Those Are The Days That Bind Us
by s_a_m

Summary

His father wasn’t stupid. He was an officer of the law, trained to look for patterns. He confronted Stiles about werewolves and they shouted and Stiles tried to explain but his father was so, so, so mad, more mad than Stiles had ever seen him, ever in all his life and then his father looked at him and said,

“It’s like you’re not my son anymore.”

And Stiles broke.

Notes

Thanks for stopping by to read!

This was a completed work posted on staggered dates, so each chapter has a note about what
tags matter/were added for each chapter. There are also notes at the bottom for anyone who wants the advance warning for something that may be a trigger. Let me know if anything needs to be added or adjusted.

This fic is open for inspired works, art or podfics. I am a heathen and not on any social media sites, so just drop me a line in the comments and I'd be happy to link from my fic back to you!

The title of this fic comes from Bastille's 'Bad Blood'.

Comments and questions welcome!

Enjoy!
s_a_m

UPDATE: 2/3/17:
It's done! Go enjoy a podfic of this work by the awesome AvidReaderLady. Click HERE to go listen, or from the link at the bottom.
Best,
s_a_m
Gerard Argent was dead. They found his corpse in a pool of black goo three miles from the warehouse. Markings indicated he had been dragging himself across the asphalt for the final one hundred and thirty-four feet before his heart finally gave out. Deaton checked and then double checked the body; Gerard wasn’t coming back from the dead. Per his own wishes, Gerard’s body was cremated and his ashes were scattered by his family in the ocean.

Stiles read the police reports. He was with Deaton for all four hours of his careful examination. He snuck into the crematorium and saw the worker turn Gerard’s body to ash. He watched Chris Argent cast his father’s ashes into the Pacific and waited until every last particle frothed and then dissolved into nothing.

None of it kept Stiles from having nightmares of wrinkled hands reaching out of the dark to grab him. Hurt him.

But there was no time for any of that. Erica and Boyd were missing. The Alpha pack was closing in. There was no place for fear, no matter how far down it reached into the vulnerable parts of Stiles’ mind.

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“What do you mean they’re missing?” Stiles’ outburst was accompanied by an appropriate amount of flailing. Scott rubbed his face, shoulders sagging. They were on the sofa in the Stilinski living room. The coffee table was covered with textbooks and notes they hadn’t looked at since sitting down after school.

“Derek hasn’t seen them in two weeks. Isaac said that they were planning to leave town, but after Gerard…” Scott stared at Stiles, eyes flashing gold

Stiles didn’t notice. His vision wavered.

“Dude,” Scott touched Stiles’ arm, “Your heart is going crazy. You okay?”

“Yeah,” Stiles managed a half grin, barely convincing, “Just, you know- that whole thing with him was pretty fucked up.”

Scott’s eyes swept over Stiles slowly, taking in his pale skin, the dark circles under his eyes, and the thinness to his already thin frame.

“Are we going to talk about whatever this is?” he asked finally. Stiles waved him off with a blithe gesture that said there isn’t anything to talk about. Scott frowned. But then, as he had been doing for the last week, he let it go. There were other things to worry about right now.

“They were going to come back after… the thing. Isaac got a text from Erica asking where Derek was. He told her, but they never showed.” Scott flopped back and scrubbed his face again. Stiles
forced away the phantom sensation of hands grabbing him, and scratched his neck.

“Alright, so. Erica and Boyd are missing. They were going to stay, so they would have been on the residential side of town moving towards where we all were at the warehouse.” Stiles rubbed his hands on his thighs. “The Alpha pack?”


“And how long ago did they figure that out?” he groused, “And how long before they decided to tell us?” Scott hummed in agreement.

“They want our help with trying to track them.” Scott said. He shifted slightly on the sofa. Stiles side-eyed his best friend.

“You mean, they want you to help them and you decided to tell me despite their not saying a word about me.”

Scott had the decency to look a little guilty. Stiles sighed and ran a hand through his hair. It was starting to get long

“Whatever. You have the fancy nose and the night vision eyes and the super speed and all that shit. What use would I be in tracking them?” Stiles’ voice wasn’t bitter. It was tired. Scott opened his mouth, but didn’t say anything. There was nothing to say to that. Stiles turned to Scott, about to say something pithy to make Scott forget about the tension, when the front door opened and the Sheriff walked in.

The two boys guiltily reached for their notes, trying to look like they had been studying. But John hardly noticed. His steps were heavy and his brow was furrowed as he entered the living room. He muttered a greeting before turning around and walking back out to head to the kitchen. Stiles and Scott exchanged a look before standing to follow him.

John was rummaging in the fridge, still in his uniform.

“Hey, Dad. What’s going on?” Stiles asked. He grabbed the kettle off the stove and filled it with water. Scott got the chamomile tea out of the cupboard.

“Two of your classmates were declared missing today.” John didn’t see the way Stiles and Scott exchanged significant glances.

“Who?” Stiles set the kettle back on the stove and turned on the element.

“Vernon Boyd and Erica Reyes.”

“Yeah,” Scott said, and shoved his hands in his jeans pockets. “We, uh, I guess we haven’t seen them in school for a while.”

The Sheriff nodded absently as he pulled the tinfoil top off a cup of yogurt. He turned to get a spoon and smiled at the sight of Stiles holding one out for him. He reached out to take it, but then his hand diverted to touch the bruise still faintly visible on Stiles’ cheek bone. He wasn’t smiling anymore.

“I wish you’d let me do something.” He said to his son. Stiles smiled as brightly as he could.

“It’s not a big deal, Dad. Just some kids being assholes.” John grunted and dropped his hand to take the spoon.
“Well, I’ve got two missing kids. I just want you to take care, Stiles. There’s been too much bad sh-stuff going on in town.”

“I think you mean ‘bad shit’ Dad.” Stiles forced a chuckle. “There’s been a ton of bad shit going on in town.”

“Language,” John fixed his son with a stern eye. Stiles raised his hands in surrender, grin cheeky.

“Promise me you and Scott will be careful. I don’t want you getting into any more trouble. I don’t want you getting hurt.”

“Sure, Dad, we will.” Stiles said with absolute insincerity. His father huffed and side-eyed him fondly.

“Go do your homework.” He waved them off and got a mug down for his tea. Scott and Stiles returned to the living room. Once seated, Scott stopped Stiles from picking up his notebook. At his confused expression, Scott looked at Stiles and then pointedly looked in the direction of the Sheriff and tilted his head at him. Stiles felt what little color there was in his face drain away. His hands started to shake.

“No.” he whispered the word in a hoarse voice. Scott’s lips thinned, but he nodded and reached out to touch Stiles on the back of one trembling hand.

“Okay.” He said, and pulled a textbook towards himself, “I think you should tell him. But, okay.”

It took ten minutes for his hands to steady enough for him to pick up his own textbook.

*

Jackson and Lydia nearly kill each other on their first full moon.

“Well,” Stiles said, wiping at a something smudged on his cheekbone. He was pretty sure it was Jackson’s blood. From when Lydia had clawed open his forearm while aiming for his throat. Most of the splatter had landed on Scott who had been standing in front of Stiles at the time. Allison, intelligent Disney princess/badass hunter that she was, had successfully managed to opt out of the evening. Something about bonding with her father over all the terrible, terrible things that could go wrong on a full moon.

“It can’t get worse than this, I guess?” Stiles said with a listless shrug.

Derek sighed and shoved at Stiles’ shoulder as he passed by. He crouched next to the sprawled forms of his most recent betas. They lay panting with exhaustion on the concrete floor of the abandoned warehouse. Derek rubbed his large hands over their hair and stroked down their flanks, soothing as he scent marked them.

“You did better than I expected. But like I thought, you two need to work out your issues before the next full moon.” Lydia raised a perfectly plucked eyebrow and Jackson snorted in derision.

“What issues?” they said at the same time. They grimaced but didn’t look at each other.

“Your relationship,” Derek said, surprisingly patient, “or lack thereof. This was your first full moon
and even with a human here, you two spent the whole moonrise trying to claw each other to death.” This time Lydia scoffed, and Jackson immediately started protesting that any kind of problem existed.

“Oh my god,” Stiles said suddenly, interrupting the argument. He didn’t flail or gesticulate wildly. He held himself perfectly, unnaturally, still. “I was a test, I was- I was **bait!**” Derek looked over his shoulder at Stiles and smirked, just a little. Isaac huffed a small laughed and hunkered down next to Derek, pressing into his side.

“I needed to see if they could handle being around humans. And you were perfectly safe Stiles. Scott would have gotten you out of here if they had turned on you.”

Stiles turned on Scott then, mouth open in disbelief. Scott, who had been morosely rubbing at the blood stains on his shirt, jumped guiltily at the sound of his name. He smiled sheepishly at Stiles and shrugged one of his shoulders in apology.

“You knew,” Stiles said, the accusation choking the words in this throat and making them gravel across his tongue. Scott furrowed his brows in confusion, then raised them in alarmed understanding. His spine went ramrod straight and he reached out to Stiles, placating, but Stiles shoved him off. Derek stood abruptly and took a step toward Stiles. He jerked away from Derek as well.

“You knew I was going to be bait, that there was danger, real danger- you –you knew- and you didn’t- you didn’t-” Stiles was dimly aware he was having a panic attack. It was bad. He hadn’t had one this bad since those first terrible weeks after his mother had passed away. He couldn’t even say that he was having a panic attack, couldn’t control himself, couldn’t stop shaking and gasping for breath and stuttering accusations at his best friend. His blood was rushing in his ears, the floor was moving under his feet. And then his vision whitened out.

He doesn’t remember falling down, but the throbbing in his shoulder told him he went down hard and none of the werewolves caught him. There was a voice somewhere above him speaking softly and slowly, telling him that he was safe now, that everything was alright. He was fine, just fine.

Stiles opened his eyes. The first thing he saw were hazel-green eyes with intense eyebrows staring down at him. Slowly his awareness slid back into place. He was on the ground, his head cradled in Scott’s lap. Derek was holding a hand to his chest. The voice was his, telling Stiles to breathe. Off to the side Lydia, Jackson and Isaac were watching him with solemn expressions.


“You didn’t tell me.” Stiles’ voice was raw. Shit, he must have been screaming. “You didn’t tell me, you didn’t say I was- you knew but you didn’t tell me. I didn’t know, I didn’t know, I could have been hurt but I didn’t know, I didn’t know, I didn’t know, I didn’t know, I didn’t know, I didn’t know, I didn’t know. I didn’t know, I didn’t know.”

“Shh,” Derek slid his hand up Stiles’ chest and cradled his cheek, “Calm down, Stiles. Your heart is racing again.” It was true, Stiles was half-way to another panic attack. “Breathe,” Derek told him, and Stiles did. He watched Derek’s chest and matched the rhythmic up and down of it, breathing deeply and slowly.

“Fuck,” he said eventually, “This is embarrassing.”

“The bruise,” Lydia said suddenly, and all eyes turned on her, inquisitive. “The night of the game, the night Jackson-” she cut off and her eyes darted to Jackson before turning back to Stiles. “I went to your house that night. You had a bruise on your cheek. You said a couple of guys from the opposing team had gotten to you, roughed you up a little. Then, at the warehouse with Gerard-”
everyone turned back to Stiles. His calm heartbeat had started racing again and his breath was choppy and painful.

“Stiles,” Scott leaned over him to look his friend right it the eye, “Did Gerard do something to you that night?” Stiles flinched and turned his head desperately away; he didn’t want to look at anyone. He kicked his legs, trying to move his body away but Scott gripped his shoulders and Derek pressed one hand to Stiles’ hip. They were all talking, all crowding and touching and pressing, anything to get Stiles to stop thrashing, trying to get him to calm down.

“I was there!” he shouted, and everyone stopped moving. The words were bursting out now and he couldn’t stop them. “I was there in the basement with Erica and Boyd. He- he took me, walked right up onto the field and just grabbed me off it and hit me and I couldn’t do anything to protect myself and I was- I was out on the field and it was in public and my Daddy was there and you were there, werewolves were there and he still got me. I should have been fine, I should have been safe but I wasn’t so he just took me and-”

This time, his vision blacked out and he was gone.

*

Stiles was the king of ignoring a problem until it went away.

In this case he had a strict I’m not talking about it, don’t ask me about it if you don’t want me to walk away policy in place over his whole issue with Gerard. He told everyone, collectively and only once, that he was dealing with it, that there was nothing more to say, so please just forget about it.

They didn’t forget about it. All of them tried to talk about it with him once, except for Scott who tried twice and Derek who didn’t try at all. He doesn’t know if Scott or Derek said something, but eventually the whole issue was dropped.

He was pathetically grateful.

*

The searching werewolves found nothing on Erica and Boyd for another week. The longer they were missing, the more useless Stiles felt. The more useless he felt, the more twisted his nightmares became. So on a Thursday after school, while Scott was out with Isaac and Derek and Jackson trying desperately to catch a scent that wasn’t a month cold, Stiles dropped in to talk to a certain veterinarian who was good at helping wolves.

“You said I should be the spark. And I was. I made a fifty foot line out of a handful of mountain ash.” Deaton raised his brows and settled back on his heels. “There has to be more to it than that. I have to be capable of more.” Stiles crossed his arms, hunching his shoulders. Deaton looked at Stiles for a long time, face carefully neutral.

“There is,” he admitted finally, “But it will take time and patience.” He warned, and Stiles smiled sharply, eyes hard.
Deaton had tried, at first, to teach Stiles the things he himself could do. But the magic kept slipping away from Stiles. It backfired or twisted and came out wrong.

One day— not all that long after Stiles first showed up and asked to learn magic—a woman brought in her dog with what she thought was a broken foreleg. Leaving her in the reception area, Deaton took x-rays of the leg and located a small hairline fracture in one of the toe bones.

Gently, Deaton coached Stiles through a simple bone-mending spell.

The dog’s leg rotted off at the shoulder.

Stiles doesn’t know what Deaton told the woman or what happened to the dog afterwards. The smell of rancid meat caused a roll of nausea that had him vomiting first on himself and then into a toilet. He threw everything up, even the bile, but was still dry heaving until Deaton laid a cool hand on the back of his neck and whispered something in Gaelic in his ear.

“Not right. It wasn’t right. I shouldn’t— that wasn’t—” Stiles was babbling as Deaton pulled him into his office and sat him down in his swivel chair. “It wasn’t right. I don’t think- I don’t think I’m supposed to do magic like that.” The words were a terrified gasp.

“No.” Deaton said, and then knelt down before Stiles, looking him right in the eye. “I think I owe you an apology, Stiles.”

“What?” Stiles blinked dully at Deaton, wits still scattered in the aftermath of an anguished howl and flesh that slithered right off the bone.

“Magic is different for everyone. Some can dabble in everything, no kind of magic off limits. Some are stuck to the most basic levels, limited by the strength of their will and their spark. Some have a natural inclination towards one type of magic and excel in it, but can still manage good work in other areas. And, sometimes,” Deaton reached out and pressed his hand to Stiles knee, “Though rarely, sometimes a person can only use one or a few types of magic to the exclusion of all others.”

Stiles’ jaw worked for a long moment, his mind trying desperately to re-collect, process, and react.

“What does that even mean?” he whispered finally.

“It means I think you have a very rare type of manifestation for magic, Stiles. And I have done you a great disservice today by not recognizing that sooner.” Stiles just blinked at the man, and Deaton sighed softly, looking suddenly much older.

“Go home for today, Stiles. Rest, regain yourself. Come back tomorrow and we’ll figure this out for certain.”

Stiles staggered out of the clinic a little while later in borrowed scrubs, his vomit covered clothes in a plastic bag in his backpack. He was still so shaken he didn’t even really register that Derek was leaning up against the driver’s side door of his Jeep until the werewolf put out a hand to keep Stiles from running in to him.
Without a word, Derek fished Stiles’ car keys out of his backpack and firmly pressed Stiles into the passenger seat, buckling him in before taking the wheel and starting them off for the Stilinski household.

Stiles was perfectly silent, staring out the window, until they were half way back. Watching his older neighbor Mr. Harper walk his mastiff, same as he did every day of the year, jarred something in Stiles.

He told Derek about making the dog’s leg rot off and what Deaton thought about his magic and about throwing up and what the rancid flesh smelled like and how his magic felt both betrayed and like a betrayal as it roiled under his skin and rebelled against the purity of the healing, twisting itself into something corrupt and foul.

“Okay.” It was all Derek said as they stopped for a light.

“I don’t want- I don’t think I can… Scott might-”

“I won’t say anything.”

A tension Stiles didn’t know had been building in his shoulder and spine vanished and he sagged against the door, head landing with a thunk on the window.

“Thank you.” he whispered. He doesn’t know if Derek answered him because he fell asleep a moment later.

*

Deaton was wise. He was full to the brim with arcane and supernatural knowledge. But he was a peaceful man, a Druid. His magic was the way of patience, growth and healing. The magic he used was not the magic Stiles could use. It was a matter of temperament and the core of one’s own self. Stiles was passionate and volatile, direct and stanch, clever and reckless. His was not the path of old trees and growing herbs and flowing water.

The day after Stiles made the dog’s leg rot off instead of fixing it, Deaton cast a seeking, looking for the epicenter of Stiles’ magic.

When he was told that his magic lay in dry blood and broken bone, in hard earth and dead root, in winter skies and black decay, Stiles wasn’t entirely surprised. The last few months had been eye opening to the dark places that lay inside himself, and the putrefied skin and muscle and cartilage of the dog’s leg had merely served to underline that.

He was surprised, however, when Deaton went on to say that his magic also lay in heart.

“It is odd,” Deaton admitted, tucking the seeking bowl and seeing stones away in the cupboard he had pulled them from, “Most magic users have aptitudes that fall in line with the others, like a theme. Or perhaps, more accurately, a harmony. But to be of the kind of… hard magic you are and yet to be also of heart? You are a contradiction.”

Stiles gave Deaton a sharp look from where he sat on the man’s chair in the veterinary office. “How are they a contradiction?”
“The heart is a thing of pure compassion, Stiles. It is the core of a person, that which represents love, loyalty, kindness, center and wholeness. The rest of your magic is… brutal.” The man shrugged and sat on his desk, opposite Stiles. “You are cruelty and sympathy all at once. The heart you have in your magic is the only reason I will continue to teach you, Stiles.”

“Why?”

“You tell me.” Deaton watch Stiles with dark, calm eyes. Stiles licked his chapped lips before he answered.

“If cruelty was all I was, I would use the magic cruelly. The heart will temper it.”

“Precisely,” Deaton nodded in approval. “Don’t ever forget that, Stiles.”

*

When Jackson came to Stiles three weeks after that panicked full moon for help with his failing relationship with Lydia, Stiles doesn’t know what to do; laugh at Jackson’s desperation, feel flattered that Jackson considers his advice worthwhile, or be hurt, insulted and furious that- despite knowing Stiles has loved Lydia for ten years- Jackson came to him and essentially rubbed the unlikelihood of Stiles ever being with her in his face.

So instead of dealing with any of that shit, he shoves down all his emotions and tells Jackson what he needs to hear.

“You fucked up, Jackson. You let your selfish insecurities and overblown ego push her away from you. It had nothing at all to do with being a Kanima and you know it.” Jackson flinches, pales and covers his face with his hand, but to his unending credit, he doesn’t try to protest any of Stiles’ painfully honest points.

“I can’t speak for Lydia, but if someone I loved told me I was dead weight that needed to be cut out, I would never forgive them. Lydia loved you, in spite of how you treated her. I don’t know if that makes her fucking stupid or a fucking saint, but it does make her much too good for you.” Jackson’s shoulders are shaking and Stiles, for just a moment, considers leaving it at that. He thinks about how if Lydia didn’t have Jackson and his jock status to pretend for she could be herself. And then, maybe, there was a chance that he could take Jackson’s place and be with her.

Stiles looks at Jackson’s trembling form and remembers how Lydia had crouched over his body, heartbroken, but so strong.

He thinks about Jackson, top of the high school food chain, whose best friend was Danny, openly gay and still getting shit for it. He thinks about Lydia, the smartest woman alive, picking Jackson over and over again. He thinks about how unlikely it is that Jackson knows that his birth parents died in a car crash, that he was never unloved or unwanted but somehow his parents fucked up and he had spiraled down in a pit of insecurities so deep he had turned into a goddamn lizard monster instead of a werewolf.

If Stiles could learn to trust Derek, if he could forgive Scott for trying to kill him, if he could get over Allison and Isaac and Erica and Boyd threatening him and his loved ones, then he could sure as hell give Jackson a second chance.
He could let Lydia go.

“This time, you let her decide for herself, and you fucking respect her decision. If Lydia wants you, you learn to be good together. If she doesn’t want you, you back out like a goddamn gentleman. And you stay packmate with her no matter what.”

Jackson is crying, hunched in on himself and Stiles gives in to the urge and slings an arm over Jackson’s shoulder and wraps his other arm up and around so he can grip the back of Jackson’s neck. Jackson melts into Stiles’ hold, his sobs taking on a wolfish whimper. They sit for over an hour on the edge of Stiles’ bed, unmoving except for the shaking.

When he leaves, he threatens to rip out Stiles’ throat with his teeth if he ever tells anyone. Stiles sniggers and tells him his threats are completely unoriginal. Jackson leaves in a huff, his werewolf healing already taking the puffy red out of his eyes.

Seven hours later, just past midnight, Lydia shows up at his window in her pajamas and crawls into bed with him. She tells him how she and Jackson are over, and she’s not sure if that’s really what she wants. She cries on his shoulder as she tells him how a part of her wants him back so badly, still loves him.

“But do you like him?” Stiles asks her quietly, one hand rubbing down her back. She looks at him in confusion.

“You love him, sure, but do you even like him? Do you want to spend time with him? Does he make you laugh? Do you want to do everything with him, all the time?” Her eyes widen in understanding and she voices a soft “Oh”, before she burrows her face into his chest.

“All this stuff going on, it’s changing everything. Changing what we want, and parts of who we are. Make sure you like him, for who he is now, before you try to love him like you did before all this.”

“Did you tell Jackson that, too?”

“No. I told him to stop being a selfish dick and think about what you want for once.”

Lydia huffed a small laugh, and nuzzles at his neck. “When did you start being so… so settled, Stiles?”

He remembers his mother smiling at him with a pale face and sunken cheeks. He remembers Scott crying on his shoulder because he didn’t understand why his father wasn’t coming home. He remembers gnarled hands reaching out of the dark to hurt him. He answers; “Werewolves, man,” and Lydia laughs for real this time.

It makes his heart ache to have her here, and not in the way he’s always wanted. But, he thinks, he should probably listen to his own advice and get to know Lydia again before he decides to be in love with her.

*

Stiles wasn’t there when Allison showed up and asked Derek to be pack.

He would have given anything to have been there for it. He says as much to Isaac.
“Nah,” Isaac settled down on Stiles’ bed with one of his books. Stiles doesn’t remember saying Isaac could use his bed or borrow his books, but he was willing to chalk up the complete lack of boundaries as a pack/werewolf thing and ignore it in the face of getting the details of the encounter.

“What does ‘nah’ mean?”

“I mean, well, nothing big happened. Allison explained she wanted to be pack because she wanted to protect the town. That she couldn’t handle the way her family did things anymore. That she wanted to try standing with werewolves instead of against them. Derek said yes and told her to start showing up for meetings. And that was it.” Isaac opened *Dracula* to the first page.

Stiles considered Isaac’s words. “Right,” he said at last, and stood. “I’ll be back later.” He ignored Isaac’s searching look and snagged his car keys off his desk.

*

Stiles arrived at the Hale house just as the sun was dipping behind the trees. Its rays tinged the house red and orange and reminded Stiles of fire. He made himself think of other things.

He found Derek on the ground level. Some of the boards on the windows had been ripped away letting the sun illuminate the dusty room. There were scattered fragments of wood all over the floor. A chest, several tables and a round mirror were pushed against the fractured walls. A patterned green sofa partially blocked the threshold.

In the center of the room Derek was doing rapid pushups. The flooring under him was damp with sweat. Stiles stood by the sofa and watched for a long minuet. Derek didn’t stop or acknowledge his presence.

“How many have you done?” he asked finally. Derek stopped, elbows bent, forehead almost touching the floor. His arms trembled.

“I lost count around five hundred.” He said, and then started again. Stiles sat on the green sofa and braced his elbows on his knees.

“And how many times have you lost count around five hundred?”

“Four.”

“Are you committing suicide by exercise because you let Allison in the pack?”

“No.”

“I think that’s a lie. It doesn’t make sense, Derek. You didn’t have to say yes.”

Derek stopped again, not looking at Stiles. “With her in the pack, Scott is more likely to stay. So is Lydia. And Jackson will stay for her, and you’ll stay for Scott and Lydia. Isaac will stay for Boyd and Erica. And when we get them back they’ll stay because they’ll know it was a mistake to leave.” He resumed his pushups.

Stiles sat on him. Derek’s chest hit the floor. He growled and twisted to throw Stiles off.

“We are not your pets.” Derek froze, arm angled awkwardly to grip Stiles’ bicep.
“What?”

“You can’t coerce us into staying. Peter tried that shit and we killed him.”

Derek lifted himself to his hands and knees. Stiles toppled over and landed hard on his back with a yelp. On his feet Derek moved away from Stiles, eyeing him warily. “We are not having this conversation.”

Stiles heaved himself to his feet and dropped down onto the green sofa, coughing through the cloud of dust it raised. “Yeah, we are.”

Derek glared at Stiles and slammed his hand down on the sill of an exposed window. The house shuddered and creaked around them. Stiles didn’t jump, didn’t let his heart race, and didn’t say anything. He met Derek’s angry gaze evenly. Eventually Derek turned his back to Stiles and rested an elbow on the frame of the window, pressing his forehead to his forearm. Stiles let the silence stretch.

“I shouldn’t have turned them.” Derek offered a while later. Stiles snorted softly. He could practically hear Derek’s teeth grinding. “They were all too young.”

“Not that young anymore,” Stile said, thinking of Peter burning, Kate gargling on her last breath, and all his father’s deputies limp and unmoving on the floor of the station.

“No, I guess not,” he agreed, then when on, “Didn’t have a choice. If I wanted pack, they had to be young.”

“Why?”

“Better chance to survive the bite.”

“See, that’s a thing that would be good.” Stiles watched Derek’s muscles flex as he turned his head to look over his shoulder. Stiles stood and moved to stand behind Derek, meeting his confused gaze with a wry smile.

“Did you ever tell them that? That they had to be young to survive?” Derek’s eyebrows and averted gaze spoke volumes. After a moment’s hesitation Stiles lifted his hand and pressed his palm to Derek’s bare shoulder. The muscles under his hand twitched, but Derek didn’t pull away. He turned his head and rested it on his forearm again.

“Didn’t think so, big guy. They think you picked them because they were weak. That they would want power and you wanted soldiers, so it all worked out.”

“Being pack isn’t about that. It’s about—” Derek’s breath hitches painfully, “It’s about family.”

“But you never told them that. So how could they know?” Stiles said quietly, thumb rubbing absentely over Derek’s skin. “You hardly tell them anything. All they know of being werewolves is that they are a danger to themselves and others. That they are cursed by the moon to lose control. That bad things happen to the people around them because they are werewolves. They only know these things because you don’t talk to them about anything good. And you don’t talk to them about important shit like this because you think of us as unruly pets, not people with minds and opinions and feelings.”

Derek leans into his arm harder.

“You told Scott the bite was a gift. But you haven’t explained how. They fight you because you
don’t treat them like you respect them. They’ll stay with you for now because they don’t know what else to do. But if you want them to stay because they want to stay, you have to work for their respect in return. You have to show them that being pack and being a werewolf is a good thing. Get it?”

“Yeah. I got it.” Derek’s voice is rough. Stiles lets a little time pass so he can regain his composure. He picks out the constellations he knows in the night sky, feeling Derek breath under his palm. When his breathing and heart beat are calm, Stiles pats Derek’s shoulder a little to get his attention. Derek turned around to face Stiles and leaned against the window frame, arms folded over his chest. His eyebrows tilted in query.

“So. Next.” Stiles grins at the bitch face Derek makes.

“There’s more?”

“Yes.” Stiles says firmly. “Allison,” Derek huffs at her names and fidgets for a moment before speaking.

“She’s fine. She’s nothing like-” he cuts himself off.

“No. She isn’t anything like her aunt.” Stiles reaches up to scratch his fingers through Derek’s sweaty hair. Derek bats him away gently and brushes past Stiles, letting his hand drift briefly across Stiles’ hip.

“I know she’s not her aunt. Her scent- it will take time to adjust. But I will.” He promised quietly.

Stiles smiled and said, “Yeah,” confident. Derek grabbed a towel from one the tables and wiped at the sweat on his face.

“And what about you?”

“Huh?”

“Are you going stay with me?” Derek is looking at him out of the corner of his eye. Stiles’ breath hitches, just a little.

“Yeah, you’d all be lost without me,” he drawls boldly to cover his reaction. “I’m the goddamn lynch pin of this operation.”

Derek doesn’t say anything, but Stiles spies a tiny smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. He smacks Derek on the shoulder as he a passes on his way back out of the room.

“You stink. Go take a shower, big guy.”

“I could always rip your throat out will my teeth, you know.”

“So old. Get some new material, asshole.”

*

“So, you know how Lydia and Jackson broke up, like, a month ago?” Scott asked from where he was sprawled on Stiles’ bed, texting someone on his phone.
Isaac- who was reclining half on top of Scott reading a book- made a small noise of interest, and flipped a page. Stiles, seated at his desk, said nothing and flipped a page in his own book. It was from Deaton and it was boring as shit, but the basics were the basics and if he was going to do this, learn whatever fucked up magic he could use, he was going to do it properly. With only a little chapter skipping.

“They still hang out. Like, I saw them coming out from a movie when I was on my way back from scouting.” Stiles made a small noise this time to acknowledge that Scott was speaking. Had he been paying any attention at all, Scott would have noticed that Stiles’ attention was not on his book at all even though his eyes were.

“Isn’t that weird?” Scott asked at last, gaze shifting from Stiles to Isaac. Stiles swung his chair out from his desk and smiled cheerily at Scott.

“Nope. It’s not. Really. Like if two people who love each other are together and then break up it’s not like they can’t still be friends.”

“Or,” Isaac added pointedly, “Get back together later.” He flipped to a new page. Stiles was ninety-nine percent sure he hadn’t actually finished the page before.

“Huh.” Scott said thoughtfully, looking at his phone. It beeped as a new message came in. “So like what? They just talked about it and it all just worked out?”

“Honesty is the best policy.” Stiles said with a small grin. Scott frowned at his phone for a long moment, and then typed out a message. He hesitated before he hit send. The reply was almost instant. Scott jumped up from the bed, and Isaac shuffled easily to recline against the headboard, eyes never leaving the book in his hand.

“Listen, I’ve got something to do. I’ll be back in time for some tracking tonight. Cool?” he barely waited for Isaac’s nod before he was out the door. When the sound of his bike had faded Stiles flopped down on the bed next to Isaac with a huge sigh.

“Thank fuck. All the pining was starting to exhaust me.” He wiggled around until he was comfortably pressed to Isaac’s side. The blonde pulled his phone out of his pocket and flicked his fingers over the screen before he started to type.

“Who’re you texting?” Isaac glanced up from his phone to give Stiles a small smirk.

