Running with Wolves

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Running with Wolves

by DarkAkumaHunter

Summary

They underestimated the latest creature to crawl into Beacon Hills, and in the blink of an eye Stiles finds himself back where it all began: the night Scott was bitten. Everything spirals downhill from there. Season 4-ish? Spoilers ahead.

Hiatus until ~November
Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Stiles gets an unwelcome surprise, and sees some old faces

Chapter Notes

First part of the chapter rewritten 31/8/17 - no plot changes, don't fret

The first thing Stiles registered was pain.

His entire body ached, a fiery itch that felt like he was bursting at the seams, and the stabbing pain in his skull quite possibly represented the worst migraine he’d ever had in his entire life.

All in all, that was hardly an unexpected outcome of getting tossed about by a supernatural entity and maybe blacking out for a while. Bodily pain was kind of the norm these days.

Stiles really didn’t want to open his eyes, but his senses were struggling past the pain and demanding his consciousness get with the program, and the general lack of sound in his immediate vicinity when the last thing he remembered was being in the middle of a fight, well, it sent a little thrill of panic racing through him. Letting a bit of light further aggravate his migraine was a small price to pay in order to gather his bearings.

Carefully cracking open one eye, Stiles squinted up at what turned out to be a ceiling. (Hadn’t he been outside? How long did he pass out for?) He instinctively flinched away from the light (why was the light on? What time was it?) and, setting his jaw against the flaring – but slowly easing – pain in his limbs, forced himself to roll over onto his side, shielding his gaze from direct light and allowing his to peer about himself.

If his eyes weren’t playing tricks on him, then it seemed as though he was in his dad’s study. But that made zero sense. If he’d not only been unconscious long enough to be dragged home but someone had also taken the effort to bring him all the way to his house, why dump him on the floor in the study and not, say, either on the couch in the living room (right inside the front door, convenient) or on his bed in his room.

Unless his chauffer had just felt like being a particularly bizarre brand of unhelpful? Except he’d been injured – even if Stiles’ body hurt in ways he wouldn’t necessarily have expected from the beating he remembered taking, he still knew he’d been hurt somehow – and even if sometimes there were some confusing levels of friendly douche-baggery amongst the pack they never messed around when someone (especially the delicate human) was hurt. There had been more than enough death and near-death experiences for them to know exactly where to draw the line.

As Stiles pondered all of this, and the pain in his head filtered down to a more manageable level, he noticed that the room wasn’t as quiet as he’d originally assumed. Beside the sound of his slightly panicked heartbeat there was a low, vaguely electronic murmuring. Distinguishing actual words or
meaning from it felt too much of a chore amongst his confusion, but given where he was he could
guess a likely source: his dad’s police scanner.

And didn’t that just bring back memories? It had been a long time since he’d snuck about listening to
the scanner while his dad was at work, staving off boredom and trying to pick out anything
interesting from the police chatter. These days he hardly needed to help finding trouble; it always,
invariably, found them first.

That errant thought made Stiles frown. He didn’t listen to the scanner anymore, and his dad never left
it on when he was out – be that out of the room or out of the house entirely. Why was it on?

Although they were all little things, that was officially too many mysteries to justify Stiles just laying
passively on the carpet. The pain in his extremities had numbed to something of a tingle, more
uncomfortable than sore, like he was stretched a little too thin, trying to contain too much within
himself. (Was that some sort of magic backlash? He’d worry about it later.) His head, while still sore,
had dropped out of migraine territory and was lingering somewhere closer to ‘annoying headache’.
With crippling pain no longer an excuse, Stiles pushed himself slowly up off the floor.

From a higher vantage point, and with a somewhat clearer mind, Stiles examined the study with a
critical eye. It was a lot… tidier than Stiles was accustomed to; emptier even. No sprawling folders
of unexplainable incidents or files that needed tweaking to present human motivations and actions.
No notes tacked to the walls. The yarn his dad had stolen from Stiles’ own Mystery Board
Preparedness Kit™ was nowhere to be seen.

An uneasy weight settled heavy in Stiles’ stomach, a chill dancing up his spine. Unexplained
irregularities were always a valid reason to panic.

His gaze slid over his dad’s calendar – still there, notated in red – and then shot back, apprehension
turning to dread.

January 2011.

Stiles’ brain short-circuited. The first word he voiced since waking up was an emphatic “Nope.” He
started laughing, and no one was around to point out that it was maybe a little bit hysterical. His
hands raised to his head to tug jerkily at his hair, only to come up short because

where was all his hair?

The laughter choked to a sudden halt, caught in his throat as he pressed his palms despairingly
against the short unmistakable feel of his old buzz cut. His feet began moving before he’d even made
a conscious decision on what to do; he stumbled a little, that strange and uncomfortable sense of
wrongness in his body translating to motion as well, but managed to stay upright until he was
standing in front of the bathroom mirror.

There was no denying that the face staring back at him was technically his own, but it was also
definitely not the face he’d seen in the mirror that morning. The skin was too smooth, lacking the
myriad tiny scars that Stiles knew littered his own body, most barely visible unless you knew where
to look but that told a story of all the fights he’d thrown his stupid fragile human body into. The
permanent dark circles beneath his eyes that had developed sometime around the Nogitsune and
never gone away weren’t there.

That person in the mirror with the short hair and the healthy complexion? Stiles could barely
remember what it was like to be that person. And now he was, what, having a nightmare? Tripping
out like nobody’s business? (He staunchly ignored the part of his mind that almost tauntingly started
humming the Doctor Who theme tune.)
“Oh god,” he whispered, pressing a trembling hand to the cool glass. “Somebody please tell me this is some fucked up dream.” He stared almost pleadingly at his hand, familiar but unfamiliar, but no amount of frenzied counting could convince him that he truly was dreaming. When you mess with the supernatural why would anything ever get the simplest answer?

Occam’s razor, one of Stiles’ favourite methods of rationalising supernatural occurrences, whispered unwanted and unhelpful conclusions. The room, the calendar, the face in the mirror: there were only so many things they could mean when thrown together like that. But Stiles could not deal with that right now. He needed to get away from his unsettling reflection and find something more tangible, more, well, more.

Stiles kept his gaze pointedly turned away from any even mildly reflective surfaces as he made his way back to the study. He needed to centre himself, to come to grips with whatever the hell was going on, and the best way, sometimes the only way, to do that was with information. Of course, information didn’t necessitate truth; it could be manipulated or simply inaccurate, but any information was better than standing in an unfamiliar-familiar house in an unfamiliar-familiar body in a shirt he was 99% sure he didn’t own anymore while he worked himself into a panic attack.

He took three slow, deep breaths, brushing the panic aside, squashing it beneath desperate determination. When he thought he could safely function without significant risk of breaking out in hysterical laughter or tears, he sat himself down by the scanner and started paying proper attention.

It didn’t take long for something to stand out.

Dispatch was directing some officers to check out reports of a dead body being found in the woods.

Death wasn’t exactly a rarity in Beacon Hills, especially not once all the supernatural shit really got stuck in, but it was also a reasonably small place, and bodies being dumped in the woods were hardly commonplace. Stiles didn’t have to know the exact date to know what they were talking about.

This was the night everything had changed.

Truth or fiction?

The creature they’d been trying to chase out of town (because they’d been under no illusions about their ability to kill it) had been undeniably powerful, but what powers it possessed were still a mystery to all of them. Had it trapped Stiles in his own mind? Was this going to be some nightmarish Groundhog Day scenario? Would it be better if this was all in his head, or would it be worse?

Stiles didn’t have any answers. All he knew was that he couldn’t just sit there and pretend none of it was happening. He had to go and see it for himself.

While he scoured the house looking for his keys, the voice of timeline stability reared its ugly head and softly reminded him that, if he wanted to make sure, regardless of the truth of the situation, that nothing went sideways, he should make a detour and pick up Scott. The very thought of seeing Scott just then – the fragile human Scott of pre-2011, and not Scott the True Alpha – sent an anxious shiver through him. Seeing someone else would make this realer, somehow, and that was technically what he was after, but not… Not someone he was so emotionally connected to. Even though the Sheriff was going to be at the scene, Stiles didn’t have to go down and see him; he just needed to get close.

If he went to Scott’s place now, raw and wild and panicky and so obviously out of place, he’d probably break down, and then Scott wouldn’t let him leave, and he’d never get to the woods. He
needed to go to the woods. For the sake of his sanity. To understand. For clarity.

If he didn’t wake up or break free before the sun rose, he’d be seeing Scott tomorrow anyway. The rapid beating of his heart as he slipped out of the house and out to his jeep confirmed that tomorrow was still too soon, but he could only work with what he had.

Scott was staying home.

Stiles was doing this alone.

The drive did nothing to calm his nerves, fingers tapping anxiously against the steering wheel the whole way. Finding a discreet place to park was second nature by now with how often he’d had to sneak out while avoiding police patrols for one thing or another. He might not be able to outsmart a werewolf, but he’d worked damn hard to improve his ability to avoid detection by other regular humans.

Once upon a time Stiles might’ve enjoyed the atmosphere of a forest at night, but he’d spent enough time running for his life that now it only seemed to impress that something else had gone wrong. It was quiet, and the darkness felt almost heavy, but it was easy enough to pick his way reasonably quietly through the trees towards where the headlights of a car illuminated that fateful patch of land.

He only took a quick glance – crosschecking the scene with his vague recollections of that evening all those many long months ago – before sinking into the dirt and leaves at the base of a tree, hidden from prying eyes. If he stayed quiet he could slink away again without anyone any the wiser to his presence, but he didn’t exactly trust himself to accomplish that. Every exhale was a little shakier than he’d like, each breath rattling in his lungs and catching in his throat on the way out.

It had only been a momentarily glimpse but… his dad was down there. Physically younger, sure, but also not yet weighed down with stress from untold numbers of supernatural incidents and deaths he could never explain to the justice system; free from the way that knowledge and responsibility had aged him.

Stiles dug blunt nails into his scalp, forcing himself to focus on smoothing his breathing and not on the emotional whiplash of seeing another unfamiliar-familiar face. Whatever was happening, if the goal was to shake him up, it had well and truly been accomplished.

Time passed by without Stiles being acutely aware of it. All he knew was that there were still several officers milling about when he finally picked himself up off the ground. He brushed the loose plant matter from his jeans, ignored the dirt clinging to his ankles, and pushed away from the tree, meandering slowly but surely back in the direction of his jeep.

Every now and again Stiles paused, straining his ears to listen to his surroundings. He was on high alert, because he was always on high alert when out and about in the dark these days, but he was also distraught – he wasn’t processing the sensory data like he usually did, and most of his thoughts were stuck on that image of his dad and not on pondering the significance of the date.

He was caught entirely off guard when a loud howl echoed through the woods from somewhere to his left. He swore harshly under his breath, clarity breaking through his confused despair.

“Run,” Stiles muttered to himself, urging his body to move. He wasn’t far from his jeep; if he could put on a good sprint, run as hard as his rabbiting hard would let him, then he might make it before the wolf bore down on him. There was no way Peter could open a car door while he was getting his crazy wolf rage on. But Stiles’ body was frozen in terror, because he knew exactly the sorts of things Peter Hale was capable of, and it sounded way safer to maybe just try and play dead and hope he’d
leave well enough alone.

His racing heartbeat would be a burning beacon; he was a sitting duck, trapped by his own mind. Tense with anticipatory dread, Stiles clenched his eyes shut. All he could do was hope to be left alone, but Peter had never been particularly good at granting his wishes.

There was a rustle of paws on the forest floor, a growling breath, and then pain. His knees giving out on him, Stiles collapsed, pressing his hands hopelessly to the warm blood leaking from his side as his vision greyed around the edges, partly from pain and partly from panic.

Here or there, then or now, there was just no winning today.

oOoOo

Stiles almost didn’t go to school that morning.

He’d spent all night in the woods, regardless of the fact that crazy psycho-wolf Peter Hale might still have been running about, panicked out of his mind because he’d fucked up big time. Because maybe, just maybe, this was all real and happening, and Stiles had just changed everything. He hadn’t brought Scott with him, ergo, Scott hadn’t been bitten. Stiles had.

Stiles, the perpetual human, with no good traits apart from his obsessive researching and his ability to sass Derek Hale and not get his throat ripped out. Stiles, who had tossed about the thought of asking for the bite once or twice before really thinking about it, and what it had done to his friends, and decided that all that enhanced shit wasn’t worth the mental trauma.

But he’d dragged himself back home in the early hours of the morning, driving his jeep as quietly as possible (which was hard) and eventually parking it down the street. His dad would already know he’d snuck out, but he didn’t need to hear what time he made it home.

Stiles had a shower, washing away all the grime from a night spent in the woods and all the blood. He wrapped his torso, not bothering to be too thorough about it, since either it would be healed by the end of the day, or he’d be dead. (Oh god, was he going to die? Peter had seemed to think he’d take quite nicely to the bite, when he’d offered it to him, but was pre-resurrection Peter the best person to trust on their judgment calls?)

His head spun at the thought. Stiles had been in plenty of life or death situations, but never had he been so completely useless. There was literally nothing that could be done. His body would either accept it or reject it. He would live or die painfully. 50/50. The flip of a coin. All he could do was wait, and that was terrifying. Not quite as terrifying as being trapped in his own mind, nothing would be able to top that; it was a different sort of terror. A helplessness.

Stiles took more Adderall than he was supposed to before heading off to school. It didn’t help. He wasn’t sure it was ever going to help again. Stiles also knew he was going to have to confront his dad at some point, and he was going to get a serious tongue-lashing. He’d been lying to his dad’s face for so long now… He wasn’t sure what he was going to do.

He just had to… act normal. But what was normal? Stiles couldn’t remember.

oOoOo

Stiles stared at his locker and groaned low in his throat. He’d managed to slip inside without drawing too much attention, and he’d avoided talking to anyone thus far, but he couldn’t remember his damned combination.
Everything was just a bit too loud; sounds too sharp, colours a tad too vibrant. It made it hard to concentrate. And two days ago he’d had far more pressing things to worry about than last year’s locker combination.

Stiles identified Scott’s approach ten seconds before his best friend called out a greeting and clapped him on the back. It was strange, because he’d never been able to tell Scott’s footsteps from anyone else’s before; the only difference he’d ever been able to hear was between sneakers and heels. How did he know that particular gait belonged to Scott when it was the first time he’d heard it?

It suddenly hit him just how hard the whole thing must have been for Scott, who had absolutely no idea what was going on at the time. If his friend hadn’t been so damned obstinate about the whole thing he might have been proud just then.

“What’s up man? You’re just staring at your locker, and it’s starting to freak me out.”

Stiles held back a flinch, because Scott was too close, and his voice was too loud. He sighed, made an aborted motion to run his hand through his hair, and shook his head.

“Forgot my combination,” he admitted, trying hard to limit the amount of melancholy in his voice to ‘first day back’ levels, and keep it away from ‘the world is ending’. Because Stiles had honed his melodrama over the years, but even so, his current ‘end of the world’ melancholy was serious stuff, because everyone he knew nearly died on an almost weekly basis.

Scott gave him a slightly worried look, and Stiles belatedly realised that his current ‘first day back’ melancholy was probably tantamount to his old ‘end of the world’ moping. He tried for a smile, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

Scott reached across him and opened Stiles’ locker for him.

“You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah.” Stiles nodded emphatically, even though he didn’t believe that at all. “I just didn’t get much sleep last night. You know.”

Scott frowned his adorable confused frown, and Stiles had to bite his lip to stop from just spilling everything right there and then. Scott would never believe him. He hadn’t even believed Stiles when Scott was the one affected, even if Stiles had been joking in the beginning. Scott was too idealistically realistic (most of the time) to believe anything like this.

And it struck Stiles now, in retrospect, that talking about werewolf stuff all the time in crowded school corridors probably hadn’t been the smartest move. How many people had overheard them?

“I’m serious,” Stiles tacked on, forcing some energy into it. “I’ll be fine in a few hours.” It was a lie. Stiles was vehemently certain that he’d never be okay again. But maybe, in a few hours, he’d have managed to get himself together enough to pretend. He’d looked alpha Scott in the eye and lied to him before. How hard could it be to lie to a human?

Oh god. Nothing’s going to be the same ever again.

oOoOo

Stiles had thought he was prepared for pretty much anything, but then Allison Argent walked into his first period class.

(Turns out he was prepared for absolutely nothing.)
His heart ached at the sight of her. Smiling and free from the knowledge of werewolves and hunting. Unburdened by the strains of dating a werewolf, of family loyalty, of life. Living and breathing and sitting in the row behind him.

Stiles, the _Nogitsune_, had killed her. Killed her right in front of Scott and Isaac, in front of everyone who loved her. There were days when he woke up and wondered why her father hadn’t just killed him. Those mornings usually coincided with nights filled with nightmares wherein the Nogitsune was a figment of his imagination, created to try and separate him from the horrid things he was doing.

After the Nogitsune had been inside him, Stiles realised that he was capable of doing horrible things. And just because it was the Nogitsune which killed Allison, it didn’t mean Stiles couldn’t someday wind up doing the same thing.

So seeing Allison made him want to tear his heart out and leave it on the floor, because he didn’t deserve to feel.

But it was nothing compared to his first glimpse of Erica Reyes.

Stiles knew that back then, the person he had been wouldn’t have given Erica a second glance in the hallways. No one did. She didn’t have any friends, not really. And Stiles knew what that was like, to an extent, because he could pretend to be pals with the guys on the lacrosse team, like Danny (but definitely not guys like Greenburg or Jackson), but Scott was his only real, good friend.

