feels incredibly humbled to be included in this get together. He can only imagine how big and impressive the Assembly must be if these are just the number of Hales there are locally.

Aunt Meredith lifts her left hand and snaps her thumb and middle finger together to get everyone’s attention. There is a hush that falls over the Hale brood, so she smiles and says, “Good evening to everyone. Most of you know, or should know who I am. Our visitors can be excused of course. My name is Meredith, second oldest sister to Talia. My role in our Pack is to basically partner with Rosemary, and we compile together all the main communication and events we have been able to confirm with our Alpha so that we can make sure we are united, on the same page, and exercising our core values as a family. And that’s chiefly what I do on the back end.

“So I have some exciting announcements to share with you. Very thrilled for the upcoming summer. Rosemary and I have been toiling away to make sure everyone has a safe and productive summer, so...” She pauses with a light chuckle when everyone starts clapping. She even makes an effort to bow slightly as she stands on the wooden podium. She makes a gesture to her son and he begins passing her some papers. “Thank you, thank you. Uh, so first things first. Despite how hectic circumstances have been, we would like to take the time to acknowledge Jackson and Malia as our own. Sweet niece and nephew, you must forgive us, as we didn’t even know we missed you, but we are so happy to have you back.”

Everyone stands and, with most of them having their eyes changing to gold ringlets, they howl up at the sky.

Malia presses the back of her hand to her trembling mouth as her eyes glisten, looking so very touched, while something complicated crosses Jackson’s face. He almost seems surprised by their acknowledgement as he swallows dryly and flushes a little.

Eventually things settle and everyone is sitting down, looking to Aunt Meredith to continue on. She
does by saying, “I also want to give warm congratulations to Cora and Derek for finding their True Matches.”

Stiles flushes while Derek and Cora go a little pink when some of their family members do a few obnoxious ‘oohs’ and ‘ahhs’ while they clap.

Peter makes it a point to really clap loud (as if he had a hand in any of it) and Boyd seems more than comfortable with the attention, tossing a wink over to Cora from where he’s sitting behind Isaac.

Aunt Meredith makes a gesture for everyone to settle down with an amused smile before she continues, “Full Moon is next week and as always, we will be going deep within the guts of the preserve for our Run. Our Human family members are, of course, encouraged to stay together, here in the house until the Great Mother turns her face away. Okay?” There are some nods “Good. We will be meeting northwest on the south end of Mount Hebe at exactly six pm, and we will begin shifting fully at eight pm. As always, keep in mind that Talia, Rosemary, and I have equipped our family cabin with all the essential supplies for our three day excursion and Constance has volunteered this month to be Gamekeeper.

“Moving on,” she says, taking a breath and swapping out her paperwork with her son and wife. “The Assembly is fast approaching, and I just want to remind everyone that Rosemary and I need to know how and when you plan on getting to our fortress in Upper California. Are you carpooling? Are you flying? We need a headcount of who is doing what so we can delegate specific tasks to you all. As much as Rosemary and I love our roles and what we do, we also recognize when something is bigger than us and our Assembly is a beast so we need as many hands on deck as possible. Our specific sector of the family is responsible for hosting every leg of our family, so please, really work with us. We’ll send you all invitations to the Google document we have in the works.

“Next thing to discuss is the Fourth of July weekend. It’s approaching, and we have a couple pack members getting ready to celebrate their Moon Day.” Aunt Meredith pauses with a smile when a few people make exclamations and clap. “Cora and Derek, was there something you wanted to do specifically this year around?”

Cora and Derek look at each other and spend a few moments muttering things amongst themselves. Stiles has to lean back slightly so they can have the room to discuss things.

Eventually they come to some sort of agreement, nodding to each other before they pull away.

Derek says, “Disney World.” and there is this ripple of excitement that spreads on all sides.

Aunt Meredith smiles, amused, and takes a moment to pull out her smartphone and add it to her agenda. “Rosemary and I will get right on that. I’m guessing we don’t want to vote on this? Everyone is okay with spending the holiday weekend in Florida?”

The confirmation is both loud and enthusiastic.

Stiles will admit to being all for the idea as well. He’s only ever been to Disneyland a handful of times when his mother was still alive. He’s unsure, however, if his dad will let him go. He certainly hopes so, but there may be other plans since the Fourth falls on the anniversary of his mother’s death.

“Okay, Rosemary and I will get back to everyone about that.” Aunt Meredith says before she pockets her phone. She takes a moment to swap out her paperwork before continuing, “Tomorrow, Laura and Kate will be hosting a family brunch around, and I believe you said, nine am?”

“We actually had to change the time because the place we want to have it at actually doesn’t accept
private parties any earlier than noon,” Kate corrects, cupping her hands around her mouth so her voice can carry while Laura nods in agreement.

“Right, so we will say everyone meet us at Little Slices of Heaven at exactly noon. Kate and I have the place booked until three pm, so it will just be us there,” Laura explains and there’s a murmur of interest that follows.

“You heard them,” Aunt Meredith simply says. “Later on they will have a housewarming party as well, but that’s not for everyone. So if you have an invitation, you’re expected to show up. If you don’t, you’re probably too young or too old.” She lets everyone laugh at her joke before she continues, “Many thanks to the tireless efforts of Derek Sr. and Kehlani, who have drafted up an employment column in hopes of hiring a new groundskeeper to take up all the responsibilities that Mr. Ravenhill left behind when he passed. Do either of you have anything to say or add?”

“Yeah, just that we hope to have the role fulfilled by the end of the summer,” Derek Sr. chimes from where he’s seated between Talia and Nana Hale. He’s shifting Olive around in his lap because she’s still squirming impatiently.

“We are very optimistic,” Kehlani agrees. “But it helps, you know, if any of you want to put your feelers out there. Maybe talk to your friends because they may know someone who knows someone, and that particular person who hears about it may just be the ones to connect us to whoever is right for the position.”

There’s a murmur of agreement.

“Yes, very true.” Aunt Meredith switches out the last of her paperwork. “Final announcements are as followed — Ricardo has expanded his business! He will be opening up three more children’s furniture stores. The ateliers will be in Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York. At our last Pack Meeting, it was announced that he had been looking for someone to hand over his store here in Beacon Hills. I’ll let you take it from here.”

Ricardo (olive skin tone, shoulder length black hair with grey streaks that make him even more striking, deep brown eyes, and a goatee) stands and climbs on the log bench he was just seated at beside his husband, as to be in view of everyone. “Uh, good evening everyone. Especially to the new faces I see here. I know most of you know me, but I’ll just introduce myself for those who don’t. My name is Ricardo. I’ve been a part of this family for what seems a lifetime. What could I honestly say about the Hale Pack that hasn’t already been said about sliced bread?” He pauses as everyone laughs and he gives a cheeky grin. “Anyway, I’ve been happily married and bonded to this wonderful, supportive man who has seen me through my highs and lows. Helped me balance my work and personal life, even while I was carrying our children, which I will admit, I was not the most graceful or the nicest pregnant person.”

“I know you better say that!” Kehlani exclaims in agreement and everyone laughs.

Ricardo chuckles and just nods. “But, seriously, I have been truly blessed to be a part of such an amazing family and Pack. I’d like to take the time to thank you, Talia. You showed my husband and I such love and compassion and welcomed us with open arms when my family didn’t, since not everyone is comfortable with crossbreeding. But just as people weren’t fond of interracial couples or same sex couples, I’m sure we’ll get there one day.”

There’s a murmur of agreement as Talia stands and pressed her hands to her mouth to blow Ricardo an air kiss.

Ricardo pretends to catch them and hold them close to his chest as he smiles. Then he continues,
“So, yes, that’s me. I said all that just to say that, yes, I am expanding. Something I never imagined to do in a million years, but when Derek Sr. tells you that he thinks you’ve got a shot at starting a chain, you don’t ignore it. The man knows his stuff.”

Everyone laughs and claps in agreement.

Derek Sr. pretends to bow from where he’s sitting with a lightly dozing Olive in his lap.

Ricardo laughs and says, “In all honesty, I am very excited about the road ahead of me. I’ve always loved crafting and building and I of course love children too. They should have something that’s so unique for them in an affordable way. From my popularity here, I’ve seen that a lot of people agree. I considered maybe closing the store but Kehlani talked me off the ledge and we agreed that there shouldn’t be a reason why I couldn’t hand it over to someone who shares my vision. And, I know, I know, you want me to shut up and just tell you whom I’ve chosen. I will, but it wasn’t easy. The response was tremendous and a bit overwhelming but I really trust the decision I came to. So, without further delay, and I know it’s been killing them not to say anything this whole time because I asked them not to while things were being finalized. And I know you all have been very curious. Especially Nana Hale who has been grilling me almost every day about it.”

“You’re as tight as our family vaults, darling,” Nana Hale exclaims and there’s a ripple of laughter that follows.

“I just know how to keep a secret.” Ricardo winks at the older woman and grins when she playfully waves him off. “Now then, it is with great pleasure and confidence that I announce the store will be given over to Kasey and Leon.”

Everyone claps loudly and cheers while Kasey (lily white skin, thick eyebrows, a fair face, waist length black hair dyed green at the tips, and sleeve tattoos on both arms) and Leon (reddish brown skin, green eyes, curly brown hair, and very tall) stand to wave and smile.

Ricardo sits down and whispers something to his husband as everyone calms down.

Aunt Meredith snaps her fingers to get everyone’s attention again. When she has it, she says, “I know I speak for everyone when I say we expect great things from you, Ricardo. You’ve done beautiful work here, and not meaning Beacon Hills, but here at this house. From the table in our dining room, to these log benches, and everything else you’ve done. You certainly always leave a mark, and we are excited to share you with the rest of the world, where you will, as well, certainly leave a mark.” She pauses as everyone claps in agreement. Then she continues, “Zach, Sabrina, Regina, and Eunice have been gifted by the Great Mother this year, and as such, they were recently given a Guide. Tonight, they will perform their Naming.” She makes a gesture to the four of them and they round the fire pit to stand before Talia.

Talia stands as her eyes shift over to red, and the air shifting around her crackles with such contained power that it makes the magic that’s been dormant in Stiles’s belly squirm in recognition.

Zach, Sabrina, Regina, and Eunice get down on one knee as they cradle their puppies in their arms.

Talia says, “It’s been explained that the Naming is very significant and important when it comes to your brother-cousins?”

The four kids nod solemnly.

“Proceed.”

Zach, a boy with butterscotch skin and short dreadlocks, is the first to stand. He holds up his red
haired Tibetan Mastiff and proclaims, “This is my Guide. I will name her Yibambe. Yibambe comes from...” He pauses, glances over his shoulder at his mother, who is recording with proud tears, and she nods encouragingly at him. He turns and faces Talia again before continuing, “Yibambe comes from Xhosa, a language which originated in South Africa, means “hold” as in “hold fast” or “hold strong”. And she, my companion, will do so for me as we live out the rest of our days together. Alpha, will you please accept my Naming?”

A hush falls over the area as Talia reaches out with her right hand to let Zach’s companion scent her. “Yibambe,” she repeats very carefully and the puppy barks joyfully. Talia smiles and lowers her hand. “Beta, I accept your Naming. You have chosen well. What therefore the Great Mother hath joined together, let not Man or Beast put asunder.”

Zach steps forward and hugs Talia tightly before he runs back to his family, who accept him with open arms and congratulations.

Sabrina is the next to stand before Talia. She holds up a black haired Tibetan Mastiff and proclaims, “This is my Guide. I will name him Salem. Salem means...” She pauses and glances to Cora, who only nods encouragingly. Sabrina straightens with confidence, and continues, “Cora and Derek helped me find the best translation from the Hebrew language. Salem has a meaning of “peace” and he, my companion, will help me find mine as we live out the rest of our days together. Alpha, will you please accept my Naming?”

Talia reaches out with her right hand to let Sabrina’s companion scent her. “Salem,” she repeats very carefully and the puppy barks joyfully. Talia smiles and lowers her hand. “Beta, I accept your Naming. You have chosen well. What therefore the Great Mother hath joined together, let not Man or Beast put asunder.”

Sabrina beams, thanks the older woman profusely, and runs to join her family. They welcome her with open arms and warm congratulations.

Regina, a beautiful mixture of both her fathers, is the next to stand before Talia. She holds up a white haired Tibetan Mastiff and proclaims, “This is my Guide. I will name her Bibianna. Bibianna is an early deviation of Vivian. Vivian originates in Latin language and means "full of life". She, my companion, will help me to remain as such as we live out the rest of our days together. Alpha, will you please accept my Naming?”

Talia reaches out with her right hand to let Regina’s companion scent her. “Bibianna,” she repeats very carefully and the puppy barks joyfully. Talia smiles and lowers her hand. “Beta, I accept your Naming. You have chosen well. What therefore the Great Mother hath joined together, let not Man or Beast put asunder.”

Regina reaches for Talia’s right hand and kisses the back of it gratefully before she strides confidently back to her family. They welcome her with open arms and warm congratulations.

Eunice, a preteen with perfectly straight teeth, pale skin, brown freckles clustered over the bridge of her nose, fanning out to her cheeks, and corn yellow hair braided into two messy ponytails, is the next to stand. She looks a little green and nervous as she holds up a golden haired Tibetan Mastiff and proclaims, “This is my Guide. I will name him Dream. It comes from, um, Old English maybe. Um. I think it means ‘music, or joy’. Uh. I hope to have that with my brother-cousin. Alpha, will you please accept my Naming?”

Talia cocks her head in consideration while Eunice keeps her gaze lowered to the ground. She reaches out with her right hand but the puppy stares at it with dead eyes.
Eunice is shaking now.

Talia tries a few times to get the puppy to scent her but yields no results. She says, “Dream?”

The puppy doesn’t acknowledge the name.

“Dream,” Talia repeats once more.

Nothing.

Eunice has tears streaming down her face, and small whimpers escape, even though she’s clearly trying to hold them in.

Talia makes a thoughtful sound before kneeling and taking the puppy from the preteen to exam. Finally, she hands the puppy back over, stands, and says, “Do not be troubled, Eunice. The pup is well bred and healthy. The name just isn’t right. I cannot accept your Naming, but don’t be discouraged. I didn’t get my Naming right until the third time. Sometimes it takes time, and it can’t be rushed. This isn’t a ‘no’, but merely a ‘not right now’, okay?”

Eunice starts weeping but she nods and holds her puppy close. “I-I’m sorry, Alpha.”

“Sweet girl, don’t apologize. It’s okay. Come here,” Talia murmurs soothingly and accepts her niece with open arms. She takes a moment to scent the young girl and kisses the top of her head until she calms down. When she does, Talia takes a moment to dry the tears from her face before sending her back to her mother.

Aunt Emelia sends Talia a small smile before she comforts her distressed daughter.

Talia sits down and does a gesture towards Aunt Meredith that communicates ‘wait a minute before you move on’.

Aunt Meredith nods and leans over to whisper something to her wife.

Stiles takes advantage of the lull to lean over and whisper to Derek, “Does that always happen during a Naming?”

Derek shrugs, but then seems to think better of it and nods instead. “It’s kind of like taking your first steps as a Werewolf. Some get it right on the first try, others stumble,” he explains. “And before you ask, yes I was one of the ones who stumbled. Choosing a name for that kind of connection is really nerve wrecking. It’s a two-sided thing. The Sentinel and the Guide have to agree on it. My first time around, with Jordan, I tried to name him Ezekiel. Jordan fought me all the way up to the Naming and refused to acknowledge it. As embarrassed as I was, I understood that it’s not like having a normal pet. Guides are called companions and brother-cousins for a reason. You wouldn’t just carelessly name a family member who didn’t have one and trusted you to give them one, right? Same concept.”

Stiles makes a thoughtful sound, finding it absolutely intriguing.

Aunt Meredith snaps her fingers to get everyone’s attention once more. When she does, she says, “Okay, suffer me a little longer. We’ll get to the s’mores in a moment, I promise.”

Olive makes a very loud, throaty and unhappy sound.

Aunt Meredith laughs, charmed (as does everyone else). She says, “Oh, baby, I know. I’m so mean to keep you from your marshmallows. Aunty is so sorry. She’s almost done,” she coos to the six month old.
Olive just kicks her legs and pouts as she squirms in her father’s arms, but she doesn’t say anything else.

Aunt Meredith chuckles and continues, “We will be having a family picnic the last weekend of June to celebrate the start of summer vacation.”

Most of the cheers come from the younger generation of Hales.

“On a more serious note, due to the suggestion given by Virtue Braeden, and with much concern over the safety of the preserve, we will begin doing patrols during the night.” Aunt Meredith has to speak a little louder since there is a murmur of unrest starting up. “I know, I know. It’s not ideal. Certainly not the most enjoyable way to spend your nights, but it is our only option until we can hire a new groundskeeper. At the moment, Braeden has her Conduit Whit Lee patrolling the woods for us until we come up with our own arrangements. Now, Rosemary and I will be posting a signup sheet in the kitchen. It will be taped to the deep freezer, right on top to make signup as easy as possible. There will also be a space to outline your availability. Not to say that, that’s what you’ll be getting but if enough people sign up, we will make sure to work with your preferred shifts. We need volunteers by Sunday night so that Rosemary and I can release a digital schedule that will be accessible to everyone who has signed up, about early Tuesday morning at the latest.

“My very last announcement, which is particularly my favorite one of the night,” she teases. “Is that my sweet, smart, and wonderful son Max is expecting his first child with his Match. Max, you have anything to say?”

Max rubs the back of neck with a grin, and his eyes are bright with his joy. “I don’t know what I should say. Bianca is the talker. She has a way of word-spinning that is far better than what I can do.” He shrugs when everyone chuckles. “Bianca, who unfortunately couldn’t be here to accept your congratulations, will be happy to invite you all to a baby shower we plan on having when she gets back. She is in the middle of a six-month internship overseas in Australia, but when she returns, we want to have it here at the house. Uh, we’re registered online if you’re thinking of getting us anything. We made a list, which she mostly dictated, and that’s fine because I have the worst taste. Thanks.”

Everyone claps and offers their congratulations while Max shoulders it with polite awkwardness.

Aunt Meredith gives the floor to Talia, who takes her place on the podium. She makes a gesture for everyone to settle down.

Once there is a hush among the area, Talia says, “The last time I saw my mother, Sofia, was on a night much like tonight.” It really gets quiet, and the weight of Talia’s words becomes very clear and tangible. “We were at the end of a pack meeting, and I remember that I wasn’t all the way there. Distracted. And my mother noticed. But she was the type of woman who was so sharp that she could look at you and it was like she could see your thoughts. She could sense how you’re feeling at just one glance. But she was never abrupt about it.” She pauses to smile as she thinks on it, her eyes glazing with the distant memory. “She had a way of getting you to talk without her even prompting that much. That night, she asked me to stay behind to clean up the area and sent everyone else up to the house. We’re cleaning, and it’s completely silent, well, what can be considered nearly silent for a Were, save for the leaves rustling in the trees, and an animal scuttling somewhere in the distance. And there was the sound of our family buzzing around us like a cocoon, a comfort, a familiarity to me usually. But that night I could not relax. And I start getting nervous because my mom loved to sing while she was cleaning. That was her thing. Now, she couldn’t carry a tune to save her life —”

Everyone starts to laugh.
"— but she loved singing just the same. I mean, it was odd for her not to at least be humming if she wasn’t speaking at all. But, not that night. She was as silent as the grave. Internally, I start panicking a little. I thought maybe I did something wrong, so I start trying to remember if I did something or said something incorrect, wondering why she just won’t say what she’s thinking. But then it hits me that she’s waiting for me to talk about what’s bothering me.

“My mother never hesitated when it came to verbal correction, and this time around, I really hadn’t done anything at the time that would have earned that sort of attention.” She pauses, choosing her words carefully. “I stopped what I was doing, and I turned to her, and I said, ‘Mom, I’m upset’. And she stops what she’s doing, turns to look at me, and then she says, ‘Yeah. I know’.” She continues, “I said, ‘Mom, how did you do it? How did you deal with me when I rebelled?’ She laughed and said, ‘Talia, of all thirteen of my children, legitimate or otherwise, you always gave me the least amount of trouble!’ We both laughed and I thought, yeah, she’s right. So I said, ‘Mom, the Great Mother has saw fit to give me a daughter who questions everything I do!’ and she said, ‘Good. A healthy child is not always obedient’. But I said, ‘Laura and I keep bumping heads. She won’t go to any of our private schools. She’s not interested in learning the responsibilities of an Alpha, and she’s adamant her future isn’t taking my place as Chief Alpha of the Hale Pack’.” She pauses before she says, “My mom laughed and said, ‘You can rarely change the mind of a daughter you raised to have a spine that’s stronger than your own; strong enough that even the rest of the world must yield to her will instead of the other way around. That is the Hale way, and you should be proud that you raised her to be true to it. Our women are leaders and our men are compassionate beyond what’s expected’.

“Then, she looked around, seemed satisfied with what we had done to the area, and held me close, gave me a kiss, and told me to be reasonable.” Everyone is quiet with contemplation. “Of course, I completely disregarded the advice, even after the devastating blow her death hit me with, still lingering even now, to this day. I’m still healing from that wound, but a part of that recovery has been thinking back to the things my mother has tried to teach me. You see, she was right. I need to be more reasonable. I have tried to mold Laura into my image, and she resisted.” She smiles and says, “Being a mother is such a wonderful gift, but it comes with great responsibility. I have learned that it’s not our place to tell our children who we think they should be, but rather to help them find out who they are. Our children aren’t supposed to be our second chance at reliving our own lives without making those mistakes we made the next time around. Their lives are their own, and as hard as it to let go and let them live for themselves, it is our duty to be the ones who supports them through the good and bad.

“Laura, I want to take this time, now that you’ve moved out and are living on your own, I want to let you know how proud I am of you and the woman you’ve become. I want to take the time to give you a word of affirmation. I give you my absolute blessing to follow your dreams.” She motions for Laura to join her and Laura with wet cheeks. Talia grabs her shaky hands, bringing both together before she kisses both knuckles. She pulls away and rests her right hand on top of Laura’s head, saying, “May our Great Mother Moon bless you and keep you. May she make Her face shine on you and be gracious to you. May She turn Her face toward you and give you peace. May Her favor surround you as like a shield and may She cause your enemies to be your footstool.

“Laura, if I release you to this world, will you help me instate my Confirmation tonight?” Talia asks. Laura, holding back tears, nods rapidly and causes more to fall down her cheeks.

Talia smiles, eyes lining with moisture as well before she steps off the podium to stand on equal footing with her oldest child. She reaches out and pulls Laura close, and they share a quiet moment of affection before they pull away.

Stiles smiles to himself as he watches the touching moment. He notices that they both gather
themselves in the same way: first wiping away the tears from under their eyes, wiping wet hands over the top of their thighs to dry them before reaching up to fix their hair, tucking it behind their ears. Yes, they are very much alike, and Stiles can finally confirm that they did use to bump heads because of it. He’s happy to see that Talia has at last given her blessing to Laura to pursue what she wants.

Talia exhaled before smiling and standing up on the podium with Laura in tow. She then gestures for Cora and Stiles to approach.

Stiles can’t explain why he gets nervous, magic squirming low in his gut with anticipation. He feels the eyes of the whole Pack on him, watching with open curiosity and an inkling of what’s about to happen.

Talia waits until Cora and Stiles are directly in her reach before she puts her hands on their shoulders to bodily turn them to face the entire Pack. She rests a hand on each of their shoulders and says, “Tonight, I am issuing a Confirmation. Laura, if you would please give your blessing first to Cora?”

Laura nods and says, “I, Laura Talia Hale, pledge to give my Rites to my little sister when it is time for her to take up the mantle as Chief Alpha. I do not wish to contest the promotion, nor will I challenge her for the title.”

Stiles glances at Cora from the corner of his eye to see her fighting down a self-assured grin. It kind of makes him want to grin as well in understanding.

Talia speaks next, her heated hands still resting warmly on top of their shoulders, “And I, Talia Cora Hale, hereby name Cora Sofia Hale as my successor, and Mieczysław “Stiles” Stilinski as my Second. Stiles has already begun his training, and Cora will be joining him starting week twenty to begin hers alongside his.”

Stiles stiffens in shock and surprise, not only that she knows his real name and pronounced it correctly, but also because she publicly declared him as her Second-in-Command.

It’s flooring and thrilling at the same time.

His face gets red when everyone stands to their feet and cheers loudly (some howling into the sky and beating a fist to their chests where others clap and stomp their feet).

Derek is one of howlers.

Stiles ducks his head as his smile widens, an indescribable pleasure washing through him and expanding in his chest like frothy foam at the sight.

Cora turns and faces Stiles, grabbing his right hand with her own like she’s about to give him a firm handshake that never actually happens.

Stiles doesn’t quite understand why until he starts a little at the feel of Talia resting a warm hand on the crown of his head as well as Cora’s.

A hush falls over the area.

Talia says, “With you all as my witness, I will now speak the Blessing of Garwalf, the first woman, Were, and Alpha of the Hale line: May the Great Mother give you the dew of the Cosmos and of the fatness of the Earth. Let all Lycanthrope with eyes to see and ears to hear, recognize your birthright and give their respect over to your territory. May that territory expand and thrive under your leadership and authority. May She bless you with the kind of wisdom that makes both your family
and your pack prosperous. Cursed be everyone who curses you and blessed be everyone who blesses you. Let it be so from this day forward. Così sia.”

Everyone replies, “Così sia!” and begin clapping/howling again.

Talia claps her hands together and says, “And now — s’mores.”

Stiles is a bit dazed, realizing just how official things had been. He lets go of Cora’s hand as everyone else crowds around the fire pit with their skewers and s’more ingredients. He nudges Cora out of the swell of it so they can wander over to the dog’s feeding station for a semblance of calm and privacy. He says, “So, that just happened. Uh, any thoughts you want to share about it? I mean I knew your mother wanted me as her Second, and that she was going to give her Rites to you, but I never got a chance to ask you if you’d even want to inherit me as a Second too.”

Cora just looks at him for a few beats of silence before she crouches down to rub at the dogs that begin to surround them with interest and excitement. She’s giving special attention to Ginger as she says, “Mom never tried to hide the fact that she wanted you as her Second. Never used to understand what she saw that made her set on it, if I can be honest.” She pauses, then says, “You remember when you and Uncle Peter helped save all those kids from your next-door neighbors?”

Stiles is a bit thrown by the redirection, but he says, “Yeah, of course. The Ghouls who I thought were Witches, but that was a wildly ignorant assumption.” He pauses, then says, “Why?”

“You bucked against everyone when they told you that nothing was wrong.” Cora stands and faces him, looking directly in the eyes. “You risked your life for a bunch of kids you didn’t even know, and you saved them.”

Stiles frowns but he nods slowly, not understanding the significance of it outside of what’s plainly obvious. “I just did what anyone else should have done in that situation,” he simply says.

Cora smirks and snorts wryly. “See, that’s my point exactly.” She shakes her head as her smirk expands into a smile. “Stiles, you came to school after all that, covered in bruises, a literal hero, and you didn’t say a single thing about it. Even though that was all everyone wanted to talk about. But you…you didn’t say anything. You didn’t gloat. You didn’t act different. You didn’t even try to take credit. You just continued living your life as if you hadn’t made a difference at all, when in reality, you had done something so amazing that it still deserves recognition.” She shakes her head and looks away. “So, you know, I think that was the moment I knew I wanted you to be my Second.” She crosses her arms and says, “It’s not you that has to prove that your worthy of being my Second. It’s me that has to prove I’m worthy of being your Alpha.”

“Oh,” Stiles croaks, touched beyond words and hoping he doesn’t start crying. That was the absolute nicest thing that Cora has ever said to him. “Thank you,” he says softly, when he’s able to get through the shock. He clears his throat. “We’re best friends, Cora. We kind of owe it to each other to work on being worthy of one another.” He holds out his right hand with a purpose. “We’re in this together, no matter what. Deal?”

Cora grabs his hand without hesitating and this time they do shake hands. She says, “Deal.”

The sky is a dark canopy of stars above their heads, and this far from the fire, no one besides the dogs and the heavens above bear witness to the quiet hug they share for the next five minutes.

They return and rejoin the others shortly after.

Cora bobs and weaves through most of her family members to get to Boyd and Isaac, taking a
moment to greet Boyd’s family warmly and they do the same with open arms. Then she takes the
time to scent both Boyd and Isaac equally in a way that makes Stiles curious about their dynamic. He
can’t assume, he knows, but he wonders and hopes that his brother is happy and comfortable in the
midst of it all.

Even lost in his thoughts over it, Stiles still finds himself being drawn to Derek’s side without even
thinking about it.

Derek gives him a stupefying grin and says, “I made you a s’more, babe. Say ahh.”

Stiles snorts but opens his mouth obligingly, letting the older teen feed him with indulgent mirth. He
wrinkles his nose as the chocolate burns his tongue but his magic is quick to rise up and soothe the
ache, healing it quickly. “Mmm, too hot,” he declares, wiping crumbs from his lips.

Derek pops the rest of fractured s’more in his mouth as his brow furrows. After he swallows, he
says, “You know I can’t tell at all. Sorry, I always eat mine like that.”

“Werewolf,” Stiles sighs with a fond smile. “Here, let me make my own before you give my mouth
third degree burns.”

Derek makes an unhappy sound. “I would never!” he protests and keeps the s’more ingredients out
of Stiles’s reach. “No, I want to get this right. Just supervise me.”

Stiles laughs and rolls his eyes. “You are ridiculous. Fine. Make the marshmallow hot enough to melt
the chocolate but not too hot that it burns my tongue. The marshmallow should be brown, but not
halfway black.”

Derek frowns as he withdraws the skewered marshmallow he was holding over the firepit. “Oops,”
he mutters and stares at the dark marshmallow. He shrugs and pops it in his mouth before replacing
it. “Let’s try that again.”

Stiles does his best to guide Derek through a series of failed attempts while also accepting each
congratulation tossed his way by a passing family/pack member.

Derek finally succeeds in making a perfect s’more, glowing with pride when Stiles takes a bite that’s
hand fed to him with a thumbs-up in approval. Stiles chews in good humor, thinking about how
particular Derek can be when he wants to get something right. Stiles finds it more charming than
annoying, and while wiping the corners of his mouth clean, he wonders if Derek has been introduced
to puppy chow (aka muddy buddies).

Derek leans forwards quickly, faster than Stiles can blink, and presses an open mouth kiss to the
corner of his mouth, swiping his tongue over the dip of Stiles’s mouth before pulling back so he can
watch Stiles splutter and get flustered over it. “You had some chocolate there, I was only trying to
help,” he explains with an innocent expression.

Stiles does not buy it and tries to be annoyed but it’s hard to be when his whole face feels like it’s
tingling in the aftermath of Derek’s sneaky maneuvers. “Why don’t you just lick my whole face
while you’re at — hey, no! I was being sarcastic. Derek!” He laughs and tries to hold Derek at bay
as the older teen sticks out his tongue and tries to lean forward with it, aiming for Stiles’s cheeks.