“Jackson and Lydia. Want to throw a ‘no more eye-fucking at pack meetings’ party?”

“Fuck, yes. Make them pick up pizza and wake me up when they get here.” Then Stiles closed his eyes and went to sleep. Seriously, the pining? Fucking exhausting to watch.

* 

Actually, it was the nightmares that were exhausting.

*
And his slowly decreasing weight didn’t help much either.

*

Pack meetings both evolved and devolved as the summer went by.

The fragile strands of trust that existed between them thickened and grew strong as the petty infighting and grudges slowly faded in the face of gaining something much more precious; family. Pack. People you could depend on no matter what. A place to belong no matter where. The meetings were for bonding. For growing to understand and appreciate the differences between them that made them stronger as a whole.

On the flip side, they went from being important and necessary info sharing sessions, training time and supernatural education seminars to being glorified pizza parties, movie nights, board game tournaments, and puppy pile sleepovers.

The look on Peter’s face the first time he realized that the teenagers were going to use the pack meetings as an excuse to screw around during their summer break? Fucking priceless.

Derek seemed to not care so long as everyone showed up and did as they were told. Mostly.

It took weeks to get to a stable place, but Stiles couldn’t stop himself from smiling every fucking time he thought about it. There had been a lot of ups and downs; Allison and Scott’s turbulent relationship, Lydia and Jackson working out the boundaries of their new friendship, Isaac’s abuse issues, Derek’s and Peter’s various trust and fire and communication and Argent issues.

But now? They were close, they were nearly pack, and the gap left by Erica and Boyd was vast and deep and felt even by the humans. All puppy play aside, everyone was anxious to get the missing pack members back.

And the vulnerability of their absence fed into Stiles’ trauma. He dreamed of the dark basement. He dreamed of age spotted hands. He dreamed of fists landing on his face and pain and fear and electricity. He woke with screams barely held back, heart racing, sweat pouring, chest heaving.

He tried, but he couldn’t let the pack help, not all the way. He channeled all his feelings of insecurity and terror into his magic lessons. He flew through the basics, dosed up on Adderall to keep himself from sleeping. He spent those sleepless nights reading and rereading the precious few books he got from Deaton. Doing his own research into the kinds of magic he was compatible with. Trying to practice spells and focusing his thoughts, sharpening his will to manipulate the magic inherent in himself and the world around him.

The pack, the magic, all of it was a distraction to keep him from remembering hands pulling him into the dark.

*
Sometimes his reaction to that night frustrated Stiles.

So what if he had been taken? So what if he had been rouged up a little? So what if he had been threatened? Big deal. Peter took him. Erica had rouged him up. Derek threatened him. It was nothing. Scott had almost killed him. Peter had almost killed him. Matt Daehler had almost killed him. \textit{It wasn’t a big fucking deal.}

Except it was. Because Stiles had done some cursory research on PTSD and other trauma and he knew it was different. That really, Gerard had been the straw that broke the camel’s proverbial back. Everything had piled up one on top of the other. It lead to a persistent sense of insecurity.

And that pervasive sense of unease, the hypervigilance, the nightmares, the panic attacks, all of them were because Gerard Argent had been the one to really make him fear for his life.

And that pissed Stiles off. And made him want to curl up into a ball and cry. And made him want to snuggle at the center of a wolf pile because that was the only time he got a halfway decent nights rest.

*  

“They want to eat us?” Stiles fake gaged into a bush that grew unchecked by the Hale house. The wolves and Stiles were standing around the front porch, the late evening sun painting the clearing in red and orange. Erica and Boyd had been missing for five months; summer was nearly over.

“No Stiles, they just want to kill us and absorb our power.” Derek furrowed his brows at Stiles in displeasure. Stiles sneered back cheerfully. Derek rolled his eyes, lips twitching in a half smile. It felt like a victory.

“At least,” Peter cut in, “That’s what we think they’re doing here.”

“But we still have no idea?” Scott asked and looked at Isaac. The younger wolf was sitting on the front steps, sagging with exhaustion. He had been running himself ragged looking for Boyd and Erica. He shook his head and shrugged, then listed to lean against the rail. Derek settled on the step above Isaac and let his beta shift to rest his head on his knee.

“How do we know they want to kill us for our power?” Stiles asked. He thought it was an obvious, and entirely pertinent question. Peter hummed and pursed his lips. Derek’s brow furrowed deeper, his hands absently coming up to stroke down Isaac’s neck and back in comfort. Stiles groaned and flung his hands up into air.

“The answer is gonna suck balls, isn’t it?”

*  

After hearing about what Deucalion and the others did to become stronger Alphas, about Talia and about \textit{Gerard’s place} in the whole clusterfuck, Stiles throws up into the bush for real.
“Yep,” he gasped, hands on his knees, vomit still dripping from his lips, “Smelly, hairy, trucker balls.” Lydia rubbed a hand across his back. Jackson scoffed, muttering about weak stomachs. Derek and Peter rolled their eyes at almost exactly the same time.

No one disagreed.

*

They found a fresh trail for Erica and Boyd a week into the new school year. It had obviously been deliberately laid and was, therefore, obviously a trap.

“This is so obviously a trap, I’m insulted.” Stiles wrinkled his nose in distaste, absently shifting his messenger bag over his shoulder. The strap was starting to dig painfully after two hours of trudging through the woods with the pack. Scott snorted, but didn’t look at Stiles. His eyes were glowing gold, flicking restlessly, watching the faint shadows between trees. They were at a standstill, waiting.

Derek and Peter were at the front of the formation, Allison on the right flank and Isaac on the left, with sharp-eared Lydia bringing up the rear. Stiles was in the center with Scott as guard. Stiles needed to stay unharmed; he was their last resort.

Stiles opened his mouth to complain some more when Derek hushed him, eyes intently watching a point before them. After a few moments Jackson came into view, shifting his features back to their human shape.

“The scent ends about a thousand yards ahead,” he informed Derek in a bored tone, trying to hide how impressed he was with himself and failing utterly. Stiles wondered if Derek was regretting certain comments made about sharpest nose in the pack yet. “There’s a little cabin. I can’t smell any people nearby but-” Jackson made frustrated sound. “There’s some kind of plant growing next to it. The scent made my nose all numb.”

“What did it look like?” Stiles asked hastily before Jackson could go on. Jackson frowned at Stiles and growled, flashing his fangs.

“I don’t know, Stilinski. Little white flowers in a bunch. They reminded me of perfume.” Stiles was eighty-five percent sure Jackson was irritated at not knowing the flower, rather than at Stiles for asking the question.

“So, not wolfsbane? Which is kind of important. In general.” Stiles made face right back at Jackson’s sneer.

“Jasmine, probably. It’s a very strong smelling flower.” Lydia said, and shrugged when they turned to look at her. “I used to have a bottle.” Jackson glanced at Lydia for a moment, and Stiles thought that maybe he looked a little wistful, but Jackson quickly turned back to address Derek again. The alpha looked impatient.

“I can’t tell if they’re there or not. I circled around the place as wide as I could, but the scent doesn’t pick up anywhere else.”

Derek clapped a hand on Jackson’s shoulder, then slid it up to grab his neck lightly and rumbled in approval. Jackson made a pleased sound in the back of his throat, and pressed into his Alpha’s grip.
“Did you smell any of the Alpha pack?” he asked.

“No.”

“That hardly matters.” Peter cut in, “Strong werewolves- omega, beta or alpha- can learn to control their body to hide their scent.”

“Oh, my god,” Stiles flung his hands up into the air, “It’s a trap! How did anyone think this was going to work? It’s so obvious.” He crossed his arms over his thin chest and shoved his hands into his armpits. “I don’t like this. What the fuck are they trying to accomplish by making it so… so fucking obvious?”

“They are no doubt accomplishing exactly what they intended,” Peter smirked a little at Stiles and the teen shuffled so he was half behind Scott. It made Peter smirk more.

“We know it’s probably a trap,” he went on, turning to Derek, “But there’s been nothing on our two wayward wolves for five months. They’ve created a situation that gives us two options; one, we think our packmates are in the cabin, we go in to save them, and spring the trap. Two, we realize it’s a trap, but we’re desperate for information so we walk right out there anyway and spring the trap, hoping something comes of it. In either case, they get what they want; some or all of us caught in the trap.”

“They can’t be nearby,” Jackson said, folding his arms over this chest. Derek dropped his hand and touched Jackson’s briefly before pulling away to pace in a short line, brow furrowed in thought. “I went in a pretty wide circle, and there wasn’t anything.”

“As I said,” Peter rolled his eyes, “they can hide their scent.”

“No,” Allison said suddenly, “Jackson’s right. Wouldn’t they have taken the opportunity to, I don’t know, thin the herd? Jackson was alone. If they were nearby, that would have been a perfect chance to knock us down by one.”

“And spook us,” Isaac added, “If we had no idea what happened to Jackson, we’d be left just standing here, waiting. Like, psychological warfare, or whatever.”

“It would weaken us, make us unsettled,” Derek acknowledged, and looked to Peter. The undead man was watching Allison with hard eyes. She met his gaze head on, and without shame.

“A Hunter’s tactic.” He said with a sneer.

“A predator’s tactic first,” Scott said, smiling warmly at Allison before addressing Peter. “Cutting the weak from the herd to hunt it for food.” Peter pursed his lips and the anger abruptly vanished from his face.

“True enough. But in that case, they run the risk of simply scaring us off. They might not be nearby. But…” he trailed off, brow furrowed, lost in thought. Stiles picked up the line of his logic.

“But… if they did lead us out here, but aren’t here themselves, then why go to the trouble in the first place?”

“Booby trap the cabin?” Lydia suggested. “Load it up with explosives and rig it to blow once we’re near it?”

Peter hummed thoughtfully, “Jackson, how close did you get to the cabin?”
“I don’t know, maybe fifty yards out.”

“So not close enough to trip a wire, or something equally cliché,” Peter lifted a brow at Jackson. “I don’t suppose you happened to spot anything as incriminating as that?”

“Wasn’t looking for it,” he shook his head and growled in frustration again. Derek ran a quick hand through Jackson’s hair to settle him as he passed in his pacing. Out of all of them, Isaac and Jackson needed their Alpha’s touch the most.

“They could just be waiting inside.” Scott offered, “Like, we go in through the door one by one and it limits our movements enough so they can take us out.”

“Or,” Stiles said, heart racing in horror, “They wait until all or most of us are inside and trap us there, and then-” Stiles cut himself off, and looked at the ground.

“And then burn us.” Derek said quietly. There was a moment of absolute stillness.

“They probably think it poetic,” Peter growled, fangs out and eyes glowing blue.

“Okay,” Derek finally stopped pacing and turned to address the whole pack. “We do this as smart as we can. Jackson, take Allison and Isaac, go over where you were before and this time pay attention to anything out of place, not just scents. Allison, try to see inside the cabin, a sniper’s view later might be helpful. Once you’re back, if there’s nothing that changes the situation, we’ll move in, set a semi-circle perimeter around the front and Peter and I will go in.”

He raised a hand against the outbursts of protests.

“We’re older and stronger. If they are inside, we can at least make it back out onto open ground. If it is booby trapped we’re more likely to survive it. Whether inside or outside, or not here at all, we’ll be ready for them.” Derek made eye contact with all of them, one by one, waiting for each of them to acknowledge the plan.

Stiles’ heart was pounding. He had spent the summer with the pack, watching them grow close, letting himself be pulled in along with them. It was a gradual thing, and not yet fully formed. But the one who had changed the most was Derek. There was a softness to him now, something Stiles was certain had to do with having pack. The loneliness of losing his family, then his sister, and having to kill his uncle- he couldn’t imagine it at all. And seeing Derek like this- competent, caring, growing as an Alpha in what felt like the truest sense- it made Stiles feel…something. Something that made his heart beat a little faster, something that made his spine tingle.

When Derek looked at him, Stiles’ stomach flip-flopped and his heart raced. He nodded gravely, then grinned and Derek nearly smiled back, his mouth twitching.

“Stiles, you’ll be ready,” it was more a statement than a questions but Stiles responded by blithely patting his messenger bag and grinning with just a hint of edge to it.

Peter took Isaac’s flank position and Scott took Allison’s after a long, wet kiss everyone pointedly ignored. After they left with Jackson, a quiet fell. They settled in to wait. They were all a little tense but it wasn’t an unbearable tension. They were working together. They were pack. And they were going to get Erica and Boyd back.

Stiles was starting to think they could really do this. He was getting stronger learning magic. And he had gained back five pounds over the last two weeks. Together, they could save Erica and Boyd. They could build a pack and they could survive whatever strange supernatural shit Beacon Hills tossed at them next. He thought that they could totally kick the Alpha pack’s ass.
Naturally, like the jinx he truly is, that’s when everything went to shit.

* 

Boyd and Erica were in the cabin, as it turns out. But the Hale pack didn’t know that until after the Alpha pack ambushed them. They had been waiting for the pack to separate a little more before attacking. And they discovered the Alphas didn’t want to kill them to absorb their power. They wanted Derek to kill his whole pack, absorb the power, and then join the Alpha pack. Stiles heard all about this from Deucalion, the Alpha of Alphas, the Apex Predator, the Demon Wolf.

And a fucking Drama Queen, too.

Stiles, human and seemingly not worth the time of his enemies, was hiding behind a tree nearby while Duke narrated his reason for attack and expected triumph with a grin on his face that was half shit eating and half insane.

Stiles was giving his pack five minutes, tops. He started a countdown on his phone.

Two minutes later Scott screamed as an Alpha threw him to the ground so hard his back broke with a sickening crack. And Stiles was done waiting.

He opened his messenger bag.

* 

During the summer, Stiles spent a lot of time with the pack, drawing the bonds of his packmates closer. What time he didn’t spend with the pack, he spent with Deaton learning the basic theories of magic. And the time he didn’t spend learning from Deaton, he used to teach himself magic.

It was, in hindsight, probably not the smartest thing he had ever done. But Stiles had a pack to protect and packmates missing and while he really should learn the basics, skipping a few chapters ahead in the textbook and occasionally turning to outside sources couldn’t do too much damage. Right?

At the very least, after making all the wood furniture in his house partially rot, he learned to do this shit outside and away from any buildings or tall trees.

If Deaton ever found out about Stiles’ independent research, he was sure the normally placid man would have very harsh words to say to him. Because he wasn’t looking for spells of protections or wards or small-time charms. He was looking for spells that hurt, maimed, tore and shredded. Spells that would grip tight and rot a person down to nothing.

And it was so fucking easy. Nothing was as easy as magic that corrupted.
He still tried. On wounded squirrels and mice. He tried to fix them, but they were so small and so very fragile. They just decomposed at the touch of his magic. He threw up every time, heaving until his stomach was empty.

Other spells, ones that didn’t involve healing, were difficult but not impossible. He and Deaton discovered he could dowse and cast a seeking and place wards and do minor enchantments. Stiles didn’t stop shaking for an hour after they were sure.

It was only the act of healing that was forbidden to him.

Stiles told all this to Derek one night after drinking a quarter bottle of Jack. They were alone in the Hale house, in the room with the dusty green sofa. He told Derek how it felt to not be able to help the way he wanted, how it hurt not to be able to heal. How he felt sick to his stomach that this was what his magic was. That he felt as foul and as filthy as the magic he cast, that it was eating him up inside.

“Okay,” Derek said.

“Okay? Th’ fu’k even mean?” Stiles slurred at the Alpha. Derek pulled himself away from the wall he had been leaning against and gently pried the bottle from Stiles’ grip. Stiles let him; it wasn’t like he could actually stand from the sofa anyway.

“Stop trying to heal rodents, Stiles.” Derek completely ignored the question as he screwed the top back on the bottle. “If that’s not what your magic can do, then don’t do it.”

“Why you ok’y wit’ dis? This. Why you ok’y wit’ this? M’ magic sick and icky and bad.” Stiles wasn’t crying. He wasn’t because that would be much too embarrassing and his eyes wouldn’t betray him like that. He believed it even through Derek using the cuff of his sleeve to wipe his cheeks.

“Because it’s fine Stiles. Whatever kind of magic you do or do not have, it’s your magic and that makes it okay because I-” Derek’s words faltered for a moment. “Because I trust you.”

He looked at Stiles for a long moment, something like vulnerability on his face. And Stiles was drunk so he couldn’t think straight, but he had a sneaking suspicion that even if he was sober he still wouldn’t have been able to think up a good answer to that. So he improvised.

“Ok’y,” Stiles said, knocked his head against Derek’s and then passed out so he didn’t have to deal with the repercussions of any of it.

Unsurprisingly, he didn’t sleep soundly; he hadn’t had a good night’s sleep since age-spotted hands had reached out to grab him. Stiles remembers someone shaking him awake more than once from nightmares. He remembers a hand running through his sweat soaked hair, soothing.

He woke the next morning hung over and in his own bed. He doesn’t remember getting there.

* 

Stiles held the knife in his hands, staring at the lines of blood that glistened on its surface.
Deucalion’s corpse lay at his feet. The Alpha pack had declined to collect their leader’s remains before they left, never to return.

The last resort plan he had hatched with Derek and Allison had been simple. Stiles could rot anything, so he was going to rot their Alpha power. While they were all writhing in agony, Derek or Allison would kill Deucalion.

Derek and Stiles hadn’t liked it at first, that Allison had volunteered, but she had been adamant. She had, like Stiles, used her down time from the pack to pursue her own training. That training had been with her father and it had prepared her to make a kill. In the end, both had caved in the face of her resolve.

Naturally there were problems with the plan of last resort.

Primarily, the spell affected the Alpha power within its proximity. It wasn’t made to rot- or rather, not rot- the Alpha power held by a specific person. So when Stiles cast the spell, Derek was affected along with the Alpha pack- on the ground, spine arching in agonizing pain as the very core of himself was disintegrated.

And because if any of the betas killed Deucalion they would become Alpha of the Alpha Pack, and no one really wanted that, it wasn’t like one of them could do it. So as they had decided earlier, either Allison- a human- or Derek- already an Alpha- would have been the only two choices for the whole ‘kill Deucalion’ part of the plan.

Except that Allison wasn’t where Deucalion was. She had left with Isaac and Jackson to scout further out and was not where Deucalion was.

Stiles recalled feverishly for a moment all the quotes he had ever heard about common sense and how fucking uncommon it actually was. Then he looked at Derek, his face a twisted mask of pain.

He reached into his messenger bag again and pulled out the seven inch Teflon-coated, serrated-edge combat knife Allison had given to him before they had set out mere hours ago, just in case. He stepped carefully around the magic circle and the wolf’s pelt that made up the spell and approached Deucalion.

Stiles straddled his waist to keep Deucalion’s bucking form still enough for him to thrust the knife under his sternum and into his heart.

*

He doesn’t remember making it back to the Hale house. Derek has him wrapped up tight in his arms when he wakes in the puppy pile the next morning.

*

Alongside the wrinkled hands, a bloody knife starts to show up in his nightmares.
Later that afternoon, when he had finally wrapped his head around it, Derek laughed.

In the ruins of his family’s home, with Isaac, Erica and Boyd, and Lydia and Jackson sleeping safely on a mattress upstairs, Scott disappeared to celebrate with Allison, Peter vanished and with only Stiles standing there to witness it, Derek laughed. It was a deep rolling sound from his belly, so full of fucking joy that they were alive- every last one of them- and Stiles couldn’t stop himself. He forgot about Deucalion and his magic and all the shit that was his life now. He stepped right up into Derek’s space, grabbed him by the back of his head and pulled him down for a kiss.

He didn’t know what he expected. For Derek to punch him maybe. Or pull back and look at him with that disappointed expression that always made his stomach drop. He hoped to God that Derek would at least let them both just forget about it, chalk it up to a delayed reaction to survivor’s adrenaline, idiocy, full moon madness- something, anything.

He didn’t expect to get shoved against a wall, one hand on his hip and another on his neck, a thick thigh knocking his knees apart and pressing against his half-hard length. He didn’t expect Derek to choke on his name, and then ravish his mouth, kissing him wet and dirty. For his hips to rock up into Stiles’ until they were both panting with breathless laughter and hushed moans, coming in their pants.

And it was so good. For the first time in a long time Stiles felt the tension leak from his body and he sagged against Derek’s warm chest. The hypervigilance he had had since Gerard had smiled and held the door open for him as he let Stiles walk out of his house finally eased a little. Exhaustion crept in and he let Derek drive him home so his dad wouldn’t worry. His tired mind circled back to the kiss again and again.

As first kisses went, Stiles figured it was pretty fucking spectacular. A good indicator of the future. Stiles was totally into it. He wanted this to be a thing. A recurring thing, that recurred frequently. And judging by the stain of semen on the front of Derek’s pants? He figured Derek was on board with that too.

It never occurred to Stiles to check with Derek to see if they were both on the same page, much less reading the same goddamn book.

*

Stiles ran away.

A little over one month after Erica and Boyd had been rescued, Stiles packed a duffle with clothes and books on magic he had stolen from Deaton and just left. Didn’t even bother with a note.

By then, the five pounds he’d gotten back had vanished, taking another three with them.

He sold the Jeep three towns away to a guy who wasn’t anywhere near legit, and used the cash to buy a piece of shit from the next town after that, and then he was out of California.
The calls started sixteen hours after he left. The first call woke him from a fitful slumber in a trashy motel room somewhere in Nevada. He stared at the back of the phone for a long time, not letting himself see who was calling. On the fourteenth call, he shut his phone off and smashed it to pieces. Then he rolled over and tried to get some sleep.

The nightmares that had been plaguing him for the last six months jumped in intensity that night. He woke screaming twice and in cold, frantic sweats four other times.

In the years after, the nightmares didn’t get much worse, but they didn’t get better either.

*

It started with Derek.

The day after they had kissed, Stiles brought up the possibility of more. Derek laughed at him. He told Stiles he was seventeen years old. That he was just a human beta, and barely a beta at that. He was not going to date Stiles. Really, whatever had given him that idea?

Stiles’ heart ached, and it was a thousand times more painful than Lydia choosing Jackson. But he endured because he had Scott and pack and magic and his father.

But then Scott had looked at him like Stiles had stabbed him in the back. No one but Derek and Allison had known about the last resort plan against the Alpha pack. Scott raged and shouted about trust and pack and how things were finally looking good and then Stiles had made Allison lie to him about the plan and had lied to Scott about his magic, and what do you mean it feels like shit Stiles, its magic, it’s great, it’s useful, how could you? Get out!

The sheer hypocrisy of it. After what Scott did to Derek to get at Gerard without saying anything? It cut at Stiles. But even this could be endured. Scott was a good person. He just was. Give it time and they would mend their friendship. No big deal.

But then Erica and Boyd wouldn’t talk to him. And Isaac told him it had to do with some shit about not doing enough to save them, being in the basement with them and then getting to leave while they were tortured. Then, them getting out of the basement only to get caught again and tortured again and no offence Stiles but we thought you were going to get us out and you fucking didn’t (their words, not mine, not mine, Isaac pleaded) so kindly step the fuck off.

And this too was okay, just fine, totally cool, because Stiles was sure they were all on the U.S.S. PTSD and, while rocky, they just needed time to get their shit together, to be pack and understand that Stiles was packmate, and that meant they were family. And it was cool he could handle this he could, he could.

But then Deaton found out about the spell and extrapolated Stiles’ independent research and cut him off, no more lessons, I’m sorry Stiles but you agreed to do this my way and if you are not then I cannot teach you. And whatever, Stiles had stumbled blindly through the whole werewolf thing, he could manage to teach himself magic because he had a pack to protect and he told himself that was enough.

The pack wasn’t as welcoming as it had been anymore. Scott wasn’t talking to him and so Allison wasn’t talking to him and Erica and Boyd weren’t talking to him, treated him like he was the enemy
and Isaac was with them because they were close, so close, like they were siblings and Lydia and Jackson were dancing around each other and making little interested faces at each other, unable to see anything else and Derek, the Alpha, Stiles’ Alpha, was avoiding him and the pack, his betas, could feel it through the bond even if they didn’t really notice it and they were avoiding Stiles too and that was just fucking fine, fine, fine, fine and dandy, because it would all blow over, he just needed time, just a little more time, just a little more, just a little more he could do this, he could handle this. So what if he started skipping pack meets, it was okay, they just needed space to deal and he could give them that.

But his father wasn’t stupid. He was an officer of the law, trained to look for patterns and string facts together to make a coherent theory out of a mess of clues. And one night he confronted Stiles about werewolves and they shouted and Stiles tried to explain but his father was so, so, so mad, more mad than Stiles had ever seen him, ever in all his life and then his father looked at him and said,

“It’s like you’re not my son anymore.”

And Stiles broke.

Chapter End Notes

Vomit Counter: Chapter - 3/Total - 3
Strengthening

Chapter Notes

New tags for this chapter: Original Character(s), Road Trip.

I get to introduce two (kind of three?) OCs this chapter that you'll see/hear in later chapters. I'm excited for what you guys think of them. Naturally I gave them slightly weird names so I've got some pronunciations shoved into the bottom notes if you want them. (And one place name pronunciation, because I make a point of it in the fic, so I thought I'd give you a chance to hear it pronounced aloud properly)

There's a little paragraph in this chapter where I use gender neutral pronouns; not something I'm familiar with. I did some research but I'm not confident of my understanding of the use of the pronouns. If anyone out there is familiar with them, or can point me to a good resource, I'd be much obliged.

Bonus Game: Can you guess how many names I can fit into a fic that end in 's' and require awkward uses of apostrophes?
Careful!- There are more names in later chapters.

Enjoy!

s_a_m

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stiles drives aimlessly for weeks. Just picked a freeway and drove until it ended and then picked another. He doesn’t remember most of it. Everything is faded and far away. He feels numb. He pays for his gas and his shit motel rooms with cash he drained from his checking account. Usually he ends up just sleeping in his car. Sometimes he remembers to eat, sometime not. His hair gets longer. A scraggly beard grows in and thickens.

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One day he sees his picture on a board filled with other missing children. The kid in the picture has a buzz cut and is smiling open mouthed, like he’s the happiest guy in the world. He finds the flyer on the floor of his Jeep two days later. He doesn’t remember taking it. He rips it up and lets the wind carry the scraps away.

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It occurs to him as he drives along the southern coast that he should be angry. He should be fucking furious at all of them for this.
He should be angry that Derek’s insecurities had him pushing Stiles away. That he used his youth as an excuse. That he lashed out because he was afraid of being with Stiles, with anyone.

He should be angry that Scott was so wrapped up in his relationship with Allison that he couldn’t see what a hypocritical little shit he was. That he didn’t listen. That he was treating Allison like a brainless child even though it had been her choice not to tell Scott about the last resort plan to defeat the Alpha pack. That if Scott had let him explain he could have told him that it actually was a last resort. That none of them had really wanted to do it. That magic wasn’t all the same and that he still didn’t know if he could handle the magic he had fermenting inside him.

He should be angry that Erica and Boyd and Isaac were stepping out on him. That their irrationality kept them from feeling the pack bond that was between them. Stiles was human but even he could feel it thrumming in his chest. And they should have realized that all of the pack had been looking, that all of the pack was responsible for their lengthy imprisonment, not just Stiles.

He should be angry that Deaton had stopped training him. He should have known better; that Stiles would just find some other way because he was going to protect his friends, no matter what. It was his role to be a resource to Stiles so that his magic didn’t do any harm. He was supposed to guide Stiles. Instead he was backing out. Taking away his support. Leaving Stiles alone to struggle through learning his magic on his own.

He should be angry that Lydia and Jackson didn’t notice.

That they all ignored him and shunned him.

That none of them realized Stiles wasn’t sleeping. That he was losing weight. That his panic attacks were happening more frequently.

He should be angry that they forgot he had stabbed a man in the heart. That Gerard Argent had kidnapped him and beaten him. That he had been paralyzed by a lizard monster and made helpless, vulnerable, while good men and women lay dead around him. That he was best friends with a fucking werewolf and he didn’t have to be. That he didn’t have to be friends with any of them. He could have just walked out of it; ignored everything and lived a normal life. But he hadn’t. He had fucking stayed and fought beside them because they were his friends and loyalty meant something to him.

And he should be angry that his father, who was supposed to love him no matter what, had looked him right in the eye and told him he wasn’t his son.

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Stiles wasn’t numb anymore. He was burning. But he still wasn’t seeing clearly and he just kept moving, going nowhere.

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He stepped on a scale at some point, mostly just because it was there in the corner of the filthy
bathroom. He was a hundred and thirty-two pounds. In the stained mirror he flexed his abdomen and counted his ribs. He avoided his own sunken gaze.

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He went north before Louisiana gave way to Mississippi;

*Welcome to Arkansas, The Natural State, Buckle-up For Safety.*

*Welcome to Missouri, The Show-Me State.*

*The People of Iowa Welcome You; Iowa, Fields of Opportunity.*

*Welcome to Minnesota, 10,000 Lakes.*

His car stalled out somewhere halfway up Minnesota in the middle of the woods. He doesn’t know what he would have done if it hadn’t ground to a halt. It wasn’t like he had his passport to get into Canada.

The road he was stranded on was narrow, barely enough room for two cars to pass each other by. He got out and shivered. A light snow was falling. He had only ever seen snow on the mountains. It had never fallen back in- his part of California.

He grabbed the keys and his duffle bag, all he had in the world. A sign a while back had said the next town, Onamia, was ten miles away. He started walking. He figured it would take him about three hours at a slow pace. And he had nothing but time.

An hour later, Stiles- if he had had breath to spare- would have laughed bitterly at his bad luck. The light snow had gradually started to come down harder, and the wind had started to blow more fiercely. The temperature plummeted. Stiles didn’t know if this was a blizzard, but he was out in bad weather with only his red hoody, jeans and converse shoes. The wind and snow were blinding him. He couldn’t see the road in front of him and his foot prints were filling up fast behind him. No way forward and no way back.

His eyes were watering, but he couldn’t blame all the moisture on the weather. He kept moving. He was pretty sure he needed to keep moving. If he stopped the cold would kill him. He kept telling himself to keep walking. He told himself that he could do this, he could get to safety, get to help. Stiles tried to use the repetitive thoughts to keep calm.

It wasn’t working.

The wind was cutting through the front of his hoody. He had tried for a while, but he didn’t have the strength to hold his duffle in front of himself to serve as a windbreaker. He pulled on every scrap of clothing he could manage, but it was hardly anything. He sacrificed some of his socks to cover his hands.

It was cold. So cold. The clouds above were dense and everything was dark. He couldn’t tell if it was night yet or not. His sense of time was skewed. But he couldn’t bring himself to pull off his makeshift mittens to check his wrist watch. It exposed too much of his skin, let the cold in under the inadequate layers of his sleeves.
He didn’t know what else to do. He just kept walking. Kept telling himself he was getting ever closer to safety and help. His thoughts and limbs were becoming sluggish. He was tired. So tired and the snow kept piling up and it took more and more effort to just trudge through.

He kept going until he walked into a tree and knocked himself out.

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When he woke up, there was only darkness. A zing of panic ran up his spine. He moved his head, eyes desperately seeking light. It was only then that he felt the cloth covering his face. The movement of his head made it slide enough to let in a speck of light. Stiles relaxed marginally.

He sat up slowly, letting the cloth fall away. His body ached. Looking down he realized his hands were wrapped in towels. They were stiff and fitted in a way that told Stiles they had been wrapped around his hands wet and left there to dry. They smelt faintly of plants. It was a sweet and soothing scent.