Stiles remembered Erica as a werewolf. Fierce, sensual, abrasive. Damaged. But what he remembered most was Erica, dead. It was something he tried to forget, but knew he would never be able to. Stiles had mourned her for a long time – he still was, in all honesty – because she was his Catwoman, and he hadn’t spent nearly as much time with her as he ought to have, and her death had filled him with regrets about things done and not done that he was never going to have a chance to rectify.

Except, there she was. Epileptic, pre-werewolf Erica. A childhood friend he’d ignored all through high school.

Seeing Erica was like a punch to the gut. A werewolf punch. Probably hard enough to rupture organs. It staggered him.

It threw him so badly that Stiles ditched Scott and his hopeless gossip about Allison (oh the things he could have told him, not that he and Allison had ever really talked much on a personal level), and took his lunch over to the corner of the cafeteria where Erica was sitting all alone. Her skin was paler than he remembered.

“Hey, Erica.” Stiles hoped like hell she didn’t catch the waver in his voice. He was trying to suppress it, but it was difficult, with so many emotions clouding his mind as he looked at her. “Do you mind if I sit?”

“Stiles…” Erica looked up at him with wide, suspicious eyes. Stiles flinched. He’d done that to her. They’d been really tight when they were younger, and now look at them.

“It’s okay if you don’t want me to, I can go,” he began rambling, a little frantic. He didn’t know what she was thinking and he must seem really off today and all the freaking heartbeat sounds weren’t helping at all, and how did Scott even deal with all of this? “I just…” Stiles shrugged helplessly. “I wanted to see how my Catwoman was holding up. And maybe apologise.”
Erica considered him for a long moment, brown eyes scrutinising every inch of his face. Stiles tried not to think about how he hadn’t been able to save her, because he didn’t think looking at her as though she were a ghost was going to score him any points.

Eventually she nodded, and Stiles sat down, suddenly aware of the attention they’d drawn from those people seated near them.

“You haven’t called me Catwoman since we were twelve,” Erica said, in a manner that reminded Stiles a little of the werewolf Erica, when she wasn’t afraid to say whatever was on her mind. Stiles supposed she’d always been like that, except no one had been around to notice. He’d missed it. More than he realised.

“Yeah.” Stiles rubbed his hand over his head, lamenting that fact. “I haven’t been much of a friend since then.”

Erica was still watching him carefully, so he tried to be as open as possible.

“What brought this on then?” Erica asked, gesturing between them, hesitant, as though she wasn’t entirely sure she wanted to hear the answer.

“I guess you could call it a New Year’s resolution, or turning over a new leaf?” Stiles couldn’t tell her why he was really doing this. They sounded like good reasons, didn’t they? “I came to the conclusion, recently, that I’ve been kind of a dick to you these past few years. And that that’s really not on. Because you, Erica, you’re pretty amazing, and I’m not sure if you realise that. And everyone who teases you or ignores you, they’re all missing out. Because you rock. And I’ve kind of missed my Catwoman.”

Stiles tapped his fingers along the edge of the table, counting them over and over again as both reassurance and a way to fill the new silence. When he looked back up, Erica wasn’t looking at him. She was staring across the cafeteria. He followed her gaze, and zeroed in on Scott. Poor, confused Scott.

Erica turned back to him, a different look in her eyes now. “I believe you,” she said. Belatedly, Stiles realised she had probably thought it was some sort of prank.

“Thank you.” Stiles offered up a smile, one that he hoped looked more sincere than the one he’d given Scott that morning. “Listen, I have lacrosse after school and stuff, so I’m busy, but we should hang out some time. Watch Batman. I don’t know. You choose.”

Erica smiled softly, and it lit up her face. A burning hatred welled up in Stiles’ gut, furious at everyone who teased her and beat her back into her shell. He knew that technically he and Scott also fell under that umbrella, for ignoring her, but that stopped now.

Step one of a plan Stiles was making up as he went was now complete. They may not be his pack yet, but Stiles wasn’t going to let them be alone anymore. Not this time.

OoOoOo

Stiles didn’t go to lacrosse practice after school. He knew Scott had been training really hard over the break, and his friend was convinced he was somehow going to make it to first line this season, but he didn’t have the time for it right now. He remembered Scott’s first practice after being bitten. Stiles didn’t need a repeat.

Coach would yell at him for it later, despite having pretty much never made it off the bench before, but he’d deal with that when the time came. Right now, he needed to talk to Derek.
Despite everything that had happened throughout the day, it was hard for Stiles to remember that this Derek he was heading out to find wasn’t his Derek. This Derek was mourning the loss of his sister, and was without a pack. His Derek was part of a pack. A dysfunctional, unconventional pack, for sure, but a pack nonetheless.

Stiles parked his jeep in the same place as the previous night, and stepped out into the preserve. His hand came up to rest against his side as he stood under the trees. The bite mark didn’t hurt anymore. If he looked, he’d probably find it gone, or at least nearly healed.

It was strange, being on the receiving end. How many times had Stiles seen his friends injured, only to miraculously heal? How many times had he envied that, when he got thrown around trying to help? If the Nogitsune hadn’t completely blown the lid on the supernatural, Stiles wouldn’t have put it past his dad to assume he’d somehow joined a gang, with the way he kept collecting injuries.

Stiles breathed in deeply through his nose, taking in the enhanced scents of the woods. It was a confusing mix, and he couldn’t identify most of it, but mostly it just smelled like nature. A homely, comforting scent.

“How do I find me a Sourwolf?” Stiles breathed out. “Now then,”
Chapter 2

For all his familiarity with the preserve, finding Derek was no easy task. All the scents and sounds screwed with his sense of direction for a while; every time Stiles stepped on a twig or crunched too many leaves he’d spin around, looking for whoever was out there with him. He had to really concentrate on ignoring the sounds he made as he walked.

It didn’t help that Stiles didn’t really know where Derek was likely to lurk. He could have just gone straight up to the ruins of the Hale House, but Stiles imagined that ending with a claw in his stomach, so it was best to at least pretend that he didn’t know how to get there from just about any point in the preserve.

So he was really stuck with wandering randomly through the woods until Derek got fed up of the noisy wolf meandering about the place and came to kick him out. Stiles just hoped that Derek’s method of chasing people away from the preserve still meant standing menacingly with his arms crossed and reminding him that he was trespassing.

In his pocket, his phone buzzed. Stiles ignored it. Twenty to one it was Scott asking him where he’d run off to, why he wasn’t at practice. Right now he couldn’t think of anything to tell him. Definitely not the truth. And not what he could pretend was the truth, because Scott would think it weird that Stiles hadn’t told him about it before school, or demanded Scott come with him.

Stiles thumbed his phone off and made a right around a large tree.

Standing on the slope above him, clad in dark colours and ultimately looking highly unimpressed, was Derek Hale.

Stiles put his hands on his knees, breathing a sigh of relief. He might play lacrosse, but he was usually on the bench; he wasn’t the fittest kid around. Being half-way to werewolf wasn’t helping too much right now. Wandering the woods was monotonous, and that tired him out more than any actual walking. It made him a little anxious.

“This is private property,” Derek told him, scowling. His tone was more hostile than Stiles had heard it in a long time, but he had expected this sort of welcome. He probably smelled like a wolf by now, and that would no doubt make Derek suspicious.

“I know,” Stiles admitted, standing straight. Was werewolf body language a thing? Scott had never told him. Rules would be nice right about now. He didn’t always follow them, but Stiles liked rules.

“But I need to talk to you.”

Derek stared down at Stiles, and Stiles stared back, trying to ignore the sting brought about by the lack of recognition. Of course Derek didn’t recognise him, they’d never met before, he knew that. But as with everything before that, knowing was one thing, and seeing it was another.

“I wasn’t aware of a new pack arriving in Beacon Hills. But I’ve been gone a long time. The Hale Pack has no dominance here any longer. You don’t need my permission for anything.”

Stiles grimaced, rubbing the back of his neck.

*Come on Derek, can’t you smell the difference between wolf and kid-who-got-bitten-yesterday? Or*
do you just not care? You were never this chatty to Scott in the beginning, never accused him of being from another pack. What’s your deal?

“That’s not it at all Sourwolf.” Stiles cringed as the nickname slipped out. He was so used to thinking it, to Derek scowling with that ‘I’m secretly amused’ scowl whenever he said it within hearing. By now it was a reflex. What better way to lighten the mood after a hard week than with some ribbing in the Hale loft?

Derek shifted, moving into a stance that was a little more battle-ready. Stiles could almost smell the confusion.

Actually, he probably could. Was that what confusion smelled like? It was weird that emotions had scents. He’d rather they didn’t. There were things he didn’t need to know. Like, a lot of things. He had enough to deal with already, he didn’t need to know when everyone else was depressed as well.

Stiles held his hands out in submission, shaking his head.

“No no no, don’t do that, just hear me out. Listen. You’re the only wolf in Beacon Hills, yeah?”

They both knew that wasn’t true, but Stiles hardly thought Derek would acknowledge his uncle, considering he was – allegedly – in a coma.

Derek inclined his head. Stiles wasn’t sure if that was a nod or just an indication that he was listening. Either way he carried on.

“Well, this might sound a little crazy then, but I was out here last night. And I was bitten.” Stiles’ fingers drifted up to his side again. “And see, the thing is, I don’t reckon you did it. Which begs the question of who did.”

Stiles hadn’t really thought this whole thing through. He couldn’t just outright accuse Peter Hale, because that would raise far too many questions about things he couldn’t, or rather, probably shouldn’t, answer. Like how he knew about Peter, to start the ball rolling, and then how he knew the Hales were werewolves, and why he was so adamant that a man in a coma had been the one to bite him. It was all a bit of a mess.

“How do I know you’re not lying?”

Oh, typical Derek, ignoring evidence that was right in front of him.

Stiles sighed, and thumped his fist against his chest, over his heart.

“Does it sound like I’m lying?”

Okay, so maybe now wasn’t the best time to be encouraging the heartbeat lie-detector. Today had been super stressful already, and Stiles didn’t think his heart had settled yet after all his shocks at school. Gods, even seeing Mr Harris had given him a scare! From the shock of everything he’d been focussing only on those of his deceased friends he’d have to see once more; he’d entirely forgotten that other people he knew had suffered too.

Derek took a few measured steps down the slope, coming closer to Stiles.

“Your heartbeat is all over the place,” he told Stiles bluntly. “But I do believe you. You twitch every time you hear something around us, like you need to see what it was. You smell like a wolf, but you don’t act like one. But that’s not my problem. You’re on your own.”
Stiles’ hands fell to his sides. That was not what he was expecting. Derek had been all over Scott, needling him, worrying about him exposing their mutual secret. What made Stiles different? Why was nothing ever the same? Stiles didn’t have the time for this added stress, the added unknown, the question of what made him so damn different from his best friend.

“Oh,” Stiles laughed sarcastically. “Of course. The Sheriff’s son gets turned by some wandering lunatic, and Beacon Hills’ resident wolf doesn’t care. Fucking typical.”

Derek visibly startled.

“You’re the Sheriff’s son?”

“Yes! Wait, what? That’s what you focus on?! Honestly, I don’t get the way your mind works.”

“That means you know why I’m back in town.”

Stiles was about to protest that, because it implied that he was a sneak and an eavesdropper (which was true, but not the point), but in all fairness he did know what was happening, and it would be easier to just admit it.

“Yes.” Stiles brought his hands together, tapping his fingers nervously. “That body they found in the woods yesterday. That’s… Laura Hale, isn’t it? She’s your sister. Obviously you’d come back for something like that.”

Derek’s countenance changed all of a sudden, in a manner Stiles didn’t quite understand. It wasn’t as though he suddenly seemed friendly and approachable, and Derek certainly hadn’t stopped scowling at him. The suspicion was still there, and probably would be for a long time. There was almost a desperation about him.

Stiles found himself assaulted by unfamiliar scents as he really focussed on Derek. His nose twitched, and he decided to breathe through his mouth, uncomfortable. They were emotive scents, he was sure, and he didn’t want to know what they meant. That was personal, pervasive, and he wasn’t interested in invading Derek’s privacy, not then and not now.

Derek’s fingers dug into his arms, and if it wasn’t for that jacket he used to wear all the time Stiles was sure he might have been drawing blood.

“I’m trying to find out what happened to her,” Derek admitted slowly, each word delivered with a weighted hesitance, as though he wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to tell Stiles this. “But it’s not easy. The Sheriff’s already suspicious of me, which I can’t blame him for, but it complicates things. You… If you hear anything, about the investigation…”

It took mere seconds for Stiles to make up his mind. He still felt guilty for getting Derek arrested, even if this Derek didn’t know about it. And maybe the arrangement could be useful, while he worked up a semi-decent plan for breaking the news to Derek that his uncle wasn’t as spaced out as he appeared to be.

“I’ll tell you if I hear anything. Promise.”

Derek nodded, jaw clenched, and the atmosphere, which now lacked most of the previous tense hostility, adopted a sense of awkwardness.

Stiles shifted uneasily.

He didn’t want to ask, but he really didn’t want to spend his first full moon on his own. It had been
bad enough dealing with Scott, who hadn’t been willing to listen to him and had fought him every step of the way, in the beginning. He wasn’t at all certain that, with him chained up, Stiles would be able to attain that same level of preparedness (not that he’d been that prepared in the first place).

Derek relaxed his fingers, rubbing his chin in thought. “You said you were attacked yesterday?”

Stiles paused, dragged out of his fretful planning.

“Yes.”

Derek flashed his beta-blue eyes at him, and Stiles felt his burn in response.

“You have surprisingly good self-control for a newbie, particularly this close to the full moon.” Derek’s nostrils flared. Stiles wondered if he still smelled like the pack. If he smelled like Derek. Like Derek’s pack. Was that why he wasn’t concerned about him? Because Stiles smelled like wolf? “It’s true that I haven’t sensed a new pack in town, but are you certain you’re alone?”

“100%.”

“Then you don’t have anyone to help you through your first moon.”

Stiles shook his head, not willing to speak in case he shattered whatever strangely charitable mood Derek appeared to be in.

“Normally your alpha would do that, but…” The reasoning went unspoken. A rogue alpha wolf was roaming Beacon Hills, and he seemed to have no sense of self, or responsibility. “I’m not going to claim to be a good teacher by any stretch of the imagination. But if you want guidance, in return for keeping an ear out for police reports, I’d be… willing.”

“Please,” Stiles gushed, words tumbling over each other. “Whatever help you can give me, please, I’ll take anything I can get.”

To Stiles, who had become rather adept at reading Hale facial expressions, Derek seemed taken aback by his eagerness. Derek wasn’t much of a people person, Stiles knew that, and maybe it was strange for someone to want to spend time with him.

He’d deal with Derek’s screwy emotional state later. Right now, he had protection for Friday, at least over this full moon. For now, that was all he could ask.

oOoOo

Tuesday through Thursday was spent with Stiles trying his best to acclimatise.

He sat with Erica at lunch, and dragged Scott along with him. He took moments to covertly stare at those people who had died, to really force it into his mind that they were all back.

Scott spent most of Tuesday trying to get answers from Stiles about his everything, from his mood to his skipping lacrosse practice. Stiles evaded them all, with convenient lies and non-answers. If their roles had been reversed, Stiles never would have caved so easily, because he knew how to tell when Scott was lying. But Scott had never been as good at reading him, and now he was distracted by Allison all over again.

It turned out that Scott had managed to up his lacrosse game. As much as a not-so-athletic asthmatic kid could, anyway. Coach had said he might actually get to play. It wasn’t quite first line like Scott had wanted, but Coach didn’t exactly hand out maybes like candy.
Stiles was contemplating quitting lacrosse altogether.

Stiles wasn’t annoyed, exactly, that Scott was still head-over-heels for Allison Argent. Her family being Hunters was a total non-issue now, since Scott was still one hundred per cent human. She was a good person, and Scott deserved a bit of love. It also made Scott distracted, and that much easier to fool. Things he should have been glad for. But it also angered a little part of him. (A part that had grown much larger and louder since the Nogitsune tried to bring about his inner darkness.) Because Scott was his best friend and he was supposed to notice when things were wrong.

The same things were happening all over again except this time Scott was even more oblivious, because he wasn’t the person in trouble.

Lying to Scott always felt like kicking a puppy. Stiles hated doing it. He wanted to tell Scott everything, but had to sort out a game plan. Maybe, once he was in control, and could change at will, then he’d tell Scott. Because with proof, Scott would have to believe him. Except he was glad Scott didn’t know. Because if he never learned about werewolves, he’d never have to hide that knowledge from the Argents, and he’d never get caught between two sides like that again.

Trying to be selfless was frustrating.

Stiles skipped school on Friday.

He didn’t need to, the full moon wasn’t until that evening. Scott was going to freak out. The school was going to call his dad, and he was going to be in serious trouble. But there were things he needed to do.

Stiles packed some things in his bag and headed out to the preserve again. Because no one would think to look for him there. Up until now he’d never taken all that much of an interest in the woods, save for the occasional childhood outing. If he was going to skip school, it was one of the last places they’d ever look for him.

Sitting in a small clearing, nestled up against a smoother tree, Stiles opened up a fresh notebook and laid it across his lap. It hadn’t even been a week yet, but his mind was slipping.

Stiles had an impressive grasp of facts in the present, but remembering specifics of events he was involved in, that was a completely different story. Personal experiences became a haze of passing time, even the nightmare inducing stuff.

Regardless of whether or not he was ever going to use the information, he needed to get it all down on paper, to force the memories back into clarity in his mind. He needed to remember, in order to see the differences. In order to protect the people he cared about, and to protect Beacon Hills.