Derek is persistent, and Stiles has to finally slap both of his hands over his face to hide himself from
view. Derek tries to get Stiles’s to reveal his face, but he stubbornly refuses. “Okay, okay. I’m
stepping back and giving up,” he promises.

“Yeah right,” Stiles mumbles from behind his hands.
“Seriously, I’m backing off.”

Stiles peeks an eye from between his fingers and sees Derek grinning patiently with his hands behind his back, rocking on his heels in a charmingly boyish way. Stiles narrows his eyes, but he lowers his hands completely.

Derek, like the absolute liar he is, does not hesitate for a second.

Stiles feels his warm tongue stroke slowly up the side of his face, starting from the bottom of his jaw, up over his chin, narrowly missing the corner of his mouth, up and over his eye to his eyebrow; the appendage being velvety rough and moist against his reddening skin.

Then in the blink of an eye, Derek is gone, laughing long and loud with maniacal joy while Stiles reboots.

When Stiles finally snaps out of it, he gives into the chase, running after Derek as he leads them into the guts of the forest.

Further away from the campsite, it’s harder to see with nothing but the stars and the moon lighting the way.

Stiles has no choice but to slow his pace when he stumbles, and he has to squint through the dark to make sense of everything around him. He feels around for his magic, but it appears to be out cold after a long day. He sighs, knowing better than to disturb his magic for a non-emergency and he lets it be.

Attempting to get his bearings and sense of direction, he comes to a complete stop when he can no longer see. He reaches out blindly and feels the wood of a nearby tree, rough and course under his hand, and he tries to listen for Derek but all he hears is the call of nature. He’s about to call his enhanced sight into action when hands reach out to spin him around so that his back is against the tree.

Derek swallows the yelp of surprise that escapes from his mouth and his heart seems to freeze for a second before picking up double time. He wraps his arms around Derek’s neck and kisses him back with as much vigor.

They separate after a moment, breathing heavily and lightheaded.

Stiles can’t see much but the sky above and the way Derek’s eyes are glowing with gold. Something about the sight makes Stiles want to continue to chase and be chased. Even without the help of his magic or leaning on his enhanced sight, he thinks it would be thrilling to run through the woods, all the while knowing that Derek was there, somewhere, even if he couldn’t see anything but the gold ringlet of his eyes staring back in the darkness.

Derek sighs and lowers his forehead to Stiles’s shoulder. He says, “Mom says we’re too far. We’ve got to get back now. Kate’s looking for you anyway. She’s ready to leave.”

Stiles threads his fingers in the short hairs at the base of Derek’s head and makes no move to push the older teen away. He savors their closeness for a moment longer before he cups his hands under Derek’s jaw so he can lift his head and kiss him one last time, heart racing with the daring and boldness of his actions.

Derek seems to melt with the kiss and he hugs Stiles as close as he can, like he’s afraid the other boy will disappear at any moment. He gentles the kiss when he prepares to pull away and grabs Stiles’s hand to lead him back to the campsite.
When they return, they find they’ve stumbled upon a food fight.

Everyone, both big and small (even Jackson and Malia get in on the action), laughs and tosses marshmallows and pieces of chocolate at each other as if they were water balloons. It’s all a mess of immaturity and carefree joy that’s both hilarious and beautiful witness.

Stiles feels extremely blessed to see the Hale Pack this way — strong in their softness and love.

In that moment, he knows with utmost certainty that he would die for any one of them.

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Kate keeps her word about dropping Stiles, Scott, and Isaac off at home. The only thing is that Parrish has decided to include himself into the process as well.

Isaac doesn’t look pleased about it.

Tensions are high between the recently united pair, and Stiles is curious to know why that is.

When Kate pulls up to the curb in front of the house, Isaac is the first to leap out of the car and storm his way up the steps.

“Isaac, wait!” Parrish quickly climbs out of the car to run after the preteen.

Kate sighs and puts the car in park before motioning for Scott and Stiles to exit her car as well. When they do, she just turns on the radio and pulls out her phone to fiddle with it as she waits for Parrish. She makes no move to leave the driver’s side.

Stiles and Scott make their way up the walkway, to the stairs, and finally into the house.

Isaac and Parrish are in the middle of the kitchen, arguing.

Stiles winces and gestures for Scott to follow him up the stairs. He doesn’t go to his room however, he leans against the corner to peer down the stairs and into the kitchen in concern (and mostly to be nosy).

Scott mumbles something about going to sleep before he disappears, leaving Stiles to his spying.

Isaac is complaining, “You’ve got to chill. You can’t just come back into my life after vanishing for years and act like you care about me!”

“This isn’t an act! I care very deeply about you. You’re my son,” Parrish insists.

“Yeah, well you may be partially responsible for creating me but you’re not my father. Back off.” Isaac doesn’t wait for his response. He storms up the steps and past Stiles without a word before slamming his door so hard that the house nearly shakes with it.

Parrish stands in the kitchen with his hands on his hips and a severe frown. Then he clenches his jaw, straightens his shoulders, and turns to stand at the bottom of the stairs before saying, “I know, Isaac. I know you don’t think of me as your father in the way that counts, and I know you’ve got a good thing here with the Stilinskis. I’m not trying to take that away from you.”

Stiles watches as Parrish waits for a moment, eyeing the wall that belongs to Isaac’s room as though he’s listening for a response.

Isaac slowly opens the door, peeking out to make sure Parrish isn’t immediately there, and he exits
his room to stand at the very top of the steps next to Stiles.

Parrish repeats, “I’m not trying to uproot you from your life.”

Isaac’s mouth wiggles unsurely before he says, with undisguised suspicion, “You’re not?”

Parrish smiles sadly. “No. I promise.”

Isaac takes that in for a long moment. Fidgeting a bit unsurely, he says, “It’s hard to think of you as my father.”

“I know. I was your brother before I was anything else to you,” Parrish agrees with gentle patience.

“I can’t…” Isaac swallows dryly and licks his lips nervously. “I can’t be the son you want. I – I don’t know how to be that.”

Parrish blinks up at him with genuine confusion. “What kind of son do you think I want?”

Stiles is very concerned to see that his little brother is literally shaking.

Isaac’s voice is hoarse when he responds, “Someone who isn’t damaged goods.”

Stiles inhales sharply and opens his mouth to protest.

Isaac lifts a hand in his direction to signal that he does not want to be interrupted. He continues when Stiles shuts his mouth with a click, “People look at you and they think the world of your face. They look at mine, and they pity me. They assume I’ll never have a normal life, never find anyone willing to ignore that half of my face looks like it’s been pulverized with a meat grinder.”

“I think your beautiful,” Parrish counters, keeping his face open and honest.

“You have to say that. You’re the one that made me.”

“And I did a really damn good job too,” Parrish quips, undeterred. “Isaac, from the moment I gave birth to you and held you in my arms as my son, I knew I would never find anything else as beautiful as you. And I wish I could go back and fight harder for you to give you the family you always deserved right at the beginning. But that’s never going to be possible.” He exhales. “You’re incredibly smart, respectful, and kind. And you are absolutely more than what I deserve, and I will spend the rest of my life doing what it takes, just to get you to smile at me again. If I gain more than that, I’ll count myself unbelievably lucky. All I want is for you to be happy, and I’d like to be one of the people in your life that makes that happen.”

Isaac’s mouth twists thoughtfully, and he folds his arms defensively. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to freak out on you. I know you’re trying hard, but I just — it’s too much all at once.”

“I’m being a helicopter dad,” Parrish concludes and huffs wryly when Isaac quickly nods. “Well, I promise to work on it, if you agree to go to Laura and Kate’s brunch with me tomorrow. We can even come up with some code words. If I’m being overbearing, you can say ‘helicopter’s getting really close’. I will immediately give you space.”

Isaac pretends to mull it over before he says, “I’ll say yes if we leave by two. Tomorrow I start my first day interning for Peter at his clinic.”

A complicated expression crosses over Parrish’s face, and when he settles on a disapproving frown, he says, “Would you be upset if I tried to talk you out of working with Peter?”
“Yes. I like animals and I want to be a vet someday,” Isaac replies bluntly. “Peter is...the way that he is but he seems very good at what he does. Besides, it doesn’t seem fair that you can swap spit with him and Kate, but I’m not allowed to invest in my future.”

Parrish goes beet red and takes a step back from the stairs. He quickly gathers himself, clears his throat, and says, “I was going to talk to you about that. It’s nothing serious.”

“Do they know that? Cause every time they’re even near you they smell exactly like my dad does when he’s looking at Ms. McCall.”

Parrish gawks. “That’s — you’re my main focus right now and — I don’t think —”

“If you don’t feel the same, you should probably end it. It’s not cool to string them along. It’s not like I’m vouching for Peter, and Kate and I may be siblings but we’re not that close, but it’s not cool to string them along,” Isaac interjects. “I don’t really understand the appeal of what you’re doing with them, and I know not a lot of people like being alone, or need physical connection. So, I’m not judging you, or anything. I just want you to have healthy relationships. Your parents, my grandparents, never showed us good examples of that.”

Parrish nods slowly, looking a bit dumbfounded.

“I’m tired,” Isaac says with a sigh. “Dad hasn’t replaced my phone yet, so you can call the house when you’re on your way to pick me up tomorrow. Goodnight.”


“I know.” The door clicks shut behind him.

Parrish snorts and scrubs his hands over his face. He looks drained. “Do you mind walking me out?” he asks.

Stiles nods and jogs down the steps to follow the older man to the front door. “Sorry about eavesdropping,” he says.

“It’s fine, I think Isaac felt better with you there — brave enough to tell me how he really feels,” Parrish supposes. “It’s better than when he gives the silent treatment.”

“He’s a professional when it comes to that,” Stiles jokes.

Parrish pauses in the doorway of the front door but he keeps his gaze forward, aimed at Kate. “He really makes you work for it, doesn’t he?” he questions, almost rhetorically.

“Yes, he does,” Stiles happily agrees. “But once he warms up to you, there’s really nothing better than to have him on your side.”

Parrish smiles sadly, finally glancing his way. “I meant what I said. I’m glad he has you and the sheriff. You’re really good people,” he compliments.

“Thanks,” Stiles says. “My dad and I are lucky to have him. And if it makes a difference, I think Isaac is the best thing you’ve given to this world.”

Parrish’s eyes get misty all at once, and he looks very close to tears. He laughs wetly. “It makes a difference,” he promises. “Thank you. Have a good night.”

“Same to you.” Stiles watches Parrish make his way to Kate’s black jaguar before climbing in.
They ride off into the night together.

Stiles locks the front door, and takes his time checking all the windows to make sure they are properly closed as well. He checks the back door before wandering to press his ear to the basement door.

Complete silence.

He’s unsure if that’s because his Aunt Lorraine is sleep, or because she’s not in the house at all. He doesn’t take any chances by knocking, and he climbs the stairs to make his way to his room.

Scott is out cold with all the windows still open and blowing in the cool night air.

Stiles smiles fondly at his best friend before he roots around his messy floor for a clean towel. He considers cleaning up but ultimately dismisses the idea since he’s too tired for it. He knows Derek would be appalled to see that he’s let his room become disarray once again but it’s a hard habit to break.

Once he locates a towel, he tucks away in his bathroom for a nice, steamy shower, and spends less than an hour scrubbing himself down, thinking about the way Derek’s kisses felt before he’s forced to turn the temperature settings to cold. He exits when he’s calm enough to, wet and pink but clean, and returns to his room to climb into some pajamas. He manages to pluck his phone from his carelessly discarded jeans and notices he has a few missed texts and calls.

He prioritizes his dad first, and once he’s fully dressed, he sits by the window sill, so he can peer out a dormant Nana, surrounded by flickering fireflies as always, and he calls his old man back.

“Hey, kiddo. How are things?”

Stiles smiles at the sound of his dad’s voice and realizes he misses him. “Things are as fine as they can be here. I’ll tell you more when you guys get back, but I don’t want you to worry.”

“I’m already worried,” he warns, but his voice is too full of good humor and cheer for that to be true. “You know, I can’t remember the last time I took a vacation like this. It’s nice. Melissa and I are thinking of doing something with you boys before you go back to school. Or maybe in June if we can save up for it sooner.”

“I’m sure whatever you two come up with will be epic,” Stiles says with confidence. He pauses for a moment, then he says, “Dad, can I ask you a question?”

“You already did.”

Stiles rolls his eyes. “Seriously?”

“I’m a father, it’s my right. You may even understand one day.” His dad shifts on the other end, and it sounds like he’s standing to his feet. “One moment. My father senses are tingling and I feel this question is a heavy hitter.”

Stiles smiles to himself as he pokes at a crack in his window sill and listens as his father shuts himself in what probably is the hotel bathroom.

“Alright, shoot.” There’s an echo, which only confirms his location.

“Do you and Melissa — are you happy?”
His dad makes a thoughtful sound on the other end. “Yes. I’m happy.”

“Do you love her?”

“Yes.” No hesitation. “Do you want to talk about that?”

“No. I mean — not really. I know it’s...different from what you had with mom. I know you’ll always love mom in a special way.”

“That’s right,” his dad carefully agrees. “Loving someone means something different every time it happens with someone new. Claudia will always hold a special place in my heart. Melissa understands that too.”

Stiles hadn’t even realized he was worried about it until his dad mentions it. “Yeah. She’s really — I like her.” His wiggles his mouth thoughtfully. “I think mom would’ve liked her too.”

“Possibly,” his dad vaguely agrees, sounding amused over it. “I think what matters is that you and Isaac like her.”

“We do!” Stiles quickly swears. “We also want you to be happy. It’s great that Melissa makes you happy. Do you think you’ll marry her one day?”

“If she’ll have me, that might be sooner than you think,” his dad remarks. “That okay with you, son?”

“Would we have to move?”

“I’m sure we can work that out later on, you know, down the line. Our house is the best option since we have more space, but you or Isaac may have to share a room with Scott.”

Stiles snorts. “Isaac would never go for it. That’s gonna be all me. But, I already think of Scott like a brother. I’m sure sharing a room with him will be okay.”

“Possibly, but again, we can really talk about this later. How are you? What did you boys get up to today?”

Stiles spends the next hour telling his dad about his entire day. From his confrontation with Heather, what he found in the woods with Braedden through the help of Welpip, the confrontation he witnessed between Jackson and his parents, to the pack meeting where his future place in the Hale Pack was confirmed by Talia.

His father listens with an attentive and supportive ear.

“Well, I won’t hold you any longer. You’re pretty much caught up,” Stiles jokes.

The sheriff responds in kind by saying, “It’s like I never left.”

“Goodnight, dad. Love you. Send Melissa my best.”

“Of course. Love you too. Get some sleep. You’ve got some gardening to do tomorrow.”

Stiles smiles widely at the thought of it and the magic in his gut lurches in its sleep, restless with anticipation. He hangs up and his phone vibrates in his hand to remind him he still has unread text messages. He decides to check into the group chat he joined during the pack meeting only hours ago with Allison, Lydia, Cora, Derek, Jackson, Isaac, Boyd, and Malia.
It looks like they’ve already chosen a group name (The Beacon Bunch), and he’s missed an entire conversation that goes like this:

Allison texts: **Hey guys. Wanna carpool to Laura and Kate’s brunch with me and Lydia? My mom says she can pick everyone up.**

Boyd: **Nah, I’m out. My lil sis got a dance recital thing. She’ll kill me if I miss it. I’ll just see all ya’ll at they party later.**

Cora: :(  
Cora: **No one told me Veronica was going to be dancing this weekend.**

Cora: **I want to come. Where’s my invitation? Je me sens rejeté !!!**

Boyd: **LOL you’re always welcome. If you wanna be there, we’ll come and get you. Veronica would love another cheerleader.**

Cora: :) :) :)  
Cora: **Isaac, do you want to come to Veronica’s recital with me?**

Scott: **This is Isaac.**

Scott: **I don't have my phone yet.**

Scott: **I’ve already got a ride to Laura and Kate’s brunch thing, so no thanks. Take some pictures for me.**

Cora: **K.**

Boyd: **Of course.**

Derek: **I’m taking my car so I’m good. Jackson will be riding with me.**

Malia: **I need a ride too, Derek!**

Derek: **No biggie. The more the merrier.**

Malia: **Guys, I’m catching a ride with Derek. :)**

Allison: **Scott?**

Scott: **It’s really me this time. I’m down.**

Scott: **Goodnight :]**

Allison: **Great! Goodnight. <3<3<3**

Scott: :]

Scott: <3<3<3<3<3<3<3<3<3<3<3<3<3<3<3<3<3<3<3<3<3<3<3

Lydia: **Has anyone heard from Stiles?**
Derek: He’s not answering my texts either ): ):

Derek: Babe, if you’re reading this...reply to my texts first.

Cora: Ugh, don’t be gross.

Allison: Stiles?

Stiles finally replies, almost an hour and a half late: Hey, sorry guys.

The responses that follow happen while he’s still replying.

Derek: You were supposed to text me first. #loyalty

Stiles: I was talking to my dad.

Stiles: Wow, Derek. Chill.

Cora: Yeah, Derek.

Cora: cHiLL oUt

Stiles: lol thanks Cora

Cora: You’re my future Second. I’ll always have your back. ;)

Lydia: You’re not coming to brunch tomorrow, are you?

Derek: Well he’s my future husband.

Stiles: Same here, Cora.

Derek: So.

Stiles: OMG

Derek: I come first.

Stiles: DEREK.

Stiles: Sorry, Lyds. I’ve got some gardening to do.

Stiles: I’ll be at the party though.

Allison: Good enough for me. Goodnight everyone!

Everyone, apart from Scott, Jackson, and Isaac, respond with their own goodnights and the group chat becomes dormant after that. He decides to look at the text Deaton sent him some time ago.

It reads: Mr. Stilinski, I will be by at 10 am so that we can begin breaking ground. I have emailed you several readings, and I would like for you to have read them before I arrive. No need to reply.

Stiles spends the next few minutes, reading the selected chapters that Deaton sent. He prints them out so that he can highlight what he feels is really important using his three-color code system ‘green,
yellow, and red’. He even prints out the reading outline Deaton has attached to the email with instructions to do his studying in this particular order:

2. *Practical Magic for Gardeners* (pgs. 45 - 60)

While he studies for the morning, he goes back and forth with Derek via text like he usually does before bed. The conversation ends something like this:

**I wish I kissed you more tonight**

Stiles’s types out, deletes, and then retypes for about ten minutes before he replies: *Yeah, me too. I think I might dream about it tonight.*

(:

**Am I your first kiss?**

Yes.

**Did you like it?**

Stiles snorts, face red and he rolls his eyes at himself mostly and replies: *Yes. It was better than what I’ve ever imagined a kiss might be.*

**That makes me really happy to know.**

**I like kissing you.**

*Yeah? Even though it was my first time doing it?*

**It’s you. I think I was destined to enjoy it.**

*Mushy.*

*Thanks.*

**You’re certainly welcome. (:**

*Have to go to bed. Gotta wake up early to work with Deaton. Come over after the brunch thing?*

**Yes, of course. Just know I will kiss you as soon as I see you.**

Stiles feels heat rise to his face as he imagines it and his heart quickens.

**That a threat?**

**It’s a promise.**

**Goodnight, babe.**

*Goodnight, sourwolf.*
Sourwolf?

How is it possible that I both like and dislike that nickname?

Explain this to me.

No thanks. Goodnight. :)

???

Stiles laughs to himself before he locks and silences his phone before quickly finishes up the last of his reading. When he’s satisfied that the core of those readings has sunk in, he decides to call it a night. He slips into bed beside Scott and falls asleep to his best friend’s light snoring.

He doesn’t dream about kissing Derek, but he does dream that he’s standing in a field of wildflowers at the bottom of a red ladder set upon the soil of the earth, the top of it reaching into the milky whirlpool of heaven.

In his hands, he has a horn made of gold. Without thinking, he lifts it to his mouth and blows until the Earth begins to tremble.

There’s the sound of rolling thunder before Angels begin to ascend and descend from the red ladder to the sound of harps playing in the wind.

As Stiles watches it all happen, he thinks about how people on Earth usually describe Angels as beings of light and warmth. But these Angels aren’t like that at all.

They wear robes made of silk and jewels, their eyes, by a count of six on their elongated faces, are black and beady like a bird’s, with skin like amber gemstones, and teeth that are pointy and razor sharp like a shark’s. They have swords with long blades that wink dangerously under a sheet of burning fire. On the opposite arm, they carry octagon shaped shields made of lightning. Their hair floats around their buggy faces like black wax with shimmering silver highlights, and their massive wings fan out behind them, their white feathers dusted and covered with gold plating.

They are both terrible and beautiful to behold.

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Saturday morning starts with the smell of bacon, waffles, and eggs wafting from the kitchen.

Scott is the first to answer the siren’s call since he’s already up and about, brushing his teeth and walking around with a seaweed face mask. “Dude, did you know Isaac has this amazing clay mask? It makes my face tingle.”

“For the last time, it’s not mine,” Isaac says, poking his head through Stiles’s doorway.

Scott frowns around his toothbrush, mouth slightly foamy with toothpaste. “But it was in your room,” he points out.

“Cora must have left it here that last time she spent the night,” Isaac guesses. “I’m going to tell her you used some without asking.”

Scott stammers and protests, chasing Isaac out into the hallway to beg for mercy.

Stiles chuckles from where he’s tucked away under his covers. He kicks them off with an audible
stretch and jaw cracking yawn. He rubs the sleep from his eyes with one hand while he reaches out with the other to grope his nightstand for his phone.

His locked screen, as always, is filled with all sorts of notifications. He spends the next ten minutes responding to what he can before he peels himself out of bed to get ready for the day. It’s nearing the time that Deaton is supposed to come over and Stiles doesn’t want to keep his mentor waiting.

All he really has to do is brush his teeth, wash his face, and comb his hair (since he already took a shower the night before). But judging by how swelteringly warm the air feels as it blows into his open window, he can tell he’s going to sweat right through his thin maroon short sleeved t-shirt and not so breathable tan chinos.

Stiles isn’t exactly sure what the right clothes are for gardening, so he’s winging it until he’s told otherwise. He doesn’t have any good shoes for it either, and he ends up borrowing a pair of his dad’s deep brown ankle rain boots. He texts his dad to let him know but his old man just tells him he might as well keep them because he has plenty more where that came from.

Comfortable with his attire, he pockets his phone after closing his dad’s door behind him and makes his way down the stairs and into the kitchen.

Aunt Lorraine is sitting at the head of the table with an enchanted newspaper that has moving pictures and a steaming cup of coffee. She’s spelled the cookware to wield itself at the burning stove.

Her Conduit, Jay, is at his perching post on top of the refrigerator and happily chewing away at half of a banana.

Isaac, who is sitting across from Scott at the lower end of the table, has two plates set before him, loaded with food. He’s taking bites from each plate while he reads *Gone Girl* — it looks like he’s close to being done.

Scott, however, still has small patches of green on his face from the mask he was wearing earlier, not completely washed off, and he’s eating in a distracted manner while he watches what’s playing on the tv (*The Amazing World of Gumball*) behind Isaac.

“Have a seat, dear heart,” Aunt Lorraine says from behind her newspaper. “How did you sleep?”

Stiles looks down and realizes she’s summoned a plate for him at the opposite end of the table. So, he sits down and picks up his silverware because everything smells appetizing, refusing to think about the dilemma she’s put him and Lydia in recently. He finally responds after the first couple of bites, “Okay. Thanks. And thanks.”

Aunt Lorraine waits a full ten minutes before she shakes out the paper and folds it, laying it gently beside her plate. “Sweet nephew, you’re in the papers.”

Stiles starts at that. He blinks and swallows the food in his mouth. “I am?”

Aunt Lorraine wiggles her nose and the paper appears at his end of the table under a puff of blue smoke. “Take a look and see. You’ve been listed in the Werewolf Society pages. Something about a Confirmation for the Hale Pack? I’m assuming you know what it’s all about.”

Stiles goes bug-eyed when he picks up the newspaper named as the *Paranormal Press Daily: North America Edition* and sees this small article:

**Hale Pack Confirmation: Has Influential Alpha,**
Talia Hale, Finally Named a Second-In-Command?

written by gossip columnist
Junie H. Bishop
(Beta to the Bishop Pack
of Wolf Trap, VA)

Sources close to the family confirm that the Chief Alpha to the Hale clan has only recently begun seriously scouting for a potential replacement for her husband, Five of Virtues, Abraham Hale, who passed away in a mysterious car crash only fifteen years ago under suspicious circumstances.

The Hale Pack is one of the wealthiest and well-known packs in all of North America, with smaller ties in other countries such as Canada, and their homeland, Italy. They have both founded and funded over three hundred charities domestically alone. Not to mention that they are at the forefront of private education for Werewolves, with highly sought-after schools planted in five major states: California, Alaska, Texas, Florida and New York.

It’s no surprise that dozens of applicants have reached out to Alpha Hale over the years for a chance to align themselves with her pack as her Second. The position alone has been the most coveted spot in the Werewolf community.

And for those of you who need perspective about why that is, and if everything I mentioned before is not enough, think of it like this: The Hales are basically Were Royalty. They are only one of perhaps six other prominent packs that can trace their ancestral bloodline right to its original source. History is power, folks. In the Were community, it’s the only way to cement your place and family line in the Paranormal World.

So, the Hale Pack has pretty much the same level of influence as the Royal Family in England. Basically, in this scenario, Alpha Talia Hale is Queen, and whoever she picks as her Second would essentially be her Regent. Talk about a cushy job, right? Hopefully now you realize why anyone would be scrambling at the chance to take up the mantle. Whoever this lucky someone is that has been rumored as Confirmed, has a lot to live up to. Being the Second to an affiliate such as the Hale Pack is no small joke.

This rumor also comes right at the heels of speculation that a Seven of Virtues, a being of excellence that hasn’t been sighted in perhaps over a hundred years, might have been gifted to this world in this day and age. Sources in California claim that the Seven of Virtues is currently residing in Beacon Hills.

We have reached out to a representative of the Hale Pack and are waiting to hear back about the credibility of these claims. Meanwhile, all of (Hunter) Mayor Gerard Argent’s legal advisors have declined our request for a comment about the Seven of Virtues.

Hopefully my next article will find me getting to the bottom of this. Thanks for reading.

Stiles slowly lowers the paper with shaking hands and exhales. This is…not good. He absolutely does not want to be in the limelight. He quickly gropes himself for his phone while Isaac steals the paper to read the article as well. Scott gets up to join him, if only maybe to see what’s got his best friend so twitchy.

Talia answers on the second ring, and Stiles would be flattered by the consideration if he wasn’t so busy panicking. “Stiles? Is everything okay?” she asks, voice heavy with concern.
“We’re in the paper!” Stiles exclaims and winces. “Sorry,” he says, lowering his voice. “Hello. Good morning. I — sorry. I may be freaking out, but we’re in the paper.”

“Oh.” Talia does not sound surprised. “I had not realized you had access to paranormal print.”


Talia pauses on the other end. “You seem to be taking this in as well as you can,” she carefully points out.

“Adaptability may just be the key to my survival,” Stiles assumes, half-serious. “So, you must know that we’re in the papers.”

Talia says, “Which paper are you looking at?”

Stiles groans at the question. “Does this mean we’re in more than one? How come you don’t just automatically know? Which one are you looking at?” he demands before he can think better of it.

Talia chuckles, sounding more amused than upset with Stiles’s formal tone. “I saw it on the news this morning. It was a quick segment on the Lunar Review with Alpha Lucy Lebeau,” she reports. “Now tell me what paper you’re looking at.”


“That’s a favorite of Cora’s,” Talia remarks, voice soft with fond mirth. “Stiles, I don’t want you to worry. Our family has an excellent law firm that has been representing us for over twelve years now. We’ll make sure that your name stays out of the spotlight until you’re ready to share yourself with the rest of the world.”

Stiles feels himself relax at that. “Yeah, that’s — thank you. I would really like to not be in the news.”

“Then I will take care of it,” Talia promises. “Is there anything else you need?”

“No but thanks again.”

“Of course. If there is ever anything you need, please do not hesitate to ask. You’re family now,” Talia assures.

Stiles flushes with pleased validation. “Okay,” he simply says.

Talia replies with a goodbye and hangs up.

Stiles is about to pocket his phone when it vibrates with a text from Derek.

Everything okay? Overheard the conversation.

Yeah I’m okay. Crisis averted.

“Dude, you’re actually in the news,” Scott marvels from where he’s standing beside Isaac, who’s
handing the paper back to his older brother. “Well, the magic news.”

Stiles snorts, but addresses Isaac as he says, “Did you know about this? The news stuff, I mean. Do you have access to it?”

Isaac stacks his plates together with a frown. He says, “Of course not. It’s a class thing.”

“What?” Stiles is confused. “Are you talking about school?”

“No,” Isaac gently corrects. “Class as in social division. Subscribing to printed material, or streaming apps is very limited and very expensive. You have to be like what Humans consider to be upper class in order to obtain stuff like that. My family has always been far from wealthy. You only hear about things like that in passing if you’re not lucky enough to experience it.”

Stiles takes in that bit of information and rolls it around in his head in order to gain perspective over it. “Would you...do you want access to that stuff?” he carefully asks.

Isaac averts his gaze with a slow shrug. “It’d be nice. But I understand why we wouldn’t be able to. I’m used to going without. Besides, Cora keeps me up to date on what’s happening most of the time. I barely notice otherwise,” he states neutrally.

Stiles, unsure what to say, just nods and watches as his brother take his dishes to the sink before he continues to text Derek.

Is your family always in the news?

Well the secret Werewolf news?

Pretty much, but you get used to it after a while.

!!!!!

Am I dating the Werewolf Prince William? Because the article implied I am. Well not specifically like that but like in a metaphorical way because they compared you to the Royal Family.

Ugh, I hate when they do that.

We’re more like the Addams Family if anything.

No imagination, I swear.

Stiles finds himself laughing nearly hysterically at that because there is no way this is his life at only the age of fifteen. He sighs and shakes his head as he thinks on it before he goes back to texting Derek.

Hey, how much would it cost if I wanted the permissions needed to access the paranormal media outlets?

Well there’s a singular streaming service that runs it all and its founded by the Silver Magistrate.

But each level of service runs for a different price and only gives you as much as you pay to access anything.

I think the lowest subscription runs for like $500 a month. But that only gives you access to a
select few of the printing material.

$500?? A?? Month???

I know. I know.

It's not cheap.

*I thought you’d say something like $50 bucks. Ugh. That would have been manageable.*

How do you mean? Do you want access? Because I can make that happen.

*Yes! How? Yes!*

**LOL my Aunt Kehlani is a reporter for Beacon Hills Gazette which is a dual online news outlet.**

The face of it is all articles about the Human world, but on the backend, they also report of the happenings in the Supernatural community.