His senses were dull and exhaustion was pulling at him, making his muscles lax and his spine slump. He was warm. He sank back into the bed and rolled to his side. He felt the cloth around his feet shift, wondered briefly why they were there, and drifted to sleep.

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The second time he woke his head was much clearer. The cloth wrappings were gone. He realized now that they were probably to treat frostbite. He must have been out in the cold and snow for hours. He was surprised he hadn’t lost at least one finger or toe. He peeled off the thick socks on his feet and counted, just to make sure.

The room he was in was small and had only one window, covered with plastic that seemed to breathe with the wind. It was the only source of light. Under the window lay his duffle bag. There was a space heater next to the bed. Across the room was a door. Under it, a faint light filtered through the crack.

He set his foot on the ground, intending to cross to the door, but yanked it back up on the bed with a stifled yelp. The wood floor was freezing, even with the space heater nearby. He tugged the thick socks back on and for the first time realized they weren’t his. None of the clothes he was wearing were his.

He counted three long sleeve shirts under a black sweater, and two layers of what he suspected were long johns under flannel pajama bottoms. The thick socks were actually several pairs of socks stitched together at the top to make them one.

He pulled the sleeves over his hands and made for the door. He felt the cold of the metal handle even through the fabric of his layered shirts. The door opened inwards, and he stepped out into a narrow hallway. To his left the hallway ended a few feet away at a door leading outside. Immediately opposite him was a tiny bathroom, with a toilet, sink and cramped shower.
To his right the hallway opened into a long rectangular room. Around the corner to the right was a fire place, already blazing and crackling, wood shifting behind the metal screen. Framing the fireplace were two book cases, full of spines that were old and leathery. Before the wide area rug that touched the edge of the hearth were two recliners covered in an awful green corduroy. Hanging above the stone mantle was a wolf’s pelt. Stiles’ gaze flickered away quickly.

The wall opposite the hallway had a bank of ceiling-high windows that stretched all the way from one end of the room to the other, interrupted by another door leading outside. These windows were covered in taut plastic too. On the opposite side of the room from the fire place was a kitchen. It looked odd, and Stiles couldn’t place it until he realized there was no dishwasher and a low deep freeze sat in place of an upright refrigerator. There was a small table set awkwardly in the center of the kitchen with two chairs.

Slowly he entered the room and moved towards the kitchen. There was a final door in the wall of the kitchen, leading to a place behind the tiny bathroom. Stiles was eyeing the cupboards, trying to divine which one would have food in it when the door opened suddenly. He jumped back, eyes darting to find an exit.

“Finally awake? Good.” A tall man dressed in as many layers as Stiles stepped out and clapped his large hands. Stiles caught sight of an unkempt bed behind the man before the door swung shut. He had a full head of hair and a wild beard that were both white-grey.

“I’ll get breakfast. Then we’ll talk about why you tried to kill yourself, young man.” The man strode into the kitchen and started pulling out cast iron pots and pans from the cupboards.

“I didn’t try to kill myself.” Stiles couldn’t help protesting, but he didn’t move to follow the man. He stayed in the middle of the room, trying to figure out if he was safe.

“And what were you doing out in a snowstorm wearing nothing but a sweatshirt and jeans if you were not trying to kill yourself?”

“I was trying to get to town. My car broke down.”

“Oh, yeah? Not familiar with northern weather, eh?”

“No, I’m from- a warmer state.” Stiles folded his arms and hunched his shoulders. The man eyed him for a moment, humming thoughtfully.

“Which town?” he asked, and moved to the deep freeze. He pulled out a package of meat and a carton of eggs. From where he stood Stiles could just make out the snow that was packed into the bottom of the freezer. With a plastic bowl, the man scooped some of the snow into a cast iron pot. Stiles drew away from him as he passed on his way to the fireplace. The man set the pot over the open flames and settled down on his haunches beside it.

“Onamia.”

“Oh-naym-ee-uh, not on-uh-me-uh.” The man corrected absently. “But I have to say young man, Onamia is a hundred and sixty miles south of here, in Mille Lacs County.”

“What?”

“We’re near Rauch, in Koochiching County. Barely eight hundred people in the whole area.”

“That can’t be right.” Stiles looked down at his feet. “I couldn’t have walked that far. It’s impossible.”
“They say ‘where there’s a will, there’s a way’. And I think your will is very strong.” The man peered into the pot. The water was melted, but sat still in the pot. He settled back again, watching Stiles out of the corner of his eye. Stiles hardly noticed. He was trying to control his breathing, trying to keep the panic attack at bay.

“But how could I- how is it even possible-?” Stiles was grasping at straws trying to figure out how he could have moved a hundred and sixty miles through the snow in winter and not died.

Winter skies.

It came back to him abruptly. The seeking Deaton had cast months ago, after he rotted the flesh from the leg of a dog.

“It lies in dry blood and broken bone. In hard earth and dead root. In winter skies and black decay, but most of all in heart.” He was hardly aware he had spoken until the man asked him,

“What lies with these things?”

“My magic,” he answered, then started, realizing what he had said to this stranger. “No, I mean-um-” the man shook his head at Stiles and then peered again into the pot.

“You will not have an easy life, with attributes like that, young man. I do not envy you the trials that will follow as you find your own path.” Stiles gaped.

“You know about magic?”

“It is how I kept the frostbite from setting in and stealing your hands and feet and nose and cheeks.” The water in the pot was boiling now, and the man returned to the kitchen to fetch the eggs, plopping four of them in the pot.

“It is also how I found you under the snow. You were calling out for help with all your being. My own magic responded. I cannot help but want to help. It is in my nature.” The man smiled and held out a hand.

“Andris.”

“Stiles.” He took the man’s hand. The shake was firm and the contact settled something in Stiles, made him feel safe. He sat at the table in the kitchen and watched Andris thaw eggs and sausage and cook them over the fire. He served breakfast on delicate china painted with a rose border. Stiles raised an eyebrow and Andris chuckled, but offered no explanation.

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“What now, young Stiles?” Andris asked. After cleaning up from breakfast they had claimed the recliners before the fire and sat nursing mugs of hot chocolate, watching the flames.

“I don’t know.”

“Doesn’t your teacher miss you? Your family?” Stiles’ lips pressed thin.

“He said I wasn’t his student anymore.”
“But that was not the only reason you left.” It was gently said.

“No.” Stiles answered shortly. Andris didn’t push.

“Well. I am not a man to ignore fate.”

“What do you mean?”

“You are here.” Andris waved his hand expansively and Stiles got the impression that he wasn’t just talking about the cabin. “You are without a teacher, and far from home. The winter you have an affinity with has started early and locked you within my house. We will have four months—perhaps five—where it is only the two of us with no easy way to leave. It seems to me the only thing to do is help you grasp your magic.”

“Really? Just like that?”

“As I said, this seems like fate to me. Your will is very strong Stiles. I would not be surprised if it can cause ripples through your own fate, enough that they can resonate with the fates of others.” Stiles considered this.

“Yeah, no. I don’t understand.”

Andris smiled. “I will teach you.”

* *

Andris was much younger than Stiles first thought. At just shy of sixty he moved like a man half his age. At first his age had made Stiles nervous, reminded him of Gerard. But the more time Stiles spent with Andris, the less it bothered him.

The nightmares never stopped, coming sometimes three or four times in a night. At the end of November, two weeks into his stay, Stiles hesitantly asked about something to make nightmares stay away. Andris had frowned gravely, and pressed the heel of his hand to Stiles’ forehead.

“I’m sorry,” he said at last and dropped his hand, “some nightmares will not be suppressed. It does not matter what you do, they will always come back.” Stiles nodded wearily and went back to cutting semi-frozen tomatoes for dinner.

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Learning from Andris was very different compared to learning from Deaton. Lessons were more like conversations than lectures. They talked about weather patterns, animals and their attributes, plants and all their uses. The flow of the currents of power in the earth. The more fickle power in the winds and the great danger that comes from calling on the power of the tide. It was obvious to Stiles that there was no lesson plan they were following. So it didn’t matter that he ran out of Adderall and his attention was all over the place. Andris was happy to talk about whatever Stiles wanted to.

It took Stiles nearly a month before he realized that Andris was letting Stiles dictate the direction of
their conversations. Sometimes he made a point to explain something in more detail, but he was perfectly content simply answering all of Stiles’ numerous questions. And Stiles flourished under such tutelage. There were things he wanted to know now, so he asked and they lead to more questions and more topics to talk about. He had all of Andris’ books to go through when he wanted to see what they were discussing written down.

His mind flexed and worked as Andris sometimes made him work his way through problems and figure out the answers to some of his own questions. He was happier than he had been in months.

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But that was all relative, and being happier did not mean he was happy.

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The first time he realized he couldn’t feel his pack bonds anymore, Stiles had a massive panic attack. Andris tried to help him through it, but in the end Stiles just had to endure it until his body gave out from sheer exhaustion. He didn’t last long; he was still at too low a weight and hadn’t had a good night’s sleep in nearly a year.

He wasn’t really surprised that Andris didn’t push him about what was bothering him. A man as capable and intelligent as Andris doesn’t choose to live out in the middle of nowhere for twenty years and not have a damn good reason. Stiles is somewhat terrified to find out what kind of skeletons are hanging in his closet.

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“Your Deaton wasn’t a bad man. He was just a Druid.” Andris set the head of his ax on the ground and leaned against it. Stiles looked up from where he was dropping the freshly chopped fire wood on top of the pile beside the cabin.

“What does that even mean?”

“Druids are taught in a rigid way. Their elders tell them ‘read from these books and learn these spells, but no more’. They are not taught to think beyond the scope of their studies, to try and over step themselves, to strive and reach for things they want to know. They are stuck in their ways.” Andris slowly turned the ax back and forth in his grip, thinking. “When he cast you out, had you done something wrong?”

“I don’t think so. I found a spell in a book I shouldn’t have had. But I needed to protect my pa- my friends.” Stiles corrected himself. “When he found out he said that if I couldn’t learn magic the way he was teaching it then he wouldn’t teach me.” Stiles stood and brushed the snow from his knees.
“I think…” he trailed off and frowned at the sky, fists clenching. “I think he was thinking that I would beg him to come back. That I would realize how much I didn’t know and that I needed him as my teacher.”

“That sounds like a tactic a Druid would take.” Andris nodded and stroked his beard thoughtfully. “Do not fault your Deaton for it. It was, I suspect, the way he was brought to heel in his youth. If you want to be angry with him, be angry that he did not know you well enough to understand that his rejection would hurt you and push you away, not make you hunger for the knowledge you cannot obtain except through him.” Stiles cut Andris a sharp look. “Don’t glare so, Stiles.” He grinned, “I am simply coming to understand you.” The grin faded, and Andris picked up a round of wood.

“I know you are angry at many people,” he said. “I think you are a smart young man, and cruelly honest with yourself. If you are still angry at them after all this time, then I think your anger is just. But,” Andris halved the round of wood and fixed Stiles with a firm gaze. “Do not let it keep you from finding home again. Wherever that is.”

Stiles swallowed hard and nodded. Neither of them mentioned the moisture gathering in the corner of his eyes.

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Stiles found drawing runes intensely difficult, much to Andris’ amusement.

“You are too scatterbrained, young man!” he laughed a great belly laugh and wiped away the crooked chalk lines of Stiles’ poor work from the floor. “You are not meant for the rigid practice of letter and symbol.”

“Then how the fuck am I supposed to cast magic?” Stiles threw the round of chalk viciously at a wall. It cracked into three pieces.

“With your will, Stiles. Feel the magic here,” Andris tapped Stiles’ abdomen, “Know what you want it to do here,” he tapped Stiles’ forehead between his eyes, “And then let it come from here,” he tapped the center of Stiles’ chest. Stiles shot Andris a dubious look. The man laughed and ruffled Stiles’ hair.

“Try this,” he pointed to a candle on the kitchen table. Stiles snorted. He’d been here three months and never seen a candle before today. Andris was hardly subtle.

“Light the candle, Stiles.”

“How?”

“With magic.”

“But how do I do it?”

“By willing it so.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”
“Try anyway.”

Stiles scrubbed a hand through his unkempt beard in frustration, and cut the old man a dark look. Andris smiled blandly at him. Stiles pressed his lips into a thin line and called for his magic. It welled up under his skin easily from the core inside himself where it rested. He held it close and a warmth suffused his chest. He was giddy with the sheer joy that his magic brought him. So different from those first painful months after he had started to learn from Deaton.

He turned his focus outward, and looked at the candle on the table. How the fuck was he supposed to light it? All the books he had read said that even simple spells needed an incantation or runes to direct the energy, so what the fuck-

Stiles stopped that train of thought suddenly. *All the books he had read.* That wasn’t right, was it? He turned to look at Andris, stunned. All the books he had gotten from Deaton had said that structure was needed to properly conduct magic. And what had Andris just said? Stiles wasn’t meant for rigidity. So what-?

*You have to believe. Be the spark.*

God. Deaton was the best and worst at the same time. Stiles smiled crookedly at Andris, closed his eyes, and believed.

He felt his magic swell within him, responsive and eager. He pictured the candle as it sat on the kitchen table and imagined the flame lighting, blue at the very base with a swath of yellow that gradually turned to a deep orange at the flickering tip. He felt his magic flicker in response. He opened his eyes. On the table, the candle was lit.

“That’s how you do it, young man.” Andris nodded. With a grin Stiles dramatically lifted one hand and snapped his fingers. The candle went out.

It was so worth Andris cuffing him gently for his cheek.

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Stiles spent the rest of the day working as much magic as he could. He created illusions of butterflies flitting about. He heated water without fire. He cleared the whole cabin of dust. He turned a small bone from a bird into a ward against scrying. He gave himself a close shave and a neat haircut. He cleaned all his dirty clothes and then all of Andris’ dirty clothes and then their sheets and then the bathroom. And after careful consideration he shifted some pipes and earth around underground and in the walls so that, come spring, the hot water would get from the heater to the faucets and shower much more efficiently.

Until now, Stiles had been so focused on the decay aspect of his magic and his inability to heal that he had neglected the other parts of it.

The rot wasn’t all he was.

He knew now, instinctively, that he could not heal. The decay that was as much a part of him as any organ in his body prevented it. He couldn’t grow things either. Anything that bloomed by his magic rapidly withered and died.
This depressed Stiles for all of five seconds until Andris said something about dried plants grown by magic being immensely powerful in potions and poultices. This distracted Stiles for an hour or so over lunch while he quizzed Andris on the different things potions could do and if Stiles could make them without his magic fucking it all up.

Eventually Stiles decided that Andris was telling him that he could, but he couldn’t quite figure out what the fuck the man was going on about with the taste of a recipe being different for each person and the body memory making each potion’s recipe a living breathing thing that changed over time and from person to person.

Not an hour after lunch, Stiles was dead on his feet, barely able to keep his eyes open. Andris prodded him into bed with good humor.

“Wha’?” Stiles asked intelligently.

“Magic is just energy stored within the body. You have used it all up today with your little experiments. Sleep for a day or two and we will work on this some more.”

“’Kay.” Stiles was asleep before his head hit his pillow.

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If Stiles was useless at runes and using props for his magic, how had the spell he cast on the Alpha pack worked? Stiles was pretty sure he knew how, but he had to ask.

When Andris asked him to clarify a little, Stiles had haltingly told him an extremely edited version of what had happened with his pack that summer and fall. Andris didn’t say a word about Stiles revealing he had been in a werewolf pack, just explained that the circle and pelt had probably done nothing, and that Stiles had willed so hard for the spell to work that it did, though he had not been consciously aware of it only being powered by himself.

Then Andris let Stiles be quiet and withdrawn for the rest of the day.

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Using magic? Awesome. The most awesome.

Stiles was limited only by his ingenuity and the very attributes that made up his magic. He devoured the books that Andris kept on his shelves and listened with rapt attention to every scrap of knowledge that the old man imparted. He questioned all of it, debated his teacher on all of it, and tried to disprove all of it in an effort to understand.

Through all of Stiles’ enthusiasm, Andris was patient and kind and open with all he knew and had experienced. Winter passed and spring came and Andris taught Stiles to hunt for food. Showed him how to move soundlessly through the woods and find fresh water and locate shelter from a storm. He taught Stiles the mechanics of potion making; how to dry herbs and grind them with mortar and pestle, to tell good ingredients from bad. To see the cadence and resonance of the different parts of
the recipe and how to feel for the proper amount for each to make it perfect no matter how much it might stray from the written instructions.

Sometimes Stiles thought he was dreaming. That he had died in the cold months ago and all of this was his version of heaven. The thing he was looking for when he had run away from his father and his pack.

But, no. What had Andris said? He was cruelly honest with himself. This wasn’t what he really wanted. What he had with Andris was good and it was what he needed right now, but it wasn’t what he wanted. Andris had been right when Stiles had first come to him. He had almost let his anger keep him from finding home again.

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In June, just shy of his eighteenth birthday, Stiles was startled to realize he wasn’t jumpy or fidgety or twitchy at all. It had stopped being an issue so gradually he had scarcely noticed. He broached the subject of his ADHD with Andris.

“Your magic has always been there, young man. But you were not using it. Its disuse was causing trouble. Now that you use it, the trouble is gone.”

“Huh. Cool.” Stiles said and then prompted a discussion of the different ailments among humanity that might be caused by magic or other supernatural influences. From there the subject turned to supernatural creatures in general. Stiles was surprised by the sheer number of them that were real and said so. Andris laughed a great belly laugh.

“Stiles, all stories start somewhere. The myths and legends and tall tales are there because someone saw something and lived to tell about it.”

Stiles wondered what kind of story would be told about him in the future. That very night he started a journal. If there was going to be a story, it was going to be right. He considered, for a moment, starting with the beginning event of roughly sixteen months ago; a mischievous boy and his friend out searching for a half a body. Anger and sorrow made his stomach churn.

He started with his almost-death by snow storm. And if he had started half way through the blank book, just in case? That was no one’s business but his own.

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Stiles was walking through a tunnel. The walls were damp loam, filling his nose with an earthy scent. There was light in the tunnel though he knew it was underground. It had no source; it simply was, lighting the way. From far behind him he could hear Andris calling to him, calling him back. But Stiles didn’t turn back. He could hear something calling from a great distance before him. He needed to find it.

There was no mark of the passing of time in the tunnel. It felt like an eternity had passed, and yet, like no time at all. It was a shock when the tunnel ended.

He left the tunnel through a hole in a great oak tree, and stood on one of its high branches. At the
end of the branch sat a bird. Stiles knew instinctively it was a brown falcon.

But it was also not a bird. It was energy and intelligence in a form it had chosen. Or perhaps been cursed with. Maybe once, a long time ago now, he had been human. Or perhaps he had been like... like the one of the shifting creatures he had known in the past. Stiles did not move, but the bird was before him now, as large as he was. No, maybe he was as small as the bird was? It didn’t matter. He buried his hands in the feathers on his breast and ignored the voice that was calling him back. An understanding passed between the brown falcon and Stiles.

Aide and loyalty for loyalty and death.

The falcon would serve him and he would care for the falcon. And when he died so too would it die. Bound as one forever, even after the greatest sundering. Stiles accepted the bird and opened his mouth to speak for the first time since he had started walking through the tunnel.

“Krzepa,” he said to the brown falcon, and by naming him, bound the not-bird to his very being. He felt his soul quiver with the connection.

He was a part of Stiles now, inseparable from himself. Krzepa was no longer an ‘other’, he was an extension of Stiles himself. It made him feel whole. He turned back finally and walked into the tunnel through the hole in the tree. Just before he passed entirely into the tunnel a great howl rent the air. Stiles fled from the sound of the wolf. Krzepa followed swift at his back.

He opened his eyes to Andris’ deeply lined face.

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“You will be the death of me, young man.” Andris slumped in the chair next to Stiles’ small bed. His face was grey with exhaustion. The age lines that were usually never quite visible creased his skin heavily. It was dark outside, as it had been when Stiles sank into the trance, but he knew he had lost a whole day.

“I’m sorry.” Stiles whispered, throat dry. “I didn’t think I’d get that deep. I just wanted to see if I could reach an astral plane.” He reached up with a hand and stroked the head of Krzepa. “I have a spirit guide. A familiar.” He whispered in awe.

“You will always be a bird of prey, so long as you ignore the wolf inside you.” Andris sighed. Stiles said nothing, just stood up gingerly and helped Andris into bed to sleep, Krzepa perched on his shoulder.

It was the first time he had had a real chance to snoop in Andris’ room. He looked around cautiously as he walked out slowly. He was torn between not wanting to pry and a deep curiosity. The room was as sparse as Stiles’ was. Except for one picture frame on his dresser. Stiles peeked at it as he passed. He was a little sorry when he did.

He shut the door quietly behind him. When Andris had first welcomed Stiles here, he had said something about it being fate. Maybe it was and maybe it wasn’t, but Stiles thought for the most part it was grief.
In the picture, a much younger Andris was helping a little boy grow flowers with magic in a garden. The boy was frowning with great concentration at the daisy under his hands, forehead puckered adorably. Andris was looking at the person holding the camera, his face soft with a smile, adoration shining in his eyes. Stiles would bet his life that the boy was his son and the person holding the camera was his wife.

Now he knew why Andris used fine china with a rose pattern on it.

Now he knew why Andris was so willing to foster Stiles.

*

Stiles thought he might have stayed with Andris forever if the man hadn’t put his foot down. It was September when Andris first brought up Stiles leaving. It had been almost a full year.

“You’re joking,” he said flatly, letting his fork clatter on the rose-edged china when he dropped it. Krzepa hopped from the back of Stiles’ chair to his shoulder, and fixed Andris with a piercing gaze.

“You are not as sad as you were anymore, young man.” Andris said quietly, wiping his mouth on a cloth napkin hemmed with lace.

“What does that even mean?”

“You left your pack because you were angry and sad. Because you did not know how to handle the situation, feeling as you did. But time has passed while you have been here.” Andris waved his hand to indicate the cabin. Krzepa eyed the hand like he was thinking about making a lunge for it. Stiles started to absently preen his feathers. To calm himself or Krzepa, he wasn’t sure.

“You are not the same young man you were when you arrived. You are no longer so weary in heart. Nowhere near death. Your family will not be the same either.”

“I don’t want to leave.”

“You must.”

“I know I’m not done learning.”

“You can learn later. Go back.”

“They don’t care about me.”

“You cannot know that until you go back and find out for sure.”

“I am sure.”

“You are not or you would not also be so sad. Go home, Stiles.”

“You can’t tell me what to do!”

“I can.”

“You are not my father!” Stiles clapped a hand to him mouth, aghast that the words had come out of
his mouth. “No. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean-” Andris gently took one of Stiles’ hands and clasped it between both of his. His smile was kind, but his eye were sad.

“I am not, though it would be a privilege to be able to claim so. No, Stiles,” he cut off Stiles again, shaking his head, “You must not forget that there is a man who is your father, waiting for his boy to come home. Whatever he and your pack did that drove you away, they are your family. Give them one more chance. Give them a chance to prove their worth to you once more.”

“I don’t-” Stiles choked, eyes gleaming, “I don’t think I can yet.”

“Then you will find yourself there when you are ready. But you will not go to them while you are here.” Andris patted Stiles’ hand and pulled a set of car keys from his pocket. Stiles stared at them, dumb founded.

“I had someone from town get your car and fix it. It has been waiting for you.” Stiles shook his head, but Andris clicked his tongue at him and pressed the keys into his hand.

“You wandered here, Stiles. And maybe my will had something to do with it. But here is where you needed to be. I have taught you all you need to know Stiles. From here, is it all just details, minutia.” Stiles buried his face in Andris’ neck and tried to keep from crying. Krzepa rubbed the crown of his head against Stiles’ temple, cooing softly.

“Oh, young man,” Andris said fondly, wrapping his arms around Stiles, “I was so very pleased to have you here. I will be sad when you go.”

“So don’t make me.”

“Stiles, you have a family waiting.”

“You are family.”

“Then you must promise to visit when all is well. Bring along your father, I should like to meet him.”

*

When Stiles drove away from Andris’ cabin that November, he left behind a phone with one number in the contacts list. The number was to the phone Stiles now had. He stopped in Minneapolis to get some coffee and passed a board filled with the faces of missing children. A woman was putting up a new one. It had his face on it.

He waited until the woman had left and the small crowd that had been attracted to the spectacle dispersed. The number under his face was the house phone. It was the middle of the day on Thursday. His father was probably at work.

Stiles found a pay phone and dialed the number. Krzepa shifted restlessly on his shoulder. He got the answering machine.

“Uh, hey Dad. It’s uh, its Stiles.” His breath caught, and he had to clear his throat before he went on. “I saw one of the missing posters you’re having put up for me. You can stop that. I’m not missing. I’m okay. I just couldn’t stay there, not with- not with the way things were. With, you know, all that
“Um,” he bit his lip, “Dad I was- I wasn’t thinking straight, when I left. I just- I needed so bad to get out, just get away from you and from Derek and from Scott, and everyone else. I’m sorry I left the way I did. But I’m,” Stiles swallowed hard, “I’m not sorry that I did leave. I needed space. And time.

“And I’m sorry but, I still do. I’m still upset, and I’m still pissed and I don’t think I can handle seeing you or any of them yet. So, I guess I just wanted to call, let you know I was alright, and that I don’t know when I’ll be back. If I’ll ever be back.” Stiles was quiet for a long time after that, just breathing into the mouthpiece. When the phone beeped to warn him that his money was almost used up he scrubbed his face and cleared his throat again.

“I don’t know if I’ll call you again. So, I guess I just, um. Good-bye.” He hung up. Ten minutes later he was out of the city headed south.

*

At some point, he cut east and ended up in Paducah, Kentucky. There he met Silas; all blond hair and long limbs and coy smiles. He was also a male witch who specialized in healing. His cheesy occult shop had a tiny clinic tucked behind it for clientele of the supernatural persuasion and only customers in-the-know could get the real ingredients for their work from the business-savvy witch.

Stiles, who had finally run out of money, made awkward contact with him out of desperation. He had intended to just sell some of the rare herbs he could dead-grow with his magic, but Silas was cunning and knew talent when he saw it. Somehow Stiles ended up working in the shop and helping Silas fill requests he got from customers.

*

Stiles had been worried at first that he wasn’t qualified to handle it, but his year with Andris hadn’t just been a reprieve and Magic 101. Talking to Silas made him realize exactly how much he knew. Stiles figured out he was at what equated to a journeyman level. One of the shop girls had joked about being on his journeyman travels.

And judging from the way Silas eyed Stiles’ ass when he said something particularly apropos? Journeyman was a good thing to be.

*

Because of Stiles’ situation, it was impossible for him to get an apartment. Once Silas found out that Stiles had been sleeping in his car and washing by hand in the bathrooms of 24-hour diners, nothing would do for the shop owner but to have Stiles move in with him.
Stiles lost his virginity to Silas one month after meeting him. He never slept in the same bed with the witch. The nightmares of wrinkled hands and bloody knives made it uncomfortable for the both of them.

About two weeks in, before Silas went down on Stiles for the first time in the alley behind the shop, Stiles admitted that his magic prevented him from working any kind of healing magic, even potions. Silas slapped him upside the head, told him there were other ways to heal and to stop being such a baby.

He spent six months learning how to triage and stitch wounds and diagnose and treat ailments with natural and modern remedies and perform operations on the fly with a pair of scissors, spider’s web and a bottle of Krazy Glue.

During all that time Silas was also teaching Stiles how to kiss and how to fuck and how to get fucked. He taught Stiles how to be safe when it came to his body and how to cherish himself.

Neither of them were exclusive and Stiles, feeling bolder than he had ever been in his life occasionally brought back a one-nighter to his tiny room in Silas’ place so he knew what other bodies felt like.

Silas wasn’t in love with Stiles, and Stiles wasn’t in love with Silas. But when Stiles had saved enough money, Silas fucked him long and slow and then kissed him sweetly before he left.

On the other side of the Tennessee-Kentucky border Stiles realized he had nothing at all to look forward to, nowhere in particular to go. He almost turned around and went back to Silas. Instead he called Andris for the first time. Laying on his motel bed he told Andris all about the last seven months. The old man laughed and joked and ribbed him and made Stiles tell an old man all about the kinds of things he had learned in a witches shop until their phones were both dead.

The next morning was a Wednesday. Stiles found a pay phone and waited until after the lunch hour to call at his father’s house. The answering machine picked up again.
“Hey, Dad. It’s Stiles.” He was quiet for a moment before he went on. “I don’t actually know why I called this time. I did see that all the pictures of me were down. So, I guess, thanks for that. And, um, well it’s been seven months. I guess a year and seven months.

“Huh. My class must be getting ready for graduation by now. Yeah, it’s just into May.” Stiles sighed heavily. “I suppose I could get my GED. I don’t know if I’ll do college. I don’t really want to anymore. If I did it’d probably be a technical thing. But I don’t really see the point. I just don’t know, Dad.” Stiles ran his fingers through Krzepa’s feathers, letting the action soothe him.

“I don’t know a lot anymore. Anyway, I’m sure you’ve already told Scott and the others that I’ve called. But I guess if you haven’t, you could. If you wanted. Oh,” Stiles said, thinking of it suddenly, “Make sure you tell that asshole Deaton that I found someone a thousand times better than his snobby ass. Fucking, stuck up Drui- Veterinarians.” He corrected quickly. “So yeah. Bye.” He hung up and kept moving south.

*  

In Louisiana a hoodoo priestess tries to sacrifice him to her serpent god. She’s the second person Stiles kills. He stands there holding the candelabra he used to brain her with, not shaking. Krzepa glides down and eats one of her eyes. It doesn’t look like it was tasty, but once Krzepa gets it in his gullet, Stiles can feel the ownership of the books in her house transfer to him.

He notes that he is much less upset at having killed someone this time around and then he calls Silas for advice. After Stiles tells the whole story, Silas swears and hangs up after promising to make a few calls himself. Then he dials Andris just to hear his soothing voice tell him what he already knows. He listens to the old man talk about karma and self-defense and how this world is so much different from the mundane one until Silas gets back to him.

Once he manages to hide the death and then transfer the ownership of the house and its contents without dying himself to a witch doctor Silas knows, he takes some of the more interesting books in the priestess’s collection and hauls ass two states east and calls his father from a truck stop in Alabama.

All he says is; “Dad, its Stiles. She was going to kill me, so she fucking deserved it. I know she fucking did but- Jesus Christ. Bye.”

*  

He befriends a pregnant bridge troll in New York City by saving zer from a harpy. Zhe and zer brood-keep were so grateful that zhe arranged it so that Stiles might pass over any bridge in the world toll free. Stiles was invited to stay for the birth. When the infant troll was born, zhe was no bigger than a newborn kitten. He pressed zer against his chest and felt zer tiny heartbeat.

*
He kills a nest of pixies in the Virginia’s by rotting out their food source. He doesn’t regret it because
the pixies were taking children and drowning them for a rite that increased their fertility.

He had taken the finger bones of the children they had killed and covered them in the blood of a
black cat. He placed the tiny bones all around the town and forest where the pixies were staying to
keep them from leaving to find another place to nest. The pixies were so small and used so much
energy that they turned to mumified husks in under two weeks.

The local hedge-witch coven rewards him with cold cash and shoos him off with a basket of mini-
quiche.