So many things were out of his control, but Stiles was going to try, dammit. He would wear himself to the bone, work himself into the ground, to ensure that things worked out differently this time around.

Derek found him late in the afternoon, in that same spot, smelling like ink and with black streaked across his fingers and hands. He didn’t ask what Stiles was writing, and Stiles didn’t offer an explanation. They weren’t friends. It didn’t matter.

He tucked the notebook away in his bag, and followed Derek deeper into the woods, towards the ruins of the Hale House. It was time for Full Moon Survival 101.
Surprisingly enough, when Stiles made it back home on Saturday morning, it wasn’t to his dad in full, angry lecture mode. The Sheriff was waiting for him in the kitchen, cradling a mug of coffee that looked like it had gone cold hours ago, but instead of angry, Stiles thought there was a rather defeated slump to his dad’s shoulders.

As worn out as he was after Derek’s version of full moon safety, all he really wanted to do was crawl into bed and sleep for maybe a week, and he could have snuck up to his room without his dad noticing, but he’d been avoiding his dad as much as possible for a week now. It was time something changed.

Slowly, making sure his steps echoed as he moved, Stiles walked into the kitchen. His dad knew he was there, but didn’t make a move to acknowledge him as Stiles pulled out a chair at the table, and sat down. He was expecting to have to start the conversation, too, but then his dad spoke up.

“Did I do something wrong?”

Stiles was stunned into silence, all weariness gone in an instant. That was not what he was expecting.

“Stiles, you’re a good kid. And I know things have been tough since your mom died, but we’ve worked through it. If this is some sort of teenage rebellion, the sneaking out and the skipping school, please, just tell me what’s going through your head, kiddo. We can deal with it together.”

Stiles tapped his fingers along the underside of the table, 1-2-3-4, 1-2-3-4, 1-2-3-4.

“Dad, no. No. You haven’t done anything wrong.”

Once upon a time Stiles had been upset about his dad working all the time, but he was the Sheriff, what had Stiles expected to happen? He was doing a good job, and Stiles hadn’t been annoyed by that in years. Months. Well, he didn’t care anymore, and that was all that mattered.

“Then talk to me Stiles. Tell me what’s happening.”

Stiles had to look away from his dad’s piercing, defeated gaze. The notebook in his bag burned him with guilt. He could never tell anyone about what was in it. Never.

But there was something he could tell his dad. He’d never wanted to, last time around, even though he could have helped them with investigations and the like, because he both hadn’t wanted to get in trouble, and he hadn’t wanted his dad to get mixed up in it when it might put him in more danger. But he was the Sheriff. He was always in danger when things went wrong in Beacon Hills, regardless of whether or not he was aware of it.

Stiles took a deep breath and faced his dad’s piercing, defeated gaze. The notebook in his bag burned him with guilt. He could never tell anyone about what was in it. Never.

But there was something he could tell his dad. He’d never wanted to, last time around, even though he could have helped them with investigations and the like, because he both hadn’t wanted to get in trouble, and he hadn’t wanted his dad to get mixed up in it when it might put him in more danger. But he was the Sheriff. He was always in danger when things went wrong in Beacon Hills, regardless of whether or not he was aware of it.

Stiles took a deep breath and faced his dad’s gaze head-on. He concentrated as hard as he could until he felt that burn in his eyes again (beta gold, he’d checked, just to make sure). His dad’s mouth fell open in shock, and he leaned forward across the table to get a better look at the unnatural glow.

“Stiles,” his dad said slowly, leaning back in his chair and folding his arms across his chest, “tell me what’s going on. And it had better be a good story.”

Looking pointedly now at his dad’s shoulder, Stiles nodded. He allowed the beta gold to recede from his eyes, because keeping it there was an extra effort he couldn’t really afford to be expending just then.

He’d heard much talk about anchors from the wolves in his life. Stiles had no idea what his was, or
could be, but if last night was anything to go by, Derek assumed he already had some sort of grasp on whatever it was. Stiles disagreed. But he had been pleasantly surprised by how well behaved he’d been. Even if he had needed to be physically restrained. And even though he might have scratched Derek a few times with lethal claws he didn’t know what to do with. That was beside the point. Derek was a big wolf, he could take care of himself. But while Stiles had fairly decent self-control, especially when it wasn’t the full moon, he had almost zero grasp on how to purposefully use any of his wolfish powers. Making his eyes glow on demand was about as far as he’d gotten.

It was going to make proving his claims rather difficult. But he had to start somewhere.

“Well then. Um. As the glowy eyes might suggest, some strange stuff had been happening lately,” Stiles waved his hands lamely in the air in front of him, trying to express the mysterious vibes of the explanation he was about to give. His dad ignored it. “You know that dead body you found on Sunday? Laura Hale? You think it was an animal attack, but that’s only half true.”

His dad frowned, a rapid succession of angry-resigned-exhausted flashing across his face.

“I would ask how you know about that, but of course you’ve been looking into my case files again. What does that have to do with you skipping school? Hold on, don’t tell me you’ve been looking for the other half of the body.”

“No no no, definitely not out searching for dead bodies.” Stiles didn’t mention that he technically knew where it was buried. Because he wasn’t supposed to know. Derek hadn’t shared, and he hadn’t gone looking for it this time around. “But it has everything to do with this.” He waved a hand, gesturing up and down his own body.

His dad sighed, and motioned for him to continue.

“Okay then. Now. This is going to sound absolutely crazy, but I swear to you, I’m telling the truth.” Stiles’ voice dropped into the serious tones he rarely ever used, because he was rarely ever trying to get across a point as dire as this. His dad noticed, and whatever had been floating through his mind before seemed to vanish. This was no boundaries, no judgment, fact talk.

“There’s really no good way to ease into this, so… Laura Hale was killed by a werewolf.”

The Sheriff’s eye twitched, but he didn’t say anything.

“And that same werewolf is still prowling about somewhere at night. And, uh, you know how I got home real late on Sunday? I kinda sorta maybe might have run into that werewolf when I was out at the preserve and that’s why my eyes glow.”

A long silence stretched out between them. Stiles drew triskelions on the tabletop.

“You’re trying to tell me you’re, what, a werewolf now?” His dad couldn’t keep the incredulity from his voice. It did sound pretty crazy. But Stiles had warned him.

“Believe me, if I’d been home last night, you would have noticed.”

“Last night? Kid, if this is a joke, it’s not a funny one.”

Stiles steeled himself.

“I swear on mom’s grave that I’m telling the truth.”

His dad sucked in a great gulp of air, startled. They’d never used that as a measuring factor before,
but both knew that neither would ever dare to lie if they invoked Claudia Stilinski’s name.

“I can prove it to you, but not right now. I don’t have control. I can’t show you. I just thought you should know, that what you’re looking for, it isn’t an animal. It’s a man. An alpha. Who fully understood what they were doing when they went after Laura Hale. And who no doubt won’t hesitate to kill again. And I want you to be careful, dad, because I can’t lose you.”

“Ohay.”

His dad climbed to his feet and rounded the table, kneeling next to Stiles’ chair.

“Okay,” he said again, wrapping his arms around Stiles’ shoulders. Stiles hadn’t realised he’d been shaking until then. “This is all crazy talk, but I believe you.”

His eyes burned again, but this time with tears. Stiles didn’t want to cry, not in front of his dad, but he couldn’t stop the tears from falling. He was scared and alone with the knowledge in his head and he didn’t know what to do about anything anymore. But his dad believed him, at least a little. It was as though the iron band around his heart had loosened, dispelling a fraction of the crippling fears that haunted him through his every waking hour.

“Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

Before any(else) decides to mention it, yes, I know that lots of people would probably argue that Stiles should have blue eyes. I for one am neutral on the topic - I went for gold here, but if I wrote another fic I might very well go blue. In this case I like to think that, if the wolf can somehow identify if you've taken an 'innocent' life, it can also tell when you're being manipulated by dark forces and will judge you accordingly.

Minor proofing/editing 26/11/16
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Minor edits done 26/11/16

Stiles had assumed that he was so wiped out from the full moon that he wouldn’t dream when he finally went to sleep on Saturday. He was wrong.

The full moon, and his mishmash survival session with Derek, had sparked memories and thoughts Stiles had hoped he’d long since suppressed. He’d nearly died more times than he cared to admit, and the thought of being restrained, while a good idea, made him a little nauseous. Because it was taking away his freedom and limiting his movement. So many times he’d been trapped by his own subconscious inability to move. Having a physical manifestation was… torturous.

He woke with a startled yell from hazy dreams of claws and guns and arrows. He was drenched with sweat, and his fingers had gone wolf on him at some point and scored large gouges into his sheets and mattress.

It seemed like mere seconds after he woke that his dad burst into his bedroom, brandishing his gun (thankfully with the safety on). Maybe Stiles’ story had shaken him up more than he’d let on, if the first thing to come to mind when he heard Stiles scream in the middle of the night was that someone had broken in. Probably Peter Hale, not that his dad had a name to put with the idea of homicidal werewolf.

“Stiles, what happened, are you okay?”

Stiles breathed deeply through his nose, attempting to calm his racing heart, only to wrinkle his nose as the scent of sweat flooded his senses. He fruitlessly attempted to hide the rip marks, which only drew his dad’s attention to his bed.

“It’s fine,” Stiles mumbled softly, hoping his voice wasn’t shaking as much as he thought it was. “Everything’s fine. I just… had a nightmare. You know.”

John Stilinski placed his hand lightly over Stiles’ wrist, pulling his hand away from the sheets, where he was tugging at the torn threads with nails still partway between claw and fingernail. He examined Stiles’ nails for a moment, caught in fascination by them, before he held Stiles’ hand between his own.

“I’m not going to ask what it was about,” John reassured him, “because I know you wouldn’t tell me anyway. But seriously, kiddo, if there’s anything I can do to help, anything at all, tell me? Sometimes it feels like you’re trying to protect me, but Stiles, I’m supposed to be protecting you. Just remember that, okay?”

Stiles forced himself not to look at the notebook full of secrets half-buried on his desk.

“Yeah dad, of course.”

He curled his fingers carefully around his dad’s hands, returning the reassuring hold while concentrating on getting his nails back to normal. It was disconcerting for Stiles to watch the change,
but he couldn’t imagine how strange it must have been for his dad to see.

“You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah.”

John stayed kneeling for a moment longer, and then released Stiles’ hands, climbing back to his feet. Stiles gnawed on his lower lip, his extra sharp teeth nothing but bad news for that particular habit.

He sighed, hanging his head.

“Dad. Do you… do you think you could stay in the room? Just until I fall asleep.”

He was going to be worrying about his dad more than he ever had before over the coming months. It would be nice if, just for a while, he could go to sleep with visual confirmation that his dad was still in one piece.

His dad didn’t say anything, aware that too much acknowledgement of Stiles’ request might embarrass him and prevent Stiles from reaching out again. Stiles was like that sometimes. He needed to be tiptoed around. But he pulled out Stiles’ desk chair and sat down.

Stiles gave a strained, slightly sheepish smile, and hesitantly moved to lie back down. The tears in the mattress rubbed against his arms, stark in his awareness now that he knew they were there. They were going to be a reminder for a long time that he was dangerous in his sleep, no matter how good he liked to think his control was when awake.

On Sunday afternoon, Stiles’ dad was called down to the station, and Stiles found himself with an unexpected visitor.

Seeing Derek twice in as many days when not in a life or death crisis? That was practically miracle territory!

Still, Stiles felt a little weird, seeing the older man again so soon after he’d told his dad about his wolf problems. He must have smelled guilty, because Derek gave him a long look when Stiles let him in, and promptly determined the reason.

“You told the Sheriff?”

Derek had his arms crossed defensively across his chest. Stiles realised Derek was reading too far into things.

“Not about you!” he protested, waving his hands in frustration. “I’m not suicidal. No. I told him about me, and about that loner wolf, but mostly I told him to be careful. I don’t need that wolf going after my dad.”

Derek breathed out slowly, relaxing his tense shoulders a fraction or two.

“It must be a burden,” he said. If Stiles was reading him right, that was some sort of permission. Well, it was good to know he hadn’t pissed Derek off too much so far.

It occurred to Stiles then that, as a born wolf, Derek never had to suffer through trying to keep something that massive hidden from his parents. School friends, sure, that was something they had in common, but family was a different matter. A sad little part of Stiles wondered what his mom would
have thought about it all.

“Anyway, dad’s going to sort the investigation into Laura’s death. So it’s up to us to find the guy.”

“No.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Stiles cupped his ear dramatically. “I could’ve sworn you just said no.”

“Exactly.” Derek dropped his arms and shoved his hands in his pockets. “Stiles, this is dangerous, and it’s not your fight. You should concentrate on centering yourself, and finding control.”

“Not your fight,” Stiles echoed, scowling. “Listen here Sourwolf, that psycho is my alpha. If that doesn’t make me involved, then I don’t know what’s going on in that little wolfy head of yours.”

Derek didn’t miss a beat.

“That’s even more reason you shouldn’t get involved. Alphas have power over their pack. If he’s as deranged as you seem to think he is, there’s no telling what he might do to you. You’d just get in the way.”

Stiles was silent as his Hale translator ticked over.

Did that mean Derek was worried about his well-being? His safety? Or was he just playing lone wolf? Stiles liked to think it was the first one.

“I was meaning to ask; why do you call me that?”

Stiles startled, eyes developing a deer-in-headlights quality.

“Call you what?” he asked nervously, despite knowing exactly what Derek meant. His emotions tended to get the better of him, and he’d let it slip out again.

Derek pulled a face. “Sourwolf. Why call me that? Monday was the first time we’ve met, wasn’t it?”

Stiles cleared his throat and said “yes” as firmly as he could manage. It was more or less true, only for Stiles that first Monday had been over a year ago. “It’s a nickname,” he continued, floundering for an explanation. “Wolf, werewolf, self-explanatory, no?” He glanced at Derek’s scowling face. “And you’re always scowling, see? So, Sourwolf.”

Derek looked like he wanted to say something else, but he restrained himself, only giving an annoyed shake of his head.

“Keep your wits about you,” he said eventually. “You have enhanced senses now. Use them. And try and stay out of trouble.”

Stiles nodded seriously.

In the back of his mind he acknowledged that he still needed to find a way to tell Derek about Peter. But that didn’t seem like a good idea at all. And Derek had basically just kicked him out of the investigation, saying he didn’t want his help. It didn’t exactly make Stiles want to tell him.

It was a little vindictive, and being vengeful was no way to save lives and change the future, but he couldn’t help it. He was still tired and he was mentally exhausted and nothing seemed right anymore.

How much had he already changed just be getting bitten in Scott’s place? By reconnecting with Erica?
Stiles would tell Derek eventually, because he deserved to know, but there was something Stiles needed to do first. He was going to pay Peter a visit, before the wolf had a chance to make the first move.

“My dad’ll be home soon,” Stiles said, not showing any signs of the decision he had just come to. “You should probably go, unless you want to help me explain the other half of the story.”

Derek rolled his eyes, but took the dismissal as it was, and allowed himself to be herded out of the house.

“Stay out of the preserve!” he called back over his shoulder as he went.

Stiles just waved and shut the door behind him.

**oOoOo**

Scott chewed Stiles out on Monday about skipping school. He’d had all weekend to think about it, but he hadn’t come up with any sort of good explanation. He brushed Scott off, saying he’d been sick, and his phone was out of credit, so he hadn’t been able to return his messages.

Scott didn’t look happy about any of it – he was starting to sense that there were things Stiles was refusing to tell him – but it was for the best. Stiles knew things would get way too complicated if Scott knew what was really going on. If Scott didn’t think he was having a psychotic break.

Sometimes he wondered if he was too hard on Scott. Scott was open-minded enough about normal things. (No one on the team, for instance, had any issues with Danny being gay, but that might have been because Danny was actually good at lacrosse.) He was a good friend, and had stuck with Stiles through thick and thin since the moment they met.

Now though, Stiles was keeping secrets and Scott was chasing his own tail trying to get in good with Allison. They just weren’t connecting. Stiles wasn’t about to say it wasn’t mostly his own fault, because he knew it was. He just didn’t know how to deal with this Scott anymore, the Scott who hadn’t struggled through being an alpha and dating a hunter and having his best friend, Stiles, possessed by a Nogitsune.

Stiles didn’t know how to deal with anyone who hadn’t seen him suffer through that possession.

He needed to work on being a better friend. But that could wait. First off, Peter Hale needed to be brought to heel.

**oOoOo**

On Tuesday, Lydia Martin sat down across from Stiles with an irritable sigh.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you. I know I ignore you all the time, but that isn’t supposed to be a two-way street. Something’s happened to you.”

Beside him, Scott openly gaped, both because Lydia Martin was suddenly sitting with them, and because he understood the underlying implication. Stiles had suddenly lost his obsession with Lydia since school started for the semester, and even Lydia herself had noticed. That was huge, on so many different levels.

Stiles glanced up from where he was talking with Erica.

Had he forgotten to flirt? Or, you know, what passed as flirting when you’re supposed to be...
hopelessly in love with someone who won’t acknowledge you.

It felt wrong to Stiles, flirting with Lydia, after he’d gotten to know her so much better as a person. He was almost completely certain he didn’t love her anymore. Well, no. He did love her, but he wasn’t in love with her. Lydia was his badass research partner, and something of a high-maintenance sister, in some ways. The fact that hopelessly attempting to grab her attention was part of maintaining his cover had completely slipped Stiles’ mind.