She has a press pass and that basically gets her unlimited access to other sources.

Amazing. *Can you ask her about the best news outlets for Werecats? I want to get it streamlined to Isaac.*

I can ask.

*Thanks.*

**No problem. (:**

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Deaton appears at exactly 10 am, right on the dot.

Stiles is already outside, sitting at the bottom of the porch steps with his notes and his pouch of amethyst stones in his lap. He watches as his mentor parks in the driveway, behind his dad’s squad car, before exiting to start pulling gardening tools from his trunk.

“Good morning, Mr. Stilinski,” Deaton greets in that grave tone of his. “How are you?”

“Fine. I didn’t have any aches or pains last night. Thankfully.” Stiles hadn’t noticed or realized until he’d taken a shower yesterday. “I’m pretending that means it’s all passed without incident.”

Deaton shakes his head, as if to dissuade the notion. “I’m afraid that isn’t the case at all. You most likely made it through only the first wave. The next few that follow will not be as manageable or as pleasant,” he warns, evenly.

Stiles sighs. “Yeah, I figured as much.” He points to the tools in the older man’s hands. “Is that for me?” he asks excitedly.

Deaton simply nods. “Let’s focus on putting up some privacy wards. It’s important to remember that when you want the most successful results, you have to carve the rune symbol for ‘veil’ on the four corners of the area you want it to cover,” he instructs. “I have some stones as well — do you recall what I told you to read?”
Stiles nods and accepts the opaque stones, along with the toolbox of supplies Deaton retrieves from his trunk. He carries them to start at the corner of the front lawn that’s directly to his left and he kneels there. He uses a trowel to dig a small hole in the ground.

Satisfied with the deepness, he leans one knee while he lifts the other to use it to balance a blank rune stone. He pulls a point chisel from the toolbox and uses it to mark the stone with the rune symbol for ‘veil’. Then he uses a safety pin to draw a bit of blood from his left thumb. He squeezes the sides of his thumb to encourage the blood forward before he smears it over the stone and plants it in the ground. He covers it completely, and sends some of his magic after it.

His magic encases it in the earth, and they work in tandem to complete the spell. The stone vibrates, lights up with a flash of light before setting with a soft hum from under the soil, a good indication and mark of success.

Deaton wanders over when Stiles stands. He motions for Stiles to step back as he kneels there, pressing his hand on top of the soil with eyes closed. Then he makes a thoughtful sound before standing. “Very good. You did it perfectly,” he compliments.

Stiles grins excitedly before gathering the toolbox and stones so he can move to the next corner of their property. He’s at the corner where his lawn meets Kira’s. He’s internally glad that the Yukimuras are not home so he can complete this ritual without being asked questions.

The second stone he lays down goes just about as well as the first, as does the third and fourth that gets planted in the two corners of the backyard.

Deaton leads Stiles across the street to initiate the final step to activating the privacy charm.

As they stand facing his house, he speaks the words, in Fae dialect, which to Human ears (or otherwise), would probably sound like flutes and wind chimes,

“Fate! our Sun and light, most blest of Glory and Wisdom,
Whom has the love to hide those who should ask,
Assure our safety in the dark shadows of the world,
And shield us from the wicked, who would speak while searching,

“Who may we devour and harm? Where does Peril have us sowing seeds?”
But we have found safety in the loving arms of your signature,
The rain, and the morning dew, the wind that sweeps and dries tears,
The dark pockets of night, covering the birds that slumber in the trees,
Where we ask to have the same peace when sleep is certain;
And through changing seasons, keep a weather eye on this house,
Which we have found and called our own, and will dwell.

Let not one bad intention, foul tongue, angry hands,

Find their way to us here, and shield us from
Those secretly armed with Peril’s favor;

Let a safety net fall,

“And catch those who would harm us most of all.” Stiles feels his eyes warm at the end of his incantation, and he sees a translucent veil, with the coloring and make of a soap bubble, fall over his house and the surrounding areas of their property where he planted the stones.

The veil stills in the shape of a dome, and continues to withstand, twinkling with light at different points.

Stiles exhales in relief and says a quick prayer of thanks to Fate before he lets his sight normalize again. With just Human eyes, his house looks no differently than normal. “How was that?” he asks, turning his head to look at his mentor.

Deaton is eyeing his house, then he closes his eyes and lifts a hand towards the house. Several beats of silence pass before he lowers his hand, and opens his eyes. “Exceptionally adept,” he confirms. He looks at Stiles and says, “Now, you shouldn’t have a fear of anyone witnessing any sort of magical activity happening as long as you’re within the perimeter of the ward.”

“Awesome.”

“Indeed? You appear to be a very quick study, Mr. Stilinski,” Deaton remarks, a hint of something that sounds like pride. “I have no doubt we’ll finish everything we need to today.”

Stiles beams and straightens with delight. “Thank you. It certainly doesn’t hurt that I have such an awesome mentor.”

Deaton’s lip twitch subtly and with a straight face, he agrees, “Yes, I imagine that gives you quite the advantage.” He sobers and then says, “Have you decided on where you would like to start planting first?”

“I thought we could start small, and see how I do with summoning enchanted rose bushes?” Stiles suggests.

“Very well.”

Stiles and Deaton work in tandem to dig a shallow dip in the dirt along the perimeter of the house. He ends up sweating under the relentless sun, and he has to tug at the front of his shirt to get some kind of relief.

By the time they meet again at the front of the house, it’s already noon. It looks as though they have dug up a miniature moat.

Deaton only endorses this metaphor by grabbing the hose from the side of the house to rest the head of it at the start of the shallow dip. He turns it on and lets it start filling up while he straightens and, turning to face Stiles, says, “You need only use as many amethyst stones as you need rose bushes. Based on what I told you to study of this ritual, how do you think we should proceed?”

Stiles takes only a microsecond to understand that he’s being tested. He replies, “Unlike rune stones, who’s efficiency depends on the longevity of the caster, low level plants summoned for the purpose of immunity to bad weather and protective wards from bad critters only require very little. So there won’t be a need for blood this time around, but I will need spit.”

“Why spit?” Deaton questions, encouraging a receipt of his required reading out of his apprentice.
“Why not blood? It would work just as well, wouldn’t it?”

“It wouldn’t. Fae blood has a higher concentration of potency and reaction to spells, enchantments, etcetera, when it comes to forest magic. Plus, blood spells always create ‘life tethers’ between the caster and the enchanted object,” Stiles explains, keeping his answer as transparent as possible. “Meaning that it will become dependent upon my life force in order to maintain it’s spell, but that’s a waste of energy for me and I’d probably find myself exhausted at the end of the day because of it.”

“Correct. Now explain to me why we would use spit in this instance? You’ve told me what blood magic does, now talk about enzyme magic,” Deaton requests.

“Spit is a perfect fit for low level charms. Mainly because the ones that thrive on them are already self-sufficient and doesn’t need the extra help of the caster,” Stiles deduces. “These rose bushes will help to normalize stability and changelessness for my garden. In order to do that, it needs just the base model for doing so, which most low level charms do. Spit has the least amount of potency, and doesn’t create any tethering.”

“Also correct,” Deaton confirms. He glances down at the makeshift shallow moat, and gestures to it. “There should be enough water to help carry each amethyst stone around the perimeter of your house where we have dug. Go ahead and begin the ritual.”

Stiles walks the perimeter of the house, counting in his head how many bushes he wants to take up the space, and he comes to the conclusion of sixteen. That’s how many amethyst stones he puts in his mouth, carefully swishing them around so they can be nicely wet with his saliva. He kneels at the edge of the shallow moat and spits the small glimmering stones of purple and blue into it, watching as the water washes them away into the stream of moving water.

He quickly steps back as the moat begins glowing like techno lights and he quickly mutters the Fae phrase for ‘grow and become’ over and over until he sees a response.

It yields good results.

The bushes form and grow into the shallow pit, sucking up the water as they expand around the house one by one like a domino effect. They grow and blossom gorgeous white roses that look like the tips of the petals have been dipped in blue glitter.

“Well done,” Deaton remarks before he goes to cut off the water for the hose. “Let’s take a lap and examine everything, shall we?”

Stiles eagerly follows his mentor as they walk from rose bush to rose bush to check for any signs of bad rot, underdevelopment, or blemish that might signal that the planting was not successful or that the charm had been contaminated somehow.

“It looks like everything is in working order,” Deaton comments as they come back to the front of the house. “I have to say, of all the gardens I have seen, yours is, by far, the most imaginative and aesthetically pleasing.”

Stiles flushes with pride and validation. “Thank you,” he says as his magic begins wafting around him like a condensed blue sparkling fog.

It twists into a swarm of fat, glittery blue bumblebees that descend on his enchanted rose bushes, as if to examine them for itself.

Stiles is watching his mentor watch his magic when Parrish pulls up to the house in his black Mazda. He parks and climbs out, looking well dressed for the day in a white button down and some navy
blue slacks. He makes his way to Deaton and Stiles. “Good afternoon,” he greets the two of them. He blinks as he looks at the rose bushes. “Those weren’t...there before, right?”

Stiles snorts. “Don’t worry, you’re not crazy. I just planted them,” he assures.

“Okay.” Parrish looks relieved as he looks away to face Stiles. He says, “I’ve come to get Isaac. Did you need a ride?”

Stiles shakes his head. “I’ve got other things to take care of, but I’ll be at the party later tonight.”

Parrish nods just as Isaac is exiting the house with two glasses of ice and lemonade. He says, “Your aunt told me to bring this out to you and your company. She also said something about leaving for a few days. Something suddenly came up, were her exact words.” He sounds skeptical as he hands Stiles and Deaton a glass of lemonade that they thank him for. “She’s gone. Won’t pretend I’m not happy about that, but she’s got the basement locked and I have clothes in the washer and dryer.”

Stiles snorts after he sucks down the lemonade in his hand. While his little brother is eyeing his enchanted rose bushes with curious interest, he says, “I’ll see if I can do something about that. How are you getting to the party tonight?”

“Peter will probably take me since I’ll be with him after this brunch thing,” Isaac supposes, ignoring the unhappy look Parrish gets about that fact. “How are you getting there? Derek, I’m guessing.”

“I actually hadn’t asked him. Besides, he’s already carpooling with Malia and Jackson, I think. He’s stopping by later, so we’ll figure it out,” Stiles promises.

Isaac says nothing to that, but he does hug his older brother before parting with a polite goodbye to Deaton and walking past Parrish to make his way the passenger side of his car.

While Parrish is giving his goodbyes, Allison and Lydia pull up in a white truck being driven by Allison’s mother, Mrs. Argent (who honks twice).

Scott comes zooming out the house. He takes the time to say his hellos and goodbyes to Deaton and Stiles before he jogs to the white truck and climbs in the back with Allison while Lydia rides shotgun.

Stiles waves to them and Lydia raises a brow as she looks pointedly at the new rose bushes surrounding his house. He makes a gesture to say that he’ll text her in a minute about it and she nods while Mrs. Argent pulls away from the curb.

Parrish follows closely behind her, and the two cars make a U-turn to head towards the direction of the more metropolitan area of Beacon Hills.

“Would you like more lemonade?” Stiles asks Deaton once they’re alone. “Actually, I’m really hungry. Can we take a break? There’s leftovers from dinner last night if you’re interested.”

“I’m famished myself, so yes I’m interested. Now is a good time to take a break,” Deaton replies and follows his apprentice into the house.

Stiles sighs in relief when nothing but the cool air flowing in from the open windows hits his heated skin. He journeys into the kitchen with his mentor and they discuss what of the leftovers is okay for Deaton to eat since he’s vegan.

Deaton declines the Irish stew for this reason alone, but accepts the soda bread with a bowl of instant brown rice and squash that Stiles quickly makes for him to substitute.
While they eat, Stiles decides to bring up his dilemma with Aunt Lorraine, and what he and Braeden found out in the woods.

“Your aunt’s situation is complex,” Deaton notes, finishing up the last of his food as Stiles does the same. “I have some contacts I may be able to reach out to see if we know of any other cases like that, or if there were any solutions.”

“Please. I’ve been looking myself and haven’t come across anything significant,” Stiles admits, grateful all the same. He takes their plates to the sink to wash.

Deaton continues, “As for Jezebel, I’m actually flying out tonight to meet with Druid Lehuanani and Virtue Braeden to discuss the best way to send a correspondence to the Silver Magistrate and petition that they pay Beacon Hills a visit. There’s to be a tribunal with a number of Druids who we feel have our best interests in mind and will help weigh in on the manner as well.”

Stiles mulls that over silently as he rinses and dries their dishes before placing them in the strainer next to the double sink. He turns to face his mentor just as the older man rises. “How long do you think you will be gone?” he asks, curious and anxious.

“How long do you think you will be gone?” Deaton gestures to the backdoor. “Shall we continue?”

Stiles nods, grabbing two bottles of water, and putting two extra in the freezer for later. He offers one to Deaton, who gratefully accepts, and they exit out the back of the house to journey in the backyard.

“Did I mention that I was in the papers today? The paranormal papers, which I didn’t even know was a thing.”

“Yes, Talia called to discuss that with me after you called her,” Deaton replies. “I know she’s given you her word that she will try and keep you out of the spotlight, but I believe it would be best if you still remained vigilant. If you ever notice anyone following you, or taking your picture, let us know.”

Stiles feels uneasy at the fact that could be a possibility someday but he says, “I will.”

“Good. Now, I think we should wake the Mother Queen.” Deaton begins walking away. “I will fetch all the supplies and tools.”

Stiles sits down at the bottom of the porch steps to remove his socks and shoes. He had mainly put them on to plant the rose bushes but in his backyard he feels more at home with bare feet.

He carefully walks over the uncomfortable gravel, past the garbage bins and out onto soft grass. He walks up to his tree, using the thick veins of roots to push up closer to the large triquetra carved in the middle. He calls to his magic as he presses a hand to the symbol, and it comes in a swarm to land among the purple-blue leaves.

It’s enough to wake Nana from her dormant state. “Hello, dearie! My, how I’ve missed you so. Keep your hand there so that I can see what’s been keeping you from me,” she advises.

Stiles does what he’s told and doesn’t resist the inevitable soft press of Nana probing his mind, sifting through his memories like lukewarm water washing over his thoughts.

Nana hums thoughtfully. “That will do it, sweetling,” she announces.

Stiles drops his hands and lets them rest limply at his sides.

“Right then. A couple of things. I want you to introduce me to Cora and Talia. I see that they will be an essential pillar in your life going forward,” Nana acknowledges. “Though, I have no doubts that
when it comes to deciding on a pack to align yourself with, you have chosen well.”

“I think they chose me,” Stiles replies as he sits down on one of her exposed roots. “I just hope to live up to the expectations.”

“You will,” Nana promises. “I have every bit of faith and confidence in you.” Then she moves on, “Things between you and Derek appear to be getting quite serious.”

Stiles goes red, knowing she must have seen all the kissing they have done but he nods with as much dignity as he can muster.

Nana chuckles. “I won’t tease. Are you happy, darling?”

“Yes,” Stiles admits softly as he thinks of Derek and of his eyes and his smile. “Very much.”

“Then I’m pleased with that decision as well,” Nana merely states. Then she continues, “Nasty business in the forests, I see. I’m glad that Virtue Braeden has taken the actions she has. Though I’ve meant to mention that I’ve been sorely vexed by her attitude and treatment towards you.”

Stiles ducks his head with a grin. “Not surprising. But I think I figured her out.”

“Yes, it would appear so. She still needs a good talking to. Be sure she stops here first when she returns,” Nana insists neutrally. “I also see that Heather did not take the news of her confinement well.”

“So, you were able to explain to her the issue,” Deaton interjects when he returns, arms full of the tools and supplies they had been using. “Did she lash out?”

Stiles stands to help him set everything at the base of Nana. He says, “Sort of, but nothing violent. I think she’s letting it sink in. I’m confident she’ll be back to talk about what her options are now.”

Deaton seems to agree as well, though he doesn’t verbalize it.

“So nice to see you, Doctor,” Nana greets warmly. “I am very pleased with my Stiles’s progress under your guidance.”

“I take no praise for it, Mother Queen,” Deaton responds politely, “Mr. Stilinski has proven himself to be a remarkable and sensible young man. I can hardly find myself responsible for how easily he adapts and learns.”

“Humble until the very end,” Nana remarks, sounding tickled. “You will accept my praise and I will hear no more of it. I should feel insulted if you don’t.”

“Then I accept it with no protest,” Deaton promises, lips twitching slightly. “While we have your attention, would you mind monitoring us as we continue to urge forward the rest of his garden? We welcome any suggestions or advice you have.”

Stiles nods eagerly in agreement.

“Of course. Go on then,” Nana encourages. “Stiles, remember to keep home in mind as you work. The atmosphere here is very ripe and ready for the change. You’ve done well with the preparation.”

“Thanks, Nana. I will.” Stiles takes a moment to walk around thoughtfully before he returns to Deaton’s side and accepts the copy of the blueprints they drafted together. “Nana, how do you feel about wearing some birdhouses?”
“I would love the company,” Nana says with a wistful sigh. “Feel free to use any of my wood for the spells. It won’t hurt me.”

“Thank you.” Stiles climbs her and spends the next hour, under Deaton’s careful watch, fashioning a handful of birdhouses with the aid of his magic and Nana’s wood. He plants them at different points up in her branches, and he nods in satisfaction when he hangs up the last one. As he’s climbing down, he notices that birds are already starting to occupy them.

Deaton climbs the tree, leaving Stiles on the ground this time, and he goes to examine the birdhouses while describing them aloud to Nana. Both of them take turns complimenting his choice of shape, design, and coloring.

Stiles is beside himself with the gratification of their praise.

Deaton climbs down so they can start working on creating a stone path with the coloring of peacock feathers that will start from the bottom of the porch steps and cut through his garden in a curvy, clockwise pattern.

That takes two hours to complete, but it’s magnificent to behold once it’s all said and done, Nana saying so herself when she gets a good look of it.

Between the three of them, they decide on lavender lining for the stone path. Stiles doesn’t have to use many amethyst stones for it either.

They spring up pretty quickly after he goes through the incantation required to summon them forward into a full-grown state.

Next, according to his blueprints, he works on planting some sweet autumn clematis along the wood fences standing on the perimeter of his backyard on every side.

“Gorgeous,” Nana compliments, of what she can see. “You’re so very creative, sweetling.”

Stiles grins and just shrugs sheepishly before he moves to the next thing after thanking her. He and Deaton work on planting daisies, rosemary, peonies, irises, sunflowers, and fragrant blooms like primroses, lily of the valleys, viburnums, and plumerias.

Stiles is soaked in sweat by the time they finish setting a small area for vegetables (mostly cucumbers, tomatoes, and bell peppers). He uses the stone path to navigate back to Deaton and Nana, who are talking pleasantly among themselves.

Deaton accepts back the empty velvet pouch when Stiles hands it to him. “No more stones?” he asks, if only to confirm.

Stiles turns to face the glory of his garden, and can feel tears spring to his eyes as he takes it all in. “No more stones. We’ve used them all,” he verifies. “Wow,” he breathes as his eyes grow warm and his sight enhances.

His garden is gleaming with magic, looking frosty with the enchantments he placed over them.

It feels just like home — just like what he senses Faerie feels like.

It’s finally finished, and with a dry swallow, he knows there’s only one thing left to do.

“I think it’s time you start considering what you would like as a Conduit,” Deaton remarks, unaware
that he’s literally voicing Stiles’s thoughts.

“I agree. You’ve done us proud, dearie. This garden is resplendent,” Nana coos affectionately.

Stiles laughs wetly and uses what he can of his dirt streaked shirt to dry his wet cheeks. He feels like he’s been spread thin, but there’s a satisfaction to the soreness of putting all his energy and focus (with the help of his magic) in building the perfect garden for himself.

“I’ll need a few days to integrate myself with the rest of your garden. Come see me on Wednesday so we can continue your lessons,” Nana suggests. “I believe Mrs. Doyle will have returned with some news for us by then.”

Stiles nods.

“Goodnight, little one.”

“Goodnight, Nana,” Stiles quietly replies and watches her fade away.

“I have a flight to catch. Do you mind helping me carry everything to my car?” Deaton asks after a moment.

Stiles shakes his head and helps his mentor gather up the tools and supplies to carry to his car and put in the trunk.

Deaton closes the trunk and pulls his keys from his pocket. He says, “From what I’ve seen of you today, I’ve decided to give you permission to summon a Conduit without me standing over your shoulder. I’ll leave a key to the safe at the shop so that you can access the Grimoire and study the ritual for it.”

Stiles blinks, feeling blindsided. “Really? Are you sure?”

“That’s not to say I would refuse being there if you have need of me, but I am confident in your abilities, and I trust you will put the Grimoire back in the same condition you found it in,” Deaton assures. “Though I will give you one piece of advice: try and do it before the next wave of your fever hits. You’ll need as much strength as possible for something that requires you to create and sustain a life.”

“Okay,” Stiles says and moves to step on the lawn and out of Deaton’s way. “Have a safe flight.”

Deaton climbs into his car, starts it, and reverses to drive off with a tame wave.

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Stiles almost jumps out of his skin when he walks into his room after climbing out of the shower to see Derek sitting in one of his bean bag chairs at his open windows, peering out into the backyard with a look of wonder.

“Geez, Derek. How come you didn’t text me to let me know you were coming over?” Stiles demands, mostly annoyed from being so caught off guard.

Derek turns to face him and cocks his head as he eyes Stiles in a way that makes him flush all the way down to his toes. “I did,” he murmurs, distracted. “You’re glowing like moonshine again.”

Stiles is in nothing but a towel, which is wrapped around his narrow waist. “I’ve been building my garden so I was deep in forest magic, so yeah, uh. You should really maybe stop looking at me like
that,’’ he pleads, squirming. ‘‘I feel like we’re probably too early in this relationship for you to be looking at me like that.’’

Derek smirks but turns to look out the windows again, facing away from Stiles completely. ‘‘The front door was unlocked,’’ he points out. ‘‘I did text you by the way. Hours ago, but I can see now what had your attention. Did you really do all that out there? It’s incredible.’’

Stiles goes hunting for some clothes as he smiles to himself, happy his full body blush is evaporating. ‘‘Yeah, mostly. Thanks. Deaton and Nana offered me guidance and assistance with it as well,’’ he explains, and decides on a pair of khaki shorts and the blue Captain America hoodie Laura bought him for his birthday.

Derek pretends not to notice him wandering into his walk in closet to change in private. ‘‘I wouldn’t have looked!’’ he promises from the other side of the door.

Stiles thinks he’s probably leaning against it because he sounds way too close to still be sitting at the windows. He snorts as he wiggles into his underwear. ‘‘Yeah, I saw the way you looked at me when I was just wearing a towel. I’m not taking any chances,’’ he says and takes a second to notice that Derek was right. His skin has that faint glow to it again, and he internally sighs, knowing the sort of attention it’s going to bring him at this party tonight.

Derek laughs on the other side of the door. ‘‘Good call,’’ is all he responds with. ‘‘You have moles and freckles everywhere. Though, maybe I’m making that up. You should come out here so I can make sure.’’

Stiles almost stumbles into the wall at that. ‘‘Oh my god. Shut up,’’ he complains. ‘‘You are such dweeb.’’

‘‘It’s not a crime to flirt with your boyfriend.’’

‘‘The way you do it should be.’’

‘‘Thanks.’’

Stiles laughs. ‘‘Not a compliment, big guy.’’

Derek just hums thoughtfully. ‘‘Jackson and Malia are waiting downstairs. We should get going soon,’’ he suggests.

‘‘I’m coming out,’’ Stiles warns and waits a few seconds before he opens the door.

Derek barely lets him get a foot through before he’s crowding him back in, closing the door behind them so they can kiss under the cover of darkness.

Stiles makes a noise of surprise but he draws Derek closer and lets his mind go blank when the older teen slips him some tongue, which he shyly returns.

Derek rumbles encouragingly and kisses him so very thoroughly and deeply that Stiles feels his knees shake. His face explodes with a blush when Derek begins to suck on his tongue, and he keens at the near filthiness of it, enjoying every single second all the while.

Stiles feels like Derek’s really been holding out on him. He groans when he feels Derek’s warm hands slip under his hoodie and skate over his skin. He pushes Derek back gently so he can gasp and catch his breath. ‘‘Okay,’’ he breathes and squirms with a laugh. ‘‘We have to stop or we really will be late. I cannot stress enough that I don’t want to have to badly explain why that is if Laura and
Kate asks— which they so will.”

Derek’s eyes are rimmed with gold, glowing with something fierce in the dark, looking as though he wants to devour Stiles. “You’re right,” he says, his voice deep and raspy and tinged with something animalistic. “I’m sorry, why are you right? That kiss made me dumb. What are we talking about?”

Stiles leaves the closet with an explosive laugh and tries to make himself presentable, even though he’s bright red. “Laura and Kate’s party,” he finally responds, once he’s calm enough to say so.

“Oh, right.” Derek goes a little pink. “You should put some shoes on, babe,” he comments for better lack of having anything else to say. He’s staring at the mess of Stiles’ floor like he’s not even really seeing it, just staring as he gets pink like he’s thinking about things he probably shouldn’t.

Stiles snickers under his breath as he goes to put on his shoes, feeling flattered that he can get the older teen to be so out of sorts just by kissing him. He puts that in his back pocket to explore later. For the moment, after he laces up his shoes, he straightens and kisses Derek chastely before pulling him along to exit his room.

Jackson and Malia are in the kitchen, talking to each other in hushed voices laced with aggressive undertones. They go quiet as soon as they spot Derek and Stiles.

Stiles gets curious all at once they might have been talking about.

Jackson blinks at Stiles, looking decidedly confused before he looks away with a blush and a confused scowl. He gets up, and stiffly mutters, “About time.”

Malia stands too, sporting an irritated frown that seems more for Jackson rather than being kept waiting. “Sorry Stiles, nothing personal, but I demand shotgun!” she exclaims without taking a second look at him.

“Uh, none taken,” Stiles says, gesturing for all of them to walk ahead of him.

They spill out the front door and down the porch steps.

Stiles falls behind to lock the door, as he feels out his magic, calling it to himself and liking the way the air seems to sing around his house. He figures it’s all the wards and charms, and he smiles to himself over it. He swallows down his magic so it can settle in his chest.

He’s making his way across the lawn to Derek’s lime green Camaro when the sight of something standing at the end of the street distracts him. That something is galloping in his direction. He squints his eyes as he gets closer to Derek’s car and is startled to realize that the thing at the other end of the street looks suspiciously like a Unicorn.

“Oomf,” is the embarrassing sound Stiles makes when he smacks into Derek’s car.

Derek lowers his window and pokes his head out. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good. I —” Stiles looks back out into the street but there’s nothing there. Huh. “ — yeah...it’s nothing. I thought I saw a — never mind. I’ve been in the sun all day.” He climbs in and sits in the seat behind Derek’s with Jackson to his right.

Once Derek is confident everyone has their seatbelt on, he starts the car and begins pulling from the curb to make a U-turn.

Malia is fiddling with his radio, only settling on a station for a minute at a time.
This goes on for about ten minutes straight until Jackson decides he’s had enough. “Look, how hard is it to choose a station? Jesus, if nothing sounds good, then turn it off!” he snaps.

Malia whips around to glare at him with golden ringlets in her eyes.

Jackson doesn’t even flinch, which is a point in his favor to be honest. He says, “Do I need to repeat myself? What?”

“Stop talking to me like I’m a little kid!” Malia growls. “Aunt Talia says that I’m literally 15 minutes older than you!”

“Just because we’re both fourteen doesn’t mean that your brain has developed like one. You’ve spent this whole time thinking you were how old? Twelve, wasn’t it?”

Malia looks like she want to climb in the backseat and beat the snot out of her twin brother but she just takes a deep breath, turns away from him and goes back to fiddling with the radio.

Jackson, who had looked unbothered up to that point, suddenly looks livid that she’s ignoring him.

Stiles and Derek share a look with each other in the rearview mirror and Stiles thinks maybe it’s because they’re thinking the same thing.

It’s unclear if those two will survive a party together.
déjà vu

14 Years Earlier

The bell shop jingles over as the edge of the shop door hits it, and a suction of the outside wind drifts in.

Claudia frowns. Pauses. Then looks at her wristwatch. Surely, she didn’t forget to flip the sign to ‘CLOSED’. She never forgets. Yet the sound of footsteps creaking over wooden floorboards is unmistakable.

Nearly 74 minutes after operating hours, Claudia gently kicks the box of new inventory she had been unpacking to the side (mostly candles, sage, and potpourri — her shop has gotten an unexpected boom of success with things going out of stock quicker than normal). She uses the edge of her work desk to haul herself to stand on steady feet. She exhales heavily at the effort and touches a hand to her flat stomach, which is gurgling in hunger.

_I should take it easy before I become dizzy. This will be just the seventh day of my fasting, even while Fate still has been silent_, she thinks, and takes a moment to be discouraged over it. _But I will not give up._

Determination washes over her, and she manages to calm and quiet the anxious feeling of an unexpected visitor. Who could it be?

She thinks, _Maybe it is my love come to escort me home and offer me comfort. But no, Jon is out of town trying to get his birth records for the police academy, and he’s been delayed by the process for a week now._

Claudia can only hope that her husband may return to her soon as she walks carefully to the front of the store on wobbly feet (her energy has thinned out). She reaches for her magic out of habit, and deflates in frustration when the empty cold feeling of loss washes over her, reminding her of her sacrifice. She feels the moon in the sky, but the connection feels severed as well, and there is a cold silence about it.

Peril has casted her out from the protection of its banner when she dared to petition Fate with her request.

_It is no good to regret what I would certainly not change, or do differently_, she thinks as she touches her stomach. _For who can demand the attention of Fate and offer only the gift of impatience in exchange? Surely my suffering shouldn’t come to nothing. I have to keep pressing for my miracle._

Claudia finally reaches the cashpoint and without having to turn her head far, spies two men and a frail old woman.

The men seem to be relatively her age or slightly older, with similar features of dark hair and soft brown eyes. They appear to be twins, easily recognizable by the neutral expression; and they wear their pressed pinstripe suits as casually as the three day stubble on their chins.

The old woman is a half a foot shorter than they are, with hair so grey it appears white, and skin a lovely shade of brown. She leans against her wooden cane with an open expression that’s full of curiosity and amusement.

The men flank either side of the old woman like bodyguards while they all stand next to one of her
wine displays, gazes endlessly searching the other end of the shop.

Claudia allows them a few moments to do so as she pushes down her own trepidation of having to speak with still new, spotty English. Her husband always praises her efforts with gentle mirth, but not all Americans were so accommodating (a harsh lesson learned). She shakes her head as though to shake away the bad memories of when she first migrated to this country only five years prior and carefully thinks of what she wants to say.

The old woman, as though sensing her, turns to face her while keeping her distance. She stares and stares but says nothing.