It gives him the idea to make money by selling his services as a magic fixer, mixing potions and
doing the dangerous shit no one else wanted to do. He decides he can do it because he’s killed two
people and three dozen pixies and if he kills some more? Well. It’s not the mundane world, it’s the
supernatural one and the laws are very different.

*

He still has nightmares, mostly the same old ones. Sometimes with a new horror he’s seen mixed in.
A Buddhist priest in Maine showed him how to calm his mind enough to fall asleep again. The
priest’s brother, an ascetic monk, taught him how to eat when he didn’t think he could.

His weight finally returned and settled.

*

The panic attacks didn’t really stop but Krzepa took them away. Reached through the bond between
them to snatch the anxiety right out of his heart when it got to be too much. It was the only magic
Krzepa ever did on his own.

*

“…God, Dad, you should have seen the look on that bastard’s face!” Stiles brushed the tears out of
his eyes as his laughter finally petered out. “Shit. Scott would have loved it. Some asshole getting
shown up by a kid. The best.” Stiles sighed deeply and shifted the pay phone to his other ear so he
could feed Krzepa some trail mix out of a pouch with the other. The falcon warbled happily. Stiles
gnawed on his bottom lip for a moment before the words came bursting out.

“Dad, Scott was such a fucking hypocrite. Jesus. What the fuck? I needed him and he blew me off. I
thought we were best friends and you just- and then Allison-” Stiles made a distressed sound. “If we
ever see each other again the first words out of your mouth had better be a fucking apology, man.
We’ve been friends since we were four, you asshole. I gave you my shovel so you could dig a moat for your castle in the sand box. I deserved better than you shouting at me and not talking to me you absolute fuck head! Christ. Bye.”

*

He has a string of one-night stands and casual lovers. He makes sure none of them have dark hair or hazel-green eyes.

He learns how to see the dead from a psychic in New Mexico.

He meets the Faerie Queen, screws up, runs for his life and swears to never fuck a Fae Prince again. Or any Faery for that matter

*

He keeps three journals; one for himself, one for the things he learns about magic and one for all the creatures he meets. He invests in a set of leather bound books, each in a different color; black, green and blue for each subject respectively. He gets them stamped with volume numbers as he fills them, so he and those who read them after his death can keep them in order.

He adds to each book his own magic to keep them from being read by someone other than himself. He binds them in a way similar to how the Hoodoo priestess from Louisiana had her own books. At his death they’ll pass ownership to someone he trusts. At the moment it’s the Lead Mare of a herd of centaurs in the mountains of Montana. Because they’re isolated and kind and have no use for books of magic he knows his thoughts and research would likely be left in peace for a hundred years.

*

He studies for his GED but never takes it. Every few months he cracks open a new study guide, completes it, and then leaves it alone again.

He calls his father infrequently and randomly; two in the morning, six at night, midday on the dot. On the rare occasion his father is home to get the phone, he hangs up and leaves town immediately.

*

Krzepa is beautiful. His feathers are clean and his eyes are bright. He can fly far and high and hunt mice for his own meals. When Stiles managed to get access to a computer after he left Andris, he was tempted to look up the meaning of his name. He didn’t. He found out by accident while helping
a pair of hunters go after a crazed basilisk that was attacking hikers on the border between Colorado and Wyoming.

Krzepa was endlessly useful to Stiles in a fight. Because he was an astral construct that only looked like a bird, he was immune to most magic. But as a part of Stiles’ very being he could carry magic that Stiles gave to him. So it was Krzepa dive bombing the basilisk where Stiles and the hunters had cornered it on a cliff in the Rocky Mountains that set it up for the final blow. He laid the freezing magic on the massive snake through contact with Krzepa, giving the younger hunter an opening to plunge the thigh bone of a goat wrapped with griffin feathers into its heart.

The hunters harvested its parts to sell on the black market and Stiles took what he needed for his own supplies and to sell to some occult shops with good reputations.

“Your Vigor is an excellent creature. Where did you capture it?” the older hunter asked, wiping basilisk blood off on his cargo pants. Stiles thought the hunters might be father and son, but they didn’t really act like it.

“My vigor?” Stiles asked, but didn’t look up. Basilisk scales were wickedly sharp and even the tiniest cut would get infected, no matter how much disinfectant he spread on the wound.

“The bird.” The man clarified and went back to cutting off the choice pieces of meat from the basilisk’s belly.

“Why call it vigor?”

“Is that not the meaning of its name?”

“Actually,” the younger hunter said as he neatly wrapped the meat in butcher’s paper, “I think its meaning is closer to ‘vim’.”

“‘Strength’,” Stiles found himself saying. When he glanced up, both of the hunters were looking at him. Krzepa shuffled a little on his shoulder. “To me, Krzepa is strength. And I didn’t capture him. He and I have an agreement.”

The hunters exchanged glances but didn’t pursue any other line of questioning. They buried the basilisk deep, ensuring it wouldn’t be unearthed in a landslide or a flood. During the grueling four days it took to dig the hole and then fill it again, Stiles thought about what he had named his bird. Why he hadn’t really known the meaning until now.

Driving away from the mountains he thought that it must have been because he wasn’t strong when he had first bound the falcon to himself. He had still been unsettled, unsure of himself, of who he was and what he wanted.

And for the most part that was still true, but he wasn’t the weak boy he was then. He was strong, and growing stronger every day.

* 

“Dad, it’s Stiles. None of them even looked at me.” He moaned into the mouth piece, slurring ever so slightly. It was the middle of the night, and Stiles was shirtless. And shoeless. And the only reason he wasn’t freezing was because it was summer in southern Florida. And because Krzepa was warm on
A whole bar full of gay, gay men and I’m not any ones type. So stupid. This is stupid. I am a catch. I am awesome. I deserve so much sex for how awesome I am.” He hiccupped and swayed where he stood. “And fuck you for letting me kiss you.” he said suddenly. “You growly, beautiful bastard with your, your fucking eyebrows. You’re so gorgeous when you laugh like you mean it. Dad, Dad, are you listening? That asshole let me kiss him, Dad.” Stiles sniffed and rubbed an eye.

“It was my first kiss, too. You dick. It was good. It was really good. I knew that then. And I know now ‘cuz I’ve kissed lots of guys. So I know it was good. It could have-” Stiles choked back a sob. “I wanted it, I did. I wanted you and then you said I was just a kid and what did I know? Like I hadn’t earned the fucking right to my own feelings after all the shit with wolves and lizards and stabbing and shit. You fucker, you were so good. A good Alpha. God. You were beautiful. I didn’t know you could laugh like that. Why didn’t I know you could laugh like that? It was… you were happy.” Stiles voice broke.

“I wanted to make you happy. I wanted to make you laugh all the time because you deserved to be happy. And if I wasn’t the one who was going to make you happy, if you didn’t want me to make you happy then you could have just said so. You didn’t need to- to make me feel like shit. Worthless.

“I liked you. I liked you so much. Thought maybe I could love you too. But you just… you broke my heart.” And Stiles is crying now, whimpering little sobs into the phone. “Hurt so much. Why did you do that to me? I thought we were pack. Weren’t we? I tried you know, I tried to be useful. I wasn’t good then at fighting or anything like that. But I was learning magic. I wanted to be strong for the pack. For you. ‘Cuz you were my Alpha and maybe you were more, but then you- why did you have to ignore me?

“They were all ignoring me, were treating me like an outsider, like I wasn’t pack. Was I ever pack? Did I just imagine the bonds? The warm, wiggly things in my chest?” There was a faint tone that told Stiles his money was almost out.

“I just don’t understand. Why would you all do that to me? Why would you- wasn’t I good enough? Hadn’t I proved my loyalty? Did you not like me anymore?”

The phone call cut off.

Krzepa used the sharpness of his beak to prompt Stiles when he needed it until he got back to his motel room. He forced himself to leave early the next day. He didn’t want to risk his father tracing the call.

*

He remembers everything he said. He wasn’t nearly as drunk as he let himself pretend he was. It was a little cowardly, but he wouldn’t have had up the courage to say anything if he was fully sober. And it needed to have been said.

It wasn’t really fair to be angry and avoid them for years when they didn’t know why.
He masters some obscure version of martial arts with the help of the ghost of a Chinese man. Stiles laid him to rest in repayment.

He comes across hunters on occasion. Sometimes he helps them, sometimes he runs from them and sometimes he kills them.

He travels around the country learning and studying and making money and fucking and fighting and laughing and making friends. Before he knows it, it’s been seven years since he left.

*

Somewhere between Nebraska and Kansas, around his twenty-second birthday, he starts to think of finding home; finding a place to settle. He decides, deliberately, that it will not be in California.

*

When a friend of a friend casually mentions to Stiles that some bad shit is going down in Beacon Hills, California, and that the Hale Pack is struggling to keep its territory, Stiles tells himself he doesn’t care. He doesn’t.

But if there is something wrong he thinks, as a supernatural fixer, it’s probably a good idea to find out all about it.

Chapter End Notes

Vomit Counter: Chapter - 0/Total - 3

Andris – Ahn-driss; this video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rDlxHSg05Wc is for some athlete that I don’t care about, but it’s the right first name. (And if you don’t know who he is DON’T LOOK. I would consider certain things in his bio as minor spoilers. I hate spoilers, so fair warning.) Hopefully the pronunciation is accurate.

Onamia – oh-naym-ee-uh; Hear is pronounced here: http://www.forvo.com/word/onamia/ Click the little blue Play button next to where it says ‘pronunciation by Cassiusaugusta (Female from United States)’ (this one is the place)

Krzepa – k-shay-pah; Hear it pronounced here: http://www.forvo.com/word/krzepa/ Click the little blue play button next to where it says ‘pronunciation by gorniak (Male from Poland)’

Silas – sigh-luhs; Starts at about 8 seconds. Plays five times.
He does recon first, obviously. It’s nothing but stupidity to race full-tilt into a situation when all you have to go on is some distant acquaintance claiming ‘bad shit is going down’. So he walks into The Bar in Chicago to ask some pertinent questions.

The Bar isn’t its name; it doesn’t have a name or a yellow pages listing. Or a white pages listing either; Stiles checked just to be sure. The patrons just call it The Bar. There’s magic woven into the very foundation of the structure; you can’t even see the place if you don’t know it exists and you can’t get in without an invitation.

Stiles first heard about The Bar from Silas back in Kentucky. The invitation he managed to get out of a lamia who owed him a favor for rescuing her children from hunters. The outside was unremarkable; a brick building with no sign, a Chinese trinket store owned by a family of fucanglong on one side and a Laundromat on the other allegedly run by a brownie.

The owner of the bar was a satyr who gave no fucks about the exclusivity of his bar. All he cared about was that the alcohol was good, that it never stopped flowing and he always had someone to drink it with. He left the business end of things to his partner, a Tsukimono-suji. With the help of her family’s fox she was the one who set the wards that kept mundane individuals out and protected those who were inside.

The Bar was one of the few places in the country that were entirely neutral. No violence, no grudges, no recruiting, no business- just drinking and good company. If the talking got to the point where there might be business, there was a mundane Thai joint just down the street that was open twenty-four/seven, and the curry came highly recommended.

Stiles had, since he started frequenting The Bar, found many clients there who were willing to pay Stiles plenty of money to fix their problems.

The interior of The Bar was simple. Wood floors, brick walling, a ceiling of exposed pipes. Tables and chairs all of different sizes and shapes to fit the many creatures that came in. The bar was granite
and the alcohol shelves behind it were steel wire with a few red and blue lighting fixtures to make it ‘look sexy’. At least that’s what the satyr had told Stiles once when he had asked about the color scheme.

Once he was past the wards and had a cup of red wine, Stiles drifted from group to group, trying to find anyone who might be talking about what he wanted to discuss. As he walked between the tables, many of the patrons nodded at him and he returned the greetings. Stiles didn’t know quite how it had happened but he had a reputation for being someone you don’t fuck around with. And that earned a lot of respect in certain circles. His rounds were interrupted by a jovial voice bellowing his name. Silas came up from behind Stiles and wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

“Well, would you look what the cactus cat dragged in. Good timing.” Silas pulled Stiles over to a table in the corner, blithely ignoring his protests. The table had three occupants. Javan, the witch doctor that had taken possession of the Hoodoo priestess’s house in Louisiana, tilted his Biltmore in greeting and offered a puff from his cigar. Stiles declined in favor of kissing Timandra’s cheek. The lamia who had helped him into The Bar smiled shyly and scented the air next to his cheek with her forked tongue.

Stiles was going to greet the third party at the table when he felt a tickle behind his ear. He sighed and pulled a fool’s gold coin out from behind it.

“Really, Dalaigh? Doesn’t that ever get old?” he flipped the coin to the long-limbed leprechaun who snatched it out of the air and made it vanish.

“Not ever.” His green eyes danced with mischief. Dalaigh was the first person Stiles had talked to in The Bar when he first arrived. When Stiles said as much to the leprechaun, he had frowned, wiggled his fingers over Stiles head and said,

“Sure enough. Your magic and my luck are all mixed up, me lad. Well, then,” he’d thrown back a shot of something disgustingly green and fixed Stiles with a bright grin, “‘Tis the luck of first meetings. You and I shall be friends from here on.”

And then Dalaigh got Stiles stinking drunk and took him back to his place to sleep it off, laughing all the while. If one can forgive the irony, Stiles always says he’s lucky to have met Dalaigh.

“Well, now,” Silas said, shoving Stiles into a chair between Timandra and Javan before pulling up his own between Timandra and Dalaigh. “Isn’t this a lucky coincidence? All of us here tonight at the same time.”

Dalaigh snorted.

Stiles was anxious. He wanted to figure out what was happening back in Beacon Hills, but Silas was right. It wasn’t often that his closest friends were gathered in one place. Who knew how long the trouble in California had been going on, if there was any at all? It could wait a few hours while he enjoyed the company. He tries to put it out of his mind for the time being.

They talked for a long time. How Javan was doing with his shipping business in the south, bringing magic supplies up from Mexico and the nearby islands. How Dalaigh’s employment with a bank was causing all sorts of odd financial miracles. Timandra proudly showed off pictures of her youngest child on their first day of elementary school. Silas told amusing stores about his staff and the troubling symptoms his patients bring to him. Stiles shared his own tales of the kind of mayhem he comes across as a supernatural fixer.

Eventually the talk turns to current gossip and after a scandalous rehashing of the suspected
relationship between the satyr and Tsukimono-suji of The Bar, Silas idly says;

“Gods, have you heard about California? It’s just unbelievable.”

It takes all of Stiles’ not inconsiderable self-control to keep from reacting overtly to the comment. The others are all nodding with appropriately disbelieving looks on their faces. Stiles clears his throat.

“Looks like I’m the only one in the dark.” He says, faking a cheerful tone. The whole of it comes out as they each lay out what they’ve heard.

Turns out the whole supernatural world is all aflutter because the Faerie Queen has temporarily moved the court from Savernake Forest in England to the Beacon Hills Preserve in California and started fucking around in the Hale Pack’s territory. Over some sort of grudge. No one can figure out what the grudge is and none of the Fae are talking, only making cryptic comments about blood for blood and undeserving death. His friends tell Stiles all about how the soldiers of the Guard are attacking the local pack, harrying and hurting them. Wearing them down. The pack has many allies but not one that would face the Fae Court for them.

Stiles vision flickers as his adrenaline kicks up. He knows what the grudge is that the Queen has. And it’s his fault. His pack is under attack because of Stiles.

Abruptly he realizes he’s going to lose control. His hands are shaking and his heart beat is stuttering. He needs to get away, get some air and calm down. He draws breath to excuse himself, but Silas leans over the table in a conspiratorial manner and says, “I hear they’re already down a ‘wolf.”

The glass cup in Stiles’ hand shatters and his breath huffs out, cold as winter air and freezes the wine where it’s splashed on the table. Krzepa flutters restlessly at his back, cooing anxiously. The other patrons don’t react; broken glass is a frequent occurrence, and most are too drunk to notice a brief drop in temperature. Silas, Timandra, Dalaigh and Javan are staring at Stiles in shock and concern.

Stiles never loses control. He smiles tightly and lets the wine thaw rapidly.

“Sorry, I just thought, how awful it is. What the Hale Pack is going through.” It’s flimsy. It’s the flimsiest of excuses to explain why he reacted as he did. He knows as soon as the words are out of his mouth that it wasn’t enough.

“Try again,” Javan says quietly and lights another cigar. He settles back in his chair and watches Stiles with a speculative gaze. The table is quiet and Stiles licks his lips, frantically trying to come up with something to explain that’s not the truth.

“Gods,” Silas says suddenly in disgust, “I can see you trying to come up with the lie, Stiles. What the fuck are you hiding?” he bares his teeth.

“Silas, please,” Timandra said softly, “Perhaps now is not the time-”

“No, I’m with the witch,” Dalaigh cuts in and leans forward, green eyes hard with irritation. “All the years we’ve known you, you never speak of yourself.”

“Neither do you.” Stiles shoots back, trying to use irritation to cover his discomfort.

“Not everything, of course not, but you know where I am from, the names of my siblings, my thoughts and opinions,” Dalaigh shakes his head and throws an arm over the back of his chair. “You never speak of your past, Stiles. You never speak of the future.”

“I know you fell out with your first teacher,” Javan says, and expels a thick cloud of smoke through
his nose. “I know you leave someone phone messages. But they don’t call back,” he adds. “But why are you alone now and when did that happen and where are you from and who else was there in your life before we met you…” he spread his hands to show how empty their depth of knowledge of Stiles was. Stiles tilts his chin to a defiant angle.

“You ever think that maybe I don’t want to talk about my past? That I liked being with you because you don’t fucking pry?”

“Bullshit!” Silas snaps. “You’re too damn nosy yourself to get mad over us poking in. No, you’d rather deflect or change the subject, not attack us like this.” Stiles sneered at him, but Silas only glared back.

“This business with the Hale pack is hitting a nerve with you.” Dalaigh agrees, swirling the amber liquid in his glass. “A pretty damn sensitive one, too.”

“You have no right.” Stiles growled, fury welling up in his chest, making his magic roil. He clamps down on it fiercely. “Whatever I have learned of you, you have offered it freely. You don’t get to demand I share my wounds with you like… like friendship is some sort of fucking business transaction.”

“No one said you had to share your wounds, Stiles.” Silas’ voice is tightly controlled to be neutral. It was a small slip but Stiles was in a mess now. No way out but through.

“Fine,” he bit out. “You caught me. I consider my past a wound. A big one that I don’t want any one poking at. Not even you, my friends.” The emphasis on the word was harsh and cutting. A mockery of the affection is should have been spoken with, that Stiles had spoken it with before. They flinched and Stiles regretted it.

This was ridiculous. There was no need for him to get so angry. Wasn’t it what he had wanted of his pack? Friends to pry at him and ask after him and come to know all of him deeply and intimately? Why was he-? But, of course he knew why.

Their rejection still hurt. Still haunted him. He still expected those he cared about to turn away, to stop caring. There was a part of him that thought this was false, a temporary interest that would vanish one day. His anger wasn’t anger. It was fear. It was the fear of being left behind by those he trusted.

He knew in a sudden flash of understanding that he would go back to Beacon Hills. That he would go back and speak face to face with his father and the pack. That he would let them explain and apologize. He would let them be angry with him over his hasty and no doubt upsetting departure. That he would give them the second chance Andris had so long ago told him he must give them. That by giving them the chance he might be able to reclaim the part of himself that didn’t really trust anymore.

But first, the friends before him.

He slumped and pressed his face to his hands, breathing deliberately to keep the anger and fear and panic at bay. Ever sensitive to the fluctuations in the emotions of others, Timandra gestured sharply at the others to keep them from the speaking, sensing that Stiles’ turmoil was just settling. That he needed a moment to breathe. After a pause, Timandra spoke softly.

“Stiles,” she laid a hand on his arm. “Four years I have known you and never have I seen you lose control of your magic. Not even when you found the hunters hurting my children.” Her voice hitches. “I could see the rage in you but you never lost hold of your power. You never lashed out
like this.” She turned her warm reptilian eyes to Stiles’ and said, “Please.”

He stood and announced; “I am not nearly drunk enough for this.”

*

He downed two shots of Jack, three of Jagger and a beer chaser in less than five minutes. Timandra aborted a gesture to try and make him slow down. She settled her hands in her lap instead.

“Hale Pack,” he started slowly. Stiles looked at the ceiling, then down at the table, then over his shoulder at the crowded room, and then back at the ceiling before settling for staring at one of his empty beer glasses. “They were… that is, I was- we were… I was packmate, once.” He says finally and the table stirs at this, but no one speaks. “The bonds, they broke a long time ago.” His fingers twist together. “My father still lives there, too.” And then he’s silent, lips thin and brow furrowed.

“I didn’t think you had any family,” Silas admits. “I figured you would have spoken of him before.” Stiles bites his lip to keep his chin from trembling.

“The last thing my father said to me,” he confesses quietly, “was that I wasn’t his son anymore.” The table is deathly still. Stiles is quiet for a long time, lets the alcohol soak his system, and for the first time, tells the whole thing from start to finish.

He goes back to being sixteen and overhearing the police chatter about a half a body in the woods and dragging his best friend out to find it. About the cluster-fuck that followed with hunters and rogue Alphas and Allison and Scott’s star-crossed love. Even about his own love for Lydia:

“She was the most beautiful girl in the world you know? All strawberry blonde and big beautiful eyes. And she was so smart. No one knew that ‘cuz she was dating the lacrosse team captain. God, Jackson was such an asshole. She was all vapid and shit ‘cuz she thought she needed to be that way but she was a genius. And I wanted her to see me ‘cuz I could see her and we were gonna have the prettiest babies. But then Peter bit her…”

He talked about Kate Argent and her crimes, about Derek killing the last of his family to become Alpha. Then Gerard coming to town and the Kanima/Jackson situation and Derek making the pack larger with Isaac and Boyd and Erica and getting paralyzed at the garage and then Derek at the school’s pool:

“I held that asshole up for two hours. He wasn’t my Alpha then. He was just this grumpy werewolf who didn’t like me and I didn’t like him, but I wasn’t going to let him drown, ‘cuz I am the best person on the planet. I am, I am the awesomest. He didn’t even thank me. Dick.”

He told them about the massacre in the police station and the lacrosse game where he was a champion but Gerard had kidnapped Boyd and Erica and then took him:

“He didn’t hurt me much, but it was enough, you know. I was scared. He could have hurt me, but he didn’t, and only because I was supposed to be a message. I still have nightmares.”

He talks about the wrap up, about Scott’s plan to fell Gerard and about Peter coming back and then the Alpha Pack coming to recruit Derek. About the history they had with the Hales and the Argents. He talks about finally giving up on Lydia and deciding to learn magic because he had a spark. And he talks about the pack growing close, so close and how good it felt to have a family like that:
“They were the best. It was the best. Could feel it in my chest, all of them, so close. So loved and loving. After my mom died it was just me and my dad and it was lonely. They made me not lonely. Safe.”

And then the beginning of the end; the magic he wove on the Alpha Pack and killing Deucalion with his own hands. Kissing Derek and his subsequent rejection. And all the rejections after that, by Scott and Allison and Isaac and Boyd and Erica and Lydia and Jackson and Deaton. And then the fatal blow by his father—‘It’s like you’re not my son anymore’:

“And I had to leave. I couldn’t stay. Not with everyone pushing me away. I couldn’t—” Stiles is dimly aware he was crying. “I told Andris that I wasn’t trying to kill myself by walking in that snowstorm but I think I was. If I hadn’t met him I would have killed myself because I couldn’t handle not being with them anymore. With them not wanting me anymore. Oh my God, I miss them. I’m so angry at them but I miss them so fucking much. I miss them all the time. Why did I— why couldn’t I have stayed? I don’t know what I did wrong. I don’t understand.”

*

Stiles is aware of being moved. Of hands holding him up and soothing him. Then there’s a bed under him smelling of clovers. The scent rouses him.

“You knew him first. Did you ever suspect—?”

“I knew there was something; he had nightmares. Sometimes he would wake up trying to get away, like someone was trying to hurt him.”

“And what? You never asked?”

“He was skittish back then. I knew if I pressed, he’d run. Kid hides the fear better now.”

“Kid. He really is a kid. What, twenty-three? Twenty-four? He doesn’t act like it.

“Killing someone at seventeen? And then running from your pack?”

“Those kinds of bonds don’t break over nothing. Pack-bonds are powerful and emotional magic. They cast him out.”

“How could they? Stiles is so… he’s just so—”

“Loyal. Honest. Brave. Gods, the things he did for the sake of that pack and they just pushed him away.”

“Maybe they didn’t realize?”

“Didn’t realize? Didn’t fucking realize my pasty white arse!”

“Quiet down!”

“Derek lost his pack-family when he was a boy. Can you blame him for fucking up like he did?”

“Yeah. I can. He was Alpha. After what Stiles did to defend him and the pack he should have held position as Beta. If he’d wanted, Stiles could have been the Alpha-mate. He should have been
revered and fucking cherished. Not cast out like so much trash.”

“Stop it. Derek wasn’t the only one at fault. It sounds like every member of the pack had issues on top of being dumb-fuck teenagers.”

“He wants to go back. He wants to save him.”

“They’re still his family.”

“He shouldn’t. After what they did-”

“That’s his choice to make.”

“He really is brave isn’t he?”

Stiles feels a hand soothe his forehead and he drops off into sleep.

*

In the morning, Silas holds the hangover cure just out of Stiles reach. He asks the question Stiles really doesn’t want to answer but knows he has to. Krzepa tolerates Stiles cuddling him to his chest like child’s doll.

“Why is the Fae Queen after the Hale Pack?”

The answer is simple;

“I killed her son.”

*

Stiles was twenty when he met Caius. It wasn’t love at first sight. It was love at second sight, and only after Caius slipped a thin bracelet on Stiles’ wrist. Stiles hadn’t met another Fae before. He didn’t know the kinds of tricks they played with love and glamour and charms. Stiles is convinced to this day that it was supposed to just be a trick; the Fae Prince, third in line to the throne, taking a human lover for a time to amuse himself. He will never know what turned it all so dangerously wrong.

There was an obsession in the heart of Caius and Stiles was its focus. He was convinced that Stiles was his one true love and the faint magic that had been laid on the bracelet to nudge his affection was doubled and tripled in an effort to force Stiles to feel the same.

It still makes Stiles nauseated to think that if Caius hadn’t been so heavy handed, if he had left the love charm to work unnoticed and wooed Stiles slowly with words and dinners and gifts instead of rushing with coarse magic, Stiles would never have caught on.

But Caius tried to force the situation, brought Stiles to his Queen mother and pronounced him his love and asked Stiles to declare the same. But the hard parts of him, the parts that had stopped
trusting people when his pack had turned its back on him, whispered that this was wrong, all wrong. And he listened, and took off the bracelet, saw clearly what was going on and tried to flee. The Prince wouldn’t let him, wasn’t used to people telling him ‘no’. None of the court was stepping forward. Stiles shouted at them that he had been spelled, that he didn’t want to marry Caius. They laughed at him and marveled at his cold feet. Hooted at him and told him not to fear is husband’s mighty rod. The Queen was impassive. So Stiles panicked, and lashed out with fist and foot and when he couldn’t escape, drew his dagger and plunged it into Caius’ heart.

He had to kill fourteen more Faeries before he could get away.

*

The unadulterated fury on his behalf warmed Stiles’ heart. He helped Silas with a charm to put the pieces of the kitchen table back together.

*

In the end, he managed to leave on his own.

They all make arguments about why it’s a terrible idea to go by himself. Why Stiles shouldn’t face down the Fae Queen’s grudge and his old pack without someone to watch his back. But Stiles can’t be persuaded otherwise. All of it is his burden, something he has to fix. Or if not fix, find a way to lay to rest. They only let him go once he accepts their gifts; bottles of potion and poison, talismans and amulets, scales and a talon, coins from a pot of gold and a pinch of good luck.

He takes Javan’s car when he insists because the witch doctor rebuilt it himself from the chassis up, carving thousands of runes into the metal and making the protections so powerful Stiles actually sneezed the first time he laid eyes on it. He makes Stiles promise to bring it back.

Stiles swears he will.

*

Twelve hours out from Beacon Hills at a rest stop, Stiles calls his father.

He hangs up after two rings. It’s stupid. He shouldn’t just surprise them like this. It’s been seven fucking years. The shock might actually give his father a heart attack and as much as Stiles still smarts over what his father said to him, he doesn’t actually wish the man dead.

But in the end he doesn’t call, ignoring the judgmental looks Krzepa gives him.
When Stiles gets to California, it’s nearly midnight. He rents a room at a B&B twenty miles out from Beacon Hills. Stiles sleeps fitfully. His nightmares are vague the way they get sometimes, like there’s too much trauma to pull from so the whole thing ends up a terrifying haze. He sweats through his sheets and then the towels he threw down somewhere around five in the morning.

He hits Beacon Hills in the early afternoon. It’s hardly changed at all. It smells the same, looks the same. He catches sight of old Mr. Harper, a little greyer, walking his arthritic mastiff. Stiles heart crumples. He pulls over and Stiles ducks behind a copse of trees to empty his stomach, Krzepa cooing in his ear. When he’s managed to compose himself he grimly gets back on the road to head into the preserve.

* 

In the end, getting the court to leave was easy. It’s what came after that was difficult.

* 

The Fae are powerful magic creatures and Stiles has always been drawn to magic. He picks his way through to the densest part of the woods. They watch him approach, silent and menacing. Armed with swords of brass and arrows tipped with copper and armor of hardened silver, the gaiety of the Fae court is tucked behind the helm of war. The Royal Guard allow him into the Queens presence and stop him fifty paces in front of her.

To her right stands her heir and first born son. To her left, her second born son. They look so much like Caius Stiles’ heart pounds in his chest. The Queen is nothing short of regal. Stiles searched her face and wondered if he just imagining the pained crow’s feet at her eyes.

“You’ve finally come.” Her voice echoed through the woods. Her court stirred at the malice in her voice. “We’ve been waiting for you, murderer.”

“No.” Stiles wonders how his voice stays steady. “I killed him, but I didn’t murder him.”

“You dare!” the Queen roars, surging to her feet. The whole of the court unsheathe their weapons. He can hear the creak of bowstrings drawn back. “You dare say that when we have seen you with our own eyes! When we watched you strike our son down before us! My boy-” she cuts off with a wild cry. Her hand raises imperiously and Stiles knows she is about to command his death.

“I demand a Trial!” he shouts and the raising war cries of the Fae snap off leaving the clearing dead silent. The Queen sags down onto her throne of tree roots and half hangs off it, knuckles white on the arm rests. She fixes Stiles with a gaze bright and manic.

“You have no right.” She hisses. “Our youngest son wanted to make you his bride. You promised yourself to him and when you grew frightened you slaughtered him before my very eyes.”
“That is not the truth.” Stiles said quietly and quickly. Everything depended on him persuading her to agree to the Trial. “I know that you’re sad he’s gone. But coming here and attacking the Hale territory? That is dishonorable. If I had known you thought what I did was murder, not self-defense, I would have come to explain sooner.”

“You accuse us of dishonor?” the Queen asked incredulously.

“The Hale pack has nothing to do with me.” He said evenly. “I haven’t been back here in seven years. Nearly four when I met Prince Caius.”