“New Year’s resolution?” he offered up with a shrug. “I had an epiphany? Gave up on a hopeless cause, because I know you’re out of my league?”

Lydia allowed herself a short moment to preen at the compliment. Stiles watched her almost wistfully. Such a brilliant mind was hidden away in her, but she spent so much time being overtly flirtatious that barely anyone ever noticed. Stiles missed the Lydia who had stopped caring what people thought of her.

“Well, acknowledging futility is always a wise step. Still…” Lydia leaned forward in her seat, resting her elbow on the table and pressing two fingers to her dark red lips as she scrutinised Stiles with those all-seeing eyes. “Something’s wrong with you,” she exclaimed, jabbing one perfectly manicured finger in Stiles’ direction, “and I’m going to figure out what.”

It was one of the rare moments in which Lydia acknowledged that they’d known each other for a long time and, even if she didn’t act like it, she cared, at least a tiny bit, what happened to Stiles.

For his part, Stiles just laughed. “You can try,” he said, the unspoken “but you’ll never figure it out” audible only to him. “Jackson’s glaring at me,” he added, glancing briefly over his shoulder to confirm that the waves of anger rolling towards him were indeed coming from Jackson Whittemore. “You should probably get back to him before he decides he’d like to break my nose.”

Lydia frowned at him, but stood from the table with a grace few could achieve in the heels she was wearing. She smoothed down her skirt and stalked away without another word.

Erica was giving Stiles an odd look. Pretty much everyone in Beacon Hills knew how Stiles Stilinski felt about Lydia Martin. To have him dismiss her without even batting an eyelash… He must be coming off quite strange.

What could he say? The last year had been an eye-opening experience. It was a shame he was the only one around to remember it. But no, it was better that way.

Still. Stiles decided it might be best to try and tone back the strangeness. He was starting to draw too much attention.

Beacons Crossing Home was somewhere Stiles never really wanted to have to go back to. He hated hospitals enough as is, but long term care units? Even worse. But needs must, and that was where Peter was.

He snuck in once visiting hours were over on Thursday evening. He was getting good at sneaking. Every time he heard footsteps coming in his direction he’d duck into a room or around a corner, avoiding nurses and hospital staff until he made it to Peter Hale’s room.

Stiles locked the door behind him. Maybe that seemed like a bad idea, locking himself in a room with a psychotic murderous werewolf, but one of the nurses was in on it, and he couldn’t remember which one. So he was halving the problem. Sort of.
Stiles took a deep breath and turned to face the still form of his alpha. If it weren’t for the fact he could hear Peter’s heart beating, he might have thought the man had died sitting in that wheelchair.

Stiles didn’t have any good memories of Peter Hale, but they weren’t all horrible. Pre-resurrection, yes, horror of all horrors. But afterwards, as loathe as Stiles was to admit it, Peter had been... amusing. In his own awful, snarky manner. They’d held a sort of mutual tolerance for each other, shaky bonds of snark and sass. But Peter had always had evil vibes, and they’d been hard to shake.

He barely remembered Peter before it all. Seeing the burns that once more littered the right side of his face was a shock to the system. For a second, pity welled up inside of him, before Stiles quashed it violently. This was his alpha, yes, but Peter was not his friend. Never had been, never would be.

Stiles perched on the edge of the hospital bed and stared Peter down.

He did seem pretty damn non-responsive. Stiles wasn’t certain Peter had blinked at all since he’d entered the room. He tilted his body left and right, but Peter’s eyes didn’t follow him. Shrugging, he reached out and rapped Peter on the side of the head. Still nothing.

Stiles sat back. He strained his ears, listening to the nurses wandering the hallways. When it was quiet, he reached inside to the wolf. His eyes burned gold. He growled low in his throat, a lupine rumble.

Though Peter didn’t move even a fraction of an inch, his wolf responded to the call of its beta. His eyes glowed a terrifying red. He hadn’t needed proof, but there it was.

“Okay,” Stiles breathed out, tapping his fingers on his knees. “There’s that.” He rubbed suddenly sweaty palms on his jeans.

He’d been in Peter’s room for a good five minutes now, and the man hadn’t made any notion of acknowledging him. Was it too soon? Had Stiles barged in when Peter wasn’t healed enough to move in human form?

“I know you can hear me in there. That you can understand me. And so that means you know what, who, I am. Since I’m here, I’d like to formally distance myself from your pack. Of course, I don’t have another alpha to run off to, so I’m sort of doing the lone wolf thing right now, just like your nephew, but I’m sure that won’t be a problem for too much longer.”

The sympathetic glow faded when Stiles leaned back. He mulled things over in his head. If there was one thing Stiles had learned over the year, it was that there was definitely a bond between an alpha and their pack. And no matter what Stiles said right then, he and Peter were pack. Scott had been so fixated that first month on pretending that nothing was wrong that he hadn’t bothered learning anything about pack. Connections couldn’t lie. They were a primal, base sort of thing.

But could he use that to convince Derek that Peter was the alpha? If he tried, he’d have to explain how he knew where Peter was, and what had made him think it might have been Peter in the first place. This Peter’s wolf smelled different to the uncle Derek had once known, wasn’t that how things had gone down? That was why he hadn’t realised sooner that Peter was the alpha.

Was it worth the risk?

Obviously Peter had to be stopped, there was no doubt there, but how was Stiles supposed to go about it?

He could do it on his own, or try and do it. But if he succeeded, and that was only if, Stiles would be an alpha. He very much didn’t want that responsibility. But Peter was mad, and he was killing
people, and he couldn’t be allowed to do that, either.

Stiles groaned, hands grasping fruitlessly at his hair.

“I need to tell Derek. Consequences be damned.”

He’d find a way. He had to.

oOoOo

Friday was a mess.

Stiles had thought up a dozen different ways to approach the subject with Derek, but all of them were risky. He’d even tossed around the idea of telling his dad, but that was ultimately discarded. He didn’t have any hard evidence, after all, and getting the police involved would be asking for trouble. In the end he hadn’t slept much.

Stiles drifted through school in a haze. He barely avoided detention from Mr Harris. Lydia had not been joking when she said she’d be keeping an eye on him. Jackson looked more pissed than normal. Scott had even stopped staring at Allison so much to gift him with his signature kicked puppy look of worry. But what was he supposed to say to him? Don’t worry, I’m just wondering how badly Derek Hale’s going to beat me up when I tell him his Uncle is killing people? Yeah, because that would go down well.

That was a legitimate concern though.

He had to spin the story in just the right way so that he didn’t overtly denounce Peter as the responsible party, and instead present it as something they needed to investigate, leading them to Peter and his red alpha eyes of doom. Oh yeah, and somehow not seem like he was lying as he did.

How had his life come to this?

Oh yeah. Ill preparation in the face of unknown dangers. It was just Stiles’ luck really that the one time Deaton wasn’t immediately sure what they were up against (when he was actually trying to be helpful and not confusing) happened to be the thing that left Stiles stranded in time.

And speaking of, Scott’s boss was a whole other problem entirely. But so, so not important.

Stiles meant to sneak away once school ended and find Derek, wherever he might have been lurking, but it turned out Derek had been thinking along similar lines, because there was Derek and his sleek car waiting in the school parking lot when Stiles shoved his way out of the flow of students leaving the main building.

He threw caution to the wind (because Scott didn’t know who Derek Hale was, and right now a stranger was actually a great excuse not to bring Scott in on things) and hurried across the crowded parking lot to the other beta.

“What are you doing here?” Stiles asked in a rush. He was freaking out just a little because this was too soon and he wasn’t prepared for all this manipulation but hey, the universe never listened to him anyway. Might as well roll with the punches.

Derek’s nostrils flared, and he shifted in what, on another person, Stiles would call discomfort, but he didn’t say anything. He didn’t acknowledge Stiles except with a small, echoing growl, low in his throat but not menacing, exactly, like so many of his other growls Stiles had become accustomed to. Derek was focused entirely on…
Chris Argent.

Stiles shook his head, rubbed the back of his neck.

“That’s Allison’s dad,” he offered quietly, opting for the oblivious route. “You know him or something?”

Derek was radiating tension.

“Or something. I’ll tell you somewhere else. Get in the car.”

Stiles jumped.

“What? But what about my jeep?!”

Derek stared at him like he’d just said something really stupid.

“You can come back for it later.”

Stiles didn’t like the thought of leaving his jeep at school for that long, but there was no point in arguing with Derek when he was in a mood, which was pretty much always. He grumbled a little under his breath, but obliging climbed into Derek’s car.

They zoomed out of the parking lot, leaving a scattered group of bewildered teens watching after them, and one stormy-faced hunter.

oOoOo

Stiles sat tentatively on the edge of the crumbling porch of the ruins of the Hale House. Derek was pacing the ground in front of him, spouting out disconnected fragments and stories about hunters that would be really confusing if he hadn’t already known everything Derek was telling him. He nodded in all the appropriate places, but stayed quiet, letting Derek get the rant out of his system.

It was a nail-biting wait to broach his own shaky assault.

When Derek seemed to have run out of steam, Stiles spoke up.

“It’s probably a coincidence though, that they’re here, right? I mean, there’s no way they could have known you were coming back to town. And the alpha hadn’t done anything super obvious before Laura, yeah?”

Derek glanced back at him over his shoulder.

“You’re right. I don’t think they’re here because of me. But their being here at all complicates things. Because he knows about me. And if you hang about with me too much he’ll suspect you as well. Hunters are supposed to have a code, but the Argents aren’t known to follow it. Not anymore.”

“Well…” Stiles tapped his fingers together. “If the alpha gets taken care of quickly, and nothing else happens, won’t he just, I don’t know, leave you alone? For the most part?”

Derek was in front of him in a flash, Stiles’ senses barely registering the movement. “What are you talking about? Stiles?”

He forced himself to look at Derek’s face, though not into his eyes.

“I’ve been… It’s like… You know how you were talking about pack bonds, during the full moon? I
think that, maybe, I can sort of, sense the alpha?"

Derek grabbed him by the shoulders, fingers digging in uncomfortably.

“Stiles, this is massive. Do you think you can track them down?”

Stiles fidgeted, heart beating wildly. Derek was way too close, and one too many threats of ripped throats had him edgy about wolf fingers near his jugular.

“I don’t know, I can try?”

Derek dragged Stiles to his feet before backing off.

“Car or by foot?”

In his head, Stiles mentally tried to calculate the distance from the Hale House to the long term care unit. It would be easier to fake by foot.

“Let’s walk,” he voiced, shaking himself and collecting his bag. If Derek got really pissed off from all this, he wanted his stuff with him for a quick getaway. He couldn’t imagine anything worse than having to walk back to Derek’s car with him while Derek was out of his mind with rage at him.

It was an incredibly tense, awkward half hour of weaving through Beacon Hills, pretending to be following some weird sixth sense. Derek, who had started with an almost terrifying intensity, had grown increasingly darker and more withdrawn the closer they came to Beacons Crossing.

Stiles was beginning to regret his decision when he stopped in front of the building and actually caught a glimpse of Derek’s face. It was deadly and murderous and blank all at once. Only Derek could pull off an expression like that.

“Are you absolutely certain?” Derek’s voice was the calm before the storm.

Stiles repressed a shudder and stammered an affirmative. Why oh why hadn’t he told his dad he was going off on a hunt for a crazy murderer? A grounding would be better than death.

Derek marched straight into the building, no longer relying on Stiles and his pretend tracking sense. They wove through the same corridors Stiles had traversed only the night before.

Peter was almost exactly how he had left him, motionless in his wheelchair.

He considered asking some sort of question, but Stiles decided he’d much rather keep Derek’s attention firmly away from him for as long as possible.

For a long moment Derek simply stared at his uncle.

“Is it him?”

Derek sounded so defeated.

Stiles couldn’t stop himself. A low, sorrowful howl broke free of his lips. Peter’s eyes glowed like a death sentence.

Make or break, this was it.
Derek remained silent and staring for a long time, even after the wolf had disappeared from Peter’s eyes. Stiles was so terrified he didn’t think he’d be able to move even if he wanted to. And he really wanted to. Invisibility would have been great right about then too. Also some sort of scent camouflage. Anything, really, that would allow Stiles to slip away undetected before the silence broke.

Unfortunately he possessed none of those abilities, and remained standing stock-still at the end of the bed.

“I don’t understand,” Derek confessed eventually, the furious edge that Stiles had been expecting mysteriously absent from his voice.

Stiles cringed, and offered up a weak, “it might not be him,” only to be immediately shot down.

“It has to be him, he has alpha characteristics now, I just don’t understand how.”

Derek kept his back to Stiles. He sounded like he was in an emotional state, and from experience Stiles knew how much Derek hated being seen as vulnerable. Still, his shoulders were a tense line of anxious muscle, and Stiles wished he had a re-do button. He could do the lone wolf thing. Probably.

“This is my uncle,” Derek added, when it occurred to him that they had barged into this room with no explanation. “He’s been practically comatose ever since the fire. And he’s never been so good an actor that he could sit this still and not react to my presence at all. How is this happening?”

Stiles fumbled for knowledge he didn’t have. When he first met the older wolf Peter had just made a miraculous recovery, but that was – Stiles checked his mental calendar – a good two weeks from now. He couldn’t remember the how and why. At the time he’d been more concerned with staying alive than listening to his speech.

Since he didn’t have an answer, Stiles fidgeted. He tugged at his sleeves, tapped his fingers against his thighs. If he let himself, Stiles was sure he’d be able to smell people slowly dying. He wanted out. He wanted far far away from the long term care unit, and far away from his messed up, wheelchair bound alpha.

But he stayed put, and breathed deeply through his mouth, and kept an eye latched firmly on Peter. If there was anyone he knew who could throw out a curve-ball to ruin his life, it would be Peter Hale.

“Technically speaking,” Stiles said slowly, quietly, “does what happens to your uncle affect his wolf?”

Derek glanced back at him, eyes dark, frowning.

“What do you mean?”
“Say…” Stiles pushed his fingers together, and stamped down on the urge to shuffle his feet.
“Mightn’t it be possible that, despite your uncle being comatose, his wolf is still raging about inside?
As though they were two different beings, trapped sharing a single body?”

Derek didn’t respond, shifting his attention back to Peter. With those eyes no longer on him, Stiles
gave in to the urge, and shuffled nervously. Tension. Waiting. Suspense. He hated all of that. It’s
probably what had gotten him in trouble so much in the last few months. He could no longer handle
the wait for answers, for strategy, for plans.

“I don’t know as much about us as I would like to. Laura was the oldest, and my mother spent most
of her time teaching these things to her. She never got around to sharing much of it with me. So it’s
possible. But then, what do we do about it?”

Being so readily included in Derek’s thought process was a strange and novel experience. Was this
really what happened when you started off friendly instead of antagonistic? Stiles was sure Derek
would do an about face quick enough if he went and got him arrested again.

“It’s your uncle Derek, your sister. I don’t think I have any right to decide what happens to him.”

“Stiles, he’s changed your entire life. Yes, this is all tied up in my family issues, but he’s your alpha.
That means something.”

Oh, Stiles wished he could tell Derek how very similar this was to his old life. Not his original life,
obviously, but he couldn’t imagine going back to that now. Not, necessarily, because he liked this
new life, but because he’d experienced too much, learned too much, to ever even consider going
back to that quiet, ignorant existence.

Stiles shook his head. “Not to me. Not really. What’s done is done. He can’t change that, and neither
can we. What’s more important than any sort of revenge, is making sure he doesn’t do it again. And
how that happens should be up to you.”

Derek sighed. Stiles probably wasn’t supposed to hear it but, well, werewolf. He couldn’t exactly
help it.

“Go home, Stiles. I’ll contact you once I figure something out.”

Stiles knew a dismissal when he heard one. He didn’t always obey dismissals, but he left without
question, eager to get away from the hospital and the tension and Peter.

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Lydia cornered Stiles at his locker on Monday morning, all thoughtful and devious. He could only be
thankful that Scott was running late, because her line of questioning caught him completely off

Lydia leaned her shoulder against the locker next to Stiles’ and made a show of looking him up and
down before speaking.

“Is he your boyfriend?”

Stiles dropped his economics book on his foot. He screwed up his face in confusion and turned to
face her.

“What? Who are we even talking about? Also no.”
“Mr Tall Dark and Mysterious, who picked you up after school on Friday?” She twirled a lock of hair around her finger, feigning boredom with the conversation, but he could tell she was truly curious.

He laughed, a little, nervous and bewildered and a little terrified.

“Derek?! No, no, noooooo. No way. Definitely not.”

Stiles squinted at her, taking in the disappointed curve to her lips, and the way she wasn’t looking at him. A glimpse of understanding washed over him. He wasn’t sure how to feel about it.

“You’re grasping at straws, really. Were you… Did you think if I’d suddenly gone gay over break then there’d be no need to be offended that I’m not falling over myself to get your attention anymore? Because if so you’re being ridiculous Lydia, and I mean that in the nicest way possible. You don’t even like me. You’re right, that some things happened to me, sure, but the only thing that concerns you is that, while I still love you Lydia, and I do, I’m not in love with you.”

Stiles sighed. He picked his book up from the floor and shoved it in his bag, giving Lydia a moment to collect herself.

She frowned at him, eyes furrowed in confusion. She folded her arms over her stomach and stared at him.

“I don’t understand you,” Lydia said, accompanied by a small sigh of frustration. “You barely know a thing about me. Obviously I’m gorgeous, so that made sense, but all this,” she gestured helplessly at him with one hand, “none of it adds up.”