“We are closed,” Claudia says, tongue curving thickly around the English words, keeping the pace steady as she thinks on the next words she needs. “I am sorry. Come back tomorrow.” Her sentences are short, but she prefers to speak to strangers this way. She’s usually nicer to customers but at the moment she finds she has no patience for them.

The men in pinstripes speak in unity as they ask, “Woman, where is your husband?”

Claudia blinks and her eyebrows furrow with surprise. What could she say to such a bizarre question? “Please, sirs, we are closed,” she repeats.

The old woman approaches her counter with a limp and smiles as if she knows something. She says, very easily with Claudia’s native dialect, “Look at me, child. I need to see your face.”

Claudia angles herself so that she’s facing the old woman directly from the other side of the counter. “You speak Polish. Where are you from?” she asks, missing home suddenly and deeply. Her heart always cries out for it, but she knows she can never return without a child.

The old woman just shakes her head. “I don’t belong to any country, but there is not a language that is unknown to me.”

Claudia has no idea what to make of that statement, and at this point she really feels tired and hungry. It’s gnawing away at her patience, so she tries again. “I would not normally be so...blunt. But is there something I can help you with so you can be on your way? I really must insist that you come back tomorrow.”

“How funny it is to be greeted with such a polite dismissal when I’ve been invited.”

“Surely it was not I that invited you and yours here. Are you referring to the flyers I have posted at the local college and at the library? I’m not yet listed in the yellow pages.”

“I know none of those things you speak, but I am not here by mistake. Was it not you crying out to me in the wilderness, Claudia? You wept so loudly, I don’t think I could have ignored it even if I tried.”

Claudia feels her confusion lift as her thoughts race with hope. There is a weighted presence to the old woman (as well as the two men), and the atmosphere in her shop changes in such a way that all the flowers in each flower display perk up and leans direction of the three visitors. “How do you know my name?” she asks, nearly breathless but intrigued. “Who are you?”

The two men and the old woman speak, in unison, saying, “I’m a wandering stranger following a voice that cries out to me. I am the sun that rises from the east and falls into the west. There is no where I call home on this Earth outside of the space my children leave in their hearts for me. My place is among the stars looking at both the beginning and end of time. I am as I was as I will be.”
Claudia’s knees get shaky, and she thinks, *Surely they are either ambassadors of Fate or Fate itself revealing themselves to me in the form of three faces!*

The old woman continues to look at her like she can hear her thoughts and her lips curl as her eyes shine with amusement. “Ask me again to leave, and I will bother you no more,” she promises.

Claudia says, in the same dialect she’s known since infancy, “I would not ask. You have not been rude. How far have you come and how far do you have to go?”

The two men and the old woman speak, in unison, “I have traveled far, and I still have yet to see when I should return.”

Claudia doesn’t hesitate when she says, “You must stay with me tonight. I would not have you come all this way to send you back. I have two rooms where I can set up a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp for you.”

“And how long will you let us be your company?” the old woman presses, mouth still curled in a smile and brown eyes shining with a gentle kindness.

“As long as you need.”

“And what if I say I have nothing to offer in return?”

“Respect to my home should be enough, I think.”

“Your husband will be okay with us there?”

Claudia hesitates because it’s a really good question. With no magic to protect herself, or her husband, was this truly wise? No, she will not doubt her gut, which has never failed her once. Something about these three visitors feel familiar to her. “My husband is a good man. I will talk to him. He is away at the moment.”

The men nod as though they agree while the old woman says, “Where should we wait for you?”

“Please wait out front if you can stand it. I will lock up and bring the car around.”

The men and the old women whisper to each other before they nod at Claudia and slip out the front door.

Claudia takes her time with cleaning up and securing her shop as she thinks deeply over the confrontation that just took place. As she goes to retrieve her blue jeep, she calls Jon and quickly explains that they would have some guests, but she’s very vague about why. Jon naturally opposes out of self-preservation but she convinces him to trust her.

“They are people of peace, I’m sure of it,” Claudia promises before adding sweet words of endearment that softens her husband’s position on the matter. They end the conversation when it’s decided they will let the three strangers have the spare rooms (on the condition that Claudia constantly texts him to let him know she’s okay).

*One day, I will have to tell Jon everything,* she swears internally as she steers her Jeep to the curb of the storefront. She’s always wanted to tell Jon about the world she comes from the moment she fell in love with him, but her father always urged her to wait until she could no longer put off explaining to him why they would never be able to conceive. *So many secrets - most of them I fear he would never forgive me for.*
“How should I call you?” the old woman asks after she climbs into the passenger seat of the car and settles in while her companions climb into the back to do the same.

“Claudia.”

“Where is your magic, Claudia?”

Claudia slams her foot on the brake in surprise and her jeep screeches to a stop as she stares wide-eyed at her. “What do you know of magic? More or less, mine?”

The old woman gives her that knowing smile. “Your candle and wine store is saturated with tokens of magic, yet it’s owner has no trace on them to be seen.”

Claudia says nothing.

“Magic is no stranger to us,” the men sitting in the back adds with a soothing tone. “But I think you know that. Where is your magic? Will you tell us?”

Claudia’s bottom lip trembles and she shakes her head, even though she knows in her heart of hearts that they already know.

The old woman doesn’t press. “Will you break bread with us tonight?” she asks instead.

Claudia grips the steering wheel. “I am fasting. However, I can prepare you something?”

“It would not do to trouble yourself. Stay the course if you must,” the old woman says and then keeps quiet the whole drive home.

After Claudia shows them to their rooms, they disappear behind closed doors for exactly six days, and they don’t once leave them.

Claudia can hear them pacing during the times she gets up to pray and meditate (and spend time with her precious Bichon, Duchess). And even still when she returns home from work to ask after them from the other side of their door. She tries to invite them to eat but it is always politely declined.

However, on the seventh day of their stay, and the fourteenth day of Claudia’s fasting, the old woman reveals herself. “It is time, I think, to break this fast of yours. Go wash up and we will cook for you.”

Claudia thinks to protest because she is the host, but something in her tells her to go along with it. So, after washing up, she joins them for dinner. The food is so good that it almost brings tears to her eyes. She manages to hold them at bay while she picks up Duchess and lets her curl on her lap.

Duchess keeps a wary eye on their three visitors, and Claudia wishes she could understand her oldest, most dearest friend like she once could when she still had her magic.

The men speak in unison, “It is time for us to leave. What can we give you in return for your kindness?”

Claudia’s heart is hammering in anticipation, an eager hope blooming. “Was this dinner not enough of a favor? I’ve never tasted anything like it on this earth!” she laughs.

The men, as though talking amongst themselves, say to the old woman, “Should we reveal to her our plans yet while she is still under the banner of Peril?”

The old woman smiles. “Ah, but I have been talking to Peril all this while, and we have come to an...
agreement. Peril is such a stubborn negotiator, but I think it helps that we have been friends so long, for who else would know the mind of Peril if not I, and vice versa?"

They three strangers nod amongst themselves, as though pleased.

Finally, the men ask, “Where are your children?”

Claudia is overcome with the uncomfortable feeling of being exposed. “My husband and I...we’re a little young, and our marriage is still new,” she simply says, and it’s something she’s recited before. “The doctor told us that we would not...that I would not be able to...” she pauses to exhale shakily. “It is a sore wound for us both. Perhaps a punishment for me for all my past transgressions.”

“Woman, why are you sad?” the men question. “Did you not hand over your magic to me nearly seven months ago?”

The old woman continues, without missing a beat, “And have I not been watching you this whole while, waiting until you were strong enough to withstand me revealing my face to you?”

Claudia feels the opposite of strong. Her body trembles as the three strangers begin to glow with a golden aura. “With no magic, how strong can I be?” she laughs in fear of weeping.

“Why do you laugh? Your flesh is weak, but your spirit is like the giants of old. Seven months ago, even with your magic, you would not have been able to see me as I am now, divided into three forms, because no one vessel can contain me. The strong can move boulders, but it is the weak that can move mountains with their faith. Why do you laugh?”

Claudia quickly sobers. “I did not laugh.”

“You did, child. You doubt what I say, yet who understands timing more than I? I don’t usually make it a habit to visit the children of Peril.”

Claudia feels dizzy with disbelief. “Why me? For all the things I’ve done, why me?”

“Sins can be forgiven, if you ask. And you have been asking for nearly four years now. You gave me your magic even when I did not ask, and have not once tried to bargain to get it back, even now when you know who I am.” The old woman smiles, and it shines with such brilliance. “You also promised the child to me. And, for this very reason, I will bless you. Around this time next year, you will be holding a son in your arms.”

Claudia springs up, rounds the table and, throwing herself to the old woman’s feet, begins to weep quietly. “Please don’t lie to me, ma’am!”

“Fate does not lie,” the men speak in unison. “Truly, we say, is there anything too hard for Fate?”

Claudia shakes her head and continues to weep.

“You have sacrificed a lot and never complained. I have seen the deep places of your heart and I am satisfied,” the old woman promises. “Let it be known that when you leave this world, you will be mine. Again I say, around this time next year, you will be holding a son in your arms.”

Claudia straightens, grabbing the old woman’s hands and kissing them, sobbing quietly with joy.

“Be at peace, Claudia. The magic you gave up will be given to your son, and he will do great things. I will call to him and he will know me like a mother and a father. He will be mine and I will give him the world.” The old woman spoke no more, and she left the house with the two men, gliding away as
though it were all a dream.

Claudia never sees them again after that night.

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Now it came to pass that it was just as Fate declared, and Claudia became pregnant and gave birth to a son around the same time the three visitors came to her.

That day, the birds sang, and the sun did not set until well after it’s usual time, leaving many in the field of science baffled by this anomaly.

But Claudia knew, in her heart of hearts, that Fate was rejoicing with her.

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10th of May 2014 - Present Day

It’s a beautiful night. Fate above, it’s a really beautiful night.

The stars are punching white holes in the inky, black sky with not a puff or whisper of a cloud nearby. There’s just a small touch of humidity, but the cool breeze that frequently swirls through the town makes up for it.

The moon is sitting heavy, but not nearly full. No, that won’t happen until Wednesday, which means Derek will be away, heeding the call of the Wild Kingdom.

Stiles presses his forehead against the backseat window with a sigh. It’s stupid but he’s already missing Derek, even though he’s literally inches away in the driver’s seat. But the thought of not being able to see him, for even a few days at a time, eats at a small corner of his happiness. It’s not anything he can explain with words, or even logic to be truthful.

Despite it being a really nice night, the energy in the car is tense (mainly because of Jackson and Malia).

He glances around, sees that Malia is still fiddling with the radio, that Jackson is stewing in silence over it (jaw clenched with stubborn pride), and that Derek is drumming his fingers restlessly over the steering wheel while they are at a standstill and mercy of a red light.

Stiles knows they must be close. He recognizes the nicely polished windows of the shop stores, the way that there are summer themed decorations in the streets and hanging from the tall lamps above. They pass the huge public library (where he hasn’t visited since Paige last tutored him), makes a sharp right near Ramona’s Old-Fashioned Eatery, and eventually pass the Beacon Hills Community College (which only makes him think of Heather and Journey), making a sharper left at the Beacon Hills Park District (#1).

He glances back over to Malia, and watches the way she tucks her wavy, dirty blonde hair behind her small ear. She has no piercings to speak of, not in the way that Cora and Kate do. She fidgets in her seat, anxious and agitated, but there is a kind of lingering sadness (a sort of loneliness) to it that Stiles notices.

Stiles feels his gaze wander over to Jackson, and he’s struck by the sight of the other boy staring at the back of his sister’s head with a curious (annoyed, yes) but curious frown. Jackson’s face relaxes into something thoughtful as he watches Malia fidget, and Stiles wonders to himself if kindness or cruelty will win over his next actions.
Stiles shifts his feet to really settle in and he hears a crinkling sound. When he looks down, he notices that he’s stepping on a shiny book (which is a little less shiny because of his shoe print). He frowns curiously, hunching over to pick it up and it takes him a couple of minutes to realize what he’s looking at.

It’s a crossword puzzle book, and it’s got Malia’s messy scrawl inside with her signature on each page she’s completed, but some of the other pages are marked with ‘Liam’ and his scrawl is neater. He says, “Hey, is this yours?”

Malia turns to look at him, like really look at him, and she stares. Actually, her jaw drops a little and her eyes starts to flicker a little back and forth from gold to hazel. Then she asks, rather bluntly, “Were you always this hot?”

“Watch it,” Derek murmurs but he also sounds way too amused to be legit jealous or upset (he certainly wasn’t last time either, which is annoyingly comforting, just like last time).

“What? I’m not trying to steal him or anything, like he doesn’t want me anyway, but damn. You...you’re like a beautiful taco. I love tacos.”

Derek starts silently laughing his ass off.

Jackson looks vaguely horrified and he kicks the back of her seat. He’s also going to great lengths to avoid looking at Stiles directly, which to be fair, is rather smart on his part.

Malia blinks, and then shakes her head as if to clear her thoughts. “Wow, I really just said that, huh? Sorry. I don’t know why...”

“No biggie,” Stiles quickly assures so they can just put whatever that was behind them and he holds up the crossword book for her to see. “Yours?”

Malia looks at it and her face lights up. “Yeah! I’ve been looking everywhere for it. I didn’t realize I left it in here,” she confirms, and snatches it up to clutch close to her chest. “Thank you.”

Stiles nods, and that’s the end of it.

Malia faces forward again, taking the time to lift the edge of the book to her nose so she can inhale deeply. It’s not immediately apparent what she’s looking for, but she must not find it because she makes an unhappy sound before tucking it under one of her thighs. She fidgets again, growling softly and lowly with pent up frustration.

Derek notices, between driving safely, and he asks, almost quietly, “Hey, you okay?”

Malia shakes her head, then realizing that he can’t look at her to see it, she responds, “No. Yes. No. I don’t know. Yes and no. No and yes. I just, I feel hot, and tight, and like I want to peel my own skin off. There’s this buzzing in my mind, like a whining, like a...like a...” She closes her eyes, as though she’s trying to picture it.

“Other Voice?” Derek offers, sounding as if he knows exactly what she’s trying to say, and perhaps he does, being family, and a Were himself. “Not like your own voice. A voice you’ve always heard in your head that sounds just like you, but a different voice.”

Jackson scoffs. “You mean like a person’s inner thoughts?” He straightens in his seat and crosses his arms. Cruelty has won this round yet again. “You’re freaking about hearing your own thoughts?”

Malia opens her mouth like she’s ready to tell him off, but she growls instead, and the fidgeting gets...
worse. She ignores him in favor of asking Derek, “It doesn't sound like my voice. Is that, you know, normal? It’s just that it sounds like...it feels like...”

“The Wolf,” Derek fills in. “We all have it. Born Weres. It’s always there, but the Wolf doesn’t surface until we get our Inheritance. You’re nearing yours. The Wolf refuses to remain quiet.”

Malia nods, almost frantically, but she looks relieved to be so understand. “Do you ever get used to it?”

“Not at first. It can be hard to listen to the Wolf when it’s clear as how my voice sounds now, and not somehow feel crazy. There’s a proverb, by our ancestor, Garwalf, that goes, *Per notti in pace, prima di rifare i letti, a comprendere profondamente noi stessi; come possiamo vedere, alla fine, fuggendo dall'angoscia interiore, rilassandoci nella calma, quando il Lupo è ancora silenzioso, possiamo arrenderci, solo, quando la Luna ululerà.*

Stiles has never heard Derek sound as beautiful as he does quoting, what seems like, ancient scripture in Italian. He wants to climb into the front seat and kiss him absolutely stupid. He blinks quickly out the haze of that particular fantasy before he gets lost in it and he clears his throat when Derek glances at him through the rear-view mirror, looking curiously intrigued as they wait out another red-light. He’s pink in the face when he realizes Derek probably definitely can smell what he’s...*imagining.*

Malia frowns. “I don’t speak Italian, Derek. What are you saying?”

“Rough translation?” Derek says with a grin as he continues holding Stiles’s gaze with a sort of playfulness that makes Stiles a little warm underneath all his clothes. “*For nights in peace, before we make our beds, in deeply understanding ourselves; how we see, at last, in fleeing from internal anguish, easing into the calm, when the Wolf is yet silent, may we surrender, only, when the Moon does howl.*”

Stiles fidgets as more warmth pools in his gut, and he’s never felt more trapped and exposed than he does in that very moment when all Derek is doing is just *looking* at him.

Malia’s nose wrinkles with deeper confusion, and she asks, “Even in English it still makes no sense to me. What does *that* mean?”

Derek laughs softly, looking charmed by his younger cousin as he finally pulls his torturous gaze away from Stiles to focus on the road again when the light goes green. “It means that eventually, yes, you do get used to having the extra voice in your head. And that when you do, it becomes a comfort.”

Malia nods, looking reassured. She settles for only a moment before she fidgets once more, hands tightening into fists over her thighs before flexing open again. The pattern repeats at least six more times.

Jackson has had it by the seventh. “Malia, you need to chill.”

Malia ignores him and fidgets with the radio again.

Jackson rubs his temples, as if he’s trying to fight down an impending headache, and his agitation seems to be feeding off of his twin sister’s. After a while, he exhales, then bends his head this way and that way to crack his neck before he cups his hands over his knees. He starts drumming his fingers in sets of three against the curve of solid bone before stopping, and then he starts again. He keeps doing this for seemingly no reason at all, and the beat nearly mimics the rhythm of a healthy
heartbeat.

Stiles feels his eyebrows lift when he notices how Jackson is staring fixedly at the back of Malia’s head while he does it, and the positive effect it seems to have on Malia. She’s still fidgeting, yes, but it’s winding down in slow increments, as if she’s honing in on the sound and focusing on it solely.

Then, after five more minutes, Malia just relaxes in the passenger seat, seeming more lucid and calm, drowsy even.

Stiles, who can have the best timing in the world, glances to the rear-view mirror where he happens to meet Derek’s gaze in the same instance he looks as well. In that shared look he can tell that he’s not the only one that’s noticed what Jackson is attempting to do, as subtle as he’s trying to be about it.

He’s acting like an anchor.

Stiles has questions. Questions that he knows won’t be answered because he’s not on the best of terms with Jackson. So, he swallows them down with a barely audible sigh and reaches out to rest his hand on Derek’s left shoulder, even feeling cunning enough to wiggle a few fingers under the collar of his shirt to touch his boyfriend’s heated skin.

Derek tilts his head to smile over his shoulder at him when they come to a stop sign, and he rests his own hand over Stiles’s briefly before he starts driving again.

The radio is humming gently, a little louder over the rumble of the engine, but for a moment in time, each one of them is at peace.

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Laura and Kate live in what is considered the downtown retail marketplace of Beacon Hills; a metropolis lined with a high concentration of restaurants, bars, cafes, and boutique shops. The duplex they share with Mrs. Argent, Allison, and Lydia is nestled in a charming tree-lined cul-de-sac filled with examples of Victorian-era condominiums and townhouses, showcasing beautiful and diverse architectural styles.

It kind of reminds Stiles of San Francisco, which is a little amusing since this is definitely not. But he supposes the people in this neighborhood used all their tax money to make it so. However, he can tell the coloring and mood of everything is way more serene than what San Francisco reflects, which has a more bubbly and high maintenance culture that is only more emphasized in the wash of a late evening orange sunset.

He wonders if they even realize it. Probably not.

Stiles finds himself pondering what it must be like to live in a pricey area like this, where the streets are always clean, landscaping is nicely funded, stores close before ten at night (save for the 7/11 and gas stations), and everything is in walking distance. There’s a small, materialistic part of him that envies it, but he understands that this sort of thinking is just a byproduct of deeply ingrained capitalism fed to him through media and advertisement.

He loves his neighborhood, his house, and his neighbors (even nosey Mrs. Doyle).

Not to mention his garden.

It may not have been more than 24 hours since he’s made his small kingdom, but he can already tell it’s the best garden in the world. Even now, as they draw closer to their destination, he can feel it
thrumming in the back of his mind, reaching out to be his lighthouse across the sea of everyday life.

God, he hasn’t felt this content in his entire life, and he once found the stash of ptasie mleczko his mom was trying to hide from him and his dad when he was six (under the kitchen sink and behind the lemon pledge). She wasn’t usually selfish, but she always meant business when it came to her favorite sweets, loved ones or not — maybe that’s where Stiles gets that touchiness about his food from.

The point is...he doesn’t have a legitimate reason to wish that his life was different — his life is pretty great...amazing really. He has a hot, attentive, and superbly smart boyfriend (who is sweeter than a bag of sugar drowning in honey), a loving and supportive father, a quick-witted little brother, a group of good-natured friends, and fiercely loyal magic that belongs to him solely until the end of time.

So yeah, there’s no reason he should be envying what anyone else has right now. He’s a Seven of Virtues that has a bright future with the Hale Pack. He is flushed with good boons.

Back to the party though.

They are obviously running a little late because the street in front of Laura and Kate’s duplex (as well as their narrow driveway) is flooded with parked cars. There’s barely any parking nearby, and after about two laps of trying to single out a spot, Derek just circles back to drop everyone off, so he can go off on this hunting expedition alone.

Stiles, of course, is not having that. And he says so as he slides in the front seat when Malia and Jackson exit the car; the recently reunited siblings all too happy to escape suffering each other in such a confined space.

Stiles has no problem falling behind since he’s not too eager to endure the next couple of hours, and he’s trying not to let his social anxiety get the best of him. It’s making him nervous just thinking about all the new faces he’ll probably see, how crowded it’s gonna be, how he’ll consciously have to refrain from being a wallflower or veering into the kitchen. This would be easier if it was a small, intimate get-together with just family and friends, but this isn’t, and he can’t imagine the things he’ll have to brave tonight.

“You know I appreciate it, but I’ll seriously be fine on my own,” Derek assures, not quite switching gears yet in case Stiles changes his mind about going inside. He lets the car idle in its parked state as more and more people show up, stepping out of ubers/lyfts or whoever they’ve carpooled with.

Stiles finds that he sees a lot of familiar faces from school (not that he’d ever had one single conversation with those people, but he recognizes their faces just the same). He turns back to Derek, trying not to think about how nervous he is as the reality of the situation starts sinking in. “Yeah, but what kind of boyfriend would I be if I let you brave it all alone?” he says, all fake cheer as he buckles in and avoids eye contact.

Derek waits until he’s completely comfortable in the passenger seat, his guard down and distracted, before leaning over to kiss him soundly on the lips. He pulls back when he’s sure he’s got Stiles nicely flustered, borderline dazed, and with a keen look, says, “You know, you can just say you’re avoiding this party as much as possible.”

Stiles snorts, face still red, and replies, “I’m that transparent, huh?”

Derek finally switches gears and begins gazing to and fro for a parking spot. “I think I’ve heard you mention once or twice something about an aversion to social gatherings. I was surprised when you
were serious about coming. Plus, you smell anxious, and your heart is doing that nervous uptick it
does when you’re nearly leaning into a panic attack but are somehow talking yourself out of it
mentally.”

Stiles rubs his lips together because they still tingle, and also because he’s trying to smother a grin at
how well his boyfriend knows him. “Okay, so maybe the only reason I agreed, outside of my never-
ending love and support for Laura and Kate, is because I knew I’d feel braver about it if I had you by
my side. I always feel like a socially awkward boat adrift a sea of social sharks that will eat me alive
as soon as they scent some blood in the water.”

Derek laughs and shifts in his seat so he’s sitting up completely straight behind the wheel. “You’ve
got a way with metaphors, but I have no problem being your life-preserver if that’s the case,” he
promises with a stupefying grin.

Stiles stares and has to blink past a few fantasies to say, “You realize that plan would work better if
you weren’t so hot? People are gonna flock to you, naturally. And then probably look at me and
wonder how I got so lucky.” Stiles mutters, “I’m not even sure.”

Derek makes a sharp right to exit the cul-de-sac street and veers onto the next street parallel to it. He
keeps his eyes on the road as he replies, “There was no luck involved. It was destiny. Like when
Jacob first laid eyes on Rachel and wept.”

Stiles shifts so he’s facing Derek a little more. “You’re referencing the bible, I just know it,” he
accuses with narrowed eyes.

Derek is grinning playfully. “On my dad’s side of the family, there’s no way to avoid the Torah,
Nevi’im and Ketuvim. But yeah, I am referencing the Old Testament. If you can get through all the
fire and brimstone, it actually gets quite poetic and romantic in some points. Jacob and Rachel are
one of my favorite stories to read, outside of David and Jonathan. It was love at first sight, and he
wasn’t willing to leave her behind until he could make her his wife. He even gave nearly 14 years of
his freedom to his father-in-law to prove he was worthy of the marriage, but despite the unfairness of
it all, those years felt like days, because that’s how much he loved her.”

Stiles swallows, his throat feels tight and his eyes are a little hot with emotion. He clears his throat
and says, “That’s…incredibly romantic, and tragic.”

Derek hums in agreement. “Sometimes that’s destiny,” he supposes.

Stiles somehow keeps his face blessedly cool when he asks, “Yeah…you think that’s what we have?
Not the tragedy part, and hopefully never that part, but. Well. You said it wasn’t luck that brought us
together.”

“Destiny. Yeah. I do. I think we were destined for each other. I can’t…like explain it without it being
too intense, but,” Derek pauses like he’s trying to find the right words for it. “I never believed in
timing before I met you, you know? But, if you hadn’t been in Cora’s class, and if she hadn’t
complained about you, or if Peter hadn’t given you a courting gift on my behalf, or if Laura had
decided to attend one of our private schools instead…I don’t know. Who knows how different things
would have been. There’s so many factors to consider, and if just the slightest thing would have been
different, we may never have ended up together.”

Stiles is reeling from some of this information, and also, he feels sick to even think that Derek’s right.
It wouldn’t have taken much for them to not end up where they are now and that’s pretty terrifying to
consider. Once the reality of that passes, he doubles back to something else that was said. “Hey. You
said Cora was complaining about me? What did I do?”
Derek laughs, and he has this faraway look like he’s thinking back to it. “It wasn’t anything big. She was annoyed with the way you were always drumming your pens and pencils on the desk. She said that you’re the kind of person that once noticed it’s like hard not noticing you. There’s just something about you that way,” he clarifies. “She’s right. I’ll never be any less aware of you.”

Stiles can feel heat worming across the bridge of his nose, groaning as he hides his face away in mortification. But then he realizes something else. “Wait, what do you mean Peter gave me a courting gift on your behalf?”

“Uncle Peter is a…traditionalist, and he’s nearly an expert when it comes to Werewolf history and how we’ve evolved through the centuries, like with hunting patterns, pack dynamics, and mating rituals,” Derek explains. “It used to be, back during my great great grandparents’ time, that all mating rituals were heavily chaperoned and chaste through the observation of a MatchMaker.”

“MatchMaker?”

“They had an elite role in Packs maybe like three generations ago because they had a Gift helping them determine which pairs were better suited for each other, which in turn could bring prosperity and powerful alliances as a result of Blessed Matches,” Derek explains, but he also sounds skeptical. “Uncle Peter believes in the Gift, but my mom says it’s all fairytales, and Moon Fables.”

“And you believe what your mom believes about it?” Stiles questions because he is very curious. “Does Peter think he’s a MatchMaker?”

“If he does, he would never confirm it. It’s a touchy subject to say the least. I can’t really say that I believe in it myself, but at the same time some of it does make sense to me. I don’t know.” Derek shrugs, and he seems to be holding something else back about it but Stiles can’t really pinpoint what it is. But Derek is speaking again before he gets the chance to ask. “Anyway, one of the rituals that a MatchMaker would go through involved acting as the representative for the person. So, to show interest in an individual, you would have to send that representative ahead of yourself with a gift symbolizing your intent to court them. If accepted, the scent marking process would begin, and if it took, it was just a sign that the potential for a bond was valid. If you wore my scent well, it’s kind of saying, without words, that you were a legitimate Match for me.”

“That sneaky bastard,” Stiles mumbles but snorts when Derek laughs in near agreement. “How did he even…what was he even thinking? You were like dating someone else! What if it hadn’t taken?”

“Oh, but my uncle is arrogant that way. He had no doubt you were my True Match. I’ve tried to ask him countless times how he knew, but he won’t budge, saying he’ll explain in the speech he’s sure to give during our Bonding Ceremony.” Derek shrugs like he doesn’t doubt it and Stiles finds it so intriguing that his boyfriend is saying it so casually, like it’s a sure thing. Dear Fate, maybe it is. “Personally, I think maybe it could have been that he noticed how unhappy I was with Paige. He may come off another way, but Uncle Peter does love his family and would do anything to make sure we’re happy. I can’t say that I’m too upset by how things worked out, but he has been smug ever since he gifted you with the third wolf. It was overkill at that point, since it was glaringly obvious you carried my scent so well and there wasn’t a need to keep adding to it.”

“I don’t have any regrets either, but I also feel bad that your uncle basically took the choice out of your hands, regardless of his intentions,” Stiles states, genuine in his concern.

Derek just grabs his left hand and kisses the back of it comfortingly while he keeps a sharp eye out for a parking spot. They’ve been driving for a while now. He says, “Don’t worry, I’ve made my feelings on that point very clear to my uncle. So, yes, he started the process, but I’m the one finishing it. I wouldn’t be with you if I didn’t want to be, Stiles. I swear that to you. The first time I picked up
my scent, mixed with yours, it was...it wasn’t like anything I’d ever smelled before. Your scent was just...perfect with mine — like fresh-scented pine citrus and vanilla honey. I tried to make myself dislike you or treat you like a friend because I already had a girlfriend who, admittedly, I was kind of miserable with because it would be like whiplash. One moment we would be fine, and then suddenly not talking for three days at a time.

“Then Paige broke my heart and after that terrible game I tried to play through, you remember? Before spring break? I still somehow ended up on your porch, and you…” Derek stutters to a stop, laughing like he's amazed. “You just cried with me, and I could smell how — that you were honest about it, you know, not mocking or anything. You were upset for me and with me. Paige never connected with me that deeply and — but you, you just understood, and you didn’t badmouth her for it either, because you’re so good and kind and, yeah, before I knew it, I just found myself wanting you. I just — I wanted you so much, Stiles.

“You supported me, comforted me, and you cried with me. You let those tears fall as if we’d been sharing the same heart and you could feel my pain without actually having any idea at all about how deep it went for me. And, well, that was the moment I thought, ‘Wow, yeah, he’s definitely the one.’ and I said to myself, okay. Okay.”

Stiles remembers that conversation. How couldn't he? It was confusing at the time but with this new clarity and incite, he just feels...he feels so alive and warm and devastatingly happy. And yeah, he knows, like he’s been known, without a doubt, that this is the person he is supposed to spend the rest of his life with.