“Don’t you speak his name to me you-”

“You attacked innocent bystanders to hurt me.” Stiles boldly interrupted the Queen. “I came here to stop that and to settle the grudge you have against me, Your Majesty.” Stiles bowed then and stayed low as he said “Again, I demand a Trial.”

From under his lashes he watched the Queen sneer at him and open her mouth. Stiles’ stomach dropped. There was no mercy in her eyes. His fingers twitched towards his pocket where one of Javan’s amulets was tucked away.

Before the Queen could do more than draw breath and Stiles move a single finger, two hands dropped on either of the Queen’s shoulders. Both her sons knelt and a hurried, whispered conference took place. Stiles held his low bow. The court remained frozen in a picture of near violence, eyes fixed on their Queen, waiting for her command. Finally the two Princes rose and helped their mother to stand. She looked a little wan now, face thinner than before.

“We accept your call to Trial.” She said and Stiles nearly collapsed with relief. Then the Queen raised her voice and said; “We call on one of the Strix to preside over this Trial.”

A shrieking call pierced the clearing and an owl the size of a large dog landed on a branch in the oak tree behind the Queen’s throne. Its feather were greyish white and the black lines that were unevenly splashed through it let the owl blend in with bark.

“Speak, and be heard.” The Strix spoke in a voice that graveled and broke over the air. Its beak didn’t move. “Speak the truth and you will live. Speak a lie and you will die.” It ruffled its feathers and settled. Krzepa eyed the owl warily and hunched closer to Stiles on his shoulder.

“As you have demanded the Trail, we will lay the accusations before the Strix.” The Queen did not wait for Stiles to accept her decree. She simply fell into a raving rant about the murder Stiles had committed before her, its injustice and the sorrow it brought her and her Court.

“You murdered my son,” she concluded. “He loved you and said that you loved him in return. And you murdered him before me you fiend!” Her cries echoed into silence.

“What say you?” the Strix fixed Stiles with its wide eyes.

Stiles drew a deep breath and made his case. He spoke of first meeting Caius, how he found the Fae handsome and pleasantly flirtatious but ultimately too volatile for his liking. How the second time he met him, Caius had slipped a bracelet on his wrist and suddenly Caius was everything he had ever wanted. How wild days and passionate nights followed. Then suddenly it grew more intense, Stiles couldn’t stop thinking of Caius, couldn’t live without him near enough to touch. And when Caius asked Stiles if he loved him he had no choice but to say yes.

He told them how he followed Caius across the ocean to his mother’s court and it was there that a crack in the enchantment appeared and Stiles was able to take the bracelet off and see what was
going on. He refused Caius’ hand in marriage and tried to leave but Caius would have none of it. When he cried out for help, told the Queen and the court that it was not love, that he had been enchanted and he wanted to leave, no one believed him, no one stepped forward to help him. He could hear Caius whispering spells in his ear, feel the fog of obedience moving across his mind. So he took Caius’ own belt knife and killed him to save himself.

“I didn’t love him. I didn’t like him. He took advantage of me. I am sorry that you lost him. And that you watched him die. But I’m not sorry that I killed him.”

“Lies!” the Queen shrieked at Stiles. “My Caius would never! He would never!”

“He speaks the truth. Your grievance is unfounded.” The Strix declared and with a great flapping of wings, was gone.

“No, my boy wouldn’t-”

“Mother,” the crown Prince said, softly and sadly. “I knew my brother. He would.”

The Queen fell to her knees.

*

He didn’t regret killing Caius. He never would. All he regretted was the pain he had brought to his family. It was sharply familiar.

*

Spine rigid and eyes flinty, the Queen sat on her throne and glared at Stiles, face a twisted mask of rage. Stiles kept his own face impassive.

“Never again will you treat with Fae,” she spat, “Never will you walk the Faerie woods. Never will you appear before us again. Our grievance is done, but you are still the killer of our son. We wish to never think of you again.”

“As long as you leave here, you won’t have to.” Stiles said wearily. There was the sound of foot steps behind Stiles. He heard the creak of leather and rustle of cloth as the court parted to let the newcomers approach. Stiles knew who they were. He couldn’t bring himself to turn around.

“Alpha Hale,” the Queen said and Stiles felt his stomach drop.

“Your Majesty.”

And. That voice. It was.

Stiles was dizzy. Adrenaline roared through his veins.

“We have no quarrel with you or yours. We depart immediately, never to return to these woods. Our grievance with the killer of our youngest son was settled. Know that so long as you treat with him,
you may not treat with us.” And then a mist rolled in, thick and curling. The Queen stepped down from her throne and walked into the mist, her sons and courtiers following behind. The Fae court faded into the mist. When a hard wind cut the mist, it revealed empty woods.

Stiles swallowed hard. In tiny increments, he turned around.

Derek stood tall and proud. At his back stood Scott and Boyd.

“Stiles!” Scott’s mouth was hanging open, his eyes wide. Boyd was eyeing him with an unreadable expression. And Derek. Derek’s face was stone, hard and unmoving. But his lips parted and Stiles read his name on Derek’s breath.

It was too much.

With more ease than the first time, Stiles caught the strands of winter around him and fled.

*

His first instinct was to get the hell out of dodge. To get out and never come back. It was such a familiar feeling that Stiles stopped packing abruptly and sat heavily on his bed.

Hours passed. The sun slowly sank down and vanished behind the horizon. With the gibbous moon at it zenith, Stiles deliberately unpacked his bag. He changed into his pajamas and slipped under the covers. His mind was still a chaotic whirl when he finally managed to sleep.

*

In the morning, he was decided. He packed quickly and got on the road. A rapid search on his phone pointed him to a small B&B inside the Beacon Hills city limits. Then he dialed a familiar number.

*

The diner was full. Hermione Granger and a lot of delicate conversations had taught him that full was better than empty. Waitresses and waiters were distracted, other patrons were focused on their food to clear their table for the next guests and the ambient noise made it difficult for anything to be over heard. Sure, maybe someone would recognize him, maybe someone would catch snippets of what was said, but it was the most privacy in a public place anyone could hope for.

Everything was decked out in green and red. Snowflakes and snowmen hung from the ceiling. Tiny pine trees with twinkling lights were tucked into the corners. A fat, rosy-cheeked Santa adorned the front door. Stiles checked his phone. December 23rd. He nearly laughed aloud, but stopped himself. It would have been a bitter sound.

Stiles let two group of people go ahead of him so he could take the small booth in the corner. He sat
on the side that gave him a line of sight on the front door, the kitchen entrance, the bathrooms and the emergency exit all at once. He took the offered waters and ordered two coffees. It took effort to keep his knee from bouncing up and down. The front door opened and Stiles stopped breathing.

His father slid into the seat opposite him.

*

John Stilinski looked tired.

His hair was greyer than Stiles remembered, and his crow’s feet were more pronounced. The lines around his mouth were deep, pulling the lips down a little in a grimace. Stiles wondered if they were his fault.

“Did you mean it?” he blurted out, forgoing a greeting and catching the sheriff off guard. The creamer the older man had been pouring into his coffee slopped over the side and onto the table. His lips pressed thin and he crushed the tiny plastic creamer cup.

“No, ‘Hey Dad, it’s nice to see you after seven years,’?” John asked, caustic. “No, ‘Glad you’re doing well,’ or even a ‘Hey, how are you,’?” Aggression was in every line of his body.

Stiles bit his lower lip to keep it from trembling. He wasn’t sure if he was hurt or angry. Probably both. “Do I even get to call you ‘Dad’ anymore? Or did you mean it when you said I wasn’t your son?” he asked in lieu of responding to his father’s acid. John’s breath hitched and he looked at Stiles with wide eyes.

Stiles wanted to ask more. He wanted to know if his father still loved him. He wanted to know if he wanted Stiles back. He wanted to know if this was a useless exercise and the window of reconciliation had already passed. But he stayed silent. Waiting for an answer.

“Is that what you’ve been thinking all this time?” John rubbed a heavy hand over his face. “Jesus, Stiles, no. No. I didn’t- you’re my son. You’ve always been my son.” He reached over the table aiming for Stiles’ forearm. Stiles drew away from the touch. His father’s hand wrapped around his coffee mug instead.

“Then why did you say I wasn’t?”

“Because I was…” he rubbed the back of his head and neck, “I was angry. And confused and scared. Stiles, you’d been lying to me for months. You never lied to me. Not until after we found half a body in the woods. And then when everything was going to shit, when the town was in danger, when you were in mortal peril you didn’t say a word to me. And I thought to myself ‘the Stiles I knew, the Stiles I raised, wouldn’t have done that. He wouldn’t have’-”

“Hey, you guys.” The waitress settles her weight on a leg, one hip thrust out, and pulled her order pad from her apron pocket. “My name’s Katie. What can I get you today?” She popped her bubble gum.

John swallowed and answered shortly, “Heart healthy omelet with a side of fruit, please.”

“I’ll take your pancakes with breakfast potatoes.” Stiles added, handing her their menus.
“Anything else to drink besides coffee? You can get a glass of orange juice or apple juice added to your meal for just a dollar.”

“No, thanks.”

“Okay. Those will be right up.” She shuffled away to speak with another table. In the silence Stiles sipped his coffee, eyeing John. When it was apparent his father had finished speaking for the moment he cleared his throat. John, who had been studying the mug in his hands, jerked his head up to give Stiles his attention.

“I didn’t tell you because I was trying to protect you.”

John face crumpled, just a little in resignation, but mostly in something far more heart breaking. “Stiles. God, Stiles, I’m a law enforcement officer. I’m your father. It was my job to protect you.”

“Werewolves.” Stiles answered succinctly. “I couldn’t - if you knew you would get involved and werewolves aren’t- you know- speeders or abusive husbands, or- or robbers. There were hunters and I couldn’t trust them to not go after you if they thought you knew. It was bad enough that I was involved. I wasn’t going to put you in danger too.”

“Jesus. Stiles if I had known-”

“You would have made me stay away.”

“Yes!”

“I wouldn’t have listened. I’d have kept lying to see them.”

“That doesn’t- Stiles if you had just explained to me what was going on-”

“Would you have believed me?”

“You could have proven is easily enough.”

“No. I didn’t want you involved.”

“Well that’s just too damn bad. I’m pack now.”

“What?”

“It’s pretty nice, being in the know. Means I can keep the town and the pack safe.”

“No. This wasn’t- you weren’t supposed to get involved.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have left.”

Silence. Stiles’ mouth flapped open. Then closed. John sipped his coffee. Katie came back and set their food down in front of them. John chatted with her for a moment before politely dismissing her. Stiles had lost his appetite. He pushed the pancakes away. John ate a few bites not looking at Stiles. Stiles stared at the false grain in the laminate table top.

“Why did you go, Stiles?” John asked eventually. His voice was quiet, and a little pleading.

“I was- I was broken.” He answered, brutally honest. “I- do you know what was going on? With Gerard and- and Deucalion? With the pack? Dad I was- I needed all of you. I needed you and all I got from any of you was willful ignorance. Or contempt. Or outright hostility. I couldn’t stay. Not
when you didn’t need me there. Not when you didn’t want me anymore.”

John pressed one hand over his eyes and Stiles pretended not to see his tears. His own eyes were dry.

“I couldn’t stay.” He said again, crossing his arms over his chest. Katie approached the table, but her steps faltered a few feet away. Her eyes flicked over their postures and the uneaten plates of food on the table. Abruptly she turned and went to check in on another table.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry you felt that way.” John said finally.

Stiles swallowed hard. “Thank you. I’m-” He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry I left how I did. That is- I didn’t leave a note, or anything.”

“No you didn’t. I looked for you.”

“I know. The posters.”

“More than that.”

“I didn’t give you much to go on.”

“No. You sold the jeep. Didn’t keep the junker you got with the money. And you never had a credit card.”

“What? You didn’t use nationwide CCTV in combination with facial recognition technology to pin point my exact location?”

“This is not a goddamn procedural cop show.”

Stiles peeked at his father from the corner of his eye. John was peeking back through the gap in his fingers.

They burst into laughter.

*

Stiles nearly cried when his father confirmed that the rumors he’d heard in The Bar were false; none of the pack had died.

*

Nothing was fixed that day. There was too much hurt and resentment built up for one good laugh to wipe the slate clean. Stiles waited until after Christmas to contact his father again and ask him out to lunch. First it was every few days, then it was every other, and then it was anytime the sheriff was on duty over lunch and most days he wasn’t.

It was stilted at first. Neither knew anything of the other anymore. Eventually they started trading stories. Stiles told his father about some of the stupid shit he had to do for his clients and his father
shared tales of the idiocy of local criminals. Stiles didn’t talk about Silas or Dalaigh or Timandra. And John didn’t talk about the pack.

The second time he had Stiles on the phone—just after that first lunch—he asked if Stiles wanted to have any of the pack over for lunch with them. Stiles hung up without answering. He called back a minute later and politely declined. His father accepted his unspoken apology graciously.

Sometime in late January, people started to figure out something was going on with the sheriff. Then they figured out who Stiles was, and anyone who didn’t already know the story found someone who could tell it. There were a few close calls at first, the nosiest gossips and the most well-meaning busybodies tried to make in-ways and give advice, dropping by their table to chat with the sheriff while trying to draw Stiles into the conversation and figure out where he had gone to and what had made him leave in the first place.

Stiles doesn’t know who his father talked to or what he said but soon enough their lunches returned to being entirely interruption free. And things were good.

Stiles set up a PayPal account and started consulting electronically. If someone really needed to be at the scene, he contacted any of the dozens of people and creatures he knew over the whole country and asked for a favor or offered part of the payment. It kept him busy when he wasn’t spending time with his father.

* 

“Hey, Silas. What’s up?” Stiles tucked the phone against his shoulder to free his hands. He grabbed a whisk and set it to the eggs and cheese in the frying pan. With the couple who ran the B&B out of town on a vacation, Stiles was on his own for breakfast for once. There was silence on the line.

“Silas?” Stile asked and stopped whisking his omelet.

“You asshole,” Silas hissed, “I should kill you for this.”

Stiles opened his mouth to protest, then recalled why Silas would be pissed at him. “Oh. Um. Oops?”

“‘Oops’ he says. ‘Oops’!” There followed a series of incoherent squawking noises that pierced Stiles’ brain. He winced and pulled the phone away from his ear, waiting for Silas to get it all out.

“Look, I know she was your assistant—”

“She was my favorite. My favorite, Stiles. No stupid questions, no mixing up ingredient jars, no insulting customers on accident. She was the best assistant I’ve had in years! And you! You got her hooked up with a nest of djinn!”

“It’s not my fault it was true love. I was hardly going to flub a marriage negotiation between djinn and wiccans just so you could keep your favorite assistant. She’d have been miserable.” Stiles is trying very hard not to laugh.

“I have a potion for that,” Silas snapped. But it was weak and choked like he was trying not to laugh too.
“How about this- the next time one of your shop assistants asks me to mediate for them so they can get happily married and leave your employment, I’ll say no and call you right after to give you a heads up. Fair?”

“Deal.” Silas laughed.

“How was the wedding?”

“Gorgeous. She wore my fire flowers in her hair.”

“You big sap you.” Stiles teased.

“Don’t tell anyone. I have a reputation.”

“Cross my heart.” Stiles stopped moving the eggs in the pan and let them cook on a lower heat. “I am sorry.” He continued more seriously. “I had to remain an objective third party. If they thought I was talking to you and you were talking to Elisa, the whole thing could have fallen through. Djinn are too paranoid.”

“I know.”

“I was going to tell you once everything was final in a legal sense.”

“Elisa beat you to it. She always was a bit of a gossip.”

“I’m forgiven for leaving you out of the loop?”

“Yes,” Silas laughed.

“Thanks.”

They chatted for a long time, but not about anything important, before hanging up. Once he was off the phone, Stiles swore under his breath. His omelet had burned.

*

It was early February, in a little bistro that was covered in pink and red that they finally got somewhere. The waitress had just dropped off a chicken salad sandwich for John and a French onion soup for Stiles. Into the quiet between the first few hungry bites John said; “I want to hear why you’re back.”

“You do remember the Faerie Queen don’t you?” Stiles lifted an eyebrow and slurped his soup obnoxiously. His father didn’t even frown. Stiles pushed his bowl to the side.

“Yes. You came back because the Faerie Queen attacked us to try and settle a grudge she had with you.” John agreed, wiping his mouth. “But she’s gone. You settled it. What I want to know- and don’t take this the wrong way,” John leaned forward, pushing his plate to the side as well. “What I want to know is; why are you still here, Stiles?”

For a moment Stiles felt incandescent rage at his father’s words. Then, heeding his warning, he stopped and tried to think clearly. If his father didn’t mean for him to think John was ungrateful for his presence then…
“After all this time, why am I back- and staying- now?” Stiles tried to clarify. His father nodded sharply. Stiles licked his lips, and then took a sip of coffee. Instead of answering directly, he started to tell a story.

* 

He’d gone to Oregon once, trying to figure out for a client why a small coastal town, not even a fourth of the size of Beacon Hills, was losing its precious few inhabitants at an alarming rate. The short answer had been true love, poor impulse control and a terrible misunderstanding.

The long answer was that a Dryad and a Nereid fell in love and, after confessing their feelings, they decided to run away together, unwilling to allow their feuding families time to talk either girl out of it. They took nothing with them. Simply went by root and fin down the coast seeking somewhere they could live without fear of retribution.

But the Nereid’s mother had seen her sneaking off somewhere and the Dryad’s sister heard whispers from the trees that spoke of her passing by with a watery companion. With no idea of what the truth was each clan made heated accusations and traded insults and threats until finally the whole thing turned to war. The collateral damage to the small human populace did nothing to curtail their fury.

It had taken Stiles three weeks and seven more unnecessary deaths to figure out what had happened and then to find both girls and convince them to come back to reassure their families that nothing had happened to either of them. The hostilities didn’t stop, only grew worse as claims of kidnapping and murder became claims seduction and rape.

Stiles was next to useless. The two lovers, devastated by the bloody horror their ill-fated love had inadvertently caused and grieving for the family members they had lost already, killed themselves believing their deaths would stop everything. Stiles acted as quickly as he could but there was nothing he could do to stop the slaughter that followed. In the end he only saved one Dryad sapling and two unhatched Nereids. The two clans wiped each other out.

* 

“I don’t-” Stiles cleared his throat and emptied his complimentary water, “I don’t think about it. Try not to anyway. But it always- it was always a little familiar. I didn’t leave a note. And sometimes I would think that maybe I was too hasty. That I should have slept on it, maybe let you change my mind in the morning. But when I thought about coming back, I talked myself out of it. Convinced myself that you wouldn’t want anything to do with me. So I didn’t come back. And then, after the Fae Queen, I was going to run again. But if I had, I know- I know- I’d never come back. So I stayed. Because I had to know if there was anything left for me here. Or if I had managed to raze it all to the ground.”

John doesn’t say anything for a long time. He pushes some of the chicken around on his plate. Fiddles with his empty coffee cup. Stiles waits, making himself eat his soup.

“When I realized you were gone,” John started, “I panicked. Called Scott first to see if he knew anything. I got everyone else’s number from him too. I called them all, even Deaton and Peter. But
got nothing. I did everything I could with APBs and missing child reports. But you had vanished. We had video of you at the used car lot. No one was with you so abduction was ruled out. After you called, we had to stop looking. You were an adult, you were fine, no signs of duress. You weren’t missing anymore, just- just my estranged son.” John swallowed and rubbed a hand over his eyes.

“And the others?” Stiles asked quietly.

John took a deep breath. “If you want to know, you’ll have to talk to them about it.” He said firmly. Stiles nodded in resignation. He knew he would have to.

*

He did know. He just didn’t know if he could. A little over one month of tentatively getting along with his father did not mean he was starting to forgive the rest of them. He missed them desperately, but that flame of anger that had blossomed in his sternum seven years ago was still burning, no matter how tired of it he was.

*

“Thanks again for letting me keep her so long, Javan,” Stiles said, “She has the best gas mileage.”

“You are welcome, Stiles.” Javan said. Stiles heard him turn away from the mouth piece to blow the smoke of his cigar. “Tell me of Beacon Hills.”

Stiles launched into a spirited retelling of how he defeated the Fae Court through the Trial. Javan expressed some interest in the Strix. Stiles promised to send him what information he had scrounged up.

“And your former pack?” Javan asked. Stiles had to laugh.

“No one else has had the courage to ask me that. Not even Dalaigh.” Stiles’ laughter trailed off. “I haven’t met any of them. Just my father.”

“And?”

“We’re talking. It took a while to get to the important stuff. You know; why I left, why I’m back, what happens now.”

“Have you managed to answer all these questions?”

“Only the first two.” Stiles listened to Javan’s little noise of acknowledgement. It was the noise he made when he still had something to say. Stiles waited.

“They know you are there.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yeah.”

“The longer you put it off, the more difficult it will become.”
A long silence.

“Yeah.” Stiles sighed finally.

“Good. Swinn-twa, mô zami.” The line went dead.

Stiles snorted. “You too, Jav.” He said to the static and hung up as well.

*

He packed his bags before sunset. He triggered the hiding spells set into the body of Javan’s car and left Beacon Hills, ensuring there was no trace of his departure. The low burn of anger in his chest that had simmered uneasily for the last few months was now a roaring blaze.

*

It didn’t start with Derek this time. It started with Scott. And Stiles didn’t let it get past that.

He’d asked his father to set up the dinner on a weekend. Scott’s chaotic schedule as a nurse at the hospital made it difficult to meet, but they managed. He invited Allison too, but Scott told the sheriff to tell Stiles he wanted to catch up first. They were best friends after all.

Stiles waited for Scott at the diner where he’d first met with his father, for good luck. The first words out of Scott’s mouth when he sat down were ‘I’m sorry’.

“You said I should apologize, right?” he went on, looking at his folded hands. “That the first thing I should say to you was ‘I’m sorry’. So. I’m sorry.”

And Stiles was opening his mouth to speak. To say what, exactly, he didn’t know. But it was positive. Scott had listened to his message, had remembered that he had hurt Stiles and wanted to make amends. So Stiles was opening his mouth to answer when Scott looked up at Stiles and smiled wide and open and beaming, sat back, picked up the menu and said; “What have you been up to, man?”

Stiles’ breath deserted him. He close his eyes and counted slowly to ten. When he opened them, Scott was still looking at the menu.

“That’s it?” Stiles asked lowly. Scott looked at Stiles with a furrow to his brow. “That’s all you have to say.”

Scott lowered his menu a little. He looked confused and wary, like he was realizing something was wrong. “You said I should apologize, so I did. So, we’re cool now right?” And he smiled again, big and sunny. Stiles’ anger burned hot white.

“Are you, you asshole? Do you mean it?” he didn’t raise his voice, but the anger made it through just fine. Scott’s eyes were wide with dismay. Stiles was angry, so fucking angry.

“Do you realize what you did? Do you realize how much it hurt? I needed you and your head was so
far up Allison’s ass you didn’t even notice.” Scott tried to interrupt, tried to get a word in, but Stiles talked right over him.

“You tried to tell me what my magic was like. You didn’t listen when I needed you to listen and you were a petty, hypocritical little shit. Do you even remember that I killed a man, Scott? I killed Deucalion. And it was awful. It was fucking crushing. And I needed you and you weren’t there. All your werewolf drama, all your fucking problems I was there, helping you. You were never alone, but you. You fucking abandoned me the second I needed your help. I loved you Scott. You were my best friend in all the world and a half assed apology isn’t going to fucking cut it.”

Stiles left without giving Scott the chance to respond. He was out of Beacon Hills before the sun set that evening.

Chapter End Notes

Vomit Counter: Chapter- 1/Total - 4

The reason I put ‘Non-Con’ in the tags, but didn’t warn for it, is that the non-con is only in this one chapter, and isn’t the primary focus. I hope the tagging and author’s notes are enough.

The non-con in this chapter: Stiles rejects the advances of a man, so the guy puts a charm on Stiles so he’ll fall in love with him. He then tries to force Stiles to marry him. Stiles does have sex with him under the influence of the magic, but it’s all off screen and only indirectly reference in my writing. And he does not end up married to the guy.

In fact, he kills the bastard. I feel it was a very powerful ‘no means no’ statement on Stiles’ part.

Swinn-twa, mō zami – ‘Take care, my friend’ in Louisiana Creole French

Timandra – tim- anne- druha; Hear it pronounced here:
http://www.pronouncenames.com/pronounce/timandra

Dalaigh – dawl-ee; For this one:
http://www.forvo.com/word/%C3%B3_d%C3%A1laigh/ ignore the ‘oh’ sound at the beginning and you’ve got it.

Javan – Jay-vhun; Start at about the 10 second mark. Only plays twice.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BokSGrEVew

Caius – kai-yuhs; Starts at about 6 seconds. Plays three times.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cMGUr0GDwxs
Andris took one look at Stiles and hauled him into the cabin. He took Stiles’ bag and threw it into a corner. Stiles he put into one of the awful green corduroy chairs before the fire place. He made two of his biggest mugs of hot chocolate and let Stiles rage.

The whole thing came out eventually, between angry tears and furious shouting. Exhausted by two days of almost non-stop driving and the violence of his own emotions, Stiles fell asleep in the recliner with Krzepa gently preening his hair.

When he woke in the morning the first thing he said was; “I shouldn’t have run away.”

“No,” Andris agreed softly, “You should not have.”

Stiles swallowed painfully. “I need to call my father.”

John answered on the second ring. “Hello, son.” He greeted Stiles with a weary voice.

“Hey, Dad.” Stiles croaked, “I’m sorry. I guess I don’t think clearly when I’m pissed.”

“Why don’t you tell me what happened. I’m not too clear on the details.”

Stiles sat at the kitchen table and told it all again, much more coherently, with Andris sitting patiently across from him. His father didn’t interrupt.

“Jesus.” John sighed when Stiles had finished, “That kid never did learn any tact. No wonder Allison nearly ripped his balls off for how he handled it.” Stiles chuffed a small laugh, but his heart wasn’t in it. There was a long pause.

“Stiles are you…” John hesitated, then went on, “are you someplace safe?”

“Yeah.” Stiles smiled wryly at Andris who smiled kindly back. “I’m with Andris. You remember?”

“The teacher you found right after you left here?”
“Yeah.” Stiles grimaced slightly. He had fibbed a little about some of the places he had been and when. His father didn’t need to know some of the shit Stiles had gone through, and nearly dying in a snow storm was one of them.

“Okay, that’s good. What now, son?” And that was the question. Stiles pressed the heel of his hand to his eyes until he saw stars.

“Stiles? You still there?” his father prompted after a prolonged pause.

“Yeah.”

“Are you going to come back, son?”

“No. I’m not.” Stiles took a deep breath. “But, um, you can give them this number. All of- everyone, I guess. If they want to get in touch, they can.”

“Okay. That’s- that’s good. I can do that.” John let out a shaky breath and Stiles felt a pang of guilt. His father had only just gotten him back. Stiles’ stomach prickled with longing. He had only just gotten is father back, too.

“I’ll call you,” he promised.

“You’ll let me pick up right?” John asked, aiming for levity. He missed his mark. “I don’t want to get any more messages from you, kiddo.”

“I can do that.”

*

Stiles stayed with Andris for a few more days, catching up with his teacher and re-centering himself. He would be no good to anyone if his magic flared up because his control was compromised. When he was ready, he made his way south to Chicago.

Before he left, Andris cradled Stiles’ head in his hands and set their foreheads together. “You nearly have them back,” he murmured. “Don’t lose your way now.”

Stiles had to leave before he cried again.

*

It was easy to get back in the swing of things.

Javan sent one of his lackeys to pick up his car and bring it back to Louisiana, letting Stiles reclaim his own. Dalaigh refused to take back the gold coins and Timandra had already regrown her scales and talon. Stiles added their things to his ever growing collection of arcane objects. Silas smacked him upside the head in greeting and then yanked him into a hug.

He started taking clients again. Running around here and there, banishing spirits and killing things that needed killing. Right around winter’s thaw Stiles got a feeling of such homesickness he nearly threw up. He looked at the dead face of the hunter on the ground. Blue eyes stared up at him through
strands of silver and grey.

At second glance he looked nothing like Chris Argent, but that first one had brought back so many memories, Stiles’ stomach had lurched something awful. He shook his head and got to work. It was a squad of hunters, torn limb from limb and left to rot in the hot salt flats of Utah. He needed to know if they were following the code, or if they hadn’t and the death was justified.

And who caused it in the first place.

A local cockatrice had managed to contact him using intermediaries. It claimed it didn’t know what had happened to the hunters. But with a clutch of eggs about to hatch and given the vicious nature of most expecting creatures, Stiles had been skeptical of its innocence. It was only when he got to the area and realized how much distance there was between the killing ground and the nest that he relaxed his suspicions. The nest was unfortunately downwind of the site and the scent was causing significant discomfort to the cockatrice.

Stiles redirected the winds a bit so the smell wouldn’t reach his client. The smell didn’t bother Stiles anymore. He remembered how sick he had become when the leg of the dog he had tried to heal rotted off. He wondered now if it was caused by his own unwillingness to accept what his body and magic knew instinctually. His magic lay in decay and no aspect of the process bothered him, not even the foul stench.

He got to work, sending Krzepa circling above to keep watch. A careful search of the bodies revealed no IDs of any kind. Their wallets were devoid of anything but cash and credit cards. All the card names were so obviously fake he didn’t even bother with them. There were shell casings littering the ground. Every magazine was empty. There were knives in some of their hands. Stiles suspected it was a last ditch effort. He dreaded against what.

All their clothes were well worn, their hands calloused. Their holsters and knives were of good make but not flashy. Their guns were older models kept in perfect working condition. There were occasional splashes of decoration here and there, an image stitched out in gold or silver thread, a metal charm hanging from a sensible cuff or bracelet. Every one of them was a charm against harm or for good luck in a hunt. And Stiles was willing to bet every man and woman on the ground was at least thirty years of age. Assuming they came of age and started hunting in earnest at twenty or twenty one, all of them had at least ten years of hunting experience.

Stiles was looking at the dead bodies of thirteen veteran hunters. Terrifyingly, there was no indication that they had even wounded their quarry. He searched carefully for signs of whatever it was they were hunting, but there was nothing. No smell, no track on the salt, no stray drop of non-human blood.

* 

By the time Stiles was done looking over the bodies and the area, he was only certain of two things. First, the hunters were a team; they all bore the same hallmark of a spotted hyena, like a coat of arms. Second, he had been wrong about how they died. They hadn’t been torn limb from limb.

Their limbs had been melted off with acid.
He covers the mess as best as he can with a large plastic tarp. The sun is starting to set and he’s already sweat through three shirts. His skin is gritty and dry from all the salt in the air. He drives towards Grantsville, the nearest city. On the way he calls his father.

“Are you driving?” his father’s tone is accusatory and disappointed and authoritative all at once. Stiles rolls his eyes.

“Yes. On salt flats. With no other cars in sight.” Stiles takes a moment to actually verify this. It never hurts to pay a little extra attention, especially with something dangerous enough to kill thirteen experienced hunters at large.

He tries to convince himself that he is not shaken by this, that his own five years of experience have hardened him. He fails and a little shiver runs up his spine. He pushed his unease to the back of his mind. It’s only then he realizes his father is silent on the other end of the line.

“Dad?” he asks.