“You may think you’re a great actor, but you really aren’t.” Stiles closed his locker and leaned against it, facing Lydia. “I know you hide how smart you are, but you get the best grades in our year. I know that even though Jackson’s a total jerk, you really do love him.” He paused for a second, mulling it over, but decided to throw caution to the wind. “I know that you’re basically fluent in Latin.”

Lydia’s mouth fell open into a perfect little circle of surprise. She glared, and glanced around the hallway for eavesdroppers.

“How do you even know that?!”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

Stiles went to throw his bag over his shoulder, but froze. His Jackson sense was tingling.

“Sorry Lydia,” he said in a rush. “Places to see, people to go. I mean. Nevermind. Gotta run.” Stiles speed-walked down the corridor, hoping he’d moved before Jackson could see Lydia and him talking. He might not have been 100% of the douche he used to be when Stiles last saw future-Jackson, but he had never been a nice person. No need to add fuel to the fire.

Lydia was not the last person to comment about Stiles’ ride on Friday. Hell, even Danny got in a surprisingly snarky joke. And Danny basically never talked to him unless Stiles bugged him first.

Stiles swore he was going to have to lay down ground rules. Number One being that Derek wasn’t allowed near the school unless it was an emergency or Stiles had called him first.
Erica had teased him good-naturedly, finally at ease with the unexpected return to their friendship. She knew all the right things to say, and not to say, to keep things light. Somehow Erica had always known how to read him like that. She hadn’t always used it to keep things friendly, but she’d always known.

Scott (who, it turned out, had spent the morning before class with Allison, go him) was the worst by far. While everyone else teased and joked or made stupid gestures, Scott freaked out. It was just lucky he had the foresight to hold it back until school was over. For once he didn’t even give Stiles the imagined chance to escape, grabbing him by the arm and bodily yanking him out to the bleachers.

Once they were away from most of the student body, Scott rounded on him in a flurry of bewildered arm waving.

“What the hell have you been doing Stiles? You’ve been skipping class and practice, you won’t return half my messages, and then you run off with some random guy I’ve never seen before in my life!” Scott glared him down, all the puppy-like hurt of his usual admonishments washed away under a torrent of perhaps not misplaced rage.

It was worse for Stiles, who could almost feel a palpable anger radiating off of Scott. He flinched, because there was nothing he could say to that. All of it was true. He’d just been hoping Scott wouldn’t notice as much as he had. What could he even say to justify all that? He’d been keeping things from Scott for a reason.

“It is what it is Scott. What do you want me to say?”

“An explanation, maybe? About why you’ve had this weird 180 switch up?”

Stiles sighed heavily, scratching at the back of his neck.

“There’s nothing to tell. It’s just… personal issues. My dad knows. We’re dealing.”

Nothing about that seemed to appease Scott.

“What happened to there being no secrets between us? Since when do you tell your dad stuff before telling me?”

Stiles groaned, burying his face in his hands and concentrating on the beating of his own heart.

“Don’t you dare try and guilt me, Scott McCall. This is not about you.” The words were muffled beneath his fingers, but no less sharp.

Scott physically stumbled back several steps at his tone. On another day Stiles might have regretted the words, the tone, because they didn’t treat each other like that, but today was not one of those days. He grit his teeth, rolling further explosions about his mind, but in the end settled for a sharp glare, biting his tongue to keep the words trapped inside. Scott stared, slack-jawed and bewildered, and Stiles took the moment to stalk off, digging into his werewolf endurance and speed to get back to his jeep before anyone could stop him.

Stiles’ hands shook as he drove home. Before, he might have worried about crashing. For now, he clenched his jaw and hoped like hell that his reflexes would get him home safely.

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John found Stiles in the living room when he got home, with all the curtains pulled, the room as dark...
as it could get during the early evening, and buried in as many blankets as his super-heated body could handle.

Stiles had heard him coming long before he made it in the front door, but made no move to acknowledge that his dad was home.

To his credit, John didn’t push immediately. He traipsed upstairs, changed out of his uniform, and grabbed an apple from the kitchen before joining his son in the shadowy darkness.

Stiles peered over at him through a gap in his mess of blankets, eyes glowing softly in the dark, and a low, rumbling whine tore free of his lips.

John was visibly taken aback by the primal sound, such a strange cross between human and animal, but he bit into his apple and let the moment pass.

Stiles buried himself further into his blankets and listened to his dad’s heart beating. He was a little bit embarrassed to have been caught moping in the dark, but he wasn’t together enough to care, or to do anything about it. Scott had riled him up, leaving him emotionally wrung out. At first he’d been furious, because Scott had been mad, and Scott had no right to call him out for acting strange when he had no idea what he was going through. But that was Stiles’ fault too. He recognised that.

They didn’t keep secrets from each other; they told each other everything. That was how they had always been. Except for, you know, the sort of TMI stuff that Scott often did try to tell him which Stiles really wished he would learn to keep to himself. But Stiles was bundling this stuff up inside himself, because knowledge was dangerous, and he’d spent so much time over the last few months hiding things from everyone – different things from different people – and Scott didn’t need to be burdened by it and in the end Stiles just wished Scott would just let it go, for his own sake.

What made things worse was that Stiles very easily could tell Scott, tell him everything, from werewolves to banshees to time travel and everything in between. Because Scott had known, once, and it had made life easier – well, it had been Scott’s life messed about then, and Stiles had mostly been on the sidelines, but the knowing helped. But that Scott and this Scott were two very different people, and nothing anyone said could dispel that fact.

He was trying to protect Scott, damn it! But it was getting progressively harder to convince himself that keeping everything to himself was worth the grief. This was so much worse than when he’d been keeping all the supernatural stuff away from his dad.

Stiles sighed, long and drawn out and muffled by his blanket cocoon.

“Everything okay Stiles?” John asked, in a deceptively light tone.

Stiles wasn’t sure if he appreciated the softer inquiry, or if he’d rather his dad just dived straight in. He shrugged his shoulders, groaning lowly when he remembered his dad could barely see him through all the blankets. He shook his head anyway.

“Scott’s mad at me.”

Stiles could feel his dad frowning from across the room. He couldn’t really explain it, but his dad always frowned hard. It was a tangible sensation of disapproval, or confusion, or deep thought, or whatever it was he was frowning about at any given moment. Well, tangible to him, with years of experience and enhanced senses.

“What happened?” John paused. Stiles could hear him shifting in his seat. “Was it about the, uh, werewolf thing?”
Stiles laughed, a torn, sad sound.

“Sort of. You could argue it was. Not that he knows that.”

His dad nodded, and it was Stiles’ turn to frown.

“I see. He doesn’t know about it. You haven’t told him.”

“What, you want me to tell him? We are talking about the same Scott right? Goody two-shoes, terrible at discretion, realist, hopeless romantic Scott McCall? He doesn’t need my problems, and I’m not unloading them all on him. That would be a horrible terrible thing to do and I can’t believe you’re suggesting it.”

“You never seem to mind about that sort of thing when you’re dragging him across town to spy on police things you shouldn’t even know about.”

Stiles huffed, a burst of warm fondness blossoming inside his chest, despite it all. He wasn’t sure if it was fondness for Scott or fondness for his dad, but he didn’t want to go examining his emotions again any time soon.

“That’s different,” he protested, knowing it was a weak argument. His dad would undoubtedly think so too.

Stiles mulled everything over for a long moment. If it wasn’t the time travel, wasn’t the other life and the deaths no-longer-real and the role reversal… Yeah, if it was just the werewolf thing, maybe Stiles would tell Scott. But it wasn’t. And if he told him about the werewolves it was only a matter of time before he decided to just let everything spill out, and that could very well land him back in Eichen House.

His dad’s voice broke through his increasingly depressing thought spiral.

“I know I don’t have any say in what you tell Scott, but just think about it. Keeping it all to yourself isn’t healthy.”

Before Stiles could pull together a response his dad stood up and left the living room. He didn’t turn on any of the lights as he went.

Stiles pulled the blankets tighter around himself, and idly wondered if there was any way he could spin his story to the school guidance counselor without making her suspicious. Probably not. Druids were tricky that way. At least she’d believe him. Even if she would pry way too much.

-oOoOo-

Derek Hale was the last person Stiles wanted to see when he stepped out of the house on Tuesday morning, (well, okay, second last, because Peter would have given him an aneurism), but lo and behold, there he was, leaning up against Stiles’ jeep and not even trying to be inconspicuous.

Stiles hissed, a rush of air through his teeth as he scowled. Derek was in front of the driver’s door, but Stiles wasn’t above clambering over the gearbox to get in from the passenger side. Werewolf issues were so not what he wanted to deal with first thing in the morning. Not today.

He locked the front door with furious energy, missing the keyhole multiple times as he forcefully jabbed his key towards it. Not the best show when in front of company, but he was so beyond trying to impress Derek.
“Whatever you’re selling,” Stiles snarked, stomping along the driveway with an aggression he’d have cringed at even before werewolves were a thing that existed, “I’m not buying.”

Derek’s face twisted into that familiar dark scowl, but Stiles couldn’t even bring himself to joke about it, even in the privacy of his head. He grabbed Stiles’ arm as Stiles tried to cut around him, heading for the other side of his jeep.

“Peter killed someone else last night.”

Stiles froze, body rigid, mind spinning. He killed someone? What day was it? What was happening? What had he forgotten?

“Where?”

“At your school.”

The grip on his arm relaxed when Stiles made no motion to move away. He was in shock. He couldn’t have made a break for it even if he’d wanted to.

Death at school, death at school… There had been a depressingly high amount of those, in all honesty, Stiles couldn’t place them all chronologically, but…

Oh. Oh. He did remember this. Scott had flipped out, thinking he’d killed someone, but it had been Peter. Only Stiles hadn’t had any weird murder dreams last night and he’d woken up safely in his bed, thank you very much.

He dug the blunt fingernails of his free hand into his scalp, berating himself. If only he’d remembered this sooner, remembered the dates. If he’d forced Derek to make a decision on Friday. If he’d done it himself. He could have prevented this. He could have, he could have…

Derek spun him around to face him, hands on both shoulders, gripping firmly. He ducked his head down slightly, catching Stiles’ frantic gaze.

“Oi, Stiles, calm down. Breathe.”

Stiles stared blankly at him, the words barely registering. His heart was racing, breathing rapid, his mind wouldn’t shut up, he couldn’t think, couldn’t move, couldn’t-

Derek’s scowl turned grim.

“Sorry about this,” he said, and Stiles didn’t even get a chance to try and wonder what for before Derek had spun him again, crushing his back to Derek’s chest, one arm pinning his own to his sides while Derek’s hand carefully covered his mouth, cutting off his oxygen.

Stiles struggled weakly for several long moments, before beginning to take long, deep breaths through his nose. His thoughts silenced themselves, world narrowed down to just keep breathing, and dimly he could hear his heart begin to slow.

Derek loosened his grip, and slowly let him go. Stiles swayed, stumbled, but stayed upright without assistance. He rubbed his arms nervously and shook himself before half-turning, not quite looking at Derek but not exactly looking away either.

Stiles chuckled lowly, the sound not amused in the slightest.

“That’s… probably not the best way to deal with hyperventilation,” he commented drily, but his
heart wasn’t in it. He deserved a little panic. This was his fault.

Derek agreed easily enough, but he looked worried, more worried than he had a right to be. “Should I not have told you?” he asked uncertainly. “You would have found out when you got to school anyway.”

“No,” Stiles said softly, and then once again, with emphasis. “It was better this way.”

Derek still looked pretty unsure, but the worry disappeared quickly enough, until they were all business once more.

“The problem is, I still haven’t figured out what to do about Peter. But we can’t let him roam free like this, killing random people. I need advice, and I don’t know where to find it.”

Stiles bit his lip, stopping himself from blurting out something about Deaton or Miss Morrell, Beacon Hills’ resident druids. Miss Morrell would probably tell them to kill Peter and be done with it. In the end, Stiles had no doubt that that was exactly what they’d do. It’d happened the first time around, and it would happen again. Peter’s death was inevitable. Even after his miraculous recovery his sanity had been more than questionable.

“Somehow I don’t think I can help you out with that,” Stiles said instead.

“I wasn’t expecting you to. I just came to warn you about the murder, in case you hadn’t already heard from the Sheriff.”

Stiles hummed in acknowledgment. Would his dad kill him if he skipped school today? He really didn’t want to walk down into crime central right now. Not with Peter-stench and bad memories and the overwhelming guilt that pooled in his stomach like acid. He wouldn’t be able to handle it. He’d have another meltdown, in public this time.

“Well, I’m going to go see if I can find any leads, any inspiration about how to handle this.”

“Yeah.”

Stiles watched him leave. He stayed outside for several long minutes, listening to the birds, inhaling the scents of nature, trying to keep his thoughts from spiralling back into the abyss. Then he went back inside, left a note for his dad on the kitchen table, and locked himself in his room.
In the end, Stiles couldn’t handle it. The bus driver’s death had triggered some of those other memories he’d repressed or forgotten about and, oh yeah, Peter had killed a few more people as well. Stiles couldn’t let that happen again. Not without trying to stop it. Otherwise he’d never sleep again.

So, in all his infinite wisdom, he chose the lesser of two evils, and decided it was about time he had a talk with Deaton. Bring him back into the fold, so to speak.

Unfortunately, he really could have timed it better.

He’d been holed up in his room for most of the day, fretting and panicking and scribbling new notes down in his “secrets of the future” notebook, and he jumped straight into action when his mind came to a decision.

Except school was over by then. And as he drove to the animal clinic he realised that hey, that’s right, Scott works there. He was torn about whether or not he wanted to see Scott right then, but either way he couldn’t let Scott catch him at the clinic. He didn’t have any pets and they might start yelling at each other again, and he just couldn’t deal with that.

Stiles stopped his jeep a block away from the clinic, cut the engine, and slumped forward, bumping his head against the steering wheel. Planning, planning, he needed to learn how to plan more than ten minutes ahead. This was how he always got himself into trouble. Lack of forethought. Not planning the right things. He groaned.

Then his phone rang.

He was so surprised by it that he answered on reflex, not even checking the caller ID, and forgetting for a moment that he had more pressing things to do.

“This is Stiles.”

“Stiles!” There was a long, guilty pause. Long enough for Stiles to process oh hey, it’s Scott, what a coincidence, and for him to begin to regret answering. “Sorry, I sort of wasn’t expecting you to pick up.”

“Oh?”

“I mean, don’t take it the wrong way, I’m glad you did, just, you were really angry yesterday. I realise that now. And then you didn’t come to school, and this probably sounds really arrogant but I was worried it might have been because of me.”
Scott sounded a little bit frantic – a tiny bit breathless, his words a little more rushed than usual. He also sounded genuinely worried. In his mind, Stiles could envision the distraught expression Scott had probably been wearing all day. Unfortunately that image did little to lessen the tight ball of anxiety in his gut – if anything, it only made it worse, because yes, Scott was adorable and hard to stay mad at and also he was Stiles’ best friend.

“It’s…” Stiles sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “It’s a lot of things. It’s been a long week. I couldn’t… Dad told me what happened at the school, and I couldn’t handle that, not today.”

“Oh…”

Stiles shook his head a little fondly. Trust Scott not to fixate on things like deaths at school while Stiles wasn’t around to rant about it.

“I guess that sort of makes sense. But seriously. Dude. Are you okay?”

He took his time thinking up a response, and for once Scott let him. Stiles had spent a lot of time perfecting the sort of semi-lies that could fool a werewolf’s heartbeat lie-detector test, but even though Scott wasn’t a werewolf now Stiles didn’t want to lie to him. Not about something he could so easily be truthful about. Not when he was lying about so many things already.

“No.” He paused, rolling the words around on his tongue. “I’m not okay. Not right now. But I will be.” He hoped. He wanted to be okay. Stiles wasn’t sure he’d ever be fine, or great, but he could do okay. He just needed to set things straight.

Scott hummed on the other end of the line, affirmative, accepting, but uneasy.

“I’m not going to be at work for too long today. Deaton’s doing stuff he apparently doesn’t need my help with. If you want I could, you know, drop by? For a little bit?”

Stiles’ heart swelled with affection, and he had to bite back the agreement he usually would have automatically given. Not today, not now, not until Peter was dealt with and he knew what was happening. Not until everything was under control. Then, he swore, then he’d have time for Scott.

“Sorry man, today’s not really a good day. Why don’t you hang out with Allison?”

Stiles was mostly sure his voice was even when he made the suggestion. He was still an uneasy whirlwind of emotions when it came to Allison Argent. Guilt was right up there, of course, but there was also bitterness and jealousy and anger and respect. Stiles wasn’t sure if avoiding her was helping or hindering his emotional state.

“Stiles! She’s not- We’re not… Dude!”

Scott laughed, embarrassed and thankful. Stiles considered that a job well done. Scott wasn’t currently biting his ear off, and he had some breathing space.
They exchanged farewells, and Stiles tried his hardest not to let any of his frustration leak through. The light feeling faded the moment the call disconnected.

Stiles threw his phone onto the passenger seat, on silent this time around. He took three slow, deep breaths. Turning the ignition back on, he drove to a diner, parked his jeep out of sight, and ordered some curly fries.

Curly fries were his favourite food, his comfort food, a stress reliever. But even they did little to numb the tension thrumming through his veins, the mental battle of “do I or don’t I” raging through his thoughts.

Deep down inside, Stiles knew he was never going to be able to achieve any sense of calm until he decided, once and for all, how to approach things with Scott. His life needed balance, and direction, and a goal. Stiles always worked best with goals.

So he had three things that needed sorting.

How much of his life story he dumped on Scott.

Ensuring Peter’s preferably immediate demise.