“Was that too much?” Derek asks, seeming uncertain when Stiles remains completely silent. “I’ve gone overboard again, haven’t I? I —”

“No!” Stiles exclaims and lowers his voice as he grabs Derek’s right hand with both of his to hold close to his chest where his heart is (his magic is swirling warmly between the teeth of his ribcage, euphoric with the older teen’s confession). “No, Derek, it wasn’t. It’ll never be too much. You don’t have to keep asking because I’m starting to realize it’s only intense because it’s us and that’s probably never going to change since we fit so well together.” He exhales shakily and decides to be brave too. “You know, I'm pretty sure I knew you were the one the first time you tutored me and it had to be the way you smiled at me when I got something right. And you somehow made me like math. I never — listen I've never cared or paid much attention to how...how it could feel to have someone look at you the way you look at me and it’s...well, you know how I am. Oblivious is the word.

“But you make me pay attention, even when I tried to hide, or deny, or convince myself it was one-sided, you just — you made me pay attention, you know?” His heart is racing with his honesty and he’s scared to death to lay everything bare like this but he needs Derek to understand that he’s not alone in his affections. “I couldn’t do anything but pay attention, and Derek, no one can — has been able to hold my attention like that. You're like a force of nature, breaking through and centering yourself in the rotation of my life. God, is any of this making sense?”

Derek doesn’t respond as he turns into a dark alley and puts his lime green Camaro in park.

Stiles hardly notices. “You find a way to be both good to me and good for me. You support everything I do, and never force your perspective on me. You just get me. You really do, and I don’t think there’s anything I wouldn’t do for you. I just want you to understand that you are incredibly important to me. I see a future with you, and it’s the most comforting feeling in the world sometimes, to know you have someone, truly. And I know I can be shy or whatever, but I — you have to know that I like you so much and I know it took us a while to even get to this point, but I wouldn’t change
a thing about it. I like you enough to trust you with my real name. I mean I know you heard your mom say it, and she made it sound easy, I know, but we can work on teaching you how to say it right in private. Oh my god, that sounded sexual. I swear I didn’t mean it like that. I’m just trying to be romantic, because besides my dad and I, you’re the only other person living that knows it. Or well, I think my uncle knows, but he doesn’t count. Wait, the whole pack knows because your mom said it. Aunt Lorraine might too, and Nana. Also, I think Isaac had his suspicions before your mom confirmed it the other night but — ugh, I’m so sorry. I’m rambling, and I don’t think that I’m doing this right. Uh, okay. Let me start over. I —"

Derek cups his hand under Stiles’s jaw, turns his head just so, and starts kissing him over and over and over like it'll be the last time he will have the privilege. He kisses Stiles like he’s savoring it, like he’s…he’s…God, like he's grateful to even get the chance.

Stiles gets all weak-kneed (even though they aren’t even standing) and his limbs feel all gooey like he’s on the verge of melting into the leather seats of Derek’s Camaro.

“Perfect, perfect, perfect.” Derek keeps chanting between the kisses he stamps against Stiles's pink mouth. His hands are halfway up Stiles’s shirt, seeking skin and pawing at what he can reach, making Stiles all the more flustered but hungry for something he doesn’t quite understand. It’s making his blood absolutely sing while his magic floods the car with twinkling bioluminescent smoke. “Great Mother Moon, Stiles, you're so — so —”

Stiles kisses him back, fiercely eager and nearly desperate while he sinks his tongue into Derek’s mouth as if he hopes to leave his claim behind while the inside of the car floods with blue magical fog.

Stiles would be embarrassed about his lack of control if he weren’t so busy making a mess of Derek’s beautifully thick hair. He groans in surprised when Derek’s thumb skims over one of his nipples and he’s tempted to let it go further for that small span of time but they are both forced apart by their need for air.

He feels so lightheaded and hot all over, in a way he’s never really felt (save those few times while he was going through puberty), and he wants to do things to Derek that he doesn’t fully comprehend. He’s simply overwhelmed with all these feelings (both emotionally and physically) and he has to pull away from Derek completely to gather his wits with a clearer head.

Derek lets him go without a fuss, looking a bit out of sorts himself, face and neck covered with a blotchy blush from how things were beginning to escalate.

“We’re gonna be so late,” Stiles says, panting still, warmth still throbbing low in his gut, and he tries to think past it as he summons his magic back into himself.

Derek laughs as he drops his forehead to the top of his steering wheel and clenches it with both hands as if he’s worried they have a mind of their own and will find their way back to Stiles’s skin.

“I don’t even care,” he swears. His eyes are closed in concentration and Stiles is pleased to see, as always, that he has that kind of effect on the older teen. “You know that I’m going to marry you one day, right?”

Stiles, too stunned for words, nearly chokes on hysterical laughter, his magic surging up inside of him in near agreement with Derek. When he feels sane again, he says, “It’s way too soon for you to know that for sure.”

“I’m going to fly you to Paris and propose in front of a thousand strangers while they throw rose petals at us under the Eiffel Tower.”
“That’s…Derek, I don’t think you’re supposed to tell me how you’re gonna do it. I’m pretty sure that’s not how proposals work, and I’ve watched enough rom-coms with Isaac to feel like an expert on this.”

Derek huffs out a laugh before he straightens and gets to work with reversing out of the alley. “You know how you said everyone is going to flock to me at the party?” he asks instead.

It throws Stiles for a loop, but he rolls with it by nodding.

“Babe, I don’t know how to break it to you, but it’s pretty much gonna be the opposite tonight.”

Stiles frowns and reaches out to turn off the radio, since it’s still humming lowly with Disney songs (Malia had turned it on specifically to punish Jackson at the time). He says, “What? How do you mean? What?”

Derek smirks, eyes still restlessly searching as he drives leisurely up the street. “I mean looking the way you do right now, I should feel extremely lucky that you picked me and agreed to be my date for this party. Whatever you did with your garden today shows. So, I’m expecting some head turning when you enter a room. They’ll barely notice me, and if they do, they’ll probably mutter some mean things they think I won’t hear if they aren’t already a Were or otherwise.”

Stiles is stupefied. There’s no other way to put it. He completely forgot what the side effects for performing forest magic can be like in large crowds and now he’s going to this party when his charisma is probably at its highest.

Derek glances at him quick enough to snicker at the unhappy expression he’s wearing.

Stiles groans and hides his face in his hands. Through his fingers, he mumbles, “Is it too late to turn around?”

Derek looks highly amused when Stiles glances his way. “Hm, well if you wanted, we could say you have unexpected food poisoning and go back to your place to watch a movie or something. I’d be down to order pizza, but it’s gotta be from Ramona’s because everywhere else is pretty trash.”

“Derek, I know you aren’t proposing to me, and Paris is great and all, super romantic or whatever, and I appreciate the thought, but everything you just said right then was so hot that I want to confirm my yes for marriage right now,” Stiles swears, fake-swooning in an obnoxious way.

Derek chokes on his own laughter as he comes to a complete stop. “Lying to get out of social obligations to opt for pizza instead is what does it for you, huh?” he manages to ask after he gets his amusement under control.

“Oh yeah, it’s like my sweet spot.”

“Good to know.”

“I’ll say.” Stiles sighs. “Deaton told me before that anyone who has already seen me in this form, you know glowing with forest-magic, will already be desensitized. So at least there’s that.”

“True, but again, I’ve got your back for the times when that theory doesn’t hold true.”

“Yeah? Thanks.”

Derek takes a few minutes to parallel park in a tight spot he manages to find. He shuts off the car and unbuckles his seatbelt but makes no move to exit just yet.
Stiles knows without having to be told that they are about to talk about something very serious. He unbuckles his seatbelt as well and turns to face the older teen. “So, I feel like we’re alone now. I mean we’re parked four streets over from Laura and Kate’s place. Please say you’re about to put me out of my misery with this thing you’ve been wanting to tell me because I have been so curious ever since you brought it up.”

Derek smiles, all boyish charm, as he says, “Yeah, this seems to be the perfect time to mention what I’ve been thinking about. Well, I mean, the only other person I’ve brought this up to was Paige, but other than that...”

Stiles gets the feeling that the conversation they must have had didn’t go as nicely as Derek may have wanted to because he seems nervous about even referencing it. He works on instinct, grabbing Derek’s left hand and tangling their fingers together. “Hey, look, we’ve discussed how I’m nothing like Paige, right? You can tell me anything.”

Derek lifts their intertwined hands and kisses Stiles’s knuckles. “Yeah, sorry. I know, I do...but...” He pauses to sigh before lowering their laced hands to rest between them. “Firstly, I want to say that I never expected to be the captain of the basketball team this soon. Also, there was a point when it felt like Laura, Cora, and I were drifting apart, you know? Doing our own things or whatever. But then you came along and it’s like you gathered us all together again, and these last few months with my sisters have been great, despite the ups and downs. It’s felt like it used to with them, you know, when we were growing up and shared everything with each other. And that’s all great. But I’m still bothered by this one specific thing.”

Stiles nods encouragingly and watches Derek take a deep breath to steel himself.

“As much as I love Beacon Hills High and enjoy getting to see you every day and eat lunch with you and Cora, it’s just not...I don’t find the education to be...rewarding. It’s starting to feel like I’m wasting my time. You know what I mean? It’s not challenging, and for the longest time I’ve wanted to go to one of our private Were schools because I feel like the education there matches my speed better than our current school does. I haven’t even talked to mom about it yet, or my dad. I guess I’m afraid of what they’ll say about it. That they’ll think I’m trying to get away from Paige, and that’s not...it has nothing to do with that. But I’m also afraid Cora will resent me for leaving her behind since we’ve done everything together most of our lives. And as much as she complains about the other students, she genuinely likes BHH better than I do and she’s comfortable there. But I’m not. I’m really, very unhappy there. I don’t know, what do you think?”

Stiles inhales deeply as he ponders over his next words. “In the spirit of being completely transparent, I will say I am very surprised to hear you say all this. I really would never have guessed. Which, it doesn’t matter, because all I really want for you is for you to do what will make you happy. Is it going to suck not seeing my boyfriend in the halls or at lunch? Yeah, obviously, but that’s what weekends are for. And it’s not like I don’t know where you live, or you don’t have a car to come see me. Cora should be fine, I think. Boyd will be starting his freshman year at our school, so there’s that. And I’ll be there with her too — most of our training is going to be together, so like you wouldn’t really be leaving her by herself. I’m sure if you just tell her how you feel, she’ll understand.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Derek vaguely agrees, but he still looks worried over it. He shrugs the next moment and smiles. “Thanks. I do feel a little better about it. Plus, you know, I have all summer to come to a final decision. I’d need to consider who would replace me as captain and all that.”

“What’s left to decide? What, Were don’t play sports at those private schools?” Stiles teases, if only to lighten the mood.
Derek laughs. “Okay, point. They do, but, I don’t know, it’s easier to think about why I should stay rather then why I need to leave.”

“You’re unhappy,” Stiles echoes. “That’s enough reason for me. Derek, I don’t want you to be unhappy because you feel obligated to think about my feelings or Cora’s feelings or really anyone’s but your own. Would you talk me out of leaving if I said something like this to you?”

Derek’s face scrunches adorably with a frown. “Stiles, I would never —”

Stiles quickly leans over and kisses him before he can even complete the thought, already knowing that Derek’s about to work himself into a rant but he nips that in the bud. Also, he can’t help himself, honestly, because his boyfriend is amazing and very kissable. He’s brave enough to add some tongue too, skimming Derek’s bottom lip as he pulls back after a few moments, a little pink but satisfied that Derek looks bewildered but completely dazed by the kiss. “I know, big guy, which is my point exactly. I will support this decision as passionately as you always do mine. If Cora decides to be an ass, well, I can take care of that too. I’m her future Second, and I’m sure that comes with some perks. I think one of them is that she’s forced to listen to my opinion and consider it.”

Derek nods slowly and blinks before he grins. “Thanks. You’ll be the first to know what I decide when I actually decide on something.”

“Your parents should actually be the first to know, I think, but I’m flattered,” Stiles suggests with an amused grin as Derek shrugs but nods to concede to his point. “I can be third or fourth to know. Though I feel like I know what you’ll end up doing.”

Derek just shrugs again and smiles.

There’s a lull of silence that descends on the car, but as always, they’re both perfectly content with it.

Stiles scrares his teeth against his upper lip while Derek watches him open his glovebox without asking and he fiddles with the contents. “Oooh nice,” he says, snatching up the plain black snapback sitting on top of the boring stack of insurance paperwork. “Dibs.”

Derek watches him put the hat on backwards with a fond sort of smile. “You know, you can ask if you want to wear something of mine. I am definitely on board to donating to that cause,” he assures, wiggling his eyebrows in such an obnoxious manner.

“How about you wear something of mine? Even the score. I’m drowning in your scent over here,” Stiles faux complains.

“Ah, it’s not just you,” Derek corrects but he seems pleased with the way his hat looks on him. “Mom says we’re starting to get to a point where we just share the same scent. It’s common between True Matches. But, yeah, I can root around your wardrobe and take what I like if you’re gonna insist.”

“Uh, no. What?” Stiles laughs. “Who was insisting that? Dude, I’m not agreeing to you shopping around in my wardrobe. We can start small with like socks and then feel out the rest.”

“Selfish.”

“Shut up.”

“And mean. You’re so mean to me, babe,” Derek whines, pinching at Stiles’s sides, taking great amusement in the way he tries to squirm away. Then, like the evil gremlin he is, he starts with the poking. “I will accept nothing less than one of your hoodies or maybe a jacket.”
“Okay! Okay!” Stiles slaps his hands away. “Just! Stop! You have such bony fingers.”


Stiles is laughing so hard that he feels lightheaded, and the car is rocking with how much he’s flailing. “I will give you my favorite hoodie if you just — okay! You have such incredible ears, Derek. Oh my god.”


“Yes, yes, yes,” Stiles gasps, nearly desperate, folding like a cheap paper plate.

Derek yanks him forward, pressing their lips together, opening him up with no resistance and doing things with his tongue that should be illegal (making Stiles flail for a different reason this time around). He eventually backs off, chuckling, and looking way too smug and satisfied. “See, was that so hard? We get good rewards when we are nice to each other. Look at how pretty and pink you are. I might keep you.”

“Shut up.” Stiles shoves him away, ignoring the heat racing through his body at Derek’s words. That definitely makes something throb in his lower gut and he has no idea what his body wants Derek to do but it’s clear it’s expecting something and it’s way too soon for that. “Just shut your face.”

Derek gives him a warning looking that’s playful as he strokes his chin with a thoughtful expression that’s totally fake. “What was that? Poke you some more?”

“Ugh. No thanks. I’ll be good, you jerk.”

Derek hums but he rubs his nose with his left hand in what would normally be considered a sign of awkwardness, but is clearly only a way of hiding his smug grin while he says nothing.

Stiles rolls his eyes at the familiar gesture as he uses the mirror on the sun visor to check himself out (he’s still blissfully pink from that filthy kiss). But he likes how Derek’s hat looks on him, probably more than he should. “You know, I just wanna wear this to be as low-key as possible,” he explains. “I’m giving it back as soon as you take me home.”

“It’s cool if you keep it. I wasn’t doing much with it anyway. The low-key thing isn’t working though. You look even more attractive wearing it backwards like that, not gonna lie.”

Stiles rolls his eyes again, secretly flattered. “Such a biased opinion,” he points out.

Derek grins but doesn’t deny it. “You ready to start the walk over to the party?” he asks.

Stiles snorts. “Yeah, but only because I’m starving, and I know there will be good food. Besides, didn’t you say you were gonna bring ice? Where is it?”

“Still at the store. Laura said I shouldn’t bother. Kate ordered some kind of ice statue that’s supposed to look like the two of them as Angels. But my dad, Cora, and I made some challah and lekach since Laura was begging for some. Cora said she’d bring it all with her.”

“I’m familiar with challah but what’s lekach?”

“It’s just like a honey sponge cake with cinnamon and tea,” Derek explains and makes a gesture that they should both exit the car together. “Usually it doesn’t have a frosting, but my dad likes to make it with a pineapple drip glaze. He’s become increasingly passionate about the food he makes. I think
it’s all the baking shows he watches.”

“Pineapple drip? That sounds so good, oh my god,” Stiles groans, stomach gurgling loud enough for his own ears while Derek wirelessly locks his car. “Oh man, I just realized, but I think your dad and I are supposed to go to a convention tomorrow.”

Derek holds his hand as they take their time walking up to the main street that will lead them to Laura and Kate’s place. He says, “I don’t think that’s tomorrow, but you should text my dad to be sure. He seemed excited about it.”

Stiles nods and grabs his phone with his free hand to do so. He says, as he types out a message, “I don’t blame him. I heard from Scott that the pop culture conventions in Beacon Hills are pretty epic and could rival Comic Con.”

Derek is laughing suddenly, looking completely charmed by his boyfriend. “Stiles, that’s not what I meant. My dad is excited to hang out with you and get to know you.”

Stiles flushes and can feel the heat rising up the back of his neck to reach the tip of his ears as he tucks his phone into his back pocket. “Oh,” he simply says, feeling both flattered and bewildered. “Uh, that’s...yeah. Same here.”

Derek grins and shakes his head before pulling Stiles close enough that he can wrap an arm over his shoulders. “I’m glad you and my dad have something in common you can share. Paige never really...she didn’t get to know my family the way I wanted her to, and I barely got to know hers. It’s nice that everything is different with you.”

Derek is pleased to hear that, and he says as much. Then, he adds, “You know, I never imagined things would turn out like this when my dad and I moved. I mean, we mostly kept to ourselves after my mom died back in Los Angeles. And I always felt bad that my dad didn’t really have any friends he would hang out with. If he wasn’t at work, he was always with me.”

“Now he’s thick as thieves with my parents,” Derek points out and kisses him on his temple. “I think our dads may even be best friends.”

“If they are, it’s because your dad actually laughs at my dad’s ridiculous jokes like they’re actually funny. Your dad will never be free,” Stiles jokes and turns his face so he can kiss him back unexpectedly on the lips — he makes it as deep and biting and as sweet as he can.

Derek reacts by going pink in surprise before his mouth stretches in a dopey grin when Stiles pulls away. “Are you trying to fluster me?” he accuses, but there’s too much warmth and humor in his voice for him to actually be upset about it.

“Depends. Is it working?”

“Hard to say. You should definitely keep trying. I’m a big fan of trial runs.”

Stiles gives him a wink as he glances back at Derek’s car in the distance. “Hm, would it be mean if I told you I still think you’re a dweeb for having such a blatantly green car?”

Derek’s eyes flash gold in warning, which basically answers that question.

“Oh well, I can’t be nice to you all the time. It’s just not realistic,” Stiles supposes from under the heavy weight of Derek’s arm. “You’re a dweeb, but you’re like a hot dweeb. There. Perfectly executed backhanded compliment.”
“Right, of course. You stuck the landing and everything. However, let me just ask you this. What did you do with that expired ramen I found under your bed?”

“You’re trying to shame me, but it’s not gonna work. First of all, ramen doesn’t even have an expiration date.”

“There was a literal date printed on the side.”

“You need your eyes checked because that, big guy, is what we ramen professionals call a strong suggestion.”

“Oh babe, you’re so pretty, but you have some questionable logic.”

“You think I’m pretty?” Stiles volleys, fluttering his eyelashes in an obnoxious way.

“Questionably, yes.”

Stiles throws his head back and laughs into the night.

Derek looks pleased with himself, and maybe a little something more that Stiles hasn’t quite figured out yet. He says, “Oh, nice. Laugh number seven is definitely my favorite laugh.”

Stiles almost brains himself by walking into the oncoming stop sign at the crosswalk but his magic surges up and leans heavily on his equilibrium so that he narrowly misses it. He leaps back of course and out of the way as Derek urges him to be more careful. “I was being careful! This is your fault! What did you just say?”

“I said be careful.”

“No!” Stiles exclaims, laughing in exasperation, and steps in front of Derek to grip him by the shoulders once they safely cross the street onto the start of the cul-de-sac. “Before that, Derek! Before that!”

Derek looks bemused. “That thing I said about your laugh?”

Stiles nods rapidly.

“I said number seven is my favorite.”

Stiles stares at him. Like stares at him.

Derek stares back, brow furrowed like he doesn’t get what’s the big deal.

“You...you have a number system...for my laughter.”

Derek nods slowly.

“That’s...” Stiles flushes from head to toe. “Incredibly...charming. Derek, why am I so charmed by that?”

Derek huffs out a laugh but he shrugs. “I don’t know what to tell you.” He adds, “It’s kinda like how I said before. You make me wanna remember everything about you. Keeping a number system is like the best way to do it.”

Stiles mutters incoherently before he throws his arms around Derek’s neck to kiss him absolutely stupid. He pulls back, breathless, and says, “You are my favorite math nerd.”
Derek is completely red in the face, and his eyes are shining hotly with gold. He looks a little hungry. “Still with the backhanded compliments, huh? Whatever, I can deal.” He shrugs and looks so unbothered that Stiles wants to kiss him stupid all over again. “I can tell you about the other things I’ve been keeping track of if it gets you to keep kissing me like that,” he offers.

Stiles snorts in kind of an ugly way before he pulls away completely. “Maybe later, if we survive this party.”

Derek sighs but let’s Stiles drag him forward. “Famous last words.”

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They arrive at around nine when the party is really starting to kick off.

The duplex itself is made of stone and has massive glass windows that show off the expensive décor inside. It’s very modern looking, unlike any of the houses that surround it.

The place is flooded with people, pouring out of every entrance and littering the front and back lawns. The apartment looks to be swarming with overexcited bodies and Stiles is starting to realize just how popular Laura and Kate are.

There are so many faces and Stiles can only recognize less than three percent of them from some of his classes. It’s overwhelming how many people there are, and it’s a bit of shock to realize that most of them are the graduating class of 2014. And, yeah, Derek is right about him being the one to turn heads. He tries to keep his head as low as possible, but it’s nearly impossible to hide his face without the help of some kind of veil.

Derek loops their arms together, murmuring something comforting as they navigate their way up the steps, through the front door, over the landing, and between the thick crowds in the living room. He’s a big help with glaring down anyone who gets any ideas about approaching Stiles. He paves a way for them in search of their hostesses as they are folded deeper and deeper into the jovial chatter cutting its way through the blare of music coming from some pricey looking speakers settled around the fireplace.

Laura and Kate have a huge flat screen TV above the fireplace, which is on, and basically running a PowerPoint presentation of all their photos from early childhood to their high school graduation pictures on a loop. It definitely speaks to their personality to have such a thing on display for their adoring spectators.

Stiles doesn’t recognize a lot of the songs that are being played and it disappoints him in a way since he usually likes to use music as a crutch in social situations. The walls are shaking with the music and the house is overflowing with body heat and cocktailed smells of perfume, popcorn, liquor, and finger foods.

Stiles feels intimidated by the atmosphere, there’s no other way to describe it. His heart is thrashing, wildly flagging down attention to the fact that he is ready to jump out of his skin at any moment. He’s absolutely relieved when Derek and he find Laura and Kate in the kitchen by themselves (there’s a sign on the swinging door that reads ‘DO NOT ENTER – NO GUESTS BEYOND THIS POINT’).

Laura and Kate are pulling out all sorts of finger food trays from their fancy fridge and/or double stove to replenish everything that’s been eaten from the long buffet table Stiles spied briefly in the dining room.
Laura yells with glee when she spots them, all dazzle and charm in a matching black sequin set, red heels and red lipstick, her raven hair falling in beautiful, voluminous curls around her face and bare shoulders. “My boys are here!” she exclaims, squishing them to her in a tight, perfumed hug (grapefruit and jasmine). “Ugh, I’m so happy to see you guys. You two are my favorite. Look how cute you are, ugh, I could just eat you both up.”

“Whoa, Laura. Chill,” Derek complains, gently pushing her away as his nose wrinkles. His eyes are narrowed as he looks at her. “Have you been smoking wolfsbane again?”

Laura rolls her eyes, but she grins while using her thumb to wipe away the lipstick smear she left behind when she kissed Derek’s cheek. “Don’t worry your cute little self over it, baby brother. Our cousin Stina gifted me with an oil cartridge that’s her own special concoction, so it’s legit.”

Derek relaxes a little more at that, but he’s no closer to smiling than he was before. “As long as you got it from family. We don’t need any scares like last time,” he points out.

“I know, I know, Der. Which is why I trust that Stina doesn’t lace any of her product,” Laura promises.

Stiles feels like he’s seeing another side of Laura. “You smoke?” he asks.

Kate decides to interject, looking like one of those models with a bad attitude (white fur coat, black leather skirt and a scandalously see-through lace bustier top that does nothing to conceal the fact her nipples are pierced). She says, “Oh yeah, Laura is a real feen for drugs. Heroine, coke, PCP. You name it, she does it.”

“Not funny,” Derek states flatly.

Laura gently shoves her best friend with a laugh. “Don’t listen to her. It’s not like that at all,” she clarifies. “Many Weres like doing the hybrids, which is basically anything infused with wolfsbane, to get the same results. And I’ve only done it with alcohol and weed recreationally.”

“Yeah, and you shouldn’t try anything else either,” Derek mutters, looking upset again. He dismisses his older sister and looks to Stiles. “I’m going to get us something to drink. Be back.” He storms off without waiting for a reply.

Stiles sighs and says, “I think he’s just worried about you. I mean, it’s not really my thing to do that but I won’t judge you if you’re being smart, I guess. Actually, I feel a little concerned. Are you okay? It’s not like a...coping mechanism for something, is it?”

Laura picks up the tray of food she sat down earlier and replies, “I’m fine, and no, life is grand. I just was trying to have maybe a little bit more fun than normal. People drink all the time, I mean how is it any different to smoke?” The question is more rhetorical than anything. She pauses to sigh. “I’m fine. Honestly, I don’t blame Derek for being upset with me. I’ve made some dumb mistakes in that past that he’s had to help me cover up for, and now his ex-girlfriend is in rehab, so, yeah. He’s not especially happy with me right now, I imagine.”

“Who gives a fuck about Princess Metalhead? She made her bed, and she has to lay in it. Besides, you’re nothing like her,” Kate argues as she opens the swinging door of their kitchen to start shoving people aside to take the trays in her hands to the dining room.

“Uh, well, enjoy the party. I’m really happy you came,” Laura simply says with a sheepish grin and follows after her best friend.

Stiles is left alone in the wide kitchen with marble countertops, metal accessories planted here and
there, cabinets made with dark wood, and low hanging lights. It honestly reminds him of the kind of staged kitchen you see on cooking shows. He wanders over to the spice rack and fiddles with it while trying to talk himself into going to find Derek.

But Derek returns with two cups of homemade green punch, and there’s no longer a need for Stiles’s internal debate. “Sorry about that,” he says as he hands a cup to Stiles. “She makes me so mad sometimes. I love her to death, but she doesn’t always do the right thing.”

“Oh, well, you know. That’s a part of growing up,” Stiles offers as he takes tentative sips of the sweet tasting juice. It’s got a hint of berries and some kind of citrus fruit. “Sometimes we have to let the ones we love make their own decisions and learn from their mistakes. We can’t judge her for going through the motions just like everyone else does. But we can be there for her if it gets ugly. I don’t know what you know about how she’s dealt with stuff like that in the past obviously, but maybe we can be more open-minded to trusting her now?”

Derek shrugs but doesn’t respond otherwise, which is worrying.

“You want to get some food?” Stiles asks, if only to lighten the mood. He doesn’t like to see Derek so upset. They can revisit this subject later. “Did you see anything good while you were out there?”

Derek opens his mouth to answer but stops at the last second, eyeing the swinging door almost expectantly.

Laura comes bustling back in with a stack of dirty trays. “Stiles, you mind giving Derek and I a minute? I think Allison is looking for you. She just went upstairs to their floor.”

Stiles glances between the two dark haired siblings with a speculative look, knowing he’s being sent off so they can have a private conversation. He nods and kisses her on the cheek, liking the way her eyes light up with warmth and affection. He squeezes Derek’s hand and sends him a pointed look to be nice before he makes his way out the kitchen.

The crowds suck him up immediately, and since he’s not so distracted by the flawless décor of the apartment this time around, he notices the looks he’s being given. Not to mention that without Derek, there are a few people who are bold enough to step into his line of path to chat him up or flirt or get his attention. He politely declines every one of them, making it very clear that he’s not interested and that he has a boyfriend, but it doesn’t always go over so well but it never gets physical, thank Fate and Peril for that.

He manages to make it to the landing in the front where there is a flight of stairs leading up to the second floor where he figures is the one that belongs to Allison and her mom, as well as Lydia. He navigates through the people lounging on them, declining their invitation to join in on their conversation until he reaches the door at the top of the steps and knocks.

A cloud of red smoke starts seeping through the cracks of the door, and there’s the sound of it unlocking before opening. The red smoke then fuses together into a glittery, sparkling cloud that seems to nod at him and gestures for him to follow.

Stiles is very curious at this point, but he does follow the magical cloud, making sure to close the door behind him. He can’t help but to notice that the décor of the apartment has more muted and chromatic colors, versus all the deep wine colors Kate and Laura have in their place.

It’s like stepping into a black and white film basically.

Stiles is suddenly reminded, on a whim, that Allison is colorblind. Mrs. Argent must have their
He smiles and traces his fingers over it before he tentatively knocks.

The magical cloud sinks to the floor and disappears under the door.

Stiles waits a few moments, floor vibrating under his feet from the music downstairs, and when Lydia tells him to come in, he opens the door to see her on the floor.

Lydia is propped up by a lot of pillows, her legs folded like a pretzel with her bejeweled egg in the dip of her thighs, resting on her calves, rattling and thrashing wildly. She’s drenched in sweat, eyes closed in pain as she pants.

Jackson, Malia, and Isaac are present as well, but the three of them are looming awkwardly.

Malia is standing next to the window, watching things from a distance.

Jackson is sitting at Lydia’s desk, looking bothered and concerned.

Isaac is standing next to the nightstand, not really looking at anyone, but he seems relieved when he spots his older brother.

Stiles shoots him a reassuring smile, that gets timidly returned.

Allison is on the floor beside Lydia, holding her hand while she fans her. She glances up at Stiles and seems relieved to see him. “I’m glad you’re here,” she says, wincing when Lydia squeezes her hand until both their knuckles are white.

“What’s going on?” Stiles asks, worried.

“I have no idea, but she’s in pain. You should do something about that. You’re the most qualified for this situation,” Jackson bites out, and ignores the mean look Isaac sends him for it.

“Stop it, Jackson,” Lydia warns, eyes scrunched closed. “Don’t speak to him like that. You are bothering me, and the only reason I’m letting you stay is because you begged.”

Jackson’s face becomes blotchy with different shades of reds and pinks. He crosses his arms defensively. “I was worried. You won’t even let me hold your hand,” he mutters, staring at the side of her face. Underneath his blush, he just looks hurts.

Lydia makes a frustrated sound. “We’re broken up. I don’t need you thinking that means something later on,” she corrects.

“Trust me, you’re not missing anything,” Allison promises, wincing as Lydia squeezes her hand again. “My bones are fragile, please have mercy.”