“You’re in Utah?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s…close.” John says carefully. Stiles winces a little.

“I’m not… I’ve got a job here.” Stiles says apologetically. “Dad, none of them have called me.” He tries not to sound pathetic.

“Huh,” John sounds thoughtful, and a little sad now. “I gave them your number like you asked.” He offers.

“Yeah, no. I’m just… being impatient. Thanks, Dad. Don’t worry about it.” Stiles injects his voice with as much cheer as he can manage. Up ahead Stiles can see a road emerging from the white.

“Actually, this job I’m on…” He slows his car to a stop and turns it off, still a mile or two from the road.

“Yeah?”

“Is Chris Argent still in town?”

“Yeah, he moved back once Allison told him she was pregnant.” John sounded surprised and a little pleased. “As a matter of fact, he’s here right now. We were planning Patricia’s birthday.” John names Scott and Allison’s little girl, turning one year old. “I’ll put you on speaker, if you don’t mind?” Stiles makes a noise of agreement.

“This is quite a coincidence.” Chris sounds no different than he did seven years ago, his gravel voice stern with just a hint of threat. “Hello, Stiles.”

“Hey, Chris.” He snorts, “It’s not a coincidence. I’m friends with a leprechaun. When he’s got extra he always send a little luck my way.”

“Oh,” by his voice Chris is a little taken aback. “That… must be very convenient.”

“You would not believe how awesome it is when everything falls neatly into place.” Stiles says

“What can I do for you?” Chris asks carefully. Stiles chews on his lip for a moment before diving in. He’s a big believer in just ripping the bandage off for situations like this.

“I’m going to be honest, Chris. I need help identifying some bodies. Hunters.” Stiles hears them both men on the other end inhale sharply.

There’s a pause before Chris asks, “Any identifying features?” in a carefully blank voice.

“They all had an emblem. A spotted hyena on a green background boxed in by a white octagon.”

“Yes,” Chris’s voice cracks a little. “Yes, I know them. Stiles how many-”

“Thirteen.”

“Shit. The whole team.”

“Shit,” Stiles agrees. He can hear the tink of glasses over the line and guesses his father is pulling out whiskey for Chris.

“What? And where?” Chris demands.

“Before that,” Stiles sighs. “I’m sorry, Chris. I need to know. Where did they stand with the Code?” He can hear Chris draw a breath, sharp and angry, but instead of yelling, Chris answers evenly.

“On my honor and my life, they followed it to the letter. Why?”

“Well,” Stiles lets his head drop against his steering wheel. “Now I know I’m looking for something to kill, not something to reprimand for leaving a mess.” John chokes a little at that. Chris just hums in approval.

“Stiles, I have a… Luke, my cousin, was part of the Hunting Hyenas. I just…”

“Chris,” Stiles said softly, “They’ve been sitting a long time, exposed to the weather. There isn’t… it’s not really possible to move them, at this point.” He tried to be delicate, but there really wasn’t a delicate way to tell a man he couldn’t bury his cousin’s body in the family plot because it was so rotted the organic bits were more liquid than solid.

“Shit.” He heard Chris quaff his whiskey and then fill the glass again.

“I’ll bury all of them out here.” Stiles went on, “Deep, so no one finds them by accident.” He hesitated, then offered, “I know a white necromancer. She owes me a favor. Is that…”

“Yes.” Chris said thickly, “Yes, the Bone Sisterhood is fine.” He took a deep breath. “Thank you, Stiles.”

“You’re welcome. And you have my condolences. I can send you the GPS coordinates, if you…”

“Yes, I’d appreciate that.” He rattled off his phone number and email address. Stiles wrote them down in the dust on his dashboard. He made another note in the dust to get a pad of paper and pen to leave in his glove box.

“Okay.” Stiles swallowed down the taste of bile. “Okay. Chris. If I find where they were staying, would there be notes on what they were hunting?”
“Yes. Do you have any idea what…?”

“Not yet, but I haven’t had a chance to research it. If they’ve got notes on it, that would make this a lot easier.”

“The notes will be in code. If you send me a line of it I can give you the key. Will you be able to find where they’re staying?”

“Yeah,” Stiles eyes flicked to the patch of dead earth saturated with dried hunter’s blood he had dug up to take with him. “I’ve got my ways. You know.”

“Yeah. I know.” Chris didn’t ask any further. “The notes. Papers and journals, anything like that. Will you send it all here?”

“Yeah, I can do that.” And if he made copies to decode later so he could add their knowledge to his library, no one needed to be the wiser. “Anything else?”

“No. If they were on a hunt, a group as experienced as the Hyenas wouldn’t have anything personal with them for- for just this reason. I just- I have to report their deaths. Make sure their wills are carried out.” Chris went silent.

“Okay. Thank you, Chris. For answering my questions. I’ve got it from here.”

“I know you do. Your reputation precedes you.”

“Reputation?” John cut in “Chris, you knew where Stiles was all this time?”

“No!” Stiles cuts in loudly before his father can start shouting. Then more quietly, once he had his father’s attention, he explains, “Um. Most people find it rude if you give a false name and half of them can just tell when you use one. I’m mostly known by my real name, you know, in the biz. I’ve probably only had a reputation for a little while. Like a year or two? Chris?”

“Probably closer to three. Since that basilisk hunt you did with Vincent and his son up in the Colorado mountains. They had some things to say about your… efficiency in the field.”

“Neat.”

“Oh.” John said weakly.

“I didn’t make the connection that it was Stiles until he came back.” Chris sounded a little apologetic. “You, Allison and everyone else never talked about him. I thought I should just keep my mouth shut.”

“Well.” John sighed. “Never mind that, Chris. Stiles showed his face eventually, anyway.”

Stiles snorted loudly. There were some light chuckles from the other end of the line.

“Is that everything Stiles?” Chris asked politely, his voice once more subdued.

“Yeah,” Stiles answered. “I’ll get in touch tomorrow. Shouldn’t take me more than a couple days to clear this up.”

“If you need back up,” Chris started.

“This is too close to you,” Stiles interrupted, “You know you can’t come out here to-”
“I know,” Chris cut in, “But if you need back up, I can recommend some names. Make a few calls. They were good hunters. And we look out for our own.”

“I’ll let you know,” Stiles agreed.

“Then I’ll let you and your father get back to it.”

“When’s her birthday?” Stiles blurted out. “Patricia’s.” he clarified needlessly.

“March seventeenth, next Sunday.”

“Okay. I’ll, uh, send a card. If you don’t mind?”

“Yeah, kid. That’d be nice.” Chris said, and then he was gone and Stiles could hear the click as his father turned off the speaker mode.

“Stiles,” His father’s voice held not a little trepidation.

“Listen, Dad. I can see the road coming up and it’s got cars on it, so I’m gonna hang up. I’ll call you later, okay?” he ended the call before his father could get a word in. He could deal with this later. He had a monster to hunt.

He started his car and headed for the empty road.

*

In the end, it wasn’t nearly as black and white as it had seemed. That was why the hunters had died. That was why Stiles was going to have to kill it.

And it’s children.

*

The notes the hunters had left behind in their rooms at the shittiest motel in Grantsville made the whole of it perfectly clear.

In the nineteen-seventies, a scientist who was somewhat more in-the-know than his peers read a book called ‘On the Trail of Ancient Man’ published in 1926. The hunters, thorough in their research had even procured a copy. In it was described the Mongolian death worm, native to the Gobi Desert.

The author was skeptical. The scientist was not.

He went to the Gobi Desert and hunted for years until he finally managed to find and capture a pair of them, costing the lives of nearly the entire tribe of Mongolian natives he had hired to help him. He returned to Utah in the late nineteen-nineties and set up a facility to contain them. When he died later of natural causes there was no one who knew the facility even existed. Unmaintained, the caging system eventually failed and the death worms escaped. The hunters laid out how they thought they had hibernated for a long time before an unsuspecting family of tourists, lost and wandering the flats,
disturbed them and died from their acid; the event that had brought them to the area in the first place.

Stiles found some side-notes made about how it was strange the worms weren’t killing from afar with electricity. But a different hand had put in under the aside that some of the experiments the scientist had conducted may have made electric discharge impossible. There was little notation on what the man wanted with the death worms in the first place; none of the scientist’s notes were clear on that point.

In a journal kept by one of the women, she described how they were going to try to contain them, verify if they were sentient enough to reason with and if so send back to the Gobi. Or if they were mad and needed to be put down. Stiles took the deaths of the hunters to mean that the death worms needed to be put down. He wondered if good old fashioned fire would do the trick.

*

Fire did the trick. The two adult death worms he found died silently. Their newly hatched children did not.

*

He might have spared the children if they weren’t feeding on a young woman in flip flops and a fanny pack.

He vomited at the stench of burning flesh.

*

The white necromancer, a woman of the Bone Sisterhood and sworn to aide all those who have died, arrived three days later. She brought two of her apprentices and the four of them spend the better part of a day digging and then filling holes out on the salt flats.

The ceremony for them is short and sweet. Sister Salma’s voice was deep and melodic, and her words filled Stiles with more peace than killing the death worms had. He hesitated and then brought Sister Salma to the place where he had burned the worms and asked her to speak for them as well.

When she finished she smiled kindly. “Who may I announce the completion of my rites to for the hunters?”

“Chris Argent. He will inform the Hunter’s Council.” Stiles replies. The questions and answers are formal, part of the ceremony.

“And who may I announce the completion of my rites to for the death worms?”

“Me.”
Sister Salma blinked at that but turned to face Stiles head on. “I have witnessed the resting place of the death worms. I have read rites over them in accordance with their ways to venerate the dead. I have laid their spirits to rest. My rites are complete. What say you?”

“I acknowledge that you have completed the rites. I am grateful. Go in peace, Sister Salma.” Stiles bowed a little to the petite woman and her apprentices. Sister Salma bowed back and then cupped his cheek gently.

“This was a favor to you, dear boy. But we are not done.” She smiled at him again. “There are many who ignore us, forget us. They avenge themselves or defend themselves and think nothing of those who have died. You have never been so callous. Call on me or any of my sisters when you have need. We will answer you.” She kissed his forehead and walked west with her apprentices, vanishing into the wavering heat of the salt flats.

*

Stiles makes copies of all the hunter’s notes to go through later. Then he boxes the originals and ships them to the address Chris gave him. He also mails a card he picked out for Patricia. It’s pink and glittery and utterly generic.

Inside the card he tucks a cimaruta charm- complete with its three rue branches and with the traditional key, moon and serpent attached- on a supple leather cord. He sends a note about how each symbol on the branches represents a different form of the triple goddess and as a whole the charm is meant to protect from ill-will, particularly the evil eye. He tells them to let her wear it as a necklace.

He doesn’t tell them that instead of being cast in traditional silver he carved the cimaruta from the skull of a wolf that died a natural death and dyed it a deep red with the blood of a rabbit’s foot, strengthening the original nature of the charm and adding to its protective nature. He also adds a small feather from Krzepa, connecting him to the charm. He’ll know when it’s defending Patricia.

He hopes the spritz of Febreze will cover any lingering stench of blood and death.

*

He wanted to sign the card ‘Uncle Stiles’, but settles for an enigmatic ‘SS’. But he figures it doesn’t matter. His father had happily provided the birthdates of Lydia and Jackson’s two kids and the one Boyd and Erica had. He’s going to spoil them, ‘uncle’ or not.

*

The feeling of homesickness doesn’t go away. He’s considering what to do about this when his eye catches on a poster announcing houses for rent. It’ll have to do.
He rents out the ground floor of a two story house in Lawrence, Kansas, much to his own personal
delight and the chagrin of everyone he knows who got his gleeful ‘I’ve moved’ note. His part is
more expensive than the basement or the top floor because it comes with exclusive use of the back
yard.

The landlord is a little fuzzy on why that’s the case and Stiles was suspicious until he realized his
basement neighbors are a family of dwarves and his top floor neighbor was an English dragon. He
signs the lease on the spot. There was too much luck in finding this place first for it to be anything
but the touch of a leprechaun. Dalaigh willingly admits to it when Stiles calls him out on it.

“Luck of the Irish on your new home, Stiles.” He said cheekily before hanging up. Stiles dips into
his funds and purchases ten grams of pure gold for the leprechaun to add to his pot as a thank you.

It takes him less than a day to realize there’s an aging high priestess of a witches coven in the house
across the street, a couple of mermaids in the place next door, an outcast Faeling on the other side, a
griffin nest in a thatch of trees behind his house and an ancient boggart that goes from house to
house, too good spirited to cause much trouble.

The first thing Stiles does is bring his upstairs and downstairs neighbors each one of is pot of gold
coins to curry good will. Then he brings the mermaids the freshest fish he can manage, the Faeling
the freshest bowl of cream, the griffin a freshly killed deer, and the high priestess a fresh plate of
ginger cookies. He leaves his first left overs for the boggart.

They all live in proximity to each other and tolerate their various quirks and bad habits for much the
same reason; with so many magical entities in the area, magic comes easier. Stiles feels safe. He
knows that even if the dragon is indifferent to him, and dwarves turn up their noses at him for being
witch-kind, they’ll stop any intruders onto his floor if only to prevent them from gaining access to
any other part of the house. The same could be said of any of the others; aide if only so nothing ill
befalls them. Not the boggart, though. He won’t help anyone on principle. But if he see’s something,
he might say something offhand to one of the others.

It was a good place to live.

* 

He can tell his father is disappointed when, a week after sending Patricia’s birthday card, he tells his
father he’s found a place to live.

“It’s nice.” Stiles said, lounging on his new couch. “I’d forgotten what it was like to have a space
that was your own. I’ve spent so long living out of motels and cars. It’s just really nice.”

“You couldn’t find a place in Beacon Hills?”

“Dad.” Stiles snaps. “They still haven’t called. If I’m not pack, I have to get permission from Alpha
Hale to live in his territory. I don’t know if he or any of them will extend me even that much
courtesy. They won’t talk to me.”

“And you never talk to them!” his father snapped right back. “Stiles you’ve got to know that you leaving devastated them.”

“Did it? It sure didn’t seem like they needed me at all back then. Don’t see how leaving would have made much of a difference.” Stiles knew he was being petulant, but his pride still stung from Scott’s casual dismissal of all the things that had caused him to leave in the first place. And he had left his number with his father over a month ago. Plenty of time to call. If they were all as sad and guilty over Stiles’ departure as his father seemed to think, they would have gotten in contact.

“Stiles, for Christ’s sake. How many years has it been? You remember how bad it was between us at first. You think it’s any easier for them to call and talk to you?”

“I called you and talked to you, didn’t I?”

“You didn’t talk to me, you talked at me. There’s a difference, Stiles.” John said, exasperated.

Stiles wrinkled his nose. “Fine. There’s a difference. They could still be leaving me messages.”

“Uh-huh. And how long did it take you to call me the first time?”

Stiles mumbles the answer.

“That’s right. Over a year. How long since they had a number to call you at?”

Stiles mumbles the answer for that too.

“Yup. Just about a month. So what does that mean?”

“You’ve made your point, Dad.” Stiles sighs, disgruntled. “They need time.”

“You could always try reaching out to them first?”

“No.”

Stiles hung up on his father. Rude, he knew. He’d apologize the next time he called.

*

He likes his house. He does. It’s open and airy and he has a gorgeous garden in the back where he can dead-grow some rare herbs, and he likes have neighbors that he can talk to about the weird shit that he has to deal with for his job and it’s easier to get clients when he’s got an address he can give them to meet him at that’s not some random coffee shop.

It just doesn’t feel like home.
Two days later he gets a call from an unknown number. It’s not uncommon in his line of work, so he answers politely with his full name and asks what he can do for the person on the line.

“Stiles? It’s Allison.”

Stiles chokes on his own spit and spends the next two minutes clearing his throat.

“I,” he declared once he could speak again. “Am much smoother than that. Generally speaking.”

“I’m sure,” Allison demurred, just a little teasing. “So that’s your first name, huh?”

“Oh my God. How much money do I have to pay you to keep from telling anyone that?”

“None at all.” Allison laughed, “I think the charm you sent Patty covers it.”

“Oh. So you got it, then.” Stiles swallows.

“Yes. My father hand delivered it on her birthday. Stiles, thank you.” He can hear the genuine gratitude in her voice. “It was such a thoughtful gift. Our territory is settled now, but nothing is for certain. Knowing that Patty has a little something extra to protect her makes me feel better.”

“Then, you’re welcome, Allison.” Stiles smiles into the phone.

“I was talking to my father. He says you have a reputation.”

“Oh, yeah?” Stiles perks up, perfectly willing to ignore the awkward formality between them in the face of finally figuring out what exactly his reputation is like.

“No one will tell me what anyone else says about me. Come on, spill! How’s my street cred?”

Allison laughs happily. “You are a total badass, Stiles.”

“Hell, yes!”

“But you’re fair, too.” Allison goes on, more serious. “More fair than a lot of hunters. You can be trusted to do a job so that the least number of people die. To do the research to find the best possible solution. You’re powerful in your own right. And when you don’t have the ability or strength you find those who do and strike fair bargains.

“You are merciful, but your mercy only goes so far. You never forgive the same offence twice. You never break your word. Any friend of yours is fiercely protected, and to harm any of them will incur your wrath. You are always worth the price your clients pay, and far more people praise your name than curse it.” Allison is quiet for a moment before she finishes. “A lot of people say a lot of things, but the general consensus is this: you are a good man.”

Stiles can scarcely breathe. He clears his throat a few times, cheeks burning. “Oh.” He finally manages.

Allison bites off the start of a laugh. “It was nice.” She remarks, “Hearing that you haven’t changed at all. From back then.”

“What?” Stiles is startled by the sudden introduction of the elephant in the room.

“You still take care of people. Put their needs before your own. You always did that with the pack,” And Stiles doesn’t know if he wants to kill her or kiss her for putting it all out there in the open.

“You did a lot for us. For Scott in particular and for me as well; Isaac said you talked to Derek about
my being accepted into the pack.” She took a deep breath. “I’m sorry that I wasn’t the friend, the packmate, you needed me to be.”

This is nothing like the apology Scott gave. This is real and honest and Stiles is fighting tears.

“Thank you,” he manages to say it with only a small hitch in his breath. “Thank you. I accept your apology.” He said it formally, but the warmth in his voice was unmistakable. He can hear Allison’s near silent sigh of relief.

“Good.” She said, slightly breathless. “Good. I’m glad I called. I’m sorry it took so long.” Patricia’s party was two days ago. “I considered calling once everyone had gone home, but I thought I had better wait until I had the house to myself.”

“Scott’s not there, then?” Stiles asked, carefully neutral.

“No. That idiot,” the word was spoken with equal parts frustration and affection, “is taking Patty to visit Charles and Christine. Lydia and Jackson’s kids,” she adds belatedly, realizing that Stiles might not know the names of all the kids yet.

Stiles bites his lip, unsure if he should broach the obvious next topic. Allison makes the decision for him by bringing it up on her own.

“I told your father that I had some words to say to Scott about his dinner with you. Did he mention that?”

“Said you damn near ripped his balls off.”

“Yes, well,” Allison said primly and Stiles can just imagine her casually smoothing the fabric over her leg, as though brushing off lint. He grins.

“I’m sure you remember what Scott is like sometimes,” she started hesitantly. When Stiles just makes a little noise, neither affirmative nor negative, she goes on slowly. “I think he’s never stopped thinking of you as a friend. And he just thought that once he said sorry, everything was fine.”

“I never let him get away with it when we were kids.” Stiles snorted dismissively. “I don’t know why he thought it would work now.”

“Yes, well,” Allison said again, this time weakly. “It doesn’t change the fact that he meant well.”

“I’m sure.” Even as he said it, Stiles knew he had missed the neutral tone he was going for and had landed on hard and bitter.

“Stiles, listen to me.” Allison said firmly. “I know something about hard feeling and grudges getting in the way of making amends. You know I do. Please, you have to make an effort for it to work, too.”

“I did.” He grunted.

“Try again,” she snapped. “Try harder. If you really want to be friends with us again, even be pack with us again, you have to work on it a lot harder than this. You left. And for all that might have been our fault Stiles, you’re the one who stayed away.” There was no accusation in her voice, just hard understanding.

“Not just me. They have to make an effort, too.”
“I’ll talk to them. What do you need from them?”

It was the first time someone had asked him that, asked what he needed to feel better. Didn’t just tell him or suggest or bluntly hint at what Stiles should be doing to make amends with his old pack. This was someone finally asking what he wanted from them to start making amends. It’s the only excuse Stiles has for how his voice cracks.

“I just want them to talk to me. They all- they all just turned away from me before. I just want them to talk to me. To understand what they did to me and just say they’re sorry. That’s all I want.”

“Okay,” Allison says gently, “I’ll make sure they know that.”

“And one more thing?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t make me sound so pathetic when you do. I’ve got my reputation to think of.”

Allison laughed a deep belly laugh and it was the best sound Stiles had heard in a long time.

*

He did want it. He wanted them back so bad. But it didn’t matter that Allison and his father had made amends. That it seemed like the others wanted to make amends.

He’d been so damn scared for so damn long and he didn’t know how to stop running.

*

It’s Lydia who calls next, of course. She’s not the kind of woman to be outdone by anyone, not even her best friend.

“What exactly did you mean by ‘I’m still pissed and I don’t think I can handle seeing you or any of them yet,’ Stilinski?” were the first words out of her mouth after he picked up.

“Wha-?” Stiles didn’t even get to the ‘t’ in ‘what’ before Lydia was speaking again.

“What exactly is it that you think I did that deserves your anger? It had better be good. Or you had better have just neglected to exclude me from your statement. ‘I’m still pissed and I don’t think I can handle seeing you or any of them yet, excluding Lydia’. That is what you meant isn’t-”

“Lydia!” Stiles nearly shouts her name to get her to be quiet. “It’s not what you did. It’s what you didn’t do.” Stiles listened to Lydia breathe over the line for three exhales and four inhales.

“You stopped showing up at pack meetings. And you were losing weight, and you weren’t sleeping, and I noticed but fixing my relationship with Jackson was more important to me than whatever it was that was tearing you apart.” Lydia’s voice hitches then just a little, before she went on. “And I told myself that I could ignore you, because there were so many other people in the pack, one of them
would look after you so it wasn’t my problem. If anything you were a hindrance. Your suffering was cutting into my concentration of the situation with Jackson and that wasn’t acceptable. So I pushed you and your pain to the back of my mind until I didn’t even notice it any more. Then you were gone.”

And that was Lydia Martin through and through. Insightful and precise and unafraid to point out flaws, even with herself.

“Stiles,” she asked quietly, softly, “Why didn’t you say anything to us? To me?”

“Back then, I didn’t know how,” he said honestly. “By the time I stopped coming to meetings I was so far gone, Lydia. I didn’t think anyone would listen. Everyone had turned their back on me, one way or another. I thought I’d just ride out all the resentment. But I couldn’t handle it. So I left.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry I was too selfish to realize you needed me. To think that after you helped me, I didn’t need to help you in return. That’s what pack does. Everyone looks out for each other, we don’t just assume someone else will pick up our slack. I’m sorry.” There’s a rustle over the line and then it’s Jackson in his ear. The words were polished, obviously rehearsed, but the sentiment was so genuine Stiles didn’t care.

“Stilinski. You were honest with me. Gave me the best advice of my life. It saved my relationship with Lydia. I didn’t notice you were hurting. But I did notice you stopped hanging around. I thought about asking. I didn’t. I’m sorry.”

Stiles wiped at the tears in his eyes. He took five shaky breaths before answering; “Thank you. I’m- I accept your apology, both of you.” he heard a hitched breath from Jackson and a half choked sob from Lydia.

But in true Lydia fashion she promptly covered it up with a half-hearted accusation; “Honestly, Stiles. We could have taken care of this forever ago if you’d only come home sooner.”

Stiles had to laugh. Instead of defending himself by attacking, he disarmed her with the truth. “Lydia, I really couldn’t have. I was fucked up. At first I honestly thought none of you could stand to look at me, that you all would just turn away from me again. Then later, when I was… after I’d gotten a little better I still didn’t feel like I could come back. I couldn’t feel the pack bonds anymore. I didn’t know if I’d be welcomed, even as an old friend. I was angry and hurt. Scared, too. I needed time and space. I was a wreck for a long time, even if I didn’t look the part.”

There was a delicate sniff. “Stiles this is ruining my make-up. Stop it.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Does this mean you’ll be sending a cimaruta to Charles and Christine?”

“Yeah,” Stiles glance slid over to his work room, where a small cedar box sits on his desk holding the cimaruta charm’s he’d already made for Lydia’s kids and for Abigail, Erica and Boyd’s little girl. “I will.”

“Good. But they are not wearing the charms on leather, Stiles. Sterling silver for Christine and burnished gold for Charles, I think.”

“Lydia, I am not paying for that.”

“Fine.”
Stiles could practically see the hair flip. He sighed. “Don’t do gold. Get silver for both if you must, but not sterling. Pure is better.”

“That’s too soft for jewelry.”

“Not if you dip it in a solution of snakeroot, garlic, witches grass and spring water.”

“You’ll have to send the recipe.”

“I’ll send the solution with instructions.” Stiles promises. “Get antiques if you can. The older the better.”

There’s a groan from Jackson. “Now we’ll have to go shopping. Thanks, Stilinski.”

“Jackson!” Lydia hissed, but Stiles could hear the fondness in her voice. As the conversation on the other end devolved into playful bickering Stiles was helpless to stop his laughter.

*

There’s a knot in his chest, seven years old, that loosens, just a little.

*

Stiles collapsed against the brick of an alleyway gasping for breath. His back burned where the thing had slashed him with its claws. He was sweating. It dripped down his face and spattered onto the asphalt. He knew he didn’t have a lot of time. He yanked an amulet from around his neck and snapped it in half. The neon blue color faded to navy. Good, that was good. Help was coming. Next.

He pulled his cell phone out and fumbled through the menu until he found the number he was looking for. Chris Argent picked up after four rings.

“Stiles, your father is right here. Let me put you on-”

“Chris. Chris you need to listen.” It was getting harder to breathe. The heat of the sun was burning him.

“Stiles, what’s going on?”

“They’re not revenants or ghouls. They’re fext. You need glass. That’s their weakness. Not just bullets okay. You gotta fill them with glass. Need you to- I’m in Texas. Shit hole called Bon Weir. Need you to make some calls. Send some hunters.”

“Okay, okay. Stiles, are you wounded?”

Stiles could hear his father shouting in the background, yelling at Derek to let him go. “Yeah. They’ve got really long claws. And wings. Be careful. They’re faster than they look.”

“Stiles, you need to get to a hospital. Can you call for help? Is there anyone nearby? Stiles? Stiles,
can you hear me?”

Stiles could hear Chris. He just couldn’t answer. He could feel blood welling in his mouth now and dripping from his lips. A shadow crossed him. He opened his eyes. Javan shook his head and pressed his hand to Stiles’ forehead. His eyes slipped shut again. From a long way off he heard Javan speaking.

“No. I’ll contact you later. Bonjou.”

Stiles felt himself get hefted up from the ground. The movement pulled at the wounds on his back and his consciousness dissolved in a burst of pain.

*

Stiles didn’t fade in and out as he recovered. One moment he was deep in black, the next he was awake and staring at a familiar ceiling.

“You are so stupid.” Silas said to him, leaning over his bed to glare at Stiles.

“Not that stupid.” He croaked. Silas was still glaring, but he carefully fed Stiles ice chips until the thirst went away. Stiles was in the back room of Silas’ shop. The recovery area for long term patients. He figured it was a good sign that he didn’t have any wires or IVs hooked into him.

“Two sentences on Wikipedia.” He went on when he could speak without hurting his throat. “That’s all I had to go on. All I had time for. Killed two of them before one sliced me.”

“It nicked your spinal column. You leaked six milliliters of cerebrospinal fluid before I could close you up. And who knows how much more before Javan got you to my table?”

“You fixed that right?”

“Javan helped.” Silas scowled at Stiles.

“Oh, right,” Stiles passed a hand over his eyes. “I broke the blue amulet.”

“Thank all the gods you did. We were nearly too late as it was.”

“The fext?”

“Dead.” Silas helped Stiles sit up. His back felt tender in the way a mostly healed wound always did. “There were six in all,” Silas continued as he started moving Stiles’ limbs to check circulation and range of motion. “Your friend called in some good hunters, had the whole town cleared out in two days. They found the necromancer who made them, too.” Silas fell silent as he started massaging Stiles’ calves.

“And?” Stiles prompted

“Hm?”

“The necromancer?”

Silas sighed and shook his head. “Some damn kid who got his hands on a book and wanted to see if
“it would work.”

“Shit. Did they kill him?”

“No. They called for the Bone Sisterhood.”

“Wow. I’ll bet that kid is regretting every bad thing he ever did in his life right now.”

“They’ll never let him go,” Silas said quietly, switched legs, “He’ll have to serve in their convent until he proves he won’t practice necromancy again.”

“And there’s no way that’s going to happen.” Stiles realized bleakly. “Not if he felt the rush of power over death. Not if it came so naturally to him he could create six monsters on his first try.”

“Yeah.”

“Shit.”

Stiles heard a door open and close down the hall and footsteps coming towards his room. Silas jumped to his feet.

“Oh, right. I almost forgot.”

Stiles shot his friend a sharp look. “What?”

“You’ve been out for four days. Javan called your father. John insisted. Don’t do anything too strenuous.” Silas ducked out the door and vanished just before Stiles’ father walked into the room.

*

“That little traitor.” Stiles muttered. Before his father could say anything, Stiles stood, wincing as his legs stretched and took his weight. John reached out and clamped a hand on Stiles shoulder, firmly pressing him back down to sit on the bed.

“Why is Silas a traitor?” John asked.

“He didn’t tell me you were here until you walked in the room.” Stiles wrinkled his nose. “Friends tell friends when their parents are attending to their sick bed so they have a chance to prepare.” He tucked his ring and middle finger to his palm to make the sign of the horn and flicked a little curse at Silas. A ringing laughter filled the outside hallway and Stiles felt the witch casually brush off his magic.

“I don’t know,” his father frowned at him. “He seems like a decent man.”

“What? You’re supposed to be on my side.”

“There are no sides, Stiles”

“He took my virginity.” Stiles was aiming to shock.

John raised his eyebrow, decidedly un-shocked. “And how old were you?”
Stiles mumbled the answer.

“So, there’s no problem then.”

“What, you’re not even going to give him the shovel talk?”

“As much as I would enjoy threatening your bed partners with violence, in this case I’m too little, too late. And you’re a little old for me to sit on the front porch and clean my shotgun.”

Stiles narrowed his eyes. “Silas already told you we were together, didn’t he.”

John’s silence spoke volumes. Stiles flicked another curse at Silas out of petty spite.

“So,” John clapped his hands and sat in a chair next to the bed. “Are we done deflecting?”

“That obvious?”

“Stiles. You nearly died.” John’s voice gravely a little over the word.

“I nearly die a lot, Dad.” Stiles said as gently as he could. “It’s not usually this close, I’ll admit, but the danger has always been there. Nothing to change it now.”

“You could have died. Anytime in the last seven years you could have died and I wouldn’t have ever known what happened to you. I’d just be waiting for you to leave me a goddamn message.” John dropped his head in his hand. Stiles reached out and pressed his father’s forearm.

“I’m fine. I’ll be fine. I’ve got people like Silas and Javan looking out for me.”