And figuring out how to deal with every other impending disaster on the board.

Oh, and also figure out how things were going to go down once Derek was alpha. Derek had been sort of a terrible alpha the first go-around, and Stiles knew that was partially some sort of power anxiety, and worry about the alpha pack, but still. He needed a buffer. And Stiles might just have to be that buffer. He didn’t know how he’d manage that, but he’d have to try. Derek needed to make some better choices, if Stiles had any say in it.

So, four things to sort out.

He groaned, resisting the intense urge to smack his forehead against the table and leave it there. He did not, however, resist the urge to simply lay his head on the table and stare morosely across the diner. Running away would be so much easier. He could become a werewolf hermit somewhere out in the middle of nowhere, giving aid to passing omegas and keeping away from all the problems Beacon Hills loved to attract.

Someone snickered near his head as Stiles tried to eat a curly fry lying down. He would have ignored them to wallow in his indecision, but it was a familiar voice. He glanced up, taking in the tall, lean form of Danny Mahealani. Stiles frowned, but planted his hands against the edge of the table and pushed himself back up to face him.

Stiles didn’t say anything, because he couldn’t think of any reason that Danny would be in this dinky diner near the animal clinic. Danny tolerated his silent stare for almost a full minute before sighing, shaking his head, and sitting down in the chair across from him. Then, just to be rude, Danny stole his last four fries.

Usually Stiles just rolled with the punches when it came to upsets to his daily understanding of the world, but this was outside his parameters for weird stuff. He glared at the empty plate for a long moment, gathering his thoughts, before meeting the Hawaiian teen’s gaze head on.

“What are you doing here?”

Stiles tried not to sound angry, but he didn’t think he quite managed casual curiosity. Danny raised an eyebrow at him, and leaned back in his chair, almost but not quite tipping it back onto two legs,
because he was a gentleman. He looked away, eyeing up the rest of the patrons, before giving a completely unapologetic response.

“Lydia asked me to track your phone when she realised you weren’t at school today.”

Stiles snorted, equal parts fond and exasperated.

“Even gay guys can’t resist Lydia’s charm.”

Danny shrugged, completely unrepentant.

“It’s probably not my place to say it, but she did seem actually worried about you. Silently, of course. She won’t call you out on it. But it’s strange. You don’t usually register on her radar.”

They collapsed into silence. Stiles wasn’t sure how to respond to that. Lydia probably hadn’t told Danny anything, like how she was determined to find out what had gotten Stiles so turned about this semester, or how he’d stopped fawning over her (though that one was pretty obvious). And even then, Stiles hadn’t expected this sort of worry, this… checking up on him.

Danny watched Stiles with an unusually analytical gaze. It was unnerving, as though Danny were gathering all the answers to questions no one even knew were there to solve. Stiles wanted to know what was happening, what Danny was seeing, but asking seemed wrong. He was too scared to ask, afraid of what the answer might be.

Danny left without a word after several long minutes, and Stiles left not long after that, trying to shake off the whole thing before he embarked on his mission of the day: interrogating Deaton.

It seemed impossible, but Stiles had truly managed to forget how frustratingly vague Deaton loved to be in the few short weeks he’d been without the vet’s semi-helpful advice on hand.

Stiles managed to catch the vet by surprise, slipping silently in between closing and Deaton heading home for the night. The mountain ash counter would have posed some serious problems, but it wasn’t closed. Deaton was getting slack. Stupid, really, considering the uprising in supernatural deaths in the area. Stiles was proof of that danger too, he liked to think, because there was a darkness inside of him that had never really left after the possession and if Deaton didn’t give him answers Stiles was worried he would actually have to stop himself from maiming the man.

Deaton was in the examination room, cleaning medical instruments and restocking his drug cabinet. He had his back to the door, so Stiles managed to slip through unseen, giving him a moment to consider how best to go about this whole shebang.

Going in guns blazing seemed rash, but The Shocking Truth might be the best way to sidestep all the beating around the bush so they could get down to serious supernatural talk. Stiles hated wolfing out though. More than the enhanced senses or the glowing eyes, it was the fur and fangs that really twisted the knife in his gut, confirming once again that he was no longer human.

Stiles stood straight, and knocked his fist against the wall, alerting Deaton to his presence.

Deaton was a good actor, truly. His confusion at seeing Stiles lasted barely a second before he hid it with a look of professional patience.

“I’m terribly sorry,” he said, eyes sharp but words soft, “but the clinic is closed for the day. Unless this is an emergency? Only, I don’t see any animals.”
Stiles bit his tongue to stop the automatic sarcasm rolling from his lips, and breathed in deeply through his nose, settling himself.

“I’m here about a wolf problem.” Stiles liked to think that was just the right mix of subtlety and obviousness, with a hint of serious business. Deaton seemed to agree, for the look in his eyes became shrewd, calculating. Even so, he didn’t seem eager to play along.

“I’m sorry? There aren’t any wolves in California. And if there are, that sounds like a problem for someone else.”

Stiles huffed out a breath, not quite a laugh, something darker and uneasy. He narrowed his eyes and stepped away from the closed door, coming further into the room. If Deaton was infuriating to be around when he was actively trying to help, it was a million times worse when he was playing ignorant.

“Didn’t you hear? Some poor girl got ripped in half by a wolf. Don’t you think you should do something about that?”

Deaton took a step back for every forward motion Stiles made, but it wasn’t out of fear. Deaton didn’t smell afraid. He knew exactly what was happening, he just didn’t want to be a part of it.

“I did hear. Very unfortunate. But that’s more animal control’s problem. There’s nothing I can do about it.”

Stiles snarled, feral and not-all-human. An uncomfortable itch spread across his face, a light burning-tingling-tickling sensation that he’d grown to despise. Sharp teeth pressed against his lower lip. His eyes burned.

Deaton allowed himself the surprise this time, but there was still a distinct lack of fear that made Stiles’ more primal, animalistic side very, very angry.

“Tell me how to kill a werewolf,” Stiles demanded, voice low and angry and rumbling. Talking around his fangs was hell, but he’d worry about having riled himself into wolfling out later. “People are dying and you’re doing nothing to help.”

Deaton frowned at him, all pretenses dropped for the time being, a very serious and grave look upon his face.

“Even if I were to help, I don’t know as much about these murders as you seem to presume I do. I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“Peter Hale!” Stiles hissed, curling his fingers beneath the examination table, grasping tight to the metal to keep himself still. “Give me wolfsbane, do something!”

“Dear boy, whoever you are, you’re in no state to be going after an alpha.”

Blind fury rolled over Stiles. His claws broke through the metal table. He clenched his eyes shut and breathed deeply through his mouth, trying to focus on scents other than those emanating from Deaton.

When he dared to, he opened his mouth, poised to say something else, but decided not to bother. He barely had the presence of mind to push away the shift before hurrying back to his jeep. It had not been a successful day.

oOoOo
Stiles shut himself in his room when he got home, still fuming somewhat from his trip to the animal clinic. If Deaton wouldn’t help him he’d have to do it himself.

Pulling together a mental profile of all the scattered things Stiles knew about Peter Hale had, however, brought him to some startling revelations. Things he’d mostly forgotten about, things that would never have been relevant except, it seemed, for in this very situation.

Memories. They were the key to everything.

Peter had had memories locked away, taken from him. Torn from his mind by his alpha, Derek’s mother. They’d only been returned to him through her claws.

Stiles could use that.

It was crazy. He shouldn’t even be considering it. But the prospect was an enticing one. To forget about everything, forget about the future, the alternate timeline, whatever. To not have to remember the deaths of all those people, ones he did and didn’t care for, lives that had been lost occasionally even because of him. To forget everything he ever knew about the supernatural, save for the things this Derek had already told him, the things this timeline had taught him.

It could solve everything. The anxiety, the nightmares, the secret-keeping (well, most of it).

The biggest problem there would be catching Peter in a relatively sane moment and begging the alpha to take his memories from him. Resurrected Peter would probably refuse on the basis that Stiles had suddenly become interesting. He’d utilise his entire arsenal of creep-factor to tear every secret from Stiles’ lips until there was nothing left and Peter knew all the things that were going to happen over the next thirteen or so months.

This Peter… was probably more or less the same, actually. There was also a chance that, since Stiles was Peter’s beta, technically, Peter might use his loss of memory to enact some weird mind-control/alpha domination thing to bend Stiles’ newly altered self to his will.

Stiles didn’t know how it worked, exactly. How much of his memories would be taken away. If he would even have any say in it, if Peter agreed. He could become a slave, murdering people to please his bloodthirsty alpha.

Stiles shuddered, violently, a repulsed shiver racing up his spine. Okay, okay, bad idea, definitely a bad idea. Stiles had had more than enough mind-control for one lifetime, thank you very much.

He sighed, hanging his head in his hands.

Back to Ground Zero once more.

A voice from the hallway startled him.

“Stiles, the school called. Said you didn’t turn up today. Is everything okay?”

Stiles glanced up from his desk, shaken from his spiralling thoughts. He’d been so deep he hadn’t heard his dad’s car in the driveway, let alone his footsteps on the stairs. He wrinkled his nose, uncomfortable with that realisation, because it made him vulnerable.

When he spun his chair around to face the doorway, he didn’t bother trying to disguise the somewhat distraught expression he figured was splayed across his face.

“I ah, heard about the, ah, the bus driver.” He couldn’t get “murder” past his lips today. It made
everything feel too real, a flood of one death after another in his head. “I couldn’t – didn’t want to – be there.” Stiles gestured at his nose for good measure, because he couldn’t imagine the smell of death being anything other than nauseating at best.

His dad’s posture softened as he leaned against the doorframe, but he didn’t come into the room. He didn’t say anything else, either. But Stiles could read into his silence. Have you talked to Scott yet? Yes. About werewolves? No. Are you okay? I will be, eventually.

Stiles didn’t answer any of them aloud, letting his dad take what he would from his own silence.

The Sheriff left as silently as he arrived, but this time Stiles listened to his every footstep, tracking him through the house until he settled in the kitchen. Stiles swore not to get so caught up in his thoughts again, because that level of vulnerability, now that he was a werewolf, was unacceptable.

oOoOo

Stiles did, with some reluctance, return to school the next day. Scott was torn somewhere between incessant hovering and running for the hills, despite, or perhaps because of, Stiles' non-committal acceptance of his sort-of-apology over the phone. It was sort of infuriating because, even if they didn’t care, with Scott acting like that everyone could tell something was wrong.

Erica was blessedly silent about the whole thing, unashamedly blocking Scott from conversation for half of lunch whenever Stiles started looking uncomfortable, because Scott was a worrywart and couldn’t keep his mouth shut for long and Stiles still hadn’t decided, damn it, so it wasn’t fair.

Stiles was pretty sure he caught Lydia eyeing them from across the cafeteria at one point, though it might have been wilful thinking on his behalf, spurred on by what Danny had said.

All in all, aside from relationship angst, his day was relatively normal. At least, it was until he went to his locker after school ended and found a note had been slipped into it.

The Legends of Beacon Hills, the note read, along with an author Stiles had never heard of. That was bad enough. But Stiles would bet money on it being in Danny’s handwriting.

He shoved the note in his pocket and resolved to worry about it once he was home, away from prying eyes.

oOoOo

Stiles pinned the note to the wall and stared at it.

A quick google search had revealed that it was, indeed, a real book, not that he had ever doubted that. The question remained: why?

Danny was front and centre in Stiles’ mind now. He had become this whole new anomaly all of a sudden and Stiles just wasn’t sure how to handle it.

In retrospect, it made sense that the old Danny, the Danny he’d left behind, knew about the supernatural. Stiles had long ago come to the conclusion that it was very difficult to date a werewolf and not gather at least some information about them along the way. He might not have known Ethan very well – or, like, at all really – but in the end Stiles hadn’t doubted that the omega cared about Danny, and he wouldn’t put it past him to just tell Danny everything.

But that didn’t explain the here and now. The Danny that had never even met Ethan, let alone loved him.
Danny didn’t knowingly know any supernatural beings (to the best of Stiles’ knowledge), but he certainly knew something. Or at least he thought he did. And all Stiles wanted to do was pick his brain, to understand, to reach through the haze and see, but how?

There was zero chance Stiles was just going to walk up to Danny and demand to know what his deal was. Not only would he probably get laughed at, but he didn’t want to risk messing up the balance between what Danny knew, what he assumed, and what he had no idea about. That wasn’t to say Stiles thought Danny would be a bad accomplice, not at all, but he’d rather no one else got involved if they didn’t have to.

He wanted so badly to know where Danny fit into all of this, where he sat in the big picture, but there was just no way to find out. Hell, he didn’t even know if the book was a suggestion or a threat. Danny didn’t seem like the subtle threat kind of guy – Stiles imagined he’d be a lot more in your face about it if he knew something he was actually going to use as blackmail material – but assumptions just weren’t enough to go on anymore.

This was all driving him nuts! Deaton refused to aid him and Derek with Peter. Danny had jumped up to Mystery Number One. And his timeline was probably getting further and further off course the longer Stiles stayed close-lipped about everything, because no one was going to slip up to Chris Argent about something nobody knew.

He needed help. He needed advice. He needed…

Miss Morrell.
Going around behind Derek’s back like this probably wasn’t the best way to cement pack ties or whatever, but Stiles couldn’t afford to wait around until Derek made up his stupid wolfy mind. God knows where he even intended to get his ‘advice’ from.

It was his best, and currently only, plan in figuring out what to do with Peter. Last time was a group effort. This time he needed to be able to accomplish it alone.

Miss Morrell had been surprised to see him, because Stiles had never shown any inclination to sign himself up for a counselling session before, but even that was a hell of a lot more welcoming than Deaton. Stiles was also calmer today, with the lack of sneaking and subterfuge involved in acquiring this particular meeting. He reckoned he could control himself, and act rationally this time around.

Previous experience had also shown that bluntness was definitely the way to go with her. Marin made no particular effort to hide her knowledge, not like Deaton did, and showing he knew what he was talking about sounded like the path of least resistance. He just needed a second opinion, someone to tell him he was doing the right thing. And he knew she would advocate death over leniency.

So he settled himself in the chair, trying not to let the thought of school counselor overwhelm his rational for being there. Morrell sat opposite him. Stiles’ gaze flicked to the door to her office, closed but not locked. He shrugged. If she felt the extra security was needed once he started talking, she’d do something about it.

“So, Stiles, how can I help you today?”

Stiles spat out the words before he had a chance to rethink them.

“I was hoping for advice about a wolf problem.”

Morrell frowned at him. Her gaze was contemplative, scrutinising, and Stiles tried to be open to it. He needed her advice, and she had to know he was serious. After a long moment she twisted in her seat, setting her pen down on her desk. Stiles watched as she stood, flicking the lock and pulling the shade down over the glass pane in the door.

That was how he knew she understood.

When she returned to her seat the air around her changed. Gone was the French teacher, the guidance counselor, and in her place sat the druid, the supernatural guru.

“Can I assume you’re asking in reference to the recent deaths that have been attributed to animal attacks?”

“More or less, yeah.” Stiles tried to make himself comfortable in the chair for what was bound to be a less than pleasant conversation.

Morrell smiled thinly, as though his reaction answered several of her questions that she hadn’t even asked.
“Okay then Stiles, what can I do for you?”

“Preferably, advice on how to kill a crazy alpha. How to do that and not become an alpha would also be great, but I kind of feel like that part’s unavoidable.”

“I see. Well, I certainly won’t be sad to see the county’s current wolf issue dealt with. They’re starting to draw unwanted attention. Did you have any thoughts in mind?”

She was still treating this like counselling, a calm give and take. Stiles didn’t want to be coddled, he just wanted answers. But he should at least be grateful she hadn’t dismissed him the moment he opened his mouth.

“Ideally I’d go into it with back-up. One against one is the riskiest way to head into it, but it’s also probably my only option.” He thought about Peter, and the mixed feelings he had towards this whole thing. Tried to ignore the thought that post-resurrection Peter might actually have made a fairly decent alpha. To quash the discomfort he felt about the idea of destroying such an invaluable information source. He wanted to say fire, but that was too vindictive. Stiles was tired of being vindictive.


A slight frown wrinkled her lips when Stiles said ‘permanently’. Belatedly he realised that probably hadn’t been the best way to phrase it to avoid raising suspicion.

“Well, dead is what we’re aiming for here. Any sort of wolfsbane to the heart and there’s no coming back. If you aimed right, it would be fairly instantaneous, and also incredibly painful. As I’m sure you’re no doubt aware, werewolves can be killed the same way as humans for the most part, although it may require more force. Beheading,” Stiles cringed, “excessive blood loss, anything to the heart, wolfsbane or no. Most poisons. Drug overdose – though only the high-grade stuff, no over the counter medication. But I think you already know most of this. What you’re really here for is permission.”

Stiles refused to meet her gaze, staring pointedly towards the door. He heard her sigh.

“I don’t know why you’d come to me for this reassurance, Stiles. I’m in no real position to give it to you. I can only offer my honest opinion. Whoever is out there needs to be stopped. And the best solution is often the most permanent one. Death is a natural part of life, and it comes for some sooner than it does to others. The fate of this life rests in your hands, and that may seem like a heavy burden for a teenager. All you can do is follow your instincts, and deal with the fallout, however it may come.”

“I see,” Stiles mumbled softly.

Morrell sat back in her chair, hands folded in her lap. Stiles shifted self-consciously, their discussion technically at an end, but not yet having been dismissed.