“Aunt Lorraine suddenly appears in the wink of a spark besides Stiles, causing him to yelp and he nearly leaps into Jackson’s lap in surprise.

Jackson steadies him, his hand lingers maybe a little longer than they should.

Isaac coughs pointedly, shooting Jackson an annoyed look.
Stiles quickly puts distance between them and Jackson appears relieved if not revolted by his own behavior.

“She’s going into Mystical Labor,” Aunt Lorraine explains as she takes a count of everyone in the room, kneeling before Lydia with a bucket of ice water. She dips a hand towel in it before wringing it out and folding it while she gestures for Stiles to join them. She magicks away the bucket of ice water.

“What’s Mystical Labor?” Stiles asks once he reaches them, settling on the other side of Lydia, who quickly grabs his hand with her free one. He jolts in surprise when he feels her squeezing his hand in a rather tight grip, and also because he can feel the current of her magic buzzing under his own skin.

“It’s what we all have to go through in order to birth forth a Conduit. You spend a period of time feeding your Conduit with your magic, so they can grow and become. It doesn’t take too much but it is exhausting, just some magic here and there,” Aunt Lorraine attempts to explain as she keeps her hands hovered over the thrashing egg, using her magic to feel out the progress of things. “Lydia was fortunate enough to have a very easy gestation, but now it’s time for her Conduit to join the world. The labor seems to be exceptionally hard for her. It’s clinging to her life-force and sucking up the reserves of her magic in order to find the strength it needs to break free from where it’s been incubated. The process isn’t pleasant if you can tell, and sometimes, there can be complications. Here, swab her down with this. You three take these fans and get a nice breeze going. Keep her cool.”

Stiles accepts the cool washcloth with his free hand and begins dabbing around Lydia’s soaked temples. “What kind of complications?” he asks, worried.

Isaac, Malia, and Jackson surround them obediently and start fanning Lydia.

“There’s a chance it could be a still-born,” Aunt Lorraine warns, not unkindly. “But positives thoughts, my darling. If I sense anyone of you thinking ill of this whole process, I will have to ask you to leave.”

Everyone nods.

“Alright dear,” Aunt Lorraine says directly to Lydia. “You can draw back some. Let’s take a break. You’re doing so well.”

Lydia exhales suddenly and relaxes, opening her eyes (they are glowing with blood-orange ringlets) as moisture starts gathering in them. She’s weeping silently. “I can’t do it. I’m not strong enough and it hurts,” she whimpers.

Stiles feels his heart twist and ache in sympathy. He gently squeezes her hand and continues to dab around her forehead and temples.

Malia roughly nudges her twin brother. “Say something encouraging,” she whispers.

“What am I supposed to say?” Jackson hisses back, keeping a steady rhythm with the fold out fan in his hand.

Isaac huffs and rolls his eyes. “How hard is it to say ‘good job’?” he remarks sarcastically.

Jackson shoots him a withering stare. “I’m not her favorite person right now.”

“Hm, and yet you’re still here,” Malia retorts, sharing a conspiratorial glance with Isaac.
Stiles thinks it’s funny that they appear to be bonding over their irritation with Jackson. But, for Lydia’s sake, he decides to be responsible, and says, “The arguing isn’t helping though. Let’s just focus on what’s important right now.”

Aunt Lorraine sends him a grateful look as her hands continue to hover over the bejeweled egg. She says, “Okay, my sweet. We are nearly there. One last push of magic should do the trick.”

Lydia is shaking by this point and she’s hesitating. “I don’t think I have anything else to give. I’m so tired,” she says, in a drowsy voice. She looks pale, but her sweat soaked skin has a glow to it otherwise. “It feels like my nerves are being stabbed with hot sowing needles. It’s making my blood boil.”

Stiles grimaces against the visual it gives him, but he understands why she’s sweating and damn near breaking both Allison and Stiles’s hands. He hopes this isn’t what he has to look forward to, but it’s most likely his fate too.

“I know, I know,” Aunt Lorraine consoles. “That’s your Conduit burning through your magic. I won’t let it suck you dry, but I do need you to open up to it again. It’s using you as a tether, that’s why you feel that tug, yes? That pulling?”

Lydia exhales, bottom lip trembling, and she starts crying again. She’s still hesitating.

“Listen, Lyds, you are the strongest, most badass Banshee I have ever met,” Allison encourages, kissing her on the cheek before pulling back with a dimpled smile. “You just have to get through this and never think about it again.”

Lydia lets the tears run down her cheeks as she shakes her head in denial.

“She might if she has kids,” Malia points out. “Lydia, remember when they gathered all the seventh and eighth grade girls together for that health seminar? And we watched that video about pregnancy and labor? Blood and guts everywhere. Poop squirting out and everything.”

“Christ, I hope you have a point,” Jackson pleads, irritation and disgust bleeding into his voice and his expression.

Malia gives him the middle finger before she concentrates on fanning Lydia again. “My point is that the woman in the video was screaming bloody murder. I think you have more guts than that,” she says.

Lydia brings her gaze up and really looks at Malia.

Malia shrugs one shoulder. “It’s like you told me. You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them.”

More tears spill down Lydia’s cheeks.

“You can do it,” Stiles repeats and kisses the back of her hand, if only to distract her, catching on to what Allison and Malia are trying to do. “You can totally do this because you do everything flawlessly. We’re all so proud of you for how brave you are and we’re not going anywhere until you get through this.”

Lydia hiccups but she nods rapidly, shaking free any remaining tears left behind as she closes her eyes in concentration.

The bejeweled egg in her lap starts thrashing wildly this time, and a supernatural wind sweeps into
the room, causing the drawings that Lydia has on her wall to flutter. The watermelon-sized egg begins to levitate, spinning and spinning until it’s nearly over all their heads. Streaks of light start punching through, almost like a disco ball, until it’s nearly blinding.

Stiles is forced to turn away from it, as is Aunt Lorraine, Allison, Malia, Jackson, and Isaac.

Finally, after seven minutes of supernatural windfall and blinding beams of light, the egg seems to pop and disappear under a cloud of red smoke that falls to Lydia’s lap.

Stiles straightens and watches anxiously as the smoke clears.

When it does, there’s a very cranky black kitten crying and thrashing around, soaked to the bone with silver, opaque slime that has the odor of mint and raspberries.

If Stiles thought Lydia was weeping before, it’s nothing compared to what she’s doing now as she grabs her Conduit and holds him close, kissing all over his small kitten face with absolute love and devotion. She doesn’t seem to care that he’s covered in sticky slime or that it’s getting on her.

“Very well done, dear girl. Very well,” Aunt Lorraine praises with a nostalgic smile. “Looks like a boy, just as you thought. What were we thinking of naming him?”

Lydia has the black kitten cradled in her arms, and the kitten has stopped whimpering enough to look up at her soulfully, little nose twitching. “Prada,” she says, and repeats it in Polish, and then again in Gaelic. “Prada Natalie Martin.”


“I have a best friend, and I would never replace her,” Lydia remarks without referencing Allison but they all know whom she means (Allison goes a little pink with surprise but she looks truly pleased). “And I already recognize my cousin as my brother.”

Stiles is floored, and a little emotional. “Lyds…”

“I know,” Lydia says before he can even begin to ramble through a mountain of positive affirmations.

“But —”

“I know,” Lydia patiently promises, glancing at him briefly. “Me too.”

Stiles closes his mouth with a small grin but he nods.

Aunt Lorraine counters, “Darling, you are allowed to have more than one best friend or brother.”

Lydia shakes her head. “I understand. But. Some connections are too divine for that.”

Isaac cocks his head thoughtfully at that while Malia’s eyebrows lift in speculation.

Jackson just swallows and turns his face away, masking his discomfort and upset.

Stiles would almost feel bad if his heart wasn’t swimming in cozy validation from Lydia’s declaration. He’s never thought to wish for a sister but he’s happy that he’s inherited one nevertheless.

“So, you have decided,” Aunt Lorraine sighs, but her smile is no less encouraging.
“He will be mine and I will be his,” Lydia replies. “Not even death will separate us.”

“So be it, but he will age accordingly,” Aunt Lorraine warns. “He will grow under your guidance, but mentally, he will be four years younger than you in just six months. The gap will remain until the both of you leave this world.”

Lydia nods but she doesn’t take her eyes off the small, shivering creature.

“Well then, as us as your witnesses, I will draft up a birth certificate so that we can sign it and submit it to the Silver Magistrate to make it legitimate,” Aunt Lorraine says, magicking a document that has Prada’s full name, date and time of birth on it, and eight blank lines waiting for a signature. “In blood, please,” she instructs, pricking her finger with a thumbtack and smearing it over one of the lines. It magically transforms into her signature.

Stiles accepts it as it’s passed to him next. He pricks his finger the same way she did and watches in amazement while his blood drips onto the line under Aunt Lorraine’s signature and magically dissolves to match his signature exactly like when he writes it out himself. He then passes it to Allison next.

Allison goes through the motions as well before giving it to Isaac, who passes it to Malia, who passes it to Jackson, who gives it to Lydia.

Lydia does everything with one hand, still clutching Prada close as he starts to squirm and whimper.

Aunt Lorraine accepts the document back before she stands with it. “Congratulations. I’m sure you’ll be a wonderful mother.” She wiggles her nose and sends the document off. “That should get back to us in few days. Why don’t I take him for just a moment to look him over and get him clean, hm? Then I can show you how to feed him? I’m sure he’s terribly hungry.”

Lydia nods eagerly and after hesitating for a few moments, reluctantly hands Prada to her, watching with anxious eyes as the older woman exits the room.

“That was…something,” Malia comments after a while. “If you don’t mind, I think I’ll go back downstairs and scavenge for food.” She exits without waiting for a response.

“I’m sure Kyle is wondering where I’ve run off too,” Isaac mutters when he’s close enough to Stiles. “Were you hiding up here?” Stiles replies back, just as quietly with an amused grin.

“I needed a break. He was being overwhelming again.”

Stiles nods in understanding.

“I’m gonna go find Cora and Boyd. They can’t be far,” Isaac turns to Lydia and, in Albanian, says, “Prano urimet e mia më të mira.” With a final nod he leaves.

Jackson, noticing everyone’s confused expression, scoffs like he pities them and translates, “Accept my best wishes.”

Allison and Lydia don’t appear to be surprised by his ability to even translate it.

Stiles is the only one to ask, “Yeah, how do you know that?”

Jackson shrugs, moves to sit down at Lydia’s desk again, keeps his gaze fixed on Lydia and doesn’t elaborate how or why he knows how to speak Albanian.
Stiles might have guessed that he wouldn’t be forthcoming because Jackson has this habit of keeping everyone at a distance. Well, maybe besides Danny and Lydia.

As if to prove Stiles’s point, Jackson remarks, “You maybe want to get off the floor? It can’t be comfortable.”

Lydia ignores him.

“Come on, Lyds. He’s right. Why don’t we get you into bed?” Allison suggests and gestures for Stiles to help.

Lydia nods in agreement, looking utterly drained. When she’s all tucked in, she thanks them before saying, “I want you both to be Prada’s godparents.”

Jackson stiffens in his seat before crossing his arms dejectedly. He’s wise enough not to object, even though it’s clear he wants to say something.

“I trust you both,” Lydia presses, tiredly. “Please say yes.”

Allison and Stiles share a look before they turn back to Lydia and nod their consent.

Allison says, “I’m very honored. You’ll have to tell me what I should expect though.”

“There’s a complicated spell I’ve been working on with Aunt Lorraine. If I get it right, you’ll be able to understand him as clearly as if he were your own,” Lydia says to Allison, as though to assure her. “Would you be okay with that?”

“Oh course,” Allison swears, looking touched. “I would do anything for you.”

There’s a ghost of a smile that crosses Lydia’s face before she grows somber again. She looks to Stiles. “I won’t need to perform it with you as long as you have a Conduit,” she points out.

“Already way ahead of you,” Stiles jokes, his magic swirling excitedly in his gut as he thinks about it. “I plan on studying up for it starting tomorrow if I can.”

Lydia nods, blinking slowly like she’s trying to fight sleep. “Good. I want to be there for you when you go into labor.”

It’s amusing to Stiles the way she phrases it, but he gets what she means. “I wouldn’t have it any other way,” he promises. “Not to be a downer, but Mrs. Argent isn’t allergic to cats or opposed to there being one, is she?”

“I’ve never seen my mother catch a cold,” Allison jokes. “I think germs are scared of her. Maybe even allergies. But I think she would have said something if she minded. She already talked to Lydia and your Aunt Lorraine about what it would mean for Lydia to have a Conduit and my mom didn’t mind.”

“As long as I hold myself responsible for any accident just as equally as I would any accomplishment,” Lydia adds, seeming to be quoting the intimidating woman’s words verbatim.

“Ah, that’s good,” Stiles supposes, but it makes him thoughtful. “Actually, I should talk to my family about this too. I know my dad doesn’t have any allergies, but Melissa might, or Scott. Maybe even Isaac. I don’t want to cause them any trouble.”

Allison nods in agreement, and Lydia still looks like she’s ready to dose off at any moment.
“Is your mom here?”

Allison shakes her head. “She’s on a date with my dad. I think they might get back together,” she says, looking cautiously hopeful.

“I’ll go check on Aunt Lorraine,” Stiles decides, not wanting to push the subject. He’s brimming with questions anyway. “Make sure she’s being nice to my nephew.”

Another ghost of a smile crosses Lydia’s face as she pats his cheek gratefully before dismissing him.

Stiles snorts, turning to exit the room to do just as he’s said.

The floor is still vibrating under his feet with the music from downstairs. His stomach is gurgling, reminding him that he still hasn’t ate. He pauses for a moment to check his phone, and sees all the missed text messages waiting for him.

Scott texts: **Where are you dude? Are you with Allison? This party is nuts but everyone is really nice.**

Stiles responds: **I’m upstairs with Allison and Lydia. But I’ll be down soon. Or you can come up or whatever.**

Scott doesn’t reply right away, but he’s probably busy or in the middle of something so Stiles doesn’t mind. He looks at the next message, which is from Derek’s dad.

Derek Sr. texts: **Hello, Stiles! No worries. It was set for this Sunday, but there are apparently a few issues with the venue, so they are postponing until further notice. I’m glad you reached out, as I nearly forgot to mention it. Did you want to grab lunch to make up for it? We can talk about what events we’ll want to attend and coordinate how we can spend our time.**

Stiles smiles and responds: **Lunch sounds amazing, especially right now since I haven’t eaten, haha. Too bad about the convention, but I would still like to go if you’re up for it.**

He sends the message and then addresses the text that Derek has sent.

Derek texts: **Where did you run off to? Laura and I made nice. There were hugs and high fives and everything.**

Stiles is glad to know. He replies: **Nice! I don’t like when two of my favorite people are fighting. I’m upstairs with Allison and Lydia. Lydia’s Conduit decided tonight was the night.**

Derek’s reply is instantaneous: **Malia’s filling me in. That’s really cool. Apparently you’re an uncle now?**

Yeah, it’s crazy. I’ll tell you more when I see you. I’ll be down soon. I’m starving.

**Same. Didn’t want to eat without you.**

#loyaltyloyaltyloyalty

**That. Should not be as funny as it is.**

lol

Stiles pockets his phone and locates his Aunt Lorraine in the hallway bathroom.
She’s rubbing down a fussy Prada as she murmurs, “I know, little one. I know. We’ll have you back with your mother very soon.”

“Knock, knock,” Stiles says as he enters, and stands close to watch her work. “You probably already know I have questions.”

“I sensed it, yes,” Aunt Lorraine replies with a half grin. “You want to know about why I asked her what I did about what Prada would be to her.”

“It did cross my mind.”

Aunt Lorraine hums pleasantly. She says, “For Fae, it’s called The Choice. You are allowed to set the tone for the relationship with your Conduit because you are, with all intents and purposes, creating life by calling out to the Cosmos and waiting for its reply. You get three options: sibling, best friend, or child. Each one meaningful in its own way, but not without its own unique struggles and rewards. Lydia has decided, as some Fae do, to reap the benefits and battles of being a parent. It’s perfectly fine, and there is no stigma in the Fae community over it no matter the age of the Fae.”

Stiles takes that in, realizing he has a lot more to consider when it comes to choosing a Conduit. It doesn’t diminish his excitement in the least, but it also makes him nervous to think of what he may choose when the time comes. Right now, he has no clue, as all three options sounds equally good.

He asks, “But doesn’t everyone with a Conduit get that freedom?”

“I’m afraid not. For people like me, who aren’t Fae, our Conduits choose us. They reveal themselves when we call, but they act as a Familiar. It’s more of mentorship. They hold knowledge we need and guide us through our transition. Nature sets the tone for us, helps us find a Conduit that will help us understand Nature better and appreciate its gifts. But for Faerie kind, it’s different, as I’ve said. Fae, already invested and born of Nature, share a deeper aspect and bond than any other Paranormal. Your Conduits help to lift the final veil of Nature, allowing you to communicate with all manner of creature and living thing to get an even clearer understanding. And so, this why you get to make The Choice.”

Stiles takes that in and lets it settle in his mind.

“Now then, hand me that towel over there and you can give this little one back to your cousin while I brew some milk for the little darling,” Aunt Lorraine instructs.

Stiles fetches the grey towel she indicates to without much complaint, a little eager if he were being honest, to hold the small kitten in his arms. He’s still in an awkward place with his aunt, but at this moment, he feels truly kin to her as he watches her wrap Prada with gentle care before handing him over.

Prada is still whimpering, and his nose is twitching towards Stiles as though trying to scent him out, settling for a few moments as it stares soulfully up at him with blue eyes.

“Hey,” Stiles murmurs, voice scratchy with emotion he can’t describe. “How’s it going, little dude? I’m your Uncle Stiles. Welcome to the world. I’m sure you’re going to do great. You lucked up with your mom. She’s amazing.”

Prada blinks slowly at him before squirming again, mewling with agitation.

“Oh, okay. You’re probably hungry and want your mom. I get it.” Stiles chuckles as he carries him out the bathroom, his Aunt Lorraine has long since left. “She told me to come get you. So, I’m sure she’s just as anxious to get you in her arms again.”
Prada continues to squirm unhappily.

Stiles enters Lydia’s room again to find Allison cuddled up with her in the bed, the two of them sitting up and leaning back against a pile of pillows set up strategically against the headboard. “Special delivery,” he chimes as he hands his nephew back over to his cousin.

Lydia is all too happy to take her son back, huffing in amusement as she rubs her cheek gently against his to rub her scent all over him. Whatever she intends by the gesture works because Prada immediately settles down and begins to purr softly.

Stiles steps back and notices that Jackson is watching her do all this with this soft expression he doesn’t think he’s ever seen the other boy wear.

Aunt Lorraine reappears with a special kitten feeding bottle of milk. “Now dear, all I did was warm the organic milk I found in the kitchen. Warmed just a pinch, but the rest is up to you. All that’s left is for you to bless it with some of your magic, and it will help him grow into a strong healthy boy. We can discuss how we’ll wean him off later.”

Lydia nods and accepts the bottle, closing her eyes as the hand holding it lights up in a bioluminescent hue of red, causing the milk inside to bubble up before settling again. She presents it to Prada, whose nose twitches with interest. It takes a few tries but she does get him to lap up the milk (Aunt Lorraine guiding her through it all from where she’s sitting at the edge of the bed closest to Lydia).

This is when Scott and Derek wander into the room.

Scott’s face lights up when he sees Allison, and this dopey grin spreads across his mouth.

Allison returns it, dimples and all, gesturing for him to come over. “Come meet my godson,” she boasts proudly.

Scott approaches eagerly, sitting on the edge of the bed near Allison’s hip and he leans over to eye Prada with deep contemplation and fascination.

Jackson is still watching it all from across the room at Lydia’s desk.

Stiles jerks a bit but smiles when Derek drags him closer, ducking his head low to run his nose across the arc of Stiles’s neck, rumbling in satisfaction at having him so close. “Hey, big guy,” he murmurs and playfully tugs at Derek’s short hair. “Ready to eat?”

Derek lifts his head, waiting until the haze of his scenting passes before he blinks into awareness and nods. He says, “Cora is holding the honey cake hostage in the kitchen. When I told her you hadn’t ever had it before, she decided no one could have any until you did.”

“Loyalty,” Stiles laughs and turns to say his goodbyes to the rest of the room. He follows Derek back downstairs.

The crowds haven’t gotten any thinner, much to his disappointment.

Derek says they would be better off grabbing what they want to eat and taking it to the kitchen. Stiles isn’t certain about it, but Derek seems to understand what his dorky expression means because he smiles and says that Kate and Laura are fine with it, that they understand, that it’s enough that Stiles showed up at all.

That makes Stiles grin a little, and he’s able to relax because of it. He spends the next couple of
minutes making heads and tails of the spread before them while he stays close to Derek, and politely dismisses anyone bold enough to still offer to get him a drink or some food. He and Derek are able to escape with an armful of plates, finding blissful sanctuary in the kitchen in the company of Cora, Boyd, and Isaac.

Stiles mostly talks to Boyd about his band and how things are going. Boyd is more than happy to inform him that his mother has finally given him the green light to do some small performances at the family’s bowling alley, and maybe sometimes at the pizzeria too.

Cora talks to Isaac and Derek about Veronica’s dance recital, nearly waxing poetic about the eight-year-old’s skills and dedication. They seem to have a good laugh talking about how, when they all went out for ice cream to celebrate, Veronica nearly ran laps through the restaurant from the sugar rush and passed out as soon as she was buckled in for the drive home.

It’s nice. Nicer than what Stiles was expecting or even hoping for.

“Cake time,” Cora declares, taking a moment to hug Boyd from behind and gnaw on his shoulder.

Boyd is in the middle of eating but seems unbothered by his girlfriend’s behavior. If anything, he seems amused, if not fond.

Isaac, sitting on the counter behind them, rolls his eyes. “Can’t eat cake if you fill up on Boyd,” he points out wryly.

Cora steps back, licking at her front teeth almost thoughtfully. “Hm, maybe so,” she supposes before she grins slyly and eyes Isaac. “You look pretty tasty too.”

Isaac goes pink and shoots her a warning look. “Whatever you’re thinking, please don’t. Isn’t it enough that my bed still reeks of you?”

“You don’t even understand what it means.” Isaac looks disgruntled. “Boyd. Keep her away from me. She is acting offensive again.”

“Researching where? Did you read the Wikipedia page about lions? You tried to kiss me
like you were my mother. It was weird.”

“Oh.” Cora looks thoughtful. “Show me how to do it right then.”

Isaac sends Boyd another look. “Can you please do something about her? I don’t want that.”

“Yeah, if anyone’s gonna lick my brother, it’s going to be me,” Stiles declares, taking great pleasure in the way Isaac wrinkles his nose and rolls his eyes.

“Cat Kiss. Say Cat Kiss. It’s less weird,” Isaac corrects. “And it’s rude to do it to me first if I haven’t done it to you.”

“Well come give me a Cat Kiss. I feel like I deserve it more than Cora.”

Cora rolls her eyes.

Isaac just stares at him dryly and jumps off the counter. “I’m going back upstairs,” he says instead. “Come get me when it’s time to go home.” He disappears behind the swinging door.

“Now look what you did. You ruined my chances of getting a Cat Kiss,” Stiles says as he trashes his plate with a fake mournful tone. He faces her with a more sober expression. “But seriously, stop trying to lick my brother if he doesn’t want it.”

“Yeah, I got it,” Cora huffs, looking bothered, as if she doesn’t quite understand what she’s doing wrong. “Do you want to try some of this cake or not?”

“Sure. But I’m thirsty,” Stiles admits. He looks to Derek, who’s messing with his phone. “You want a refill?”

Derek glances up with a grin and nods. “I wouldn’t say no to more ice either.”

“Done and done. Anyone else?”

Boyd politely declines but Cora says, “I’m good. Just make it quick.”

Stiles gives her a mock salute before exiting the kitchen to get more punch.

Laura and Kate are in the living room, standing near the fireplace with Parrish and Peter as they all sing karaoke together (it’s a One Direction song).

Stiles chuckles at the sight, grateful that they are distracting everyone enough that they barely notice him weaving a path for himself to the ice sculpture of Laura and Kate, which is surprisingly still half recognizable (though it’s clear people have been chipping away at it).

There are a few people that approach him while he struggles to chip at Kate’s foot, intent on serving Derek her big toe because that would amuse them both to no end. It gets to a point where he’s fielding offers left and right until he starts feeling like Lucy Lui’s character in both Charlie’s Angels movies when she’s shooting down guys (his responses are just as short and blunt).

He’s at the punch bowl, juggling both cups, carefully grabbing the metal spoon to fill his and Derek’s cup when the cloying smell and taste of cinnamon assault his senses like a zap of lightning. His eyes get watery all at once and he chokes because it’s both unexpected and overpowering (like mace or pepper spray). He coughs coarsely, jerking wrong and making the metal spoon knock roughly into the punch bowl.

It’s going to topple over. There’s no way its not.
A clawed hand whips out and steadies it before it even gets the chance to spill a drop.

Stiles blinks past the tears lining his eyes and follows the hand to the owner, starting from the polished, almond-shaped banana yellow nails, up the arm covered in cheetah fur, to the blonde tresses pouring over wide shoulders, up to a pair of smirking neon yellow lips and finally to the laughing brown eyes of Erica Reyes.

Stiles’s grip on the cups in his hand goes slack in surprise and he ends up dropping them. He curses when it sends ice flying in all directions across the floor and he quickly bends down to clean it all up.

“Wow, Stilinski. I’m flattered to have made such an impression.” Erica says from above him, watching as he scrambles around her feet. She sighs and grabs his chin (her grip is abnormally strong, but careful, meaning she knows she could probably crush his jaw if she wanted). She lifts his head and forces him to look up at her from where he’s on his knees. She smirks. “There now. I think I like you like this.”

Stiles feels a little tongue tied and extremely embarrassed by his overreaction, not to mention very, very confused. Her touch sends an absolute chill down his spine and signals a sort of frantic warning in his mind that he has no idea what to do with.

“Well don’t look at me like that, Bambi,” Erica tsks. “Didn’t you wonder what happened to me when you ran my brothers and father off? No thoughts on how I was surviving or braving this cruel, little world of ours?”

Stiles opens his mouth to say something but Erica’s shoving a handful of shrimp in his mouth with an eye roll.

“Spare me your apologies. You and your dad did exactly what I hoped you would, you know. I kept leaving your dad gigantic clues.” Erica pulls away from him and plucks another piece of shrimp, popping it in her mouth with a delighted shiver. “Oprah may love bread, but I love fish,” she sighs and shoves shrimp after shrimp after shrimp into her mouth.

Stiles rubs at his jaw and he stands, spitting out shrimp after shrimp. Then his mind goes over what she just said and he looks at her sharply. He opens his mouth to hound her with questions.

Erica snaps her hand in front of his face with another eye roll and continues to stuff her face with shrimps, oysters, and even snatches a piece of fish cake from some guys hand, scowling at him when he tries to say something. He goes pale, cowers, and runs away in fear.

Erica smirks triumphantly.

Meanwhile Stiles is struggling to unclench his jaw to ask what the hell is going on but it feels like his jaw is wired shut with some sort of invisible binding. He realizes alarmingly fast that she’s put a hex on him almost seamlessly. He would be impressed if he wasn’t so freaked about the circumstances in general.

His magic starts to stir since it has been dormant and lucid up to this very moment. He knows it must feel his distress. He has to quickly curb the fury he can feel his magic projecting because all the lights are flickering wildly while the ice sculptures behind him begin to tremble. He throws a pointed look at Erica and gestures quickly to his mouth, hoping she understands his sense of urgency.

Erica just sucks on an oyster while staring at him blankly, unimpressed and unbothered.

Stiles sighs in frustration and takes a moment to close his eyes, which he can feel growing warm, his magic fighting to manifest. He soothes it as much as he can, guiding it to his jaw with gentle
prodding. He can feel its annoyance but it expands in his mouth like sweet tasting foam. Slowly he moves his jaw around until he feels it loosen completely. He opens his mouth in relief, opens his eyes to glare at Erica as the lights and the ice sculptures behind him finally settle.

Erica just uses her tongue and her clawed nails to clean her teeth. Then she says, “Took you long enough to shake that off. Man, you’re no fun like this. What’s Deaton been teaching you? Cause I have got to say, you suck.”

“Erica, what the hell is going on?” Stiles snaps, happy to see she’s not trying to tamper with his voice. “What do you mean my dad and I just did exactly what you wanted us to?”

“I said what I said.” Erica shrugs. “So, you know that moment in Matilda where she goes to her parents to get them to sign over their guardianship? Well, kinda the same concept for me. Only my slut of a father refused to listen to reason. And believe me when I say that Dr. Morrell and I tried to be very reasonable. She even assured my dad that he could still get visitation rights or whatever, but we both knew she was better suited to being my guardian than my dad was. I wasn’t born like a Were like my brothers, and I had these powers of persuasion I couldn’t quite fathom during my early years.

“Anyway, the point is that I needed my brothers and my father out of my hair, and you and your old man have such an annoying hero-complex.” She looks at her own claws as if she’s bored with it all. “You kind of made it too easy. I had to start with my dad, of course. Powers of persuasion, as I said. I made a few comments about how Isaac was running his mouth, saying stuff about how the Mayor is his father and how he and his family were going to go to the cops so he could get a DNA test. None of it true, naturally, but it freaked my dad the fuck out, and he enlisted my brothers on this whole cover up scheme. I’m surprised Isaac even survived it.”

Stiles feels his skin crawl as his anger begins to build.

“Well don’t look at me like that, Bambi. I never meant for him to die. I felt bad, so I asked Dr. Morell do something about his situation. Your dad was the best option, plus it would help us get an incite on your life. Know thy enemy, as they say. So yeah. It’s a good thing he did survive that night. His endurance also made my dad cagey, and when he gets cagey, he gets sloppy. And he got sloppy as fuck.” Erica pauses to laugh. “Oh, man, remember that fucking Chupacabra he left on your doorstep? What an absolute knob. He thought that would scare your dad. Idiot.” She shakes her head. “Anyway, in the background of it all, my two dumb as fuck brothers are running around town, shredding up Lydia and Danny and their families. All to cover up Mayor Argent’s disgusting indiscretions. My dad was head over heels for that sick bastard, and my brothers would cut out their own tongues for my dad, even though that loser couldn’t give a shit about the three of us. In my opinion, he would have drowned us all in the bathtub when we were toddlers if he thought he could get away with it, but since half of our DNA belongs to his True Match, well. You know. Here I am.