“Son, I want to be able to look out for you too.”

And well. There it was. His father wanted him to come back. And Stiles’ answer wasn’t one his father wanted to hear.

“I’m sorry.” Stiles said. His father’s face crumpled.

*

The call comes in the middle of the night. At first Stiles is too groggy to make out what Allison is saying. Then he realizes that Allison isn’t saying anything. She’s sobbing over her words. A rush of adrenaline pushes aside the haze of deep sleep. He’s dressed and grabbing for his I Need to Leave Right the Fuck Now duffle bag on auto pilot trying to make out what Allison is telling him.

When he does get a coherent sentence out of her Stiles abruptly turns around, sprints back up his drive way, and pounds on the door of his flight-capable upstairs neighbor. Stiles rambles at the dragon once the door is open and he looks like he’s about two seconds from ripping Stiles’ head off. But Stiles manages to say the words ‘blood’ and ‘dying’ and ‘baby’ and two minutes after that he’s airborne, flying on dragon back to Beacon Hills.
Sorry, not sorry, guys. Please no one panic over this. It will all be fine.

Mostly.

Bonjou- goodbye, Louisiana Creole French.-- can also mean 'hello'
Healing

Chapter Notes

IMPORTANT! Tags for this chapter: Death of an unborn child.

So. This is where the Gore tag comes into play. It’s pretty graphic guys. The beginning of this chapter is my homage to the horror genre in cannon TW. Think Season 3B levels of terror with lots more blood. And dead embryos. See notes below for a situation description if you need to make sure you want to read it.

Also we see a lot more of the kids this chapter. And I don’t know kids. Like at all. So, sorry if they seem weird...?

*Peers at tag list* I’m pretty sure that’s all I need up, but if anyone has any suggestions to make or feels that something wasn’t accurately tagged, feel free to speak up and I’ll take it under advisement.

This fic ate my life for seven months. I’m very glad it’s out of my head and somewhere other people can look at it.

It's been a pleasure,
s_a_m

P.S.- Much thanks to kleool and xSuzukinx, two lovely people from Latvia who were able to correct my errors when naming some of my Latvian characters!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He’s there in less than an hour. In the preserve he sends Krzepa up into the air to find the pack’s house. Later Stiles will marvel over Derek finally being able to rebuild his family home. For now, he needs to get there, fast.

It’s not winter, but the wind knows him. Once Krzepa finds the house he uses the wind to bolt through the trees, speeding his steps. Even with his human ears he can hear the screaming a dozen yards from the house. The winds blows the front door open for him and he sweeps in.

He abandons his duffle on the floor and enters the kitchen. It’s like a scene from a bad slasher film. Blood is splattered all across the walls and cabinets. There’s broken dishes and spilled food on the floor around the table, and it’s all soaked in blood. Everyone in the room is covered in it. And all of it, Stiles is certain, belongs to Erica.

Someone touches his shoulder, tries to pull him back and speak to him. Distantly, he hears Krzepa screech at them and the hand falls away. All his attention is fixed on Erica’s abdomen. It’s swollen, round and ready to pop. Stiles would be happy for her if only he hadn’t know she was only two
months pregnant and there wasn’t a sharp feeling of black magic in the air.

He walks forward. It’s like everything is moving in slow motion. His thoughts are flying fast and thick. He knew. The second he got a feel for that foul magic he knew what was going on. He’d seen it once, and you don’t fucking forget that.

His heart ached for Erica and Boyd, but there was no time for that now. If he was going to save Erica, he needed to act.

He reached the table and jumped up, straddling Erica’s knees. He sat on them ruthlessly, stilling her. Her wide, teary eyes locked on to his and through the blood bubbling up from her mouth she begged him, “Please. Save my baby. Save my baby!” Stiles pressed his palms to her cheeks and cradled her head.

“Save my baby! Save my baby!” Erica was bucking underneath him, and Stiles could see the blood gushing from between her legs and adding the pool on the table.

“Erica,” he whispered and for a moment she stopped screaming. Erica looked at Stiles with desperate hope in her eyes and into the sudden, ringing silence Stiles said;

“I’m sorry, but the thing in your belly already ate your baby. There’s nothing to save.”

Her spine arched nearly to the breaking point. She threw her head back and screamed her denial. “No!” she screamed the word over and over, loud and long, thrashing on the table. “Save my baby! Save my baby!”

“Any more of this and she’ll die.” Stiles announced calmly. He pulled a blessed knife from the top of his boot. “I need to cut it out of her and kill it.” A dark hand grabbed the arm he held the knife in. He met Boyd’s wild eyes, saw his pale face. He used his other hand to grip the back of Boyd’s neck and press their foreheads together.

“I swear,” his voice cracked. “I swear on my mother’s grave your baby is already dead. There’s nothing I can do but kill the thing that ate it. I swear. I swear.” Boyd let go. He held down his wife. Other hands reached out to grasp her, press her to the table and hold her still.

He made the cut at the bottom of her swollen mound, out of Erica’s sight. Blood spilled over his hands, soaking him past his wrists. As soon as there was an opening, the thing reached out from the fleshy gash with its slimy purple tentacles and gripped Stiles’ arm.

He let it, keeping his knife hand out of reach. The places on his skin where it touched burned, but he ignored the pain. Once it had a good grip on him, he plunged the knife into the gash on Erica’s stomach and felt his blade, blessed to always find its mark, strike home. It made a terrible wailing noise that echoed eerily through the house and then the tentacles fell slack from his arm.

He pulled the thing from her stomach and shoved it to the floor. There was no umbilical cord. Erica tried to roll to her side, sobbing, eyes searching for it. Stiles firmly turned her head back to look at him and pressed her flat to the table.

“Just a little more,” he assured her in a whisper. Stiles had always been crap at runes, but a symbol was a symbol and his will was strong. He used her blood and traced an Ailm on her forehead. Forcefully, he purged the grotesque magic that was attacking Erica’s body, snapping the connection between her and the one who had created the parasite. Erica’s gasp interrupted her hysterical weeping. She went quiet and limp. Stiles watched as her belly deflated and the cut he had made on her abdomen closed. In scarce minutes her supernatural healing had repaired the damage.
“Stiles?” the choked whisper pulled Stiles’ attention from Erica’s torso to her face. “What… what…” Stiles shushed her gently and smoothed her hair, heedless of the blood on his hands.

“It’s okay, sweetheart. You just sleep for a little while. Don’t think about anything. Just sleep.” He put a little power into the word. Erica’s eyes fluttered shut and she slipped easily into a deep sleep.

Stiles took a shaky breath and got off the table. He dropped into one of the kitchen chairs that had been shoved against a wall. “Krzepa,” He said softly. The falcon thrilled a small note and then grew to the size of a vulture. Rapidly, it snatched up the corpse of the thing that had grown in Erica’s belly and flew out the door to deal with it. Stiles gave Krzepa enough magic to bury it deep in the earth where it could do no harm.

He looked around the room. Everyone was staring at him, save Boyd, who had his face shoved into his wife’s neck, shoulders trembling.

“We have time,” he said eventually, “Get cleaned up and we can talk about what’s going to happen next.”

“And what’s that?” Derek asked quietly, his eyes burning red.

Stiles smiled at him, all teeth, no humor and so sharp it could cut the air. “We track the bitch who did this and kill her.”

Derek smiled just as maliciously as Stiles and rumbled his agreement.

* 

Stiles threw up in the bathroom, wiped away the faint tear tracks on his face and bandaged his arm neatly.

* 

“You haven’t changed.” Boyd said.

Stiles blinked and looked up from where he was sharpening his knife. Erica was lying on a couch, cleaned of blood and dressed in a long night gown. Boyd sat on the floor next to her, staring, unable to trust she would be fine if he looked away. Stiles was sitting at the coffee table, waiting for everyone to come back from cleaning up.

“Yeah?” Stiles answered uncertainly, tucking the knife away.

“You always helped us.” Boyd continued, still not looking at him. “Even when we were enemies you still tried to do right by us. Made it about the situation, not the people. We couldn’t do that. We couldn’t do anything but try to find someone to blame. And you were easy to blame. Dumbass human kid, sitting right there and doing jack shit to save us. Even knowing that you did save us didn’t stop us from being angry with you. When you left we said ‘good riddance’. Figured we were better off without you. But we weren’t. Didn’t realize how much we depend on you until you were
gone. Once we had our heads on straight we realized how fucking stupid we were, blaming you for shit that wasn’t your fault. Too late by then though. We were planning on calling soon. Saying our apologies.”

“Yeah?” Stiles voice was a croak.

“Yeah. But Erica’s not great at apologizing. We had to work up to it, you know?”

“I know.”

“So when she wakes up, you mind if we say sorry then?”

“Yeah. Take your time.” Stiles cleared his throat and blinked his eyes furiously. He was not going to cry.

“Me too.” Isaac appeared in the door way to the living room. “I’m sorry. I should have stuck by you. But Erica and Boyd, they were… they were my first packmates. I felt like I had to stick by them. I’m sorry.”

Stiles couldn’t help it. He lifted an arm. Isaac darted in and cuddled close, whining softly. Stiles ruffled his hair and held him. It felt so good, being close to someone without it being about sex. Stiles had forgotten how good a proper cuddle could feel.

Isaac stiffened suddenly under his arm and pulled away, dropping to sit next to Boyd.

A moment later Derek walked into the room.

*

“Everyone’s almost done,” Derek said and settled into the recliner.

Stiles was abruptly aware that with the way the furniture was arranged, Derek was sitting at the head of the proverbial table. Boyd shifted up onto the sofa, settling Erica’s head in his lap and taking the place to Derek’s right; the pack’s Beta, second-in-command.

Isaac took the other end of the sofa and pulled Erica’s feet over his thighs. Stiles stood and tried not to be too awkward about pulling out of the circle. It made more sense now, how the living room was arranged; he had thought it odd that there was a second sofa with its back to the television. This must be where they conducted pack meetings.

Stiles could see it; all of them gathered around in conference, Derek presiding. And then when the business part was over they’d all cuddle close and turn on a movie, squishing onto one couch. They’d argue over whose turn it was to pick the movie and elbow at each other for getting too close, laughing all the while.

Stiles forced himself to stop picturing the cozy scene. “Where are the kids, anyway?” he asked.

“With Melissa and John,” Lydia answered as she and Jackson entered the room. Both were dressed in rough clothes, the kinds of things you might wear when painting. Or, Stiles reasoned, on a hunt to kill something.

“Scott took them as soon as Erica started screaming,” Jackson added in his usual callous way. Lydia
smacked his arm as they settled on the other sofa, the end away from Derek. Allison followed shortly and sat close to the couple, leaving a space on the sofa that was to Derek’s left hand, obviously Scott’s usual place. There was a third, smaller sofa opposite Derek in the circle of furniture. Stiles guessed it was usually for his father, Peter and Melissa.

Instead of sitting there, Stiles leaned his hip against the arm of it. Derek watched him for a moment, then gestured in invitation to sit.

“Thank you, Alpha Hale,” Stiles said politely as he sat down.

“You are granted right of passage in my territory,” Derek said formally. “Your help with the welfare of my pack is most appreciated.”

“My gratitude to Hale Pack and its Alpha for the courtesy. And I’m happy to be of service.”

Derek inclined his head.

“What the hell?” Lydia asked her Alpha, incredulous. “Why are you treating Stiles like he’s a stranger?”

“Because I am,” Stiles answered at the same time Derek growled, “Not now, Lydia.” It was only the flash of red eyes that made her drop it. The betas stirred uneasily, but didn’t object.

“How did you get here so quickly?” Allison asked hastily.

“My upstairs neighbor is a dragon.” Stiles smiled gratefully at Allison for diverting the conversation. “I asked for a favor.”

“You live next to a dragon?” Isaac’s eyes were wide.

“Yeah.” Stiles smiled, only a little bit smug.

“We can talk about that later,” Derek sat forward in the recliner and braced his elbows on his knees. He fixed Stiles with a hard look. “What was that thing?”

“It doesn’t have a name as far as I know.” Stiles roughly scrapped through his hair. “It’s not a natural being. I’m not exactly sure how it gets started, or how it gets inside a person.”

“What do you know?” Derek was irritated and on edge.

Or at least, he should have been. But Stiles saw no outward sign of it. Stiles felt a pin prick of pride in his chest. Derek had figured his shit out.

Stiles abruptly realized that Derek was still as stupidly beautiful as he had been seven years ago. For a guy right around the corner from thirty he certainly didn’t look it. The skin around his mouth and eyes were still smooth and his hair was as dark as he remembered. The muscles he could see through the clinging fabric of his grey Henley spoke to the same ridiculous amount of exercise.

Heat spiked low in Stiles’ belly and panic crawled up his throat. Now was not the time to be remembering his damn attraction to Derek fucking Hale. He pushed it all down.

“I know it’s meant to-” Stiles cut a quick look to Boyd. He tried to keep his words as clinical as possible. “To take the organic material of a fetus and convert it into some kind of other creature. It absorbs the life force of the- the carrier for rapid development. When it has absorbed all the carrier’s energy it will finish developing and is supposed to come out of the uterus.”
The questions started coming from every angle.

“How long is the…” Allison groped for the word. “The gestation supposed to be?”

Stiles shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“What was it even going to be?” Jackson asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Erica was a werewolf,” Lydia pointed out. “If she kept healing herself and renewing her life force would it ever have been born?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is this a deliberate attack on our pack?” Isaac cried.

“I don’t know.”

“Will Erica ever be able to get pregnant again?” Boyd whispered.

“I don’t know. I’m sorry. I-”

“Stop.” Derek demanded and everyone shut up. He addressed Stiles. “If you don’t know so damn much, then how the fuck did you know what it was doing to Erica?” Derek was snarling by the time he finished speaking, losing his cool.

“Because I don’t read Latvian and pretty pictures can only get a guy so far.”

*

Stiles was in fact fluent in seven languages- two that were dead- and could read in an additional four. But they didn’t need to know that, so he took a deep breath and started telling the story

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“Andris asked me for a favor once. It was the only time my job took me overseas,” he began.

“Who’s Andris?” Derek interrupted.

“My teacher.” Stiles frowned at the interruption.

“Oh,” Allison exclaimed softly with a small smile, “The one who was a thousand times better than Deaton?”

“Yes, actually.” Stiles blinked and then looked around. “Where is that asshole anyway?”

“Stay on topic.” Derek snapped. “What does your teacher have to do with this?”
“Deaton is in Arizona on vacation.” Allison answered Stiles serenely, then gestured for him to go on.

Stiles smiled at her cheek. “My teacher hails from Latvia,” he went on. “A group of old school hunters based in the Baltics asked for him to lend them a hand. Andris decided he couldn’t go and asked me to take his place. The hunt itself,” Stiles clarified, “doesn’t have much to do with this. But on our way through Riga we caught wind of something dark going on. Missing bodies, adults and still born babes.”

Stiles rubbed a hand through his hair again, recalling the uneven cobble stones underfoot as he ran through narrow streets with heavily armed hunters at his back and the sharp smell of an old city in his nose. He recalled the darkness of old blood on concrete and plaster, and the slickness of formaldehyde between his fingers.

“A woman, Inga Ozola, was trying to do… something. I only flipped through about half of her grimoire and I couldn’t read a word of it, so I’m still not sure what the fuck she meant to happen, putting dead babies in the stomachs of dead women and dead men.”

“Is that how you knew what was wrong with Erica? You saw her research diagrams?” Lydia was skeptical.

“Yeah.” Stiles pressed his lips in a thin line and swallowed. “She was an excellent artist; her depictions were… detailed.”

“Is she the one who did this?” Boyd asked, eyes fixed on Erica’s sleeping face.

“Probably, yeah.” Stiles answered quietly.

“Why didn’t you kill her back then?” Jackson snarled.

“She hadn’t actually done anything yet.” Stiles fist his hands in his lap. “All the corpses we found were dead of natural causes and whatever magic she was trying hadn’t worked. Ozola was doing some form of black magic, that much was certain. But as far as the mundane authorities were concerned all she was guilty of was grave robbery, grave desecration and corpse mutilation. And the hunters and I didn’t much care as long as she hadn’t actually killed anyone. We were already in the middle of hunting something else, so we turned her over to the Bone Sisterhood.”

“Bone Sisterhood?” Lydia asked stiffly. She didn’t like not knowing something.

“They’re like a sect of universal priestesses.” Stiles answered. “They’re powerful and believe in balance and justice, so on occasion they serve as jailers for people who don’t quite deserve to be punished but likewise can’t be trusted not to do something harmful if left on their own.”

“A sect of priestesses that serve as wardens for criminals?” Lydia frowned, “That can’t be all of it.”

“It’s not. For the most part they perform funeral rites for people of any religion or species. As white necromancers they can ensure there are no lingering ghosts and no way to interfere with the dead once they’re laid to rest.”

“Laura had them come to perform rites for our family.” Derek offered quietly.

Stiles could practically feel the tension. And he certainly heard the series of sharp inhales from everyone in the room. At least now he could guess exactly how often Derek spoke of his family; not ever. Stiles studied Derek. He couldn’t tell what the tension in his shoulders meant. He licked his lips.
“Did you call on them for Laura?” Stiles hazard asking.

“No.” Derek’s lips twisted. “There was never the time. And it took weeks for one of the Sisters to show up for our family. Laura was so pissed at them she swore she’d never call for their aid again.”

“Would you like me to call on your behalf?” Stiles offered hesitantly. Derek’s head, bowed to stare at his loosely clasped hands, snapped up. “I’m in good standing with the Sisterhood,” Stiles went on. “They’ll come quickly, when I ask.”

Derek took a deep breath. His exhale was shaky, but his words were steady; “Thank you. Once this is dealt with, I’d like that.” The tension broke to audible sighs of relief.

Stiles nodded. “No problem. Now,” He rubbed his hands together briskly, “There are two possibilities; either Inga Ozola escaped the Bone Sisterhood and came overseas to finish whatever the fuck it was she had started, or someone from the Baltic team fucked up and some of her research survived and ended up in the hands of someone with an interest in her work.”

“What do you think more likely? Her escape or stray papers?” Derek asked.

“The first,” Stiles said without hesitation. “You can mimic a person’s work but you can’t mimic their magic. Whatever Ozola was trying to do didn’t work, but she was throwing all the magic she had into it. The whole of Old Riga was saturated with her power. I could sense it all over Erica before I purged it.”

“If you’re so sure why even suggest someone else might be behind it?” Allison frowned.

“I’m not infallible,” Stiles smiled wryly, “I’ve got a good memory, but all dark magic has a similar flavor to it. There’s always the chance what I felt here is close enough to what I remember for me to make a mistake. It was nearly five years ago. I wasn’t…” Stiles chewed his lip. “I hadn’t seen as much. The things she was doing to the bodies it- it rattled me.” he pressed a hand to the back of his neck. “Seen worse since. But the first time always feels like the worst.” He murmured. Quickly, he fluttered a hand in the air, partly to wave off concerned looks and partly to shoo bad memories.

“For tonight there’s not much we can do.” Stiles stood and shoved his hands in the front pockets of his jeans. “I’m going to get in touch with some people, put out feelers. The most important thing right now is to find out if this was a targeted attack or if there are other victims.” Stiles lifted his brows at Derek, asking for his input as much as his permission.

“Please do,” Derek stood as well and addressed the room, “I made some calls earlier to nearby packs, put them on alert. Once we know how wide spread this is we can either hunt the bitch ourselves or find whoever is already on her trail and join in.” he looked at Stiles. “Will you stay with us though this?”

“If you’ll let me.” Stiles held Derek’s gaze while the Alpha studied him intently.

“Yes,” Derek said finally, “We’ll need the help of someone we can trust.”

Stiles’ stomach flip flopped and his heart skipped a beat. He cleared his throat roughly and thumbed his nose, trying to hide whatever blush had risen to the surface of his face. “Is there a guest room I can camp out in?”

Derek nodded and flicked his fingers at Isaac. He jumped to his feet instantly and moved to Stiles’ side. “I’ll show you.” Isaac pressed Stiles’ shoulder to lead him from the room.

“If there any way to make the house more secure?” Boyd asked suddenly. Stiles blinked, then smiled
“I’m sorry, I should have said.” He pointed towards the ceiling. “Krzepa is keeping watch. Nothing can get past him.”


“So what?” Jackson scoffed, “He’ll caw when there’s danger and try to peck it?”

“No. Krzepa will swallow it whole.” Stiles replied sunnily, “Although I’d rather he not,” he went on with an exaggerated frown, “Then he’ll have to stay big until he’s done digesting it. Very inconvenient to run around with a falcon the size of a small elephant.”

This garnered laughs from the werewolves, breaking some of the strain of the past few hours. Against his will Stiles’ eyes flicked to Derek. The open gratitude Stiles saw on his face before his usual stoicism covered it set the heat in Stiles’ lower belly off again.

He hastily turned to follow Isaac, trying hard to deny his rekindled attraction to Derek. Now was not the time, he told himself.

He could feel Derek’s gaze on him as he left the room and couldn’t stop the shiver that ran up his spine.

*

Stiles woke seven times that night, sweaty and shaking. Erica’s screams were a looped soundtrack playing in his nightmares.

*

When Stiles woke up for good he had one hundred and twenty-six emails in his inbox. He pulled a laminated map of the United States and a whiteboard marker out of his duffle. Rapidly he scanned through the subject lines and discarded the ones that were polite regrets in response to his inquiries. Then he went through again, this time skimming the full messages and sorting through to find the ones that were redundant, lumping the information together. Then he carefully read the ones left over, isolating the pertinent information.

When he was done, Stiles had nineteen blue dots on his map, each tagged with the name of the woman who had died, her species and the date of her death. Peering at the map, Stiles got out a green marker and started numbering them, with number one being the oldest event and number nineteen being Erica.

It was the strangest crime map Stiles had ever drawn. The oldest event he had on his map was sixteen months ago. Between each dot he drew lines, showing the path of Ozola’s movements. It was a mess on the map; many of the events happened in the same place, but weeks or months apart, making the lines crisscross madly over the country.
Each cluster of events was in a large city. That much at least made sense to Stiles; a larger population made it easier for Ozola to disguise what she was doing. But Stiles couldn’t figure out why she kept going back to the same cities, risking someone making a connection. Or why she used a different species each time. Experimenting?

He scowled at the map. He had half a mind to call up Dalaigh and ask were all his luck had gone. Why this werewolf pack? There were packs in big cities too. Sure she had been in California before, and the Hale Pack wasn’t exactly out of her way or anything, but…

Maybe he was just over thinking it. Maybe it really was just a bit of bad luck. Dalaigh was always telling him that no one could be lucky forever, not even leprechauns.

But all these questions were, of course, dependent on it actually being Ozola who was behind this, Stiles thought wryly and rubbed his eyes. There was a pattern somewhere in the mess, he just wasn’t able to see it yet.

*

When he finally bothered to check the time it was nearly four in the afternoon. After the day before he didn’t have an appetite, but going nearly a day without food was no good. Stiles was standing to head downstairs to beg for food when his cell phone rang. He tripped over his own feet in his haste to answer it.

“Stiles, good day to you.” Sister Salma’s melodic voice came through on the line.

“Good afternoon, Sister,” Stiles greeted her warmly. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m calling on behalf of the Sisterhood. We understand that you are looking for someone who may have been entrusted to our care once.”

“Inga Ozola,” Stiles couldn’t keep the eagerness from his voice, “Is she still with the Sisterhood?”

“She is not.”

“Shit. So she did escape.” He wasn’t able to keep the accusation out of his voice. “How did that woman-”

“Inga Ozola did not escape,” Sister Salma interrupted gently, “She was let go.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t think I heard you right.”

“The Sisterhood in Riga told me that Ozola jaunkundze proved herself reformed and was released from the convent there two years ago.”

“Jesus. You just let her-” Stiles was nearly speechless with fury.

“The Latvian convent,” Sister Salma continued serenely, “Realized their mistake upon cleaning her room. She had left behind papers that indicated she had been interested in necromancy, and had been conducting book research while in confinement.”

“How the hell did she manage to get her hands on necromantic books?”
“One of the young initiates in Riga confessed to sharing her texts with Ozola jaunkundze. She had convinced the young girl she was innocent and wanted to join the Sisterhood. The acolyte who did this,” Sister Salma continued evenly over Stiles outraged stuttering, “was dismissed from the Sisterhood immediately. And the Sister who cleared Ozola jaunkundze for release was sent to the High Sister for judgment, where her rank was stripped and she was sent to a different convent.”

Stiles made himself take three deep breaths and think about this rationally. Blaming them wouldn’t help; he was two years too late for that. “What has the Sisterhood been doing about this?” he asked once his heart rate had settled.

“We’ve been searching, but no Sister has come across her so far.” A hint of frustration crept into her even tone.

“That’s because,” Stiles said in a flash of insight, “She’s never been in a large city where the Sisterhood has a presence.” That must be why she kept going back to the same cities, risking discovery. And since no one from the Sisterhood had been to Beacon Hills in years, the Hale Pack must have been the perfect place to try her magic on werewolves. The realizations brought to mind another question.

“Was anyone able to figure out what she was trying to do from the research left behind?” he asked.

Sister Salma was quite for a moment before she said, “Yes, they were.”

“Oh God. I’m going to hate this, aren’t I?”

* * *

Stiles hated it.

He set the map on the table in the kitchen and explained to the pack between bites of scrambled eggs and sausage what he had worked out so far.

“Why did she do this?” Erica asked. Her eyes shone brightly in her wan face. Boyd rubbed her back gently, pressed to her side. Stiles wiped his mouth, taking a moment to compose himself.

“Because she’s a selfish bitch who can’t let go.”

* *

Inga Ozola was insane. Her insanity, from what the Sisterhood could tell, resulted from the death of the woman she loved, Iveta Jansone. Unable to let go, Ozola decided she was going bring her lover back from the dead. She captured Jansone's soul and started looking for a suitable host. But at some
point she had decided the usual methods weren’t enough. She didn’t want the love of her life to be a zombie, doomed to live forever as a corpse frozen in time. Nor did she want to have Jansone possess a stranger’s body. Ozola was determined to get her lover born again, in the same body she’d had in the first place and in possession of all her memories. A perfect reincarnation.

And she didn’t care who died to make it happen.

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“Actually,” Stiles said looking at Derek suddenly, “Speaking of dead people being not dead, where’s Peter?” Stiles watched Derek’s face rapidly go through a number of different expressions before he looked away, scowling, and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Arizona.” Allison answered. She looked at Stiles expectantly. Somewhere behind him Stiles heard Isaac choke down a laugh.

“Deaton is in Arizona,” He said slowly. “On vacation. And Peter is also…” his eyes went comically wide. “Oh my God. Are they on vacation together? Are they together?”

“It’s their one year anniversary.” Allison gave a Disney princess smile and winked saucily at Stiles. He may have choked on his own spit at this point. The laughter broke the tension in the room that had been rising since Stiles first started laying out his deductions.

It was a much needed respite.

*

They were both dead, by the end of it. Inga Ozola and Iveta Jansone were laid to rest in the Beacon Hills preserve alongside the abomination that had nearly killed Erica.

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If her pattern held, Stiles knew Ozola was going to stay in the area to try at least once more before she ran off to find another place to hunt for an unwilling host.

Stiles was both right and wrong; Ozola had stayed in the area, but she hadn’t gone after anyone at all.
Erica clung to Stiles, wetting his shirt with her tears and whispering a garbled string of ‘I’m sorry’s and ‘thank you’s and ‘my baby’s into his chest.

Stiles had her head tucked under his chin and he held her tightly, doing what little he could to comfort and accept her.

Boyd stood behind Stiles, his powerful arms wrapped around them both, mouthing the words along with his wife.

*

Making some phone calls, Stiles was able to determine that there was a group of people in pursuit of Ozola, looking to make her pay for what she had done to their wives, sisters and mothers. It was difficult to communicate with them. Many had been hunting Ozola for over a year. They were driven by grief and anger and neither made for a cohesive pursuit. They were sloppy and argued endlessly amongst themselves. That they were four states away furthered communication issues.

Stiles eventually enlisted Chris Argent and his father to help get the hodge-podge conglomerate into some sort of shape to hear what Stiles had found and request more information. It was all they could do to get the bunch of them to sit still long enough to fill Stiles in on other attacks before they came roaring over to California with torches and pitchforks.

When Stiles asked why they hadn’t tried to enlist the help of hunters, who were trained for this, he received vague answers of justice done by their own hands, not wanting to pay for help, and a general sense of distrust that the hunters wouldn’t turn on them once they were done with Ozola.

Chris looked murderous, but managed not to rage in defense of Code-abiding hunters. Stiles and his father traded looks, John stricken and Stiles sickened. If hunters – or even Stiles himself – had been pointed in the right direction from the beginning, then maybe forty-seven women wouldn’t have died.

*

They rush to find her, not wanting to give the useless pursers time to come in and screw it all up. Derek coordinates the searches, organizing grids in the town and spiral patterns out in the woods. Stiles roughs up a few charms that will react to the presence of the dark magic Ozola is using. Stiles hopes that all the magic she’s been using has saturated her person enough that they’ll get a reaction at all.

Surprisingly, it takes only a day and a half to locate her hide out; an ancient cabin with only three walls left. Its close enough to camping grounds that the ‘wolves rarely run there, but isolated enough to be assured of privacy. When the pack surrounds it, it’s been almost two days since Stiles killed the thing that was meant to be Jansone reborn.

It was apparently enough time for Ozola to truly go mad.
There’s too much damage. Too much blood. Stiles stands frozen in the doorway, the entry point Derek selected for him as part of their strategy to surround Ozola. The strategy is meaningless now. She’s too far gone to try and fend them off.

It’s a familiar scene. Blood on the walls and pooling under her thrashing body, screams rending the air. She was farther along than Erica. The mutated thing in her belly was already half out, black claws tearing at her flesh to make more room. He could see her ribs, broken and thrust upward by the size of the monster she was trying to birth. Ozola was holding it, and Stiles nearly vomited when he realized she was trying to help it, trying to embrace it.

If Ozola had been a werewolf, or some other kind of creature, maybe they could have saved her. But she was human. And from the chalky coloring of her skin, nearly all her blood was on the floor.

Scott, ever a bleeding heart, looked at Stiles in disbelief when he said there was nothing he could do.

Ozola was quieting a little, her breathing shallow. The frantic movements of her twisted child were slack and slow. They were dying.

And Stiles wasn’t a healer.

“You have magic!” Scott cried, “You can save her like you saved Erica.”

Stiles sighed, and dropped into a crouch next to Scott beside her body. “Scott, if you had listened for one goddamn second seven years ago you would know you’re asking the impossible right now.”

“What are you talking about? You have-”

“Magic. Yes, I know. Now shut the fuck up and listen to me you stupid bastard.” Stiles grabbed Scott by the shoulder and shook him. Scott was silent, dumbfounded at Stiles’ vehemence.

“I’m only going to explain this to you once so listen carefully. Magic is not the same for every person. If it were, everyone who had it would be like a god. Thank fuck it’s not like that. Instead everyone has different attributes, things they can do well, and other things can’t do at all. My attributes are dry blood and broken bone. Hard earth and dead root. Winter skies and black decay.” Stiles shook Scott again.