“There’s something else,” she commented lightly. She wasn’t pushing, which Stiles found a little surprising. She was being purely observational now. “The alpha has certainly been plaguing your mind, but it’s not the only thing you wanted to talk about, regardless if it was the only thing you wanted to discuss with me.”

Stiles bit his lip, unsettled, because how could she tell? It didn’t take a genius to guess she was talking about his whole identity crisis regarding being from the freaking future. That knowledge in
itself never went away, always at the edge of his awareness, even as the details got blurry around the edges. But was it written so plainly across his face?

Morrell laughed into his panicked silence. It wasn’t a pleasant sound. Wasn’t cheerful. It was biting. Cynical. This was not the guidance counselor, this was the druid, the ex-emissary, the woman whose life was littered with darkness and murder. Who could use her skills in psychology to pluck supernatural secrets from the set of his shoulders and the frown lines in his face.

Stiles jumped to his feet, now armed with knowledge and ideas but incredibly uncomfortable. He mumbled under his breath, intending to say something to Morrell, but likely not getting any audible words out. He turned the lock on the door with fingers that shook only slightly, and slipped out into the hallway without glancing back.

If the wolves didn’t kill him, the druids certainly would.

oOoOo

Stiles had managed to worm his appointment in at second period, which was both a good and a terrible thing. It was good, because Stiles had had all his questions plain in his mind since he’d been turning them over in his head from the moment he woke up. They were fresh, and he hadn’t given himself too much time to get worked up about dealing with Miss Morrell and her sometimes unsettling bluntness – she was a realist, far more so than Deaton, but she was also incredibly tuned towards violence. It was terrible because everyone – okay, not everyone, but everyone that mattered – knew where he’d been, and they all wanted to know why.

Scott was still walking on eggshells around him, no longer certain what sort of things might set Stiles off again after their fight and sort-of reconciliation. That couldn’t quell the curiosity though, Stiles could see it in the way he sat, in the way Scott looked at him as he picked at his food.

Erica asked him if he’d had a psychotic break. It was said in jest, and he laughed, but it must have seemed half-hearted to them, because Erica didn’t seem reassured at all. If anything, Stiles would bet she was beginning to wonder if he actually had had some sort of break.

He ran his hand over his head in frustration, because they already thought something was wrong. He was supposed to be acting normal, not depressed. Sure, that was probably an easy out – counselling over some recent emotional trauma that was making him snappish and out of sorts – but Stiles was adamantly burning that bridge before he fell to the temptation of taking it. He wasn’t going to pile fake depression on top of every other problem on his plate.

The whisper in his mind that the depression might not be as fake as he claimed was stubbornly ignored as he sunk his teeth somewhat viciously into an apple.

“You know,” Stiles said, bluntly refusing to discuss the topic any further – or at all, “Scotty, you’re allowed to go hang with Allison, I hope you realise. There’s no law that says you have to spend all your lunches with us. Erica and I’ll be fine.” He added the last part as Scott’s face began to turn towards that guilty sadness and puppy dog eyes he liked so much. “She’s never going to be won over by the McCall Charm if you spend all your time with us.”

Stiles could see Erica’s calculating gaze out of the side of his eye, but he ignored it, since she hummed in affirmation all the same.

Scott stared at them from across the table, partially offended, partially looking for permission. Scott really was transparent when it came to matters of the heart.
Erica batted her hand at him in a shooing motion. “Run along lover boy, Batman and I’ll cope just fine without you sitting there pining away.”

Scott stiffened a little at her dismissal. He didn’t have anything against Erica, but Stiles could tell he was still confused by her presence. But the draw of Allison was greater than any imagined slight from Erica, and he left without further coaxing.

Stiles let out a sigh of relief once Scott was out of earshot, and slumped back in his seat, staring up at the ceiling. It was hard to stay silent in front of Scott sometimes without feeling immensely guilty. And this was technically for Scott’s own good. It was true that he’d struggle to get in good with Allison if he was never around her outside of class.

And Erica let him brood. She was good like that. Better at sensing the mood than Scott was. He knew she was still curious, but she was good at reigning it in, none of her body language overtly questioning or wary.

He really had to thank her for that one of these days.

oOoOo

When someone knocked on the door, Stiles had sort of been expecting Derek – he was much more considerate at the moment and didn’t come storming in through his window whenever they needed to talk – or, less likely, Scott – who usually texted or would otherwise just use the spare key or barge straight into the house. Chris Argent hadn’t even been in the vicinity of that list. But there he was.

The door was only half open when Stiles considered slamming it shut in Argent’s face, but aggravating the hunter seemed like a bad way to start whatever this was. Instead, Stiles stood in the doorway and made no move to invite Chris into the house, trying to appear tough without exuding hey, I’m a werewolf.

Feigning ignorance, Stiles said, “Can I help you?”

Chris had both hands in his jacket pockets, so Stiles couldn’t tell if he was armed. He’d like to think positive – Chris wouldn’t be fool enough to march up to the Sheriff’s house, armed, and threaten his son. Right?

Stiles breathed deeply through his nose, but he couldn’t catch the gunpowder-and-metal scent he’d begun to associate with his father’s gun. There were other things though, that hung over Chris in a blanket, lingering scents that seemed almost-but-not-quite part of his own unique scent. It was probably a hunter smell. Stiles wished he had something to go off of to start identifying all the things Chris was probably carrying that had the potential to kill him.

Chris watched closely, indecisive but accusatory. Like he wanted to make a move, but didn’t have all the information. Like he wanted to confirm something, but wasn’t fool enough to attack the sheriff’s son in broad daylight.

Stiles kept the tips of his fingers carefully out of sight. Better safe than sorry.

“I saw you with the Hale boy last week.” Chris had always seemed like such a good actor to Stiles. Now though it fell flat. Maybe it was only because he knew what those undertones were saying now, but it was obviously far from regular adult concern about Stiles hanging out with an older delinquent (if Derek could even be called that). “Surely you can make better friends than that. Does your father know?”

“Does Allison know you’re out threatening her classmates?” Stiles shot back, avoiding the question.
Throwing Allison’s name into the mix was a touch-and-go move, because Stiles had barely spent any time in her general vicinity outside of their shared classes. He couldn’t even remember if he’d spoken to her at all, or if he’d just shoved Scott in her direction and never looked at her again. It was sad. Dangerous. He should touch base, at least once. Even now, when he spent too long thinking about it, talking to her felt like talking to a ghost.

Chris squared his shoulders. Stiles knew that was a bad move, going straight on the defensive like that. He took a deep breath, tried to settle himself. He gave what he hoped was an apologetic shrug.

“Sorry, it’s just, what right exactly do you have to be butting into my personal life? You’ve been here what, a month? And this is the first time we’ve spoken. Hell, I only know who you are because I’ve seen you picking Allison up from school, and this is how it goes? Is it just me or is that weird?”

Suspicion runs in your blood Stiles, he told himself, you’re the sheriff’s only kid. Play on that. Move it away from Derek. Hell, go full Stranger Danger. Get him away from the house.

Hesitation flooded Argent’s stance. The acrid tang in the air faded slightly, like someone putting a cap on a vial. But then the hesitation was gone once more.

“I don’t know how much you know, Mr Stilinski, but Derek Hale is bad news. My sister’s coming to town tonight, and us and him, we don’t really see eye to eye. If you know what’s best for you, you’ll steer clear of him.”

In other words, Stiles mentally translated, you stick with the werewolf, we’re going to treat you like one. You have been warned.

“Right, well.” Stiles hedged, throwing in an edge of bewildered anger and a dose of good old fashioned sarcasm. “That wasn’t weird or ominous or anything. I think you should maybe go. Now. Before I decide my dad should have an early night, if you catch my drift.”

If Stiles was reading him right, Argent was just the tiniest bit impressed about being threatened by a teenager who may or may not know he was running with a wolf. But he backed off, taking a pointed step back from the door while Stiles watched. Finally, he took his hands from his pockets. Chris held them up in a somewhat mocking show of submission, and stalked away with a muttered farewell.

Stiles slammed the door shut with more force than he intended, locking it behind him. There were several light claw marks in the wood that his dad would no doubt see when he left for work tomorrow, but it was inconsequential really. Chris was suspicious of him, and this time with valid reason. Logically he should have known flaunting his acquaintanceship with Derek to the school was a bad idea, but there had been more urgent things to worry about than drawing the attention of hunters.

Now he was on their radar in a bad way.

He slammed his fist into the door-frame, leaving a new indentation to join the claw marks.

He just couldn’t catch a break.

oOoOo

Stiles was a bit of a mess when the sheriff did make it home that evening. He was lost in thought, planning and panicking, back and forth and forth and back in his mind. So John didn’t ask him about the new dents in the entranceway, didn’t ask him about his day. A long road of trial and error had taught them both that, for the most part, when Stiles got like this it was safest to just let him exhaust himself, rather than trying to forcibly jolt him out of it.
By the time Stiles fell into a restless sleep around 3 in the morning his desk was littered in torn pages, tired scribbles listing half-hearted action plans for operation Let’s Kill Peter.

When he woke, he shoved them into a desk drawer and promptly forgot about them.


Stumbling across Derek half-conscious in the bushes outside the Stilinski house really put all of Stiles’ plans on the backburner. With how little time he’d actually spent asleep last night it was a miracle he hadn’t heard Derek stumble his way there, but he guessed werewolf senses weren’t all that great when he reigned them all in to make way for a good think-sesh. He really needed to stop doing that.

Derek groaned at him, startlingly vulnerable in the dirt. Stiles could count the number of times Derek had been like this on one hand, and most of them had come during the Teen Derek Saga. Derek Hale and vulnerable didn’t go together. At all. Any vulnerability Derek might have felt was usually hidden deep down in the dark recesses of his mind, not splayed out in the open for everyone to see.

Stiles fought the shiver of discomfort that begged to break free and threw his bag back into the house. There was no way he was going to school when the only other (sane) werewolf in the county was delirious in front of him. He crouched down in front of the bushes and draped one of Derek’s arms over his shoulders. Thankfully he was still aware enough to hold his own weight, because werewolf or no Stiles didn’t relish the thought of hefting that much dead weight up the stairs.

Stiles kept Derek straight on his feet and did all the steering for the both of them. He closed the front door with his elbow and briefly considered just leaving Derek on the couch. Unfortunately his dad kept a rather unpredictable schedule as of late, and discovering Derek passed out on the couch was not how he wanted that particular revelation to go down.

As they stumbled up the stairs together, Stiles took the time to take a sensory inventory. Derek’s scent had become something familiar as of late, clinging faintly to his jeep, to some of his clothes, a lingering sensation of wolf that wasn’t quite pack, but was comforting nonetheless. Right now, though, his scent seemed off, somehow. Sharp. A little acrid. In fact, the scent was a little reminiscent of something he’d noticed when Chris was around, but hadn’t been able to put a name to.

Stiles swore violently as everything came crashing together in realisation.

Chris had told him, warned him even, that Kate was coming to town. Derek smelled like a hunter, like wolfsbane, and Stiles had only ever seen him like this once, when Derek asked him to cut off his fucking arm and he was not doing that again, oh no.

Stiles dropped Derek face-first on his bed. He pushed the panic to the back of his mind, and forcefully rolled Derek onto his back, tearing the sleeve of his Henley right off. And there it was, just like he remembered it, the bullet wound and the bulging black veins full of wolfsbane.

The scent was even stronger up close, so Stiles breathed through his mouth as he inspected Derek’s arm. His fingers on Derek’s skin seemed to rouse the older werewolf, and Derek pushed him away, struggling to sit up. Stiles didn’t offer to help, knowing it would only embarrass Derek, regardless of the fact he’d been poisoned.

For a long moment Derek didn’t speak, propping himself up against the wall, and gazing with a certain intensity at Stiles’ back. Stiles was rummaging around in his closet, looking for his most inconspicuous clothes for the break-in he was inevitably going to have to facilitate.
But – his hands paused their motions – he wasn’t supposed to know that yet. He half turned, looking over his shoulder at Derek. “So, uh, what’s even happening here? Because I don’t think my house is really kitted out to be your makeshift hospital, and you don’t look so great.”

Derek scowled, and the tight band of pressure around Stiles’ chest loosened somewhat, because if Derek was scowling at him like that then everything was still fine. For now.

“Hunters,” he growled out. “They got me last night.” Derek lifted a hand that trembled minutely and rested it gingerly next to the bullet wound. “Wolfsbane laced bullets.”

Stiles pulled on a dark hoodie over his shirts, ignoring for the moment that he was going to overheat, and turned fully back to face the bed. He leaned against the closet door and shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans, trying to convey something between confusion and concern.

“I thought Chris was the only hunter in town?”

“Not anymore.”

Stiles nodded thoughtfully, accepting that Derek wouldn’t want to tell him about Kate or why he knew who she was.

“Noted. So, you’re obviously sick now. How do we fix that?”

“I need you to get one of the bullets for me.”

And here comes the breaking and entering. Stiles bit his lip, thinking hard. He didn’t think he’d ever actually been inside the Argent house before. He was so instantly caught up in his planning that he barely noticed when Derek kept talking.

“I… sorry for dragging you into this. I’m putting you in danger.”

Stiles gaped openly, mouth open in shock. This cooperative Derek, the tiny undertones of compassion and worry, kept surprising him out of the blue. He’d been fully prepared to be stonewalled at every turn by this Derek, but he kept being proved wrong.

Stiles’ mouth moved before he had a chance to think about it.

“Shut up. Don’t talk like that. Like you’re a burden. You’re like, my mentor or something. You can’t be going and dying on me. What am I supposed to do then? So yeah. Going to the Argent house is crazy. But this?” He gestured between them. “This does not end today. Not on my watch.”

He blushed a little, embarrassed for letting his affectionate camaraderie for the old Derek ride through so thickly in the face of this new one. Derek seemed just as shocked as Stiles had been moments before, though he hid it better. It was an awkward moment of open emotion that neither of them were really in the state to deal with.

“Anyway,” Stiles continued, clearing his throat. “I’m just going to go then. If for some reason my dad comes home, just be quiet and pretend you aren’t here. If he finds you, well, I’ll deal with that when I get back. No dying while I’m gone.”

Jumping out the window would have made for a more dramatic exit, but Stiles was no drama queen, and he was adamant he wasn’t going to develop the same attachment for sneaking through windows that the others had.

On the way down the stairs Stiles sent off a quick text to his dad, “code gold, don’t worry.” They’d
Devised it a few days ago, a quick way to let John know when Stiles needed to run out on something for werewolf related reasons. There was no way he was getting to school today, and shy of telling his dad he was skipping school to break into someone’s house, this was the best way to tell him what was going on.

He locked the door behind him – no real obstacle if Kate came after Derek, god forbid, but it made him feel a little better. His jeep was noisy, which wasn’t great for covert stuff like this, but he didn’t feel like running across town either, so he compromised and parked a good two streets away from Allison’s house.

Initially he’d been on the verge of running late for school, and that could only work in his favour now. Hopefully.

He staked out the house for a long while, honing all his focus on that single house. It was hard, trying to separate out the heartbeats from the surrounding houses, but he stayed still, calm. He had plenty of time at his disposal. All he needed to worry about was not getting caught.

He kept his hearing focused as much as he could, but when he was certain the house was empty, he snuck in the back.

Everything in the Argent house had a faint scent of wolfsbane, lingering not on the objects themselves but in the air. Stiles supposed he shouldn’t have been surprised to think Chris carried wolfsbane with him wherever he went. Victoria probably did too. It confused his sense of smell, but he tried to put it aside.

It took longer than he would have liked to scout out Kate’s bedroom, with half his attention on the road outside, and the other half mostly concerned with making sure he didn’t touch or move anything that might be noticed. Maybe he was being a little too careful – Kate was going to notice the missing bullets after all. But paranoia was perhaps his strongest suit of all, now, and he couldn’t just ignore it at the drop of a hat.

He tried not to feel bad about going through Kate’s things. She was, after all, a ruthless murderer, and the cause of so very much distress over the last year. Tension kept his movements precise. He counted the time in his head as he searched.

Stiles heard a car pull up outside the house just as he found Kate’s bullet stash. He moved instinctively. He grabbed a couple of bullets, shoved them in his pocket, and flung everything back where he’d found it.

He slipped out of Kate’s window as the key turned in the front door.

**oOoOo**

Derek was asleep when Stiles made it back. He roused him with a firm shake, dropped one of the bullets and a lighter in his lap, and disappeared back downstairs.

He had two more wolfsbane bullets in his pocket, and he needed to decide what to do with them, preferably before the day was done.

Chapter End Notes
Minor edits 26/11/16

I jump between Marin and Morrell the same way I jump between Chris and Argent - randomly, and for no particular reason.

Sorry it's taken this long to get it out. I've been super regretting mentioning Morrell last chapter because that was such a bitch to write. If I ever do a proper plot-revision sort of story edit, I'm probably going to ditch this part, but for now it is what it is.

Sorry for all the weirdness this chapter, and the weak ending, I just wanted it finished.

You should follow me on tumblr and watch me flounder through writing, and you can talk to me about my fics, or about season 5, or yell at me when I'm being a slow-poke
Derek trailed downstairs almost an hour after Stiles returned home.

He’d taken Stiles’ absence as permission to use his shower, once he’d gotten his strength back, and Stiles couldn’t say he blamed him. After cradling the bullets in his hands for half an hour he’d developed a certain itch that made him want to scrub his hands vigorously with hot water until his skin was raw. He imagined Derek had wanted to wash away all that remained of the very thing that had nearly killed him. The scent of soap clinging to him masked almost all of the lingering wolfsbane tang.