“There you go with the eyes. Look, if it makes a difference, I didn’t want anyone to like die or anything. Especially not Lydia. Not that I care for her, but like, she’s one of us, and that’s just what Humans want, for us to be against each other. Again, to make up for it, I had Dr. Morrell looking after her. I just wanted to push my father close enough to the edge that he would throw himself over,” Erica says with matter of fact tone. “When it became clear that my dad was helping Mayor Argent get away with all his bullshit by destroying those birth records and plausible deniability clauses Mayor Argent managed to threaten people to sign. He had my brothers go fetch it all, and at that point, well, I just couldn’t let that slide. I had Dr. Morrell show me how to do the Necromancy Charm so that I could appear to Chris Argent as his dead uncle in his dreams, which lead him to reading his mother’s journals and...ha, you know the rest, right? Power of persuasion. Blah, blah, blah. Chris Argent serves his purpose by exposing his father for the trash boat he is, and he gets
indicted by the Coalition of Huntsman. Which gets him out of the way so Dr. Morrell can run for office.”

Stiles feels all the blood drain from his face. “It was you. This whole time. It was you.”

“Yeah, fuckwad. That’s literally just what I said,” Erica scoffs and grabs more shrimp before she starts circling him oh so slowly, like a vulture circling prey. “But if we have to do this whole song and dance, you might as well say it and put us both out of our misery. Do you have any idea how fucking bored I’ve been? I thought getting you here would at least be some fun or some sort of challenge. But it’s like beating a three year old at a game of chess.”

Stiles does not like what she is implying. “You...brought me here?”

“I activated the Nemeton, yes.” Erica passes behind him, around him, looking at ease while she confesses. There’s a glow to her that he recognizes as forest-magic. “You can thank your uncle for that. He’s been giving me pointers. You have no idea how desperate he is to get his physical body back. He even killed Mr. Ravenhill to prove his loyalty. Not my idea, as I’ve said before, I don’t believe in the needless murder of Paranormals. But Dr. Morrell says we need the Chalice of Resurrection if we want to make the right impact. But, like, come on, Stiles. Did you really think it was your father’s spotless record in the field that warranted his transfer and promotion? Nope. The tree called you because I willed it, and you came. The tree saw to that. Moved all the chess pieces perfectly to ensure you would come.” She divides herself into two and her and her clone keep circling him. “You know, it was so important to keep up my ‘white trash’ persona. I even got a thrill out of being so close to you and watch you become more and more sure of yourself and your powers. Of course, the trick was to make sure we never made skin to skin contact.”

Stiles can feel his magic bubbling up again as Erica splits herself once more until her and her two clones are circling him, here in the view of everyone. But...that’s just the thing. No one is even looking in their direction.

The three Erica’s smirk when they notice his face, but only the real Erica speaks, “Don’t worry. We’re cloaked under a privacy spell that leans on their impulse to disregard anything bizarre or unusual. As far as anyone knows, we’re not even here. They can’t hear us or see us. You think I would just fucking blab about all this shit without taking precautions. What do you take me for?”

“I don’t know,” Stiles grits out between clenched teeth. He breaks out in a sheen of sweat, all from restraining his magic from lashing out. He needs her to keep talking so he can think of a plan. “What should I take you for?”

“Think about it, Stiles. If you are a Virtue, what does that make me? I’ll give you a hint.” She and her two clones keep circling him. They speak, in simultaneous harmony, saying, “A proud look. A lying tongue. Hands that agitate the masses to shed innocent blood. A heart that devises wicked plots. Feet that are swift to run into mischief. A deceitful witness that uttereth lies. The one that soweth discord among brethren. Have you guessed it? I know you’ve read it in your little Virtue Bible.”

“A Seven of Vices...” Stiles exhales and there is a ringing in his ears as shock floods his system. “You’re the Benefactor.”

The Three Erica’s clap their hands, saying, “Ding, ding, ding. Though I just spread that whole Benefactor rumor to throw people off my trail. Impressive right? People are probably looking for some middle aged guy with a vendetta against Mayor Argent, when it reality, my plans for world domination go way beyond that.”

“Why? You have to tell me why. Why are you doing all this?”
“Revenge,” the Three Erica’s say, causing him to be confused about which one of them is real and which one of them is just the clone. “Against Human kind. Those weak little bitches have forced all Paranormals into hiding in shame while they rape and pillage us and our resources as we go extinct or tear each other apart for territory or possessions. I want the Human world to burn and for Paranormals to rise from those ashes, redeemed and baptized for the New World. A world without Humans.”

Stiles feels absolutely sick. She’s talking about mass genocide. “Erica. That’s not your purpose. You’re only supposed to agitate in order to bring out the best in someone. Did you have anything to do with what happened in Chicago?”

“No. Why would I want to kill our people, Stiles? That’s Mayor Argent. He’s lethal, a good example of how evil Humans really are. He plans to out us all. The chocolate is only the beginning,” the Three Erica’s say, circling him and circling him and circling him. “If Chris Argent fails me, then I will have to go to ‘Plan B’ for sure. Dr. Morrell has been teaching me how to Inter-Jump, and once I complete that training, we’ll use it to construct a Time Travel Incantation. Maybe I’ll go back and slaughter Mayor Argent while he’s still in his crib. I already have the proof I need that it’s possible. What with, you know, Abraham and all.”

Stiles watches as the Three Erica’s smirk while looking at their yellow painted nails. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“So many questions, and you’re supposed to be my equal. Look, didn’t Talia ever tell you how her first husband died? Awful thing to neglect to tell your future Second. Did Laura never talk about the car accident? Well, she was about three at the time I think, so the memory is probably hazy. Terrible thing, really. I was only trying to spook him, I’m sure, by standing in the middle of the road ass-naked and covered in blood. He swerved too hard and drove him and Laura right off the road and the car nearly wrapped around a tree. The incantation was just in its early stages yet. I could only go back so far for a handful of minutes. Not enough to do real damage, I think.”

“But you did!” Stiles snaps, tears lining his eyes. “You robbed Laura of her father!”

“I didn’t mean to kill him, as I fucking said,” the Three Erica’s hiss. “It’s like you’re not even listening to me. You try inviting an impossible incantation without repercussions, and then we’ll talk. You don’t even have a Conduit yet.”

Stiles flinches against the truth of it as his magic rages in his chest like an angry sea during a tropical storm. He can feel it leaking out, his limbs growing warm with the weight of it.

The Three Erica’s tsk. They say, “You sure you want to fight me, Stiles? You haven’t even gone through the Changing Fever. You’re weak. Nothing but a fruit fly caught in my Spider’s Web. You can writhe and thrash all you want to, but in the end, you’ll just be food. Or, you can join me. Pick the right side, pick us, your true family. I would help you protect your brother, protect Derek and his family. We could protect all Paranormals, you and I. With my power of persuasion, and your power of strategy, we could be unstoppable.”

“You’re talking about trading lives,” Stiles says hoarsely, throat tight and hot with anger and distress. “I’m not so stupid to notice that you’ve excluded my father and Scott and his mother in the sum of your protection. Not to mention others.”

“I have no love or respect for Humans. They go to war amongst themselves and hold ancient ideals about gender politics, ethnic and religious superiority, and their unquenchable greed for money and power.”
“You sound like Voldemort.”

The Three Erica’s laugh coldly. “Mark my words, Stiles. One day, you’ll look back on this day, and you’ll regret your reservations. I’m not blind, I know Humans, for all their lesser physical traits, they are far from weak. You haven’t had a taste of their cruelty yet. But, if it gets you to open your eyes, so be it. I’ll let Mayor Argent do his song and dance. I did think to curb him and his devious intentions as a sign of goodwill towards you, but I don’t think I like your tone. Yeah. I think I’ll let him tear your world wide open, and when I think you’ve had enough, I’ll restore your memories of this night.”

Stiles lets his magic lash out, knocking the Three Erica’s back, but they rise (barely batting an eye at the assault) and close in on him again, standing at three points in the form of a triangle. They snap their fingers in unison and he’s frozen. His magic still thrashes and hits the invisible force field that’s been put up.

The real Erica, the one standing before him, speaks alone, “Haven’t gone to a party in a while, I usually send Jezebel ahead of me for it, but she’s busy where I need her the most. I have to say, drafting a Demon to your team does have its perks. Not that you would know, being straight edge and all. But, this was fun. Even though I’m not here for you, I’m glad we ran into each other. It fucking sucks that I have to make you all oblivious and boring again. Oh well. I do wish you the best of luck during your training. Perhaps you’ll even be a real challenge next time. Not that you could kill me anyway, cause, again, equals. Our life-forces are kind of tied up into each other, as is the rules of the Wild Kingdom, and the Laws of Balance.”

Stiles starts shaking, dread overtaking him. “Don’t. Whatever you’re thinking —”

The Three Erica’s grab at each others hands, linking their fingers together as their irises glow with liquid silver. The air begins to sing with powerful magic, and his vision starts to swim as he’s caught in the thrall of it.

They chant, in unison, with the dialect of Fae,

“Peril, Peril. Master of the Night.

Darkly, darkly, as the Moon burns bright.

Breathe us in, and spit us out.

Show us what magic is all about.

Singing, ‘Chaos! Chaos! In your mind!’

Send him back, to the time

When roses had no thorns, and the grass smells sweet;

Peril, hear my cries, and fill his memories with red butterflies,

Burn up his memories, melt them with divine heat,

“And when he forgets...” They sound far away now. Far, far away. “Let him sleep.”

SNAP.

“Now look what you did. You ruined my chances of getting a Cat Kiss,” Stiles says as he trashes his
plate with a fake mournful tone. He frowns, pausing as he stares at the trash. He's hit with the strongest sense of déjà vu.

Cora notices his pause. “Stiles?”

Stiles shakes his head as he casts the feeling aside. He faces her with a more sober tone. “Seriously, Cora, stop trying to lick my brother if he doesn’t want it.”

“Yeah, I got it,” Cora huffs, looking bothered, as if she doesn’t quite understand what she’s doing wrong. “Do you want to try some of this cake or not?”

“Sure. But I’m thirsty,” Stiles admits, the feeling of déjà vu refusing to leave him. He looks to Derek, who’s messing with his phone. “You want a refill?”

Derek glances up with a grin and nods. “I wouldn’t say no to more ice either.”

“Done and done. Anyone else?”

Boyd politely declines but Cora says, “I’m good. Just make it quick.”

Stiles gives her a mock salute before exiting the kitchen to get more punch. He only glances into the living room where Laura and Kate are in the living room, standing near the fireplace with Parrish and Peter as they sing karaoke together (It’s a Spice Girls song).

Stiles probably should find it amusing, but he just can’t stop thinking about how it feels like he’s already seen it. The perplexing thought never leaves him as he weaves a path for himself to the ice sculpture of Laura and Kate, which is surprising still half recognizable (though it’s clear people have been chipping away at it).

There are a few people that approach him while he struggles to chip at Kate’s foot, intent on serving Derek her big toe because that would amuse them both to no end.

He’s at the punch bowl, juggling both cups, carefully grabbing the metal spoon to fill his and Derek’s cup when the cloying smell and taste of the ocean assaults his senses like a zap of lightning. His eyes get watery all at once and he chokes because it’s both unexpected and overpowering (like mace or pepper spray). He coughs through it, jerking wrong and making the metal spoon knock roughly into the punch bowl.

Someone knocks into him from behind causing the punch bowl to thrash this way and that before it settles on it’s own without a drop spilling.

Geez, that was so close.

Stiles turns to reprimand the person for their rude behavior, but his words get caught in his throat.

It’s Heather.

“Fix me,” Heather demands. Her face is caked with makeup, she’s wearing a cotton white dress with a hem that falls right above her scraped knees, and her feet are black with dirt and blood. “I want to go home!” she shouts, causing a commotion and making people glance over curiously.

Stiles shushes her and sets the cups in his hands down as she starts to sway. She falls into him, and she smells like rotten fish drenched in vodka. He dry heaves and turns his face away as she slumps against him. “Are you drunk?”
“I had a few of those angry drinks. I do not see why liquid that gives you a sense of happiness has to taste so bad, but. It’s the only thing you Walkers got right,” Heather mumbles, rubbing her cheek against his chest. “I hate it here. I hate it up here. It’s so dry and bright. And the boys are so greedy. Putting their hands all over me. The way you all chose to fornicate is revolting.”


Heather snorts and pushes away from him, wobbling on her own feet. She smiles with all teeth, looking vicious and dangerous, even in this state. “Not before I hurt them first,” she replies, looking smug.

Stiles is baffled. He clears his throat. “Where are you staying? Where do you sleep?”

“Under bridges or in the bathrooms of your food establishments. Wherever is most convenient at the time.” Heather’s expression darkens and she begins to pout. “I had the loveliest shell bed at home, cushioned with the carcasses of mollusks and starfish. I miss it. I miss it. Everything is hard and lumpy up here and I don’t understand the point of these!”

Stiles grimaces as she yells again but he can’t stop himself from laughing at where she’s pointing with an infuriated but confused expression. “You mean your knees?”

“Ugh! It even sounds stupid!” Heather exclaims. “They are so fragile. When I bump into something it hurts. How useless. Why do Walkers hold on to bones that do nothing but hurt them?”

“Uh, well, they serve their purpose by helping us walk, and bend, and sit,” Stiles explains, reaching out quickly to steady her as she sways again.

“I’m hot,” Heather complains and starts tugging at her clothes. “This skin is hot and itchy and that angry drink is making my insides all warm and, and, and...”

Stiles waits for her to finish but she doesn’t. He sighs heavily. “Come on, let’s get you out of here. You cannot take off your clothes unless you’re in private!” He scrambles to pry the hem of her dress from her hands and push it back down.

“Ugh! And that’s another thing! Why do you care about stupid things like clothes and shoes? It’s all uncomfortable,” Heather complains, but doesn’t fight him when he wraps her arm over his shoulders while pulling her close with an arm around her waist. “My glamour never works on you.”

“That’s because I’m a Virtue,” Stiles patiently explains quietly before he starts walking them in the direction of the backdoor, thinking some fresh air may do her some good. “Glamours don’t usually work on me, or so I’ve come to understand.”

“No,” Heather whines, wobbling. “My kind has charmed and tricked Vices and Virtues. Easily. But you’re different. Are you a Mermaid? You must tell me if the blood of Atlantis runs through your veins!”

Stiles laughs as he carefully moves them out the backdoor, closing it behind them as they step out into the night air. “I’m not a Mermaid. I’m Fae.”

“Mermaids are distantly related to Fae,” Heather argues before she stiffens. Then she struggles to be free of him, causing them both to sort of wobble and fall into some bushes.

Stiles groans and hopes he doesn’t get any scrapes or bruises because of this. He untangles from the bushes after a few undignified attempts, and then gets to work with helping Heather do the same. “Okay, you can’t just jerk away from me like that. Especially when we’re still walking down some
Heather glares at him. She doesn’t apologize but Stiles isn’t expecting her to. She says, “We’re related.”

“Uh. Okay.” Stiles guides her back to the steps and makes her sit down while he pulls out his phone to send an S.O.S in the group chat, dropping his location as well. “Yeah, you just said that Mermaids are distantly related to Fae.”

“Distant, being the key term here,” Heather snarls, her glamour flickering on and off in her agitation. “But the genetics are usually so thin and distant that we can still catch any one of you in our thralls. But mine doesn’t work on you! That means we’re closely related! Like cousins! Was your mother a Mermaid? Your father? One of them has the blood of Atlantis!”

Stiles shushes her because she’s starting to shout again.

That’s how Cora, Boyd, Allison, Jackson, Isaac, Scott, and Derek find them.

Heather hisses, stumbling to stand behind Stiles. Her glamour ripples to warn them of the absolute frightening creature she is. But it gets ruined when she hiccups in the next second and starts laughing. She falls back on her bottom besides Stiles’s legs, and just hugs his knees and closes her eyes.

“What the hell is she?” Jackson questions with a frown, staring down at the dozing Nymph.

“She’s an Ex-Mermaid — ow! Heather, don’t bite me!”

“I am STILL a Mermaid!” Heather yells, but she’s lying on her back at this point. The jolt from Stiles’s shock at her physical aggression sent her sprawling into the grass, limbs fanned out like a starfish. “I cannot believe I have been cursed to remain on dry land until I die. All because I had the smallest piece of Human food.” She pauses her rant to blink widely at the sky. “What did you call me?”

Stiles can feel his face get itchy and hot in embarrassment at his verbal blunder. “Uh…you never told me your name so I kinda gave you one,” he explains quietly.

Heather grows quiet and stares at him with the kind of thoughtful expression he’s not sure what to do with. Then she says, almost like a whisper, “I’ve never had a name before. No one’s ever given me a name. We don’t need them back at the Nest, or in the Palace. We talk with our minds, so we know who it is we are communicating to or about.” Her eyes are slowly filling with tears. “Say it again.”

Stiles feels his blush get a bit more prominent at the weight of everyone’s curious gazes. He says, “I didn’t really mean to —”

“Say it again,” Heather demands, pointing a wobbly finger at him. “I like it and you gave it to me and so it’s mine and you will use it! Say it, say it, say it.”

“Oh, Heather! Okay!” Stiles exclaims and sighs when he hears Malia and Scott laugh. “Guys, this is Heather. An Ex — I mean, a Nymph. As you can see, she’s had too much to drink. We can’t leave her to her own devices. She’s a danger to others and to herself.”

Heather sits up and slumps forward. She smiles with all teeth, and says, “But mostly a danger to others.”

Stiles sends her a warning look. “Don’t vaguely threaten my friends.”
Heather actually pouts and falls onto her back again. “Dull,” she complains.

“What a brat,” Malia remarks and grins when it gets Heather to scowl up at the starry sky. “I thought Mermaids were supposed to be nicer.”

“To be fair, we can’t exactly rely on the Disney interpretation,” Allison points out as she crosses her arms and cocks her head while she gazes thoughtfully at Heather.

“What about Peter Pan? She reminds me of the Mermaids from Peter Pan,” Boyd adds as Cora leans into his side with a neutral expression.

Jackson scoffs. “That’s still painting an overly flattering picture. And Stilinski just said she was a Nymph. Nymphs are generally regarded as divine spirits that are usually depicted as beautiful, young nubile maidens who love to dance and sing, but they are also invariably bound to places.”

“And seeing as how she’s stuck on dry land, the term suits her better than referring to her as a Mermaid or even a Siren,” Derek agrees, understanding what Jackson is implying.

Stiles is once again reminded that Jackson is incredibly smart, but he spends most of his time downplaying it. “Exactly.”

“How old is she?” Allison asks. “Lydia said it was important to ask. She didn’t tell me why, but she said she would be too busy trying to get Prada settled to come down here and ask for herself.”

Stiles suddenly understands why his cousin isn’t present, though he should have guessed that her newborn Conduit would be her priority. He replies, “I’m not sure actually.” He turns and looks down at Heather. “How old are you?”

“How old? What does that even mean? Do you mean like the rituals those short Walkers go through? I noticed you Walkers like to celebrate certain days with sweet things impaled with waxy fire sticks and floaty circles attached to strings.”

“I think she is literally describing a birthday party,” Derek says with a light laugh.

Everyone shares in on the humor.

Except Heather, who frowns with deep contemplation as she gazes into the sky. “I don’t understand it. You reward each other for something you are not at all responsible for. Why are tokens and favors expected for that? I was hatched about 16 cycles ago and no one has ever given me anything or honored me for it. Do whatever you want with that information. I don’t really get what you’re asking.”

“We’re trying to figure out your age,” Allison explains kindly. “So, we know how to better help you. It sounds like you’re 16 years old. Do cycles work the same as years?”

“I have no experience with the way Walkers keep time. We measure by the currents of water, whether by rivers or oceans.”

“Let’s just say she’s sixteen and move on,” Cora declares, seeming annoyed with this thread of conversation. “What are we going to do with Drunk Ariel? Obviously, we can’t leave her to her own devices, like you said, Stiles.”

“You’re going to bring her home with us, aren’t you?” Isaac deduces with a bland tone.

Stiles smiles sheepishly and promises, “I won’t force you to give up your bed. I know your nose is
more sensitive than mine.”

“I’ll go bring the car around,” Derek volunteers with a small, affectionate grin aimed at Stiles (who volleys it back). He turns to Malia and Jackson. “It shouldn’t take me long to drop them off and make sure they’re okay. I’ll come back and get you both if you’re cool to wait on me.”

Malia shrugs and Jackson simply nods.

“You didn’t have any cake,” Cora complains with a furrowed brow.

“We can cut him a slice or two and send it home with him,” Boyd offers, resting a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

Cora huffs but nods and follows him back inside so they can do just that.

Derek mutters that he’ll be back soon and both Malia and Allison volunteer to walk with him to his car, which he gratefully accepts. The three of them are gone within the next couple of seconds.

Heather makes no move to climb to her feet, choosing, instead, to stay where she is and curse the upper heavens under her breath while also begging to Peril for divine mercy.

Stiles could easily sympathize.

“Give me your phone. I’m texting dad about all this,” Isaac firmly urges. “We can’t give him a reason to ground us or further delay getting me a new phone.”

Stiles figures he has a point and he forks over his phone.

Isaac wanders off to the side of the duplex for some semblance of privacy.

“You need help getting her to her feet?” Scott asks, approaching him.

“Yeah. Thanks.”

Jackson watches the two of them struggle without once offering to help because, you know, he’s such a Samaritan like that.

It makes no difference in the end since she ends up vomiting on Jackson’s shoes during the whole process.

Stiles does his best to pretend that it isn’t karma.

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Stiles and Scott decide between themselves to sit in the back with Heather, who complains at great lengths that none of them will let her sit in the main seat and navigate the stupid metal box.

Derek humors her for a while on the drive home, asking if she’s ever driven before, to which she replies that it can’t be different than riding a Seahorse or swimming.

Isaac rudely points out that she can’t even swim anymore from where he’s sitting in the passenger seat and that’s the thing that makes Heather sit in stony silence for the rest of the ride.

Stiles literally cannot believe this is his life.

It’s edging past midnight when Derek parks in the driveway beside the sheriff’s squad car.
Stiles feels a bit more at ease under the weight of the protective wards lining the house, and the nearness of his garden. He’s glad to see that it doesn’t affect Heather negatively, which only means that she doesn’t wish to harm any of them. Though he does wonder about what might happen if she had been a threat and how his wards would react. He hopes that he doesn’t have to find out any time soon.

Once everyone is inside the house, there’s a bit of a debate about what should be done with Heather next while they stand in the kitchen (Heather is actually sitting at the table, nodding off).

“She needs to like take a shower or something,” Isaac suggests, nose wrinkled. “She smells like rotten fish, and blood, and Vodka.”

“Which brings to mind another question,” Stiles says as he turns to look at the drunk Nymph. “Heather, where have you been getting your clothes?”

Heather glares at him with glossy eyes. “What a useless query. I go to places that have them, and then if I see something I like, I just take it.”

“Great. Not only is she a drunk, but she’s a klepto,” Isaac mutters. “You have to pay for those things. You can’t just take whatever you want.”

“I left my prettiest shells!” Heather exclaims hotly.

“Shells have no real monetary value on the surface world,” Isaac argues.

“Well it’s better than trading stupid green pieces of paper with dead men that mean nothing,” Heather retorts and hiccups.

“I’m going to bed,” Isaac decides, looking perturbed. “She’s more trouble than she’s worth.”

“Insolent,” Heather mumbles as they all watch Isaac disappear up the steps. “I’m hungry. I’m always hungry. All the time. Walking everywhere uses so much energy, it’s stupid.”

“Yeah,” Scott agrees sincerely. “But we have to. It’s the way things are.” He looks to Derek and Stiles. “Should I like, I don’t know, make her something?”

“Yes, you should,” Heather responds before anyone gets the chance to, nodding her head along with her words.

“Hold on, you like threw up less than forty minutes ago,” Stiles points out. “You should probably take it easy.”

“Something with bread might help soak up any alcohol that might be lingering in her stomach,” Derek advocates. “I used to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for Laura when she started going to high school parties and went overboard with the drinking. She said it always helped.”

Stiles considers that at face value while Heather hiccups again and says, “What’s peanut butter?”

“Only the best thing ever created,” Scott replies with a sunny smile. “It tastes great paired with all sorts of things.” He continues to wax poetically about the virtues of peanut butter as he goes hunting for sandwich ingredients.

Heather drunkenly hangs onto every word, asking inquisitive questions here and there that Scott happily answers.
“I should get going, but I take it you’ll be okay?” Derek asks checking his phone for the time as he
gestures for Stiles to walk him out.

Stiles nods as they exit the house together. “Yeah, for now. My dad and Melissa should be home
tomorrow. I’m sure they’ll have some ideas about what we’ll do about Heather.”

Derek leans back against the driver’s side door when they reach his car and he drags Stiles close for
a few minutes of scenting. “Don’t forget to try the cake and tell me what you think,” he murmurs as
he skims his nose against the line of Stiles’s throat on the left side. He makes a thoughtful sound.
“You smell like fish.”

“Yeah, I bet. Heather is clingy.” Stiles runs his fingers through Derek’s hair, smiling to himself when
Derek starts rumbling lowly in his throat. “Your dad and I are supposed to have lunch tomorrow.”

Derek pulls back a little to nod and give him a deep kiss that makes his toes curl on the inside of his
shoes. He doesn’t let up until Stiles is pink and breathless, and just short of dazed. He pulls away and
says, “I’ll see you after. I believe I was promised a sleepover.”

Stiles makes an amused sound, not quite up to using actual words yet, seeing as how the world is still
spinning and all.

Derek kisses him again, chuckling in amusement and he plants one last smug kiss on the corner of
Stiles’s mouth before he wraps him into a warm hug.

Stiles hugs him back, almost fiercely, savoring the small moment of peace as he tucks his face into
the heated line of Derek’s neck. The smell of vanilla and jasmine calming him like nothing else. He
drops a kiss to Derek’s collarbone before pulling away completely.

Derek smiles before he climbs into his car, promising to text him when he finds his way home. Once
he’s buckled in and starts his car, he lowers the window to say, “Later.”

“Later.”

Derek reverses out of the driveway into the street, waving one final time as he passes.

Stiles waves faintly and watches what feels like a piece of himself drive away. His magic stirs, twists,
and unfolds itself from between his ribcage. He presses at it, feeling it out and grinning when it
presses back out of annoyance.

Just making sure you’re still there.

Absurd, Faerie. I will always be here.

Stiles senses a sharp pause. What’s wrong?

I am not entirely sure. We feel different.

Stiles blinks at that as he gazes up the street directly adjacent to his block. How do you mean?

I am not sure, as I have said.

Geez, no need to get testy with me, I’m just asking. I trust you to find out. You are the best I’ve ever
known, that’s for sure.

Stiles grins as his magic begins to fizzle and preen with the validation.
Right. Well. I am...going to need some time to cycle through you until I come across what I am looking for. You won’t need me immediately for the next 48 hours will you?

Stiles feels his mouth shrink into a frown. You really think it will take that long?

I do not know. If things go well, it may take even less. You will still feel me there, I just wont be immediately accessible for anything other than the threat of imminent danger. Please take care of yourself. You can be quite clumsy.

Ah, you’re so sweet to worry. Okay, I can suffer things for a while without you, I think.

Do not get used to it.

Stiles grins and huffs in amusement. Wouldn’t dream of it. Happy hunting.

His magic doesn’t respond, choosing to begin its search right away instead.

Stiles can feel it easing down to his toes before traveling along the nerves and muscles there. Then, he doesn’t really feel anything but a faint ebbing which is the only thing that lets him know his magic is still present. He sighs and decides to go back into the house, locking the door behind him.

Heather and Scott are just where he left them, only Heather is weeping into her peanut butter and jelly sandwich while Scott tries to pat her comfortingly on the back.

Stiles lifts an eyebrow. “Uh...”

Scott grins sheepishly and says, “She’s overwhelmed by how good it is.”

Stiles is surprised at the level of restraint he shows by not laughing even though that is absolutely hilarious. He clears his throat twice before he says, “Okay. I’m going to go find something for her to change into. You and I may have to let her have my bed and sleep down here.”

“That’s okay,” Scott promises. “I’ll keep her company.”

“Scottie, you are a prince among men.”

“You are a prince? Is this why your sandwiches take like the joys of satisfaction?” Heather questions in confusion, jelly and peanut butter smeared on her mouth and chin.

Stiles leaves as Scott explains the phrase of what being a ‘prince among men’ really means while moving to make another PB&J when she begs for it.

Stiles ends up rooting around in his closet for some clean clothes, thinking about how fortunate it is that he and Heather are nearly the same size in waist and shoulders.

He’s rifling through the linen closet in the bathroom for a towel when his pocket vibrates furiously. Thinking it’s probably Derek or his dad, he just accepts the call without looking and puts it on the bathroom counter.

“Stiles! Why am I looking at a ceiling? Where’s your face?”

Stiles blinks in surprise at the familiar voice and scrambles to pick up the phone.

Kira beams back at him from his phone screen.
“Wow, hi. Did we plan this?” Stiles asks as her video lags only by a few seconds. “Not that I’m not happy to see you. This is unexpected.”

Kira laughs and it looks like she’s sitting on a bench under a cherry blossom tree with the sun behind her. “Nah, we never got this far. I meant to always reply to your last email but things would get crazy over here and I just didn’t have the time. What time is it there? Am I calling when everyone is sleep?”

“No, it’s like almost one in the morning here, but I think Isaac is the only one that’s sleep. My dad is out of town with his girlfriend, and so Scott is staying over. We just got home from a party. It’s Laura and Kate’s housewarming.”

“Oh nice! I’m sorry I missed it.” Kira does look genuinely sorry. A breeze passes over her, making pink petals fly all around her as her shiny, black hair slaps her across her face. She laughs, embarrassed as she fixes herself and spits hair from her mouth. “As you can see, I’m still as graceful as ever. It’s like six pm here and we’re taking a quick break from the wedding rehearsal. We’re at the site where it’s supposed to happen. It’s like down to the wire since it’s happening this weekend. Both bride and groom are being divas, but I guess ceremonies like this brings that kind of thing out in people.”

Stiles nods, taking in the features of her face and realizing for once how much he misses her. With everything going on, he really hadn’t taken the time to think about it. He doesn’t say it though, but he remarks, “You look happy.”

“Thanks. Wait, should I be thanking you for that?” They both laugh. “Yeah, I’m just gonna thank you. I am. Very. I think I needed this time away, but I’m ready to come home. I miss you and everyone, but mostly you cause you’re my favorite.”

Stiles grins affectionately. “I was just thinking that, you know. That I didn’t realize how much I missed you until now.”

Kira looks pleased to hear it.

Scott materializes with Heather in tow, who seems a bit more sober. “Dude, I think it’s now or never. She keeps saying how she’s going to climb in the kitchen sink, turn on the water, and go to sleep like that.”

“Is that Scott? Hi, Scott!” Kira yells.

Scott quickly snatches the phone from Stiles before he can even confirm and he brightens when he sees Kira. “Kira! How have you been? Are you still in Japan?”

Kira starts talking excited about what she’s been up to as Scott wanders down the stairs and out of sight.

Stiles shakes his head in amusement before he closes the linen closet door and turns to Heather. “I realize there’s no polite way to ask this, but, do you know how to shower?”

Heather stares at him blankly.