“I can’t heal. It is not possible for me to perform any kind of healing magic. I don’t have it in me. I saved Erica by killing that abomination and purging the dark magic from her body. Her own healing ability repaired the damage. You have no fucking idea what you’re talking about, so stop trying to tell me what my magic can and cannot do, you asshole.”

Stiles stood up and walked away a few feet. The pack watched him with wide eyes. Abruptly he turned on heel and stomped back.

“Move,” he shoved at Scott and took his place beside Ozola. She was watching him through glazed eyes. Gently he took her hand and clasped it between his.

“Laima weeps for the hard life you’ve had.” He whispers gently to her, “Iveta will be with you now and you with her, forever, for the world is eternal.”

Ozola’s mouth twitched, like she was thinking of smiling. Then her eyes closed and her head fell
limp to one side. The black-clawed, black-skinned thing that hung out of her belly, streaked in her blood, fell still as well. Stiles checked for a pulse and searched with his magic for their life forces. There was nothing.

“Stiles,” Scott began in a wavering voice.

“Don’t talk to me right now.” Stiles cut him off, “I’m pissed at you. God,” he laughed bitterly, “This is part of why I left. What the fuck gave you the right to tell me what I can and can’t do? Jesus, Scott.”

“I didn’t know-“

“You would have known if you hadn’t blown me off to go fuck Allison all the time. I tried to tell you, man. You weren’t listening when I needed you to.”

They were standing opposite each other now, Stiles red with anger and Scott white with dismay.

“I’m sorry.” Scott said finally, “I fucked up. You were my best friend and I treated you like shit. I’m sorry.” And then he walked away.

Stiles took a shaky breath and pressed his hands to his face. “Sorry, Allison. For bringing you into it.”

“I had my place in it.” Allison admitted with a shrug, “I’m just glad you two are dealing with it.”

Stiles gave a short barking laugh. “You call that dealing with it?”

“It’s a start.” She turned away then to follow her husband.

“What now, Stiles?” Derek asked quietly, ceding command of the situation to him.

“Now,” Stiles said slowly, breathing deeply a few times in an effort to calm the adrenaline that buzzed in his veins, “We call on the Sisterhood, bury the dead and put this whole mess behind us.”

*

Erica refused to let the monster that had been in her belly be buried as her baby. A short ceremony was held over an empty casket. The gravestone had only the one date carved into it, no name or epitaph.

Derek insisted the marker go in the Hale family plot.

*

They buried Inga Ozola with the two bodies she had tried to make into Iveta Jansone deep in the woods. They left the place unmarked.

When the group of vengeance seekers finally got to town and realized their quarry had already died
and been buried, three committed suicide and six turned around and left. The few who remained were lost. They had given up everything in pursuit of Ozola. John and Derek helped them find jobs in town and a place to stay.

Stiles watched Derek handle the shell-shocked with care and felt that fire in his belly burn higher, and the prick of pride in his heart get bigger.

*

Besides the ceremonies for the recently dead, Sister Salma also held one for Laura Hale.

Afterward, she pressed her hand to Derek’s cheek and kindly told him all of his family was truly at rest. Stiles and the pack didn’t say anything about his tears.

*

Scott’s call surprised him. That he insisted on the same diner as before was shocking. Stiles considered not showing up, but figured that was too much of a dick move.

Katie the waitress led him to the table where Scott was already seated. He ordered the most expensive item on the menu, surf and turf with a side of mashed potatoes.

“You’re buying.” He jutted out his chin defiantly, daring Scott to disagree.

“Okay,” Scott said. His eyes were fixed on his plate. Burger and fries, barely touched. The silenced stretched. Katie deposited Stiles’ plate and left. He drummed his fingers on the table.

“Dude,” he said finally, “You’re the one who called me.”

“I know, I just-” Scott broke off and rubbed the back of his neck, finally looking up.

“Well then. If you’re not going to talk, you mind if I ask you a question?” Stiles waited for Scott to nod. “Why did you walk away from me in the cabin?”

“I thought you were going to punch me.” Scott admitted.

“You’re a werewolf, it’s not like that would have hurt you.”

“No, but it might have hurt you.”

“Scott, dude,” Stiles laughed, “I have magic. I wouldn’t have punched you.”

“I don’t know what kind of magic you can do.”

Stiles lifted his brows. “You know, I thought we covered this already.”

“We did, it’s just- I’m sorry.” Scott shrugged helplessly.

Stiles suddenly found Scott’s floundering kind of endearing. “So, you were kind of a dick seven
years ago.” Scott nodded, face miserable. “But,” Stiles went on, “You apologized. And meant it this
time. So that’s good.”

“So it?”

“Yeah. See, I wasn’t sure if you really got it, Scott. Why I needed to leave. Do you get it now? How much of a hypocritical asshole you were being when I needed you to be my friend? And how much that hurt me?”

“Yeah. I got it.” he said weakly.

“You gonna pull a stunt like this on me again?”

“No.”

“Okay,” Stiles said and smiled, a little tentative, “Then, that’s good.”

“Good?”

“Yeah. You know, it’s all good.”

“We’re good?” Scott was looking at Stiles wide eyed.

“We’re good.”

And then they were up and hugging. Stiles wasn’t entirely sure when he moved but he didn’t really care.

“I’m sorry,” Scott’s voice was small in his ear.

“I know, buddy. We’re good.”

*

Deaton and Peter come back from Arizona looking disgustingly satiated. Deaton takes one look at
Stiles and bows his head. It’s all the apology Stiles is going to get but it’s enough. Peter looks disappointed when he can’t cause Stiles discomfort by making innuendos about his vacation, but ruffles his hair affectionately anyway.

Stiles is somewhat flabbergasted until Lydia finds the time to tell him that Peter has been in therapy for the better part of the last seven years and it’s done him a world of good. At a quirk of an inquisitive eyebrow Lydia confesses that Derek had also been seeing someone. He’s so damn proud of the Alpha that he feels like he’s dying a little bit. When he says as much to Lydia, she snorts and walks away. He wonders if she knows that he and Derek were almost a thing, if his father shared his long ago drunken confession with everyone.

Stiles calls in Silas as soon as he can. He and Deaton fuss over Erica, conducting tests both magical and mundane. The day they have to tell her and Boyd that they’ll never have another child is a hard one. Her angry sobbing is difficult to listen to so Stiles leaves the house for a while, takes a walk on the preserve.
He expected Derek to try and talk to him. Stalk him through the woods and lurk in shadows until Stiles finally caught on and startled, letting the werewolf have his dramatic entrance.

He doesn’t.

* *

He thinks about leaving again. He saved Erica, made sure the threat was gone. It’s what he does, what all his clients pay him to do. That he’s not charging the Hale Pack doesn’t change that.

* *

“They’re good people,” Silas says, settling on the saggy chair in the living room of the B&B where he and Stiles roomed. Stiles hummed noncommittally and flopped onto the couch opposite the witch.

“I was a little surprised,” Silas went on, seemingly addressing the empty air for all the attention he paid to Stiles. “The way you described them made it sound like they were all a bunch of self-absorbed, emotionally volatile sex addicts.”

“Teenagers.”

“Quite,” Silas hummed. “You should give them a chance. Seven years is a long time.”

Stiles is quiet for a moment. “I don’t know if there’s anything to keep me here.” He admits.

“Then maybe you should find out.”

* *

Silas convinces him to stay. Tells him he needs to figure his shit out, settle everything with the pack before he decides where home is. There are threats made of awkward rashes and painful boils if he leaves before it’s all taken care of.

Stiles knows that Silas knows that Stiles is too powerful to let such a petty curse touch him, but he appreciates the sentiment.

So when Silas returns to Kentucky, Stiles doesn’t go with him.

*
His father wants him to move back into the house, but Stiles has to say no. He’s not a kid living in his father’s house anymore and he doesn’t want to regress to that.

He bargains with the couple who own the B&B he’s staying in to pay a cheaper price, but let him stay longer.

He ends up agreeing to six months.

*  

“It’s so pretty!” Christine smiles big and wide at Stiles, “Thank you mister Stiles!” she thrusts the cimaruta charm into his face in case he didn’t know what she was thanking him for.

“You’re welcome, Christy.” Stiles grins down at her and takes her proffered hand so she can shake it enthusiastically. Christy skips away to go shove the charm in her mother’s face. Lydia coos appropriately, neatly hiding the smugness of how much her daughter enjoys the sparkle of the silver chain it’s on.

Stiles had taken a quick trip back to his place in Lawrence to lock up properly and grab some things for the long stay. He’d also grabbed the box holding the cimaruta charms he had already made for the three other children in the pack. A casual lunch at the pack house seemed as good a time as any to gift them.

Charles toddles up to Stiles next and politely thanks him for his charm, addressing his feet. A little confused at Charles’ reserved attitude, Stiles accepts the gratitude with equal reserve. At the boy’s shy prompting he bends down so he’s closer to Charles’ chubby face. Quickly the little boy pecks his cheek. Charles blushes madly and then runs away to go stand with his twin sister and his mother.

“He thinks you’re really cool.” Abigail says in a very loud whisper. Boldly she pushes Stiles down onto Derek’s recliner in the pack living room and crawls up into his lap. Her cimaruta is resting against the dusky skin of her collarbone.

“Alpha said you been lots of places. Tell me a story.” Abigail settles against him and peers up at him with wide, expectant eyes.

Stiles, holding the fragile warmth of Abigail in his arms, feels his heart melt.

“A story!” Christy bellows and tromps back over to Stiles, hoisting herself up onto the low coffee table before launching herself into his lap. Stiles’ breathe bursts out of him when her knee gets him in the stomach. “I want to hear a story too!”

Charles follows at a more sedate pace but manages to squeeze his way onto Stiles’ lap with only a little help from a very amused Lydia.

“Um. Well,” Stiles starts awkwardly, ignoring the smirks and laughter from the adult pack members. He racks his brain for a story that doesn’t end in death or violent maiming. Or involve sex. Or ritual sacrifice. Or Stiles cutting something’s head off. Or torture. Or kidnapping. Or decomposing bodies. Or bad language. Or anything else entirely inappropriate for kids aged three and five. He comes up with a pathetically short list.
He makes a mental note about picking some of the stories with lesser offences and changing them to make them child safe. He clears his throat.

“Did you guys know that unicorns are real?”

Three sets of eyes go wide with awe. Stiles grins.

*

Stiles spends half of August on the southern coast of California, mediating a dispute between two rafts of selkies. It’s a lot of he-said, she-said, this-treaty-said-this, no-it-actually-said-that, I’m-prettier-than-you-and-have-more-sparkly-treasures, yeah-well-my-dick-is-bigger-so-there, arguments. Stiles amuses himself during uproars and slap fights by texting with his father or Scott and sometime Derek. Even Christy a few times, once she figured out how to work the speech recognition software on her parent’s cellphones.

Eventually he puts his foot down, demands both sides actually make a list of complaints and what they want to do about it. Stiles forces a compromise that basically guarantees that neither raft will ever actually have to have any contact with the other whatsoever. Everyone leaves happy and Stiles makes the four hour trip back north to collapse facedown onto the guestroom bed with Abigail tucked under one arm, Charles under the other and Christy curled on his back.

When he wakes up, he’s been joined by Erica, Isaac, Lydia and Scott. And Stiles isn’t sure, but he thinks he caught a glimpse of Derek watching them from the doorway before he was all the way awake.

*

“I understand your concern sir, I do. But I’m not in any position to travel right now.” Stiles explains politely for the tenth time. He’s making his twenty-fourth circuit of the small pond near the pack house.

“That’s why I’ve asked Lead Mare Cynthia to send some of her colts to you, for extra protection.” Stiles nearly sighs aloud as the rich idiot on the phone whines at Stiles some more about the horse smell and how unsafe he feels and how he was paying for Stiles to deal with the situation.

Stiles’ eye twitches. He checks his phone; he’s been dealing with this shit-for-brains for over an hour. He purses his lips and waits. Once the guy on the phone has run out of steam and is awkwardly breathing into the mouth piece, Stiles speaks.

“Mr. Smith. I made it clear at the time I accepted your case that I was not going to be able to come see you personally. You agreed to those terms. I have met the colts of the Tall Mountain Herd and they are trust worthy centaurs. Just as trust worthy as the Shaman on-route to you now. They are more than capable of getting rid of the revenants on your property. If my guarantee is not enough, then I will happily refund you and you are welcome to find another solution. Sir.”

Stiles hangs up fifteen minutes later to the sound of Mr. Smith’s obnoxiously condescending
gratitude. He goes around the pond two more times to cool his temper. Halfway back to the Hale pack house, Jackson falls in step with him.

“You were taking a long time,” he explains when Stiles looks at him funny, “Derek wanted to make sure you hadn’t been kidnapped.”

Stiles snorted.

“No, really,” Jackson actually grimaces, “Allison and Lydia have each been kidnapped twice, and Danny three times. Derek gets twitchy when someone goes out for a walk or something and takes too long.”

“Danny?”

“He’s kind of half pack. He lives way out in Fresno working for some computer company. He comes back when he can.” Jackson sounds unhappy about that.

“Cool. He visiting anytime soon?”

“Yeah, for Abigail’s birthday.”

“Oh, yeah. Mid-September, right?”

“Right.”

They walk back to the house in companionable silence. Derek is pacing on the front porch. He looks up sharply when they approach. Stiles can’t help but laugh.

“Worry-wolf,” he teases.

Derek huffs irritably and goes back inside. Jackson and Stiles smirk at each other.

*

But really, Derek was an absolute worrier. As the days went by and Stiles started spending more and more time hanging out with the pack, in their homes and in the pack house, he noticed it more and more.

It was the little things; having everyone text him where they were, arranging it so no one went out alone, making sure there were at least two ‘wolves with the kids at any given time. Stiles knew he ran patrol, circling the whole of the Hale territory once a night, making the other ‘wolves take rotations.

A quiet conversation with Boyd assuaged his fears; Derek was like this for a few weeks after anything happened in his territory. Once enough time had passed and his instincts were convinced of his pack’s safety, the hypervigilance would fade on its own and he’d relax his restrictions.

In the meantime, the betas all bore his overprotective directives with good grace, understanding their Alpha’s need to ensure everyone was safe and well, responding positively through the pack bonds to his care and attention.

Stiles doesn’t know how much more his heart can take.
“This. Is. The best. Thing. Ever.” Abigail is very nearly hyperventilating with joy. Amid all the toys and clothes and sweets she had gotten for her birthday was Stiles’ present. It was a small leather bound book of fables and fairy tales that had been inspired by real things. Every other page had an illustration that was charmed to move and play out the scenes written on the page opposite. And the characters interacted with a finger pressed to its surface, following where it went as it traced over the soft velum.

“I love stories!” Abigail screamed.

“Inside voice,” Erica reminded her daughter firmly.

“I know you love stories. Happy birthday, sweetie.” Stiles grinned and opened his arms so Abigail could launch herself at him for a hug.

“Thank you Uncle Stiles! But,” she looked at him gravely, “I can’t read yet.”

Stiles smiled. “That’s okay sweetie, open to the first story for me?” Once Abigail had opened to the first page he had her run a finger down the block of text, making sure to touch the first letter of each line.

“Once upon a time…” a voice started narrating. It sounded like it came from somewhere in the room. Abigail gasped and looked around for the speaker. Then she noticed the pictures were moving and stared at them in a half trance, totally mesmerized.

“Thank you, Stiles,” Erica said shoving wrapping paper into trash bag with Danny and Isaac helping. “It’s a wonderful gift.”

“You’ll spoil her,” Boyd almost managed to look reproving, but the softness in his eyes as he looked at his only daughter belied the reprimand.

“Rotten,” Stiles promised with a slightly evil snicker.

“Spoil me?” Christy asked innocently, sidling up.

“You have to wait for your birthday, Christine.” Lydia said firmly earning a pout from her daughter.

“Don’t be spoiled, Christy.” Charles scolded sleepily. He lay comfortable in Derek’s arms, enjoying a snuggle with his Alpha. Christy pouted harder, stomped her foot and made uppy-arms at Derek. The Alpha obliged and tucked her against his other shoulder. Within moments the twins were asleep, limp and warm in his arms. Derek rumbled soothingly in his chest and rocked gently where he stood, cradling them carefully.

Stiles manfully refrained from whimpering at the sight. It was a near thing.

*
So. Derek.

*

It wasn’t enough that he was still a stupidly beautiful, growly bastard. He had to go and become a competent Alpha. A good father figure with an extra dry sense of humor. And a damned good tactician and strategist.

The pack told some of their own tales, on nights when the kids were asleep and they were sitting around drinking wine. Stiles could tell how much he had changed. He heard about how Derek placed his trust in his betas. How he delegated so he wasn’t overwhelmed all the time. How he asked for help from other packs or allies when the going got rough.

Stiles nearly dropped his glass when he realized abruptly one night that he was falling in love with Derek Hale.

*

He brought a man back to his room that same night. Just a guy from a bar he got to talking with. They laughed as they took their clothes off and moaned into each other’s mouths while they touched and groped. But when Stiles turned over and spread his legs, it was Derek’s face he got off to.

Not the Derek of seven years ago, but the Derek of now, with his little smiles and quite laugh and big heart and strong shoulders that can carry a whole pack.

Whatever Stiles felt for Derek back then, it was nothing. Just lust and caring mixed up in the magic of pack bonds that were still too new, too intense. What Stiles was feeling for Derek now?

It was a whole different animal.

*

Scott and Isaac insisted on everyone going out to dinner on the eight year anniversary of Stiles’ running away. Stiles accepted the invitation with surprisingly good humor.

There were still hurt feelings all over the place, but they weren’t so raw anymore. They were faded and ached only a little, the way healing cuts did.

*
Stiles wondered what he was going to do if he kept bonding to the pack. They were his friends again, they were his family, in a way Silas and Timandra and Dalaigh and Javan- though cherished-never could be.

But he had a house and job he loved that took him all over the country for months at a time, and friends that he liked to visit when he couldn’t stand to be alone anymore.

He didn’t know where to find the balance.

*

“Did you eat enough?” Allison frowned at Stiles’ plate. There was half a burger left and some coleslaw. He’d eaten all the fruit and half a cob of corn but couldn’t do much more.

“Yes. I’m fine.” He assured her.

Every werewolf at the table in the pack house turned to look at him.

“Uncle Stiles,” Abigail furrowed her little eyebrows. “Why did you lie?”

Stiles sighed and looked at the faces surrounding him. Stubborn to the last. “Well, Abby, has your mommy or daddy explained white lies to you yet?”

“What are those?”

“It’s a kind of lie where you say something that’s not true but will make someone feel better or avoid an uncomfortable conversation.”

Abigail considered this. “So which one was why you lied?”

“Uncomfortable conversation.” Stiles hesitated then said, “You know how your mommy always tells you to finish your food?”

“Yeah.”

“Well it’s important that you get enough food to eat because food gives you energy and keeps you healthy. But,” he gestured to his plate. “I’m not eating all of mine.”

“Why?”

“Because I had a bad dream last night.” At Abby’s confused look he goes on, “You know how sometimes you see something gross and it makes you want to not eat? Well, I had a bad dream, and I saw something that made me want to not eat. So I’m not hungry. But I still need to eat to stay healthy, so I tried to eat at least half my food. Auntie Allison was worried about me because I wasn’t eating a lot. But I didn’t want to worry her over my nightmare so I told a white lie, so she wouldn’t worry anymore.”

“Oh.” Abigail frowned at Stiles, “But that’s stupid. Pack is there to help you. They’re supposed to worry over you. Right?” Abigail turned to look for confirmation from Derek.

“Right.” Derek said firmly, his intense eyes fixed on Stiles’ face.
“My bad.” Stiles grinned, but the tension at the table didn’t dissipate.

After the kids were down for their naps, Scott cornered Stiles coming out of the bathroom.

“Dude, are you okay?”

“As okay as I can be,” Stiles said quietly, knowing everyone was listening. “It’s not… I never let it get as bad as I was in the beginning.”

“How bad did it get?” Scott demanded, alarmed.

Stiles swallowed and admitted, “I could count my ribs, no problem.”

“Jesus.”

“I’ve got ways to work around it.” Stiles touched Scott’s shoulder. “I learned how to eat when I wasn’t hungry. I never go a day without eating three meals, even if they’re not full. I haven’t lost or gained any significant weight in five years, Scott. I’m fine, really.” He shrugged helplessly. “I just had a nightmare. It always screws with me the day afterwards.”

“How often do you have nightmares?”

“Please,” Stiles snorted. “Like you don’t have nightmares.” He held up a hand to stop Scott’s protests. “Only a couple times a year now. Every other day of the calendar I’m perfectly fine. Hungry as a bear. Really.”

Scott lets it go only because he could hear the steady beat of Stiles’ heart.

*

“Why don’t you see someone?” Lydia asked out of the blue a few days after the white lie conversation.

“I’ve made my peace with my demons,” Stiles answered, “There’s nothing else a therapist could do for me that I haven’t already managed on my own.”

She nodded briskly and then changed the subject.

*

Derek catches him by surprise.

It shouldn’t be a surprise, really. Derek was the only one who hadn’t made some kind of overture of apology and friendship towards him. Not that he was acting meanly or necessarily avoiding Stiles. He got the sense that Derek had been biding his time, building up to something.

So when Derek unexpectedly climbs in through the window of his bedroom at the B&B, Stiles is up on his feet, knife in hand to face him.
“Wow,” Stiles said after an awkward pause. “You really can’t teach an old dog new tricks.”

Derek laughed, quietly. His eyes darted to the door. Stiles put his knife back under his pillow, a habit he never intends to break.

“We’re alone. The Buchannan’s are on vacation, no one else currently in residence.” He saw Derek’s shoulders relax minutely. “You couldn’t tell?”

“Wasn’t sure,” he shrugged and sat on a chair in the corner, “I couldn’t hear your heart beat from outside.”

“Oh, right, sorry,” Stiles settled on the edge of the bed closest to Derek, not bothering with the light; it would be the full moon soon. “I put up some wards.”

Derek nodded his understanding, looking around with a keen eyes. “You don’t look like you’re staying.” He remarked.

“Oh,” Stiles looked around and realized that was exactly how it looked. “Yeah, well,” he shrugged, “I’ve lived on the road for so long, I’m not in the habit of collecting or settling in. Need to be able to leave in a hurry sometimes.” He shrugged again.

“You have a house now.” Derek pointed out.

“Yeah. And it’s nice. But I mostly use it as a library or workshop. I’m traveling more often than not.”

Derek hummed, and rubbed a hand over his thigh. All these years and Stiles could still read him. He waited for Derek to order his thoughts.

“I owe you an explanation. For eight years ago.”

“I’m all ears, man.” After weeks of spending time with the pack, Stiles found his anger was slowly leeching out if him. He was healing.

“The reason I rejected you,” he started slowly, “There wasn’t exactly one reason. I told you it was your age, and that was part of it. A large part of it, but my reluctance stemmed from a much larger… issue.”

“And that issue was…?”

“Kate Argent.”

“What?” Stiles is irritated, angry even. He knows that Kate fucked up a lot but it’s not like Derek could blame that bitch for everything. “What does she have to do with-?”

Stiles stops. He looks at Derek. Really looks. Derek has always been good at making his face blank, stoic. But Stiles has always been good at reading it. And Derek is begging him with his eyes to not make him say it. So Stiles takes a step back and thinks. What would Kate Argent have to do with how Derek approaches relationships? What would she have to do with Stiles’ age making Derek hesitate to-?

Understanding dawns suddenly.

*
That fucking bitch.

*

It makes so much sense. Stiles understands so intimately what it was that happened to Derek, sees it in his mind’s eye so clearly overlapping with his own memories of Caius, that he has to get up to puke in the bathroom. When he comes back, teeth freshly brushed, Derek hasn’t moved. He’s staring into middle space, eyes vacant in a way that makes Stiles’ heart hurt.

“Tell me you haven’t been blaming yourself for what she did.”

Derek doesn’t say anything. Just turns his head to look at Stiles with cold, empty eyes.

“Who am I kidding? Of course you did. Jesus.” Before he knows that he’s doing Stiles has settled in Derek’s lap and wrapped his arms around him. Derek’s face ends up in the crook of his neck, his arms around Stiles’ waist.

“Does the pack know about this?”

“Just Peter. And probably Deaton. Now you.”

“I’m so fucking sorry, Derek. If she weren’t dead already I’d make sure of it.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem.”

Derek cleared his throat. “So. I was kind of fucked up. Back then. And I handled it badly. I said things I shouldn’t have said. And I’m sorry.”

“You,” Stiles voice cracked, “You told me I wasn’t good enough for you.”

“I didn’t know how to make you give up without hurting you. So I said what would hurt the worst.” Derek pulled back so he could look Stiles in the eye. “Stiles, I will never be worthy of you.”

“Oh, Jesus. You can’t just say shit like that.” Stiles whined.

And then his mouth was on Derek’s and the whole world fell away.

*

“So,” Derek said roughly, cheeks still flushed and lips reducing to their normal size.

“Hnh,” Stiles responded intelligently. He squirmed on Derek’s lap, making serious effort not to disturb either of their boners.

“I would really like to court you.” Derek said softly. Stiles lifted his head to stare at the werewolf. “I
Eight years ago, Stiles might have laughed at Derek for saying he wanted to court him. But the Stiles back then didn’t know what he knew now. Didn’t know just how serious the request was. For an Alpha to ask to court someone was no small matter. The Alpha-mate would be nearly equal to the Alpha, above even the pack’s Beta in hierarchy, responsible for the care of the pack, serving in place of the Alpha when necessary. It was a position of power and respect in the pack.

And Alphas generally didn’t court without seriously considering marriage.

“Ask me.” Stiles begged. Derek gently pushed Stiles off and they both stood in the center of the bedroom. Derek tipped his head to one side in submission.

“Stiles Stilinski, I ask permission to court you.”

Stiles fought back tears. “Alpha Derek Hale, I give you permission to court me.” He heard Derek’s breathe hitch. “Will you swear to abide by your honor and respect my decision at the end of our courtship?”

“I so swear. Will you swear to abide by your honor and allow no other to influence your decision at the end of our courtship?”

“I so swear.”

Derek’s mouth caught his again. Stiles’ heart fluttered when he felt Derek’s smile on his lips.

*

“One condition though,” Stiles said between kisses.

“What?”

“My dad never did get the chance to give somebody the ‘I’m the Sheriff and I have guns and I know how to hide a body’ talk. You’ll let him, right?”

“I regret everything.”

“No you don’t.”

“No. I don’t.”

*

Stiles moved in with his father and insisted on paying rent. He did it partly because it was cheaper, partly to get away from having mundane roommates, partly because he missed his dad, and partly because it was traditional. There was meaning in a father allowing an Alpha to take his child out for courting.
A proper werewolf courtship lasted a year. There were traditional things expected of them during the different seasons, things they would do to prove their worthiness to each other and the pack.

Stiles was stupidly pleased when Derek brought down a buck for him that winter, and then a brace of rabbits in the spring. And Derek couldn’t stop beaming every time Stiles did something to care for or look after the pack’s wellbeing.

Outside of the traditional acts of the courtship, it was no different than dating. Derek took him out to dinner or planned moonlit picnics in the woods. Stiles brought Derek trinkets or little oddities that made him laugh to decorate the den with.

Stiles came up with a list of all the cliché date moments they’d never been able to have as teenagers. They went out to movies and made out in the back row. They went parking and got caught by one of his father’s deputies. They would spend all day at museums or in parks. They danced in night clubs and by themselves down darkened streets with only their own off-key humming for accompaniment.

It was sickeningly sweet and ridiculously romantic and so perfect because of it.

*

Which is not to say they didn’t fight.

Sometimes it was playful banter was over whose turn it was to pay for dinner. Other times it was screaming matches over Stiles’ work or how Derek had handled a situation with the pack.

But they talked about it. Even though it was like Stiles was pulling Derek’s teeth to get him to say anything and sometimes Stiles would run away and Derek would have to convince him to come back.

*

Stiles burst into tears one night, alone in his father’s house, because the ache in his chest that had been there since the day the pack bonds broke was gone.

He felt whole.

*

He remembers his mother telling him how when the time came, he would just know.
Krzepa bore the attentions of the pups with a long suffering patience. Christy settled a tiny crown of white flowers on his head and clapped with glee. Abigail was explaining what they were doing to Patty, who was nearly two and didn’t understand anything yet, but was happy someone was talking to her. Charles was holding very still, not wanting to startle Krzepa from his perch on his shoulder.

Scott was working the grill behind the pack house, John, Jackson and Andris nearby giving him advice on how to turn the steaks. Lydia, Melissa, Allison, Erica and Timandra were huddled together, looking at paint swatches and fabric scraps, trying to find the perfect combination to decorate the room for Allison’s new baby. Timandra’s kids, still jet-lagged, were sleeping curled up under their mother’s tail.

Peter and Deaton had vanished hours ago with Dalaigh and no one was really all that interested in finding out what they were up to. Isaac and Boyd were on kid duty with Silas, all three keeping a half an eye on the pups while talking sports scores. Javan was napping in the grass, not yet aware a mischievous Abigail had thrown purple glitter all over his clothes.

Stiles was settled in Derek’s lap on a lawn chair, kissing him lazily. The courtship wasn’t due to end for four months, but Stiles was already planning ahead.

He’d been in contact with Danny and was trying to get a formal consulting agency set up. It was a fine challenge, figuring out how to word things so that anyone mundane who stumbled across his website didn’t suspect anything, but so those who were in-the-know could get the help they needed.

He’d already gotten positive responses from a dozen people who might like to work for him, do all the traveling and supernatural fixing he used to do. He’d been back to his house in Lawrence and with the consent of his upstairs and downstairs neighbors he turned it into a safe house. Anyone who worked for him that needed a place to stay would be welcome and able to rest there.

Stiles knew he didn’t want to give up the travel and hands-on aspects of his work, but he was pretty sure Derek would be willing to compromise on him taking cases that were nearby. What exactly the definition of ‘nearby’ was would, Stiles suspected, be another of their screaming matches. But they would figure it out. And the make-up sex would be fantastic.

Stiles pulled away from Derek to look around at all the people he loved most in the world gathered in one place.

“What are you thinking?” Derek asked, pressing little kisses along Stiles’ jaw. Stiles grinned but shook his head.

“I’m hungry,” he said instead. “Make Scott grill faster, Alpha.”

Derek grinned and pulled Stiles down for another kiss.
What Stiles had been thinking was that for the first time in nearly nine years, he was happy.

And he wasn’t broken anymore.

~fin~

Chapter End Notes

Vomit counter: Chapter - 2/Total - 8

Jaunkundze – Latvian equivalent of ‘miss’

So. The dead unborn baby. Well two of them. First, someone puts some bad magic on one of the pregnant pack members. The magic implants a new incorporeal entity in the womb. Then that thing, kind of like a parasite, eats/takes over the embryo. For all intents and purposes, the original occupant of the embryo is dead at that point, and the other entity, along with some dark magic has taken possession of the flesh. The parasite then starts feeding on the mother’s life force in order to grow rapidly. The growth is killing the mother by tearing her apart from the inside. Stiles saves the mother by cutting her open and killing the parasite, while it’s still in her womb. I’d like to stress once more that by the time Stiles kills it, the mother’s actual child is already dead and it was the fault of the parasite and the one who cast the magic.

The same thing happens to another woman, only it gets farther along. The parasite manages to break her ribs and rip part of the way out of her stomach. Stiles is too late and both it and the mother die.

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