Now that the tension and adrenaline of the Death Countdown were gone, Derek seemed decidedly put out. He wore hesitancy and uncertainty like a second skin, with a mask of disinterest and frustration that did little to hide anything else. He leaned against the wall opposite where Stiles was sitting, arms folded across his chest. He looked a little ridiculous, wearing his Henley with only one sleeve, but it wasn’t like Stiles had any shirts that would fit Derek anyway. He’d be home and changed before anyone else managed to get a glimpse of him like that.

Derek looked predictably uncomfortable for the long minute that passed where neither of them said a thing. For once Stiles didn’t feel the need to break the silence, to talk his mouth off just to fill the air. It was strange, because Derek wasn’t uncomfortable because Stiles wasn’t talking, not in the way he would have been, he was simply uncomfortable in that stupid emotionally stunted way of his that surfaced whenever he needed saving. Whenever he had been saved.

And that should have been normal, should have been a relief, but it only made Stiles wearier. Because this, all of it, was so very tiring. He was changing from the person he knew himself to be, and he didn’t know how to stop it, how to bring himself back from whatever depths he was falling into.

Eventually the silence became too much, or Derek managed to string together some thoughts in his head that weren’t going to come out snappish and ungrateful, because he shifted against the wall and opened his mouth.

“They didn’t see you, did they?”

Stiles was going to take that as concern, and not potential anger.

“No one was home, and I snuck out the back.” Stiles rubbed his fingers along the arm of the couch. It would only be a lie of omission, but it wasn’t something that needed to be omitted or danced around. He stared at the fabric of the couch, and not Derek, as he, for once, told the complete truth. “Allison’s dad though, Chris. He, well, he doesn’t know anything, but he suspects. I’m not sure if he thinks I’m a werewolf or just that I’m in the know, but it’s probably because he saw us together at school.”

Stiles chanced a glance over at Derek. He looked almost pained. It took all of about three seconds for Stiles to process the potential self-loathing going on and he rushed to amend the implication.

“I’m not saying it’s your fault. Knowing my luck it would have happened one way or the other, sooner or later.” He hadn’t forgotten those baseless accusations from last time around, everyone
assuming he was the werewolf when it was so blatantly Scott.

Derek ran a hand across his face. He still appeared haggard, wrecked by his brush with death, but threats to his life had never been much of a deterrent to Derek.

“I shouldn’t have dragged you into this,” he said, throwing back to his fevered protests, biting and bitter.

“Okay, first? I barged my way into your life, not the other way around. He would have seen us together eventually, especially if he has any inclination towards keeping an eye on you. I can deal with suspicion, I’m a mouthy ADHD kid who knows exactly which buttons to push to piss people off. It wouldn’t be the first time. And if you’re still worried about today, well, it’s like I said: no one’s dying on my watch, end of story.”

Stiles threw in a weighted stare of his own, daring Derek to throw his hospitality back in his face. Surprisingly, Derek backed down, though with obvious reluctance, mouth pressed into an unhappy line. Stiles counted it as an unexpected win, and tried to make himself more comfortable.

Silences seemed to be their thing now. Another one threatened to overtake them. Derek was beginning to look ready to bolt at any moment when Stiles grasped hold of a different thread of conversation.

“I want to tell my dad. About you. And how you’re a part of the Full Moon Gang.”

Derek huffed at the name, but didn’t immediately spit out a protest. Instead, he just asked “Why?”

“For simplicity’s sake! Don’t you think this whole thing would be easier if we weren’t sneaking around behind his back? But I won’t tell him if you don’t want me to – it’s your life.”

As usual, Stiles was left wondering if he’d pushed too hard or had given too much leeway as Derek pondered the proposition. It had always been a perilous line to walk, coaxing agreement from Derek on certain topics without setting him off into an instant denial.

“He’ll be less likely to try and arrest you for lurking places you aren’t meant to lurk and just being generally shady, as you so often are, if he knows it’s for supernatural reasons,” Stiles added, for good measure.

“I do not lurk,” Derek bit out, but the line of his shoulders relaxed, and he shrugged a little. “But if you think it’ll help, go ahead. I trust you won’t spread the information carelessly.”

The ‘Because no one’s come after me yet’ echoed oddly in Stiles’ head, the implication intentional or not. Because Derek had every and yet no reason to trust Stiles. Stiles had saved his life, Stiles would be implicating himself as well if he told anyone. Stiles had stopped giving out his trust so easily a long time ago – it was strange that he often found himself thinking he might just be even bitterer than this Derek now.

“Awesome,” he said instead, clapping his hands together and entwining his fingers, not sure where to go from there.

That seemed to indicate the end of their conversation, or perhaps he just didn’t want to stick around until another one started up. Derek left before Stiles could pluck up the courage to tell him about the bullets, and the shaky outlines of plans he had for Peter. He wasn’t sure whether to be thankful or distressed about it.

oOoOo
Stiles should have known his dad was going to want to talk about his supernatural emergency when he got home. He had basically given Stiles a free pass to skive off school whenever he needed to, and he needed to make sure Stiles wasn’t abusing that privilege.

To be fair, Stiles had contemplated heading into school around lunchtime to attend his afternoon classes, but had decided it would just raise more questions. He could make his dad understand that.

Only it felt like his dad had barely made it in the front door before he started asking questions, and all of a sudden it was as though he hadn’t spent half the day waiting for this precise conversation.

Stiles waved his dad into the kitchen when he opened his mouth, and grabbed a coke and a beer from the fridge, setting them on the table with a thud that betrayed his nervous agitation. John raised an eyebrow at the beer; Stiles had never been one to encourage any sort of alcohol consumption, preferring to stare disapprovingly if he ever went past three bottles or a couple glasses of whiskey.

“That bad?” John asked as Stiles sat down.

Stiles bristled, opening his can with more force than necessary.

“Derek nearly died today,” he blurted out. “If that doesn’t qualify as bad then I don’t know what does.”

John sighed, apparently realising that there was a lot more going on – again – than he realised. He twisted the cap off his beer but didn’t take a sip.

“It’s probably best if you start at the beginning kiddo.”

“I know.” Stiles nodded decisively, wrapping his fingers tightly around the cold can. The words refused to come, however.

“Okay,” John encouraged gently, “how about we start with Derek. Derek who?”

That was simple. Stiles licked his lips and said “Hale. Derek Hale. He came back to town looking for his sister, and, well, you know.” He twirled his hand in the air.

“And the two of you are friends now? I wasn’t aware you were acquainted.”

“I wouldn’t exactly call us friends,” Stiles hedged. His hand fell back to the table. “More like… pack.”

He glanced up silently at his dad, watching as the term processed. John took a sudden gulp of beer, an indecipherable look on his face.

“So, what you’re trying to tell me is that Hale is a werewolf too?”

Stiles ignored the way his dad still stumbled uncertainly over the word werewolf.

“Yeah, pretty much.”

John sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“I’ll deal with that later,” John murmured. “What on earth happened to lead to his near demise? Or were you being melodramatic again?”

“I am never melodramatic!” Stiles protested. He paused with his hand hovering above the table, motion hastily aborted before he smacked the table top, which would have ruined his point. His
shoulders slumped. “Okay. So we’ve established the baseline. Werewolves are real. But here’s the thing. There are also Hunters. People who fight against supernatural creatures. From what I understand they’re supposed to be more of peace keepers than ruthless murderers, but, well, some of them are sort of trigger happy.”

“He was shot? Couldn’t he just report it to the Sheriff’s Station?”

“No, dad, he couldn’t. Wouldn’t. Probably shouldn’t. If it had just been normal bullets he would have been fine. He was shot in the arm. He could have just dug the bullet out and his arm would have healed no problem. The lack of wound really sort of ruins any evidence in his favour for a police report. That would have been a non-issue, really. Werewolf healing is pretty intense. But the Hunters, they know our biological weaknesses, can poison us at the drop of a hat. That’s what happened to Derek. Poison. Wolfsbane messes with our ability to heal. It gets into your bloodstream, into your heart, and you’re dead.”

John frowned at him across the table. It occurred to Stiles that he wasn’t simply rehashing the events of the day; he was letting his dad in on a whole new world full of things that wanted to – and easily could – kill his only child. Maybe this hadn’t been such a great idea after all. But he needed to get to the end.

“But Hale’s fine now?”

“More or less. He’ll sleep it off, or run it off, or whatever grouchy people like him do when recovering from near death experiences. He’s not exactly a bucket of sunshine at the best of times, but I guess a little leeway has to be allowed under dire circumstances.”

“So no one’s died today?”

“Not that I know of, no.”

“Well, I suppose that’s a relief then.” John shifted in his seat. “There’s obviously more to this story, but I’m wary about how much more I want to know. I’m probably going to regret asking, but… do you know who shot Derek?”

Stiles nodded. He glanced down at the table, then back up. “It was Kate Argent.”

The name apparently didn’t ring any alarm bells, but his dad took it in without comment.

“I’ll keep an eye on her. Is there anything else you wanted to talk about?”

Stiles paused, biting his lip. The rest of the story sat impatient on the tip of his tongue, waiting to be told now that he’d started the ball rolling. It would be so easy to just let it all out. To tell him about Chris and his thinly veiled threats. About Peter, and his numerous crimes. To let his dad deal with his alpha in whatever way the law could manage when it was based on supernatural powers and hearsay. But no. That was dangerous. He’d never approve. It would never work. It wasn’t that simple.

How did that saying go? It was better to beg forgiveness than to ask permission.

Maybe he’d be begging for a long time, but at least they’d be safe. For the time being.

Stiles swallowed back the words, and took a long sip of coke to mask the silence. He drained the can, then offered his dad a weak smile that he was sure was more grimace than anything. John rounded the table, resting a commiserating hand on Stiles’ shoulder.
“This stuff is all pretty out of my jurisdiction, and way out of my league to boot, but I can always lend an ear at least. I don’t want you getting in over your head, but something tells me it might already be too late for that. Just, promise me you’ll try and stay safe.”

The lie tasted like ash when Stiles said “I will.”

oOoOo

His dad was technically off duty this weekend, but he went down to the station anyway on Saturday morning, claiming there was paperwork he needed to catch up on. Stiles was pretty sure his deputies and the other officers were supposed to do their own paperwork, but it seemed his dad didn’t always trust them to fill it all out to his liking. Stiles used to hate that work ethic, but now it was frighteningly convenient.

It didn’t escape him that there was a possibility his dad was avoiding him. Stiles wouldn’t blame him. It was one thing to put on a brave face for an hour or two, pretend everything was fine, it was another thing entirely to come to grips with most of the things Stiles had divulged over the last few weeks. If he wanted to use work as an excuse, Stiles would let him. It was the least he could do after flipping his dad’s world upside down.

And with him down at the Station, Stiles was free to do as he pleased.

See, Stiles had a plan. Sort of. More or less. Half a plan. A bit of a plan. Either way, he needed some liquid wolfsbane, a needle and a syringe. Maybe some other stuff. It was a work in progress. If Stiles had learned anything about himself over the last few years it was that he wasn’t much of a forward planner – adrenaline and fear of death made for much better ideas than time and endless waiting.

Working at Deaton’s place would have been best, since that’s where he’d been learning the tricks of the trade – the druid trade that is, after much pestering – and it was fully stocked with things that were actually useful. But after their not so grand first encounter Stiles didn’t see breaking into the animal clinic as a viable option – Deaton might be a little more prepared to drug first and ask questions later if he continued to make a menace of himself. So he was breaking into the chemistry room at the high school instead. It wasn’t like he didn’t have plenty of practice with the whole B&E shebang.

In the end, a lot of it was a need to keep his hands busy, to be doing something even vaguely useful while he waited out the sun. There was no way he was going down there in the middle of the day, guns blazing, to kill someone. Even if that someone really kind of deserved it and it was for the greater good and all that crap.

He got some chemistry homework done too, to kill time, but it didn’t amount to much.

When it started getting late, he slunk home with a vial of essence of wolfsbane, and a lone bullet that was essentially useless without a gun to fire it. A heavy sense of expectation hung over him, weighing down every step.

It was nearly over.

oOoOo

Beacons Crossing was technically part of the hospital, and if there was one place Stiles hated being, it was hospitals. Even if he wasn’t sneaking through the dark of night towards his first solo pre-mediated murder (he wasn’t sure if he wanted to count Peter’s first death by fire or not), being near the place still would have made him anxious. It was instinctual.
It was late. Super late. Visiting time long over and emergency night-shift staff only late. If he checked his phone it’d be somewhere after midnight. He’d had to time it well so it was late enough that his dad wouldn’t be checking up on him in his room, but not so late that he risked still being out on the off-chance his dad was going to opt for an early morning either.

Creeping through the quiet hallways of the building wasn’t doing much for his nerves. Every time he heard footsteps coming in his direction he’d slip into the nearest room, wait them out, before returning to his careful trek towards Peter’s room. Even now, Stiles was unsure of himself. How could he not be? Peter was a veritable psychopath, but he was also a freaking encyclopedia. Stiles had never felt good about the destruction of knowledge. He’d try not to feel too guilty this time around though. He had experience now. Anything they needed to know, he’d find it somewhere. Peter didn’t matter.

Stiles slunk into Peter’s room with a certain sense of trepidation. It was a relief to see that he was even there. Seeing him lying so very still in his hospital bed was… unsettling, but at least he wasn’t on the prowl.

“Okay then,” Stiles muttered to himself, taking steadying breaths. He locked the door, flexed his fingers, forced down the fidgety anxiety.

Peter’s heartbeat was startlingly steady, suddenly coming in loud and clear. Stiles knew he was hyperaware, that he was allowing himself to get pulled in to focussing on a single sense, a single thing, and that he couldn’t keep lookout like that, but it was hard. He was no fan of senseless murder, and this wasn’t senseless, it was necessary and life-saving, but still. He was still ending a life. And, to him at least, it felt as though he should at least do Peter the courtesy of giving the alpha his full attention on his deathbed.

His certainty wavered as he fingered the vial of wolfsbane in his pocket. Was this going to fix anything? Was a wolf poisoning another wolf murder enough for a power transfer? What answer was Stiles even looking for?


He threw the syringe to the floor, crushed it underfoot. The vial he uncorked, pouring the contents over his hands, the tips of his fingers. He snarled, low, in the back of his throat, and crushed the now empty vial in his hand, watching impassively as the glass shattered, cutting his palm and healing over again. This was his resolution, his promise, his conviction.

Stiles padded silently to the head of Peter’s bed, staring down at the unresponsive man who had caused so much heartache in Stiles’ life. It was easy, in that moment, to forget about the consequences of what he was about to do. Really, this had been a long time coming.

His claws extended effortlessly, and he pressed the tips to the soft flesh of Peter’s throat.

“Just one more nightmare for the pile, right, o alpha mine?”

For the briefest millisecond, Stiles thought it was a shame Peter wasn’t awake to see this betrayal play out. Then he closed his eyes, dug his claws in, and wrenched his arm forward.

The scent of blood filled the air. Stiles’ heart began pounding wildly in his chest. He tried to ignore it, straining his ears for the fading sound of Peter’s pulse, blood dripping from his fingers.

When it was no more, Stiles forced himself to leave, one slow step after another.
He was undeniably a murderer now, but at what cost?

oOoOo

Stiles hadn’t been certain it would happen. Maybe, if he hadn’t been so desperate, so worried – if he hadn’t touched his claws to Peter’s flesh, had injected the wolfsbane like he planned – maybe then the power would have died with Peter.

But even now, locked in his bathroom, staring blankly at his deep red irises, hands steady but fingers shaking, he knew the risk wouldn’t have been worth it. Both the risk of Peter getting help before he could perish entirely, and the risk of the alpha power dissipating into nothingness. Stiles didn’t want it, not for himself, not to keep, but they needed an alpha, one way or another. He wasn’t about to let himself and Derek become a miserable pack of omegas. If this was how it had to be, for now, then so be it.

Stiles wasn’t entirely sure how he was supposed to hide it now, though. He’d been home for an hour and he hadn’t been able to turn his eyes off. The power flowed through him, unbidden, stronger and more unruly by far than what he’d already been dealing with. It was like the volume dial was broken now, he couldn’t dull his senses with a thought. Everything was full noise.

But that wasn’t all. Because on top of the eyes and the ears and the teeth just this side of too sharp cutting into his lips, on top of all that, there was a howling wolf inside of him, raging and wild. It wanted something, this newly empowered spirit, but Stiles didn’t know what, couldn’t understand it. It screamed and begged inside of him, pulling him this way and that, and he couldn’t make it shut up.

So he stood in his bathroom, watching himself in the mirror, caught between one moment and the next. He bit back the snarling edge to every exhale. Dug sharp nails into his palms. Tried every stupid meditation technique he’d ever seen mentioned anywhere in an attempt to calm the beast roaring in his chest, in the back of his mind.

The supernatural glow faded from his eyes eventually, but sleep wasn’t forthcoming. Stiles wasn’t even willing to chance it. He had little doubt that the blood on his hands – which he could still smell, could remember in exacting detail the warm fluid gushing from Peter’s throat – would trigger nightmares if he closed his eyes and gave in. Nightmares of Allison. Of every person who’d been wounded by his hands. Of those who hadn’t even been his fault. Of every death that had stained his high school years.

Right then, he was also afraid of himself. He’d been having nightmares for a long time; they were a familiar sort of enemy. But he had no control, over his body, over his reactions. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know what might happen if he gave himself over completely, if the wolf didn’t rest when he did. If there was ever a time for him to start sleep walking, Murphy’s Law would have that be now.

He couldn’t chance it. Not yet. Not so soon after everything that had happened.

But he wouldn’