Stiles decides to switch tactics. “How would you normally stay clean if you were home?”

“The water takes care of that. It always provides.”

“Right. Of course that’s how that works.” Stiles sighs as he gazes at his tub thoughtfully. “Okay.
Let’s start with the basics then.”

It takes nearly an hour of blunt and painfully detailed explanations before Heather gets the full picture of what she’s expected to do in the bathroom by herself. He leaves her to it after he shows her how to work the faucets and manipulate the temperature settings before reminding her that we do not eat the soap, Heather, even if it smells really good.

Stiles goes to retrieve Scott, who is still embroiled in a deep conversation with Kira. He encourages Scott to grab whatever he needs to get ready for bed before Heather has free reign of his room. Scott says his goodbyes to Kira before handing the phone over and goes to start his nightly routine.

“Don’t worry, Scott caught me up on everything,” Kira assures with a bubbly smile. “You and Derek, huh? I probably should have seen that coming. I always thought it might be Cora, but Derek was the one that looked at you how I used to look at you.”


Kira laughs and laughs. When she gets herself together, she replies, “Yeah, those little hearts and stars in your eyes definitely say different. But I’m happy for you. I really am. I hope maybe you can tell me more about it when I get back.”

“Of course. When will that be?”

“Next week, I’m hoping, though I think my dad is trying to stay until the end of the month,” Kira supposes. “My mom loves my dad enough to agree to it, even though I can tell all this social interaction is taking it’s toll. She’s not much of a people person. But, considering that she’s like basically a thousand years old, she has different beliefs on what’s important. You know what I mean?”

Stiles nods because he kind of does. “It was nice seeing you, even though we didn’t get to talk that much. Send me pictures of the wedding.”

“I will, believe me. Send me pictures of your garden! I heard it’s quite spectacular.”

“Deal.”

“Goodnight. Good luck with the Ex-Mermaid.”

Stiles chuckles and bids her goodnight. He lets her be the one to end the connection. A push notification appears on his phone, warning him of the low battery, which isn’t surprising since it feels pretty warm in his hand. He uses the time it takes to go back upstairs to his room to read all his missed texts, passing Scott who’s on his way down to make himself comfortable in the living room.

All his missed texts are mostly from Derek, and they read:

Hey, babe. Decided to crash here at Laura and Kate’s.

Cora thought we should stay behind to help them clean up.

Jackson and Malia stayed too, but Laura had to separate them since they wouldn’t stop fussing at each other and nit-picking.

Cora wants to know if you’ve had the cake yet?
How are things?

Stiles replies: You still up?

I haven’t had the cake yet. I’ll probably eat it for breakfast tbh.

You’re a real mvp for staying behind to help with the clean up.

Uh, yeah, so like things are fine. I mean Heather and I had an awkward conversation about how Humans shower, and how females in particular shower. But, you know, if I ever have a daughter someday, I’ll be prepared.

I’m pretty sure you’re sleep, so just text me when you get this.

Goodnight Sourwolf xx :)

Stiles pockets his phone as he quickly looks for some pajamas, which he changes into when he locates something clean. He manages to remind himself at the last second to put his phone on the charger on his nightstand next to Scott’s. He hopes Heather doesn’t mind how messy his room is. He’s exiting on the thought just as Heather walks out of the bathroom, soaked from head to toe, steam billowing behind her, but content nonetheless.

“Maybe you Walkers aren’t hopeless after all,” Heather comments as she passes him to enter his room.

Stiles snorts. “The shower was that good, huh?”

Heather shrugs and looks around his room curiously, clutching the towel around her body like Stiles advised, skin pink but clean, long hair darkened by water.

“Right, well, uh.” Stiles takes a moment to gesture to his bed. “I put some clothes right there for you. This is a light switch, okay? You’re supposed to push it down to make it dark. The dark makes it easier to sleep. Do you want me to open the windows? It can get pretty hot, and my dad doesn’t like us messing with the thermostat without his permission.”

Heather shrugs and continues to mess with the things on his dresser with a curious frown.

Stiles makes a quick work of opening all his windows before he eases her away from his things. “It’s rude to touch people’s belongings without their permission. Please just don’t do that.”

Heather glares, sticking up her nose as if it’s beneath her and marches back over to the edge of the bed where there are clothes waiting.

“If you need anything, I’ll be downstairs,” Stiles promises with an amused tone before he closes the door behind him and tucks away in the bathroom. He’s not surprised that there’s barely any hot water left when he tries to take a shower.

On his way back down, he checks in on Heather, amused but glad to see that she’s swaddled herself in all his blankets with her back to his windows. She, of course, forgot to turn off the light, and he makes sure to turn it off before closing the door just enough that it’s still open a crack.

Scott’s still up and watching Drake and Josh on the Nicktoons channel when Stiles makes his way back down stairs. He asks, “She okay?”

Stiles nods as he rifles through the linen closet next to the food pantry for some pillows and blankets.
He hands it over to Scott and together they push the coffee table to the side and under the windows so they can have more space on the floor.

He says, “Hey, thanks for being so flexible.”

Scott shrugs as he makes himself comfortable. “It’s fine. I kinda feel sorry for her, dude. I don’t know what I would do if I couldn’t go home or see my mom again.”

Stiles sighs contently as his head hits the pillow, and he pulls his thin blanket up to rest only at his waist, grateful for the cool breeze coming through the open windows. He says, “Yeah. Me either.”

“You’re really awesome for helping her,” Scott compliments as he settles on his stomach beside him, tucking his arms under his pillow and then resting his chin on top so he can continue to watch TV. “You know, it feels like we haven’t gotten a chance to hang out this weekend.”

“Ugh, believe me, I know. Sorry,” Stiles mumbles, eyes already closed. “Things have been crazy lately.”

“I understand. We have all summer to do things together. Plus if our parents get married, we’ll live together.”

“You okay with that?”

“Of course. Aren’t you?”

“Your mom makes my dad happy. I’m good with it.”

“Dude, same. I like your dad. He treats my mom better than my dad ever did. He used to hit her, but she never let him hurt me.” Scott exhales. “I don’t remember like a whole lot about that time. There were happy moments, but the bad ones were really bad. Like. Sometimes, when he was really, really drunk, he would like, take my mom out to the graveyard and make her get on her knees while he pointed a gun to her head and pointed to the tombstone saying that would be her if she ever left him.”

“Oh,” Stiles says faintly, horror creeping over him. “That’s...”

“Shitty? Yeah.” It’s the first time Stiles has ever heard Scott swear. “He drunk himself to death. I...I still remember how relieved my mom looked when the cops told her. She started crying, and they thought she was devastated, but she started laughing in the middle of it and I’d never see two old white dudes look so uncomfortable. They didn’t understand. Mom got her life back. We both did.”

Stiles doesn’t even let himself think when he gets up and pulls Scott in a hug.

Scott accepts it with a wry laugh. “We’re okay now, Stiles. I just wanted you to know that I’m glad our parents met.”

“So am I,” Stiles agrees before they pull apart. “Scott, I would have never guessed that you and your mom came out the other side of something like that. You two are amazing.”

“Thanks, but my mom is the amazing one. She always tells me that I don’t have to become my father. That used to worry me,” Scott admits as they get settled again. “I could never put anyone through what my dad put my mom through.”

“I would think so,” Stiles remarks with utter confidence. “You’re the sweetest person I know. Outside of Allison.”
Scott gets that dopey lovesick grin on his face. “Yeah. She’s amazing.” He sighs. “You think she’ll want to marry me someday?”

“I’m many things, but I’m not exactly a fortune teller,” Stiles teases as he lies down and closes his eyes. “You never know what the future holds.”

“That’s true.” A few beats of silence pass where Scott’s attention is solely on the comedic antics of Drake and Josh. Then, during the commercial, when Stiles is already drifting, he quietly says, “I’m excited to have you and Isaac as a brother. It’s more than I could have hoped for.”

Stiles smiles tiredly. “Yeah, after my mom died, I thought, well this is it, until I get married, my dad is all I have. He never knew his family, and my mom’s parents had died while I was still young and she was alive. I never thought I would be so fortunate to gain so much family. The turnover has been insane if I can be honest.”

“I totally understand. I’m glad to be a part of that.” Scott shifts and it sound like he’s facing forward again. “Goodnight.”

Stiles mumbles it back. He’s out like a light the next second.

That night he dreams that he’s walking the halls of his own mind and when he gets to the room holding all his memories, it’s filled with red butterflies.

He hasn’t got the first clue how to get them out.

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Stiles blinks awake, curled in a ball on his living room floor with a blanket over his head and the sound of voices murmuring lowly in the kitchen. He reaches inside of himself and faintly senses his magic still there, riding the nerves of his calves. He lets himself relax at that and gives a bone cracking stretch, which shifts the blanket off of him and exposes him to the sweet smelling breeze drifting in from the open window. The curtains flutter faintly as streams of wind tinged with the scent of roses drifts through the house. He smiles to himself, knowing his bushes must be the source.

The voices in the kitchen pause.

Stiles frowns and looks over to see that Scott is still dead to the world, mouth agape, drool running down the side of his mouth. He huffs in amusement before he blinks with a sudden thought. He’s on his feet the next second and sure enough, his dad and Melissa are sitting at the kitchen table with two cups of coffee. He doesn’t even think when he immediately makes a beeline for his dad.

His dad chuckles lowly, and stands to plant his feet for the impact of Stiles’s enthusiastic hug, more than used to it by now. “Hey, kiddo. How were things without us?”

“Awful. Terrible. Don’t ever leave us again,” Stiles jokes and moves to kneel beside Melissa so that they can embrace without her having to stand to her feet for it.

Melissa is hugging him as she laughs. “Ah, see, Jon? I told you taking a vacation was a wild idea.” She kisses Stiles on the top of his head and she rubs his back, and Stiles melts under the affection.

The sheriff huffs. “Time for ourselves? Right, what were we thinking?” he mutters sarcastically as he goes to the coffee maker to pour himself another cup.

“When did you guys get in?” Stiles questions, pulling away only slightly from Melissa, leaning into her side instead as she combs her hand through his hair. He feels a little drowsy with it, like he could
easily lie his head down on her lap and go back to sleep. He doesn’t but it’s a nice thought.

“Maybe less than an hour ago,” his dad responds as he returns to the table. He gazes at Melissa and his son over the top of his cup as he takes a slow sip. He doesn’t comment about how cozy they look but Stiles can see the way his mouth is curling happily from behind his cup and his eyes are warm.

“So, Isaac must have told you about Heather.”

His dad nods and lowers his cup. “That’s actually what Melissa and I were talking about with Mrs. Doyle before you got up.”

“Mrs. Doyle is here?” Stiles asks and pulls away from Melissa to stand. His legs are falling asleep anyway. He looks at the table and wonders how he completely missed the steaming cup of tea across the table.

“She’s using the bathroom,” Melissa explains. “She originally came to see you and Nana. She was standing outside when we pulled up. Said she’d been ringing the doorbell for a while but no one was answering.”

“And it’s no wonder,” Mrs. Doyle says as she walks down the stairs to join them again. “You’ve got a lovely little garden out back that sets an atmosphere of such peace. These grounds are just blanketed with good charms.”

“Thanks,” Stiles says as he sits in the seat beside Melissa at the end of the table where his dad is seated. He tries not to outwardly preen at the compliment. “I’m sorry we didn’t hear you.”

“Oh it’s no bother,” Mrs. Doyle promises as she sits across from him at the table. “Now then, dear, your parents have told me that you’ve come across one the Mer-folk?”

“Yeah, she’s cursed herself to a life of exile,” Stiles explains, taking a moment to rub some sleep out of his eyes. “I don’t know much about where she came from, or who she is. But she mentioned a nest, or a palace? I was wondering if you wanted to talk to her about reaching out to her family.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible,” Mrs. Doyle remarks as she pours a bit of coconut milk in her tea and stirs. Isaac won’t be pleased. “You see Mermaids are forbidden from coming to the surface world for that reason alone. To do so would be at the Mermaid’s own risk. Her family would have disowned her by now, seeing as she’s been absent for so long. They will have assumed the worse.”

“Death is the worse that can happen,” Stiles argues, annoyed at the situation in general, maybe more so for Heather than himself. “How can they just, not check up on her? They sent Peter and Kate to look for her and her brothers.”

“Did this Peter fellow go to them?”

“Well, I mean, yeah they were out in the mountains by coincidence but —”

“They used his proximity to their advantage,” Mrs. Doyle clarifies, gently interrupting him with such polite poise. She’s nothing like what Stiles would assume a Manic Pixie to be. “I’ve only known them to make contact with people from dry land every thirty years to confirm that the surface world hasn’t burned itself to ash, which is useful for them to know in case they need to prepare themselves for a fallout as well. It’ll be another thirty years before you and yours experience such luck again.”

Stiles feels his heart drop and he realizes that Heather’s temper tantrum only a couple days before must have been because she knew this as well.
Melissa rests a comforting hand on his shoulder. “It’s really wonderful that you care enough to help her,” she says. “But we talked amongst ourselves and we all agreed that we need to start thinking about how to get her integrated into a new life here.”

“I know a social worker that is familiar with special cases like these,” his dad adds. “She can help draft up documentation. She’s helped many Paranormals assimilate.”

“I hope you don’t mean Ms. Morrell,” Stiles mutters and grins when his dad gives him a pointed look. “Just checking to see that we still both agree she’s shady, working with the Benefactor and all.”

“I won’t soon forget it,” the sheriff sighs. “No, her name is Dr. Linda Graham. She’s the wife of Isaac’s psychiatrist.”

Stiles immediately feels his reservations disappear. “Oh, yeah. Isaac said he was married to a Werecat. They seem like good people.”

“Oh they are,” his dad says lightly while lifting his mug to take another sip of his coffee. “I called in a favor to one of my friends at the CIA and made sure to thoroughly vet them both. Which reminds me, I’ll have to do the same for your teachers come next school year. Same for Isaac and Scott. I’m not taking any chances.”

Stiles doesn’t argue because given past circumstances, that’s completely fair. “What will happen to Heather?”

“I happen to have plenty of space,” Mrs. Doyle lightly remarks. “I’ve spent an ample amount of time on my own. Some company would be nice, and I would not be opposed to fostering the poor dear. If she’s agreeable, of course. Otherwise, Dr. Graham will have to place her with a local family, I imagine.”

Stiles thinks about what that would mean if Heather agreed to Mrs. Doyle adopting her. Would she go to school? Would she be resentful? He hasn't a clue, but he does say, “Fair warning, she can be a handful, but she’s curious and open-minded. Well, she complains a lot about how things work up here, but she’s open-minded.”

The adults laugh at that.

“Oh, honey, that’s all teenagers,” Melissa comments, patting him on the shoulder again.

Stiles huffs and doesn’t argue.

“Where is she?” Mrs. Doyle asks.

“Probably still sleeping. Should I go get her?” Stiles is already standing on his feet.

“Yes, that would be nice. I would like to meet her,” Mrs. Doyle says.

Stiles nods and tucks in his chair as he journeys up the steps and to his room.

His bed is empty but all the sheets have been stripped from his mattress.

“Heather?” Stiles calls out. He kneels down by the bed first, looking underneath but there’s nothing but clutter there. He straightens with a frown before he cocks his head to his closet. The door is shut and he doesn’t normally leave it like that. He stands and moves across the room to his walk-in, knocks twice, and says, “Heather?”
There’s an answering groan.

Stiles huffs, relieved to have found her and opens the door.

Heather shrieks and hisses, burrowing further into the swaddle of blankets she’s under while pressed to the furthest corner of his closet. “Blasted light. It’s splitting my head open! Come in and shut the door if you must bother me, but please stop this torment,” she begs.

Stiles quickly steps in and closes the door.

Heather whimpers, and says, very quietly, “What is wrong with my body? Why do I wish for death?”

Stiles bites his bottom lip and has to breathe through the urge to laugh. When he’s calm, he explains, “It’s called a hangover. It happens when you go overboard with alcohol. Or what you called the ‘angry drink’.”

“These violent delights have violent ends,” Heather bemoans. “Tell me how to make it stop.”

“First promise you won’t indulge again, or at least anytime soon. What you do when you turn twenty-one is your business, but right now you shouldn’t be playing with things you don’t understand,” Stiles chastises.

Heather grumbles but it sounds like she’s agreeing, albeit reluctantly.

“Next, promise you will be polite when I bring you downstairs. All we are trying to do is help you,” Stiles warns.

Heather mutters, with a pleading tone, “I pledge on the currents that bore me that I will be civil, just make the accursed aching stop.”

“Come on, we have to go downstairs for it.”

“Can I bring this blanket?”

Stiles huffs and stands. “Yeah. Yeah, okay,” is his response because he isn’t cruel.

They exit the closet together, and he quickly grabs his phone from the nightstand, before sprinting over to Heather, who runs into a wall because she refuses to expose herself to any natural light. He has to bodily guide her out into the hall, over to the steps, down them, and finally helps her sit at the head of the table.

“She has a hangover,” Stiles explains in answer to the curious looks that the adults are sending them.

Mrs. Doyle tsks in sympathy. “Some toast and ginger tea ought to ease the suffering,” she suggests.

“I was just going to say that,” Melissa admits and she stands. “Won’t you stay for lunch?”

“I would be delighted, darling, thank you,” Mrs. Doyle says with a smile.

Heather mutters to herself, which they can all see since her mouth and chin are exposed.

Stiles grabs the plate filled with cake that Cora wrapped up for him, and sits down at the table again near the end where his father is and across from Mrs. Doyle. “I didn’t realize it was so late,” he remarks, looking at all the push notifications on his phone. It’s nearly three in the afternoon, but then again, he was up pretty late last night. “Mr. Hale and I were supposed to have lunch. But he texted
me to let me know he’s helping Talia with nursing Olive through a summer cold.”

“That so?” his dad comments, but he doesn’t seem too concerned, more interested in the cake on his plate. “What’s that?”

“The most delicious cake I have ever had, oh my god,” Stiles moans between bites. It’s the perfect combination of moist and firm. “Derek and Cora made it with their dad. It’s called honey cake and it’s so good. I should have warmed it up a little but, oh my god.”

“Share the wealth, son,” his dad says, making to grab a piece but Stiles pulls it close, cradling it to his chest.

“No way. No way.” Stiles quickly shoves the last of it in his mouth, snorting when his dad playfully tugs his ear to punish him for his greediness. “Aw, dad, come on,” he complains. “Hey, can Derek come over and spend the night?”

His dad shares a conspiratorial look with Melissa before he replies, “Maybe some other time, kiddo. Melissa and I want you boys to ourselves later. We were thinking of going out to dinner. We have something we want to talk to you three about.”

Stiles is instantly curious.

Melissa sets a plate with two slices of toast in front of Heather, along with a steaming cup of ginger tea. She leans towards Heather and whispers something that gets Heather to poke her head out and reveal her face.

Satisfied, Melissa returns to the stove to start cooking some rice and some Canadian bacon with biscuits.

“Now there. Look at what a lovely little thing you are,” Mrs. Doyle compliments, observing Heather as she eats like a starved woman. “My dear, Stiles tells me you’re in a bit of a bind.”

“More or less,” Heather mumbles between bites.

Mrs. Doyle hums pleasantly. “Seeing as how you are in need of a home, I would like to open mine up to you.”

“Why would I want to live with some boring Walker?” Heather grouches and ignores the warning look Stiles sends her. “I’ve been doing just fine on my own. I even have a name now,” and she looks absolutely smug over it, even though her hair is a mess and her eyes are bloodshot.

“That’s very nice, and I’m sure you’re more than capable of taking care of yourself,” Mrs. Doyle patiently agrees, undeterred. “But it helps knowing you have a warm bed, and a reliable source of food.”

Heather says nothing. She picks up the cup of tea, sticks her tongue in the liquid and winces with wide-eyed surprise. “Why is it hot?” she exclaims.

“That’s the preferred method of drinking tea,” Mrs. Doyle explains, appearing fond of the younger girl already. “It took me a while to get used to things in the Human world as well.”

Heather lowers the cup with a frown but squints her eyes at Mrs. Doyle. “Are you not Human?” she questions, more intrigued when Mrs. Doyle shakes her head no.

“I am merely moonlighting as a childless widow. I’m a Manic Pixie, and like you, I was exiled from
my home ages ago.”

Heather relaxes a fraction but Stiles knows that Mrs. Doyle has won her over. She says, “I know about Manic Pixies. Many of you helped my kind find good Nests in the ocean, back when Old Magic was still sacred to all walks of life.”

“That’s right, we did,” Mrs. Doyle confirms. “Back when I was a small Sprite, I was called Alyssum Plumwink. I’m known as Mrs. Barbara Doyle now.”

“Heather.”

“What a nice name. Did you make that up yourself?”

“It was an unexpected gift,” Heather says without looking at Stiles or even explaining herself.

It makes Stiles think about how much of an impact something as small as a name can have, but he’s glad that she’s taken a liking to it. At least enough to claim it as her own.

“Heather Doyle. It has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?” Mrs. Doyle slyly proposes. “I only live across the street, you know.”

Heather blinks at that. Then she glances at Stiles thoughtfully before turning her gaze back. “Do you have a shower?”

Stiles snorts. Of course that would be the selling point for her.

“Why, yes, I believe I do,” Mrs. Doyle replies, indulgently. “You can have your own bathroom if you accept my offer.”

Heather picks up her cup of tea and listens when Mrs. Doyle advises her to blow on it and take slow sips. After a few beats, she says, “I accept.”

“Wonderful. Sheriff, if you would make the arrangements,” Mrs. Doyle says to his dad, who nods and pulls out his phone to make a few calls. She looks to Stiles, “Why don’t we pay the Mother Queen a visit. This was originally why I came. I have news.”

Stiles perks up at that and nods.

“I’ll keep her company,” Melissa promises, nodding to Heather. She turns the fire down low for the rice and starts rubbing a cast iron skillet with butter for the Canadian bacon. “I think I should wake Scott and Isaac while I’m at it.”

Stiles leaves her to it as he and Mrs. Doyle make the walk out the backdoor.

His garden glimmers and perks up in his presence, seeming to sparkle in the sunlight with the frostiness of his charms.

“How gorgeous,” Mrs. Doyle compliments, taking a moment to roam and explore.

Stiles busies himself with summoning Nana to the surface. It’s a little harder than usual, mostly because his magic is already preoccupied, but he manages with the very little wiggle room he’s given to call on it, if only for a second.

He feels her cool presence in his mind, sifting through his memories like lukewarm water as always, until something strange happens. There’s a sharp pain, and it’s like she’s yanking herself free from him.
Nana’s face bleeds through, overtaking the triquetra symbol. She gasps sharply, “Get back! Quickly! Get back!”

Stiles doesn’t get a chance to beg her to explain when she goes up in bright neon yellow flames. He cries out at the sting of it searing his hands, making him lift an arm to shield his face from the bone-melting blaze, but his magic is already launching him across the garden to the other side, and foaming over his hands to heal them.

“The red butterflies!” Nana screams between her cries of agony, making the ground tremble, and all the birds in her branches begin to flee, though some aren’t so lucky and fall to the ground to be consumed by the flames as well. “The red butterflies!”

Before Stiles can catch his next breath, before he gets the chance to climb to his feet, before he can even yell for help, she’s completely consumed, swallowed, overtaken. And then, in a blink of an eye, she’s nothing but a huge mound of steaming yellow ash.

Mrs. Doyle dashes to his side. “Good heavens, what happened? Are you okay?”

Stiles is in such shock that he’s shaking. He starts gasping and then wheezing until he’s having a full on panic attack. He doesn’t even hear Mrs. Doyle shout for his father, his vision swimming with spots as the sensation of pins and needles floods his system. He collapses in her arms with a quiet whimper.

Everything goes cold and dark.

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Stiles wakes up on an island beach with white sand under a clear night sky bursting to the seams with twinkling galaxies.

There is a Cane Toad sitting on his chest, and it’s wearing a small wizard’s hat. It blinks, throat expanding excitedly when it notices he’s awake. “Ah! You’re conscious. Wonderful. My name Sir Jix Fire-Swamp, but you may call me Gatekeeper Fire-Swamp. I am in charge of hosting any visitors.”

“Where am I?” Stiles asks, trying to think past a spell of motion sickness. He feels like he’s been twisted from the inside out, and if it weren’t for the fact that his hands has a normal amount of fingers on them, he would think he were dreaming.

“You’re on the Isle of Monokeros, the founding Harem of the Pegasus Clan and their Unicorn children,” Gatekeeper Fire-Swamp ribbits before leaping off his chest and onto the white sand.

Stiles takes the opportunity to sit up slowly and look around. The white sand beach is empty and quiet, save for the sound of the waves rolling in from the sea made of dark purple water.

Although the island couldn’t be more than 5 miles wide, behind them sat a thick wall of vegetation made of tall trees with hanging vines, and sounded as if it housed a thousand singing insects.

There was no source of light, but nothing was dark even though the sky was full of night. Yet everything was as clear and as bright as anything would be under a high noon sun. But there was no sun, or at least not one that could be immediately singled out.

“Am I still on Earth?” Stiles wonders aloud, mostly to himself, feeling dread and confusion slowly creep over him.
Gatekeeper Fire-Swamp still replies, nevertheless, “In a manner of speaking. Tell me, young man, what is your name and how did you come to be here?”

“I don’t know,” Stiles mumbles as he pulls his knees to his chest and hugs his legs to his body. “I was…I was…” He tries to think but his thoughts come to him so slowly.

Nana.

The fire.

Stiles chokes as the memories come flooding back and before he can help himself, he starts crying. He drops his forehead to his knees and simply weeps. “God, I’ve killed her,” he chants. “I’ve killed her.”

Gatekeeper Fire-Swamp croaks thoughtfully for a moment before he murmurs, “Oh dear. In your state of grieving, you must have transported yourself here by accident. My, what shall we do? Oh, we must consult the Equine Supreme at once.”

Stiles can’t really do anything at the moment but cry.

“Yes, well, that’s alright, young man. Stay here, and I’ll be right back and then we can decide what we can do with you,” Gatekeeper Fire-Swamp advises before he disappears with a soft pop, glitter and sparkles bursting in the wake of it.

Stiles isn’t sure how long he’s left there by himself, mourning the loss of his beloved tree as he becomes sick with disorienting aches of guilt. How could that have happened? What had he done? There is no one around to answer and put his mind at ease. He can’t even feel his magic anymore, which makes him spiral even further into a vacuum of misery. Perhaps being robbed of his gifts is what he deserves.

Stiles is startled at the feel of a wet nose touching the top of his head, following a gust of wind that blows a bit of sand in his eyes. He quickly stands and uses the hem of his pajama shirt to wipe his face dry so he can see what’s going on. When he lowers his shirt and blinks carefully, he finds himself face to face with a towering white horse with massive wings made of rainbow feathers.

He gapes.

Gatekeeper Fire-Swamp appears with another soft pop on his right shoulder. “This is the young man I spoke of,” he ribbits.

The white horse, no, the Pegasus assesses him with a shrewd gaze, wings stretching away from its body thoughtfully before shrinking again. “Announce yourself, Foreigner,” it demands. “And convince me that you are not a threat to me and mine.”

Stiles goes frozen at the underlying warning, feeling more vulnerable than ever without his magic. He feels the compulsion to answer, “I don’t know how I came to be here. My name is Mieczysław Stilinski and I am a…I was a Seven of Virtues.”

“Tell me, Foreigner,” the Pegasus says, wings flexing arrogantly as it refuses to address him by his given name. “Why do you speak in past tense about your ranking? What crimes have you committed? You will find no sanctuary here if it is your intent to escape justice.”

Stiles is at a loss of what to say, or how to even explain without bawling his eyes out. He blinks rapidly when he feels the heat of new tears. But again, there’s this needling compulsion that has him
saying, “The Woodland Spirit I had been housing in my tree died because of me. I don’t know what I did, but I feel responsible. In fact, I think that’s why I don’t have any magic. Fate is punishing me.”

The Pegasus huffs in amusement. “You are not being punished, foolish boy. The Isle of Monokeros forbids Foreigners from wielding any outside magic here. Yours is simply waiting for you at the border. You will be reunited once we can determine how to offer you safe passage back without the threat of ripping yourself in half.”

“Oh,” Stiles simply says and his knees buckle in relief, causing him to fall to his knees while tears stream down his face. “Oh, but I don’t understand. It’s my fault. She…died because of me.”

“That’s enough now, Jix. You can lift your Truth Spell,” the Pegasus commands. “You are right. He is no threat. He is simply lost. Perhaps there is an answer here that he needs.”

Gatekeeper Fire-Swamp leaps onto the ground and Stiles notices the compulsion to be honest leaves him all at once.

“You must forgive our precautions,” the Pegasus says, wings flexing. “There was once a time when my kind greatly outnumbered any other creature in this world. But Mankind has robbed us in their countless invasions and quests for power. They would strip this island bare in the pursuit for immortal life, and we had to find a way to put an end to it, lest we perish and become like the stars above. My name is Eos, and I am the father of this island. We host mortal children who have died in the womb here until they are collected for their designated paradises. Are you a virgin?”

Stiles flushes at the unexpected, invasive question. He mumbles, “Yes.”

“Be not ashamed of it,” Eos encourages. “My kin would take advantage of you otherwise. We are not cruel by any means, but we are not exactly kind to Foreigners either, given our history with them. It is easier for one pure of body to resist the charms of the Fountain of Youth, than that of an individual spoiled of flesh, and as such, easier to kill. But please, refrain from leaving behind any children if it is not your intent to stay and look after them.”

Stiles doesn’t think he can even begin to understand what Eos means by that.

“Come. I will take you to the Open Fields and introduce you to my clan.” Eos approaches him, kneeling forward and folding his wings back in a blatant invitation. When he notices Stiles hesitation, he says, “Be at peace, foolish boy. No harm will come to you, as I have said.”

Stiles swallows and nods, mustering up the courage to climb the massive creature. It takes several tries and Eos politely refrains from teasing or being impatient, seeming to understand. When he’s successfully mounted, he’s pretty unsure of what to do with his hands.

“You may grab onto my mane, it will not hurt me,” Eos promises and waits until Stiles has a firm grip before he launches them off the ground.

If Eos hears the undignified squawk he gives, he doesn’t mention it, which is completely okay with Stiles.

Up in the air, being this high, Stiles always imagined it would be freeing. They soar over trees and he’s presented with a one of a kind sight of the entire island, which is bigger than he imagined.

He wishes very badly that he could enjoy it, that he could find even a moment of peace in it.

But he’s too busy silently weeping, and choking back tears.
The pain of Nana’s loss refuses to leave.

End Notes

“I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound or stab us. If the book we’re reading doesn’t wake us up with a blow to the head, what are we reading for? So that it will make us happy, as you write? Good Lord, we would be happy precisely if we had no books, and the kind of books that make us happy are the kind we could write ourselves if we had to. But we need books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.” — Franz Kafka.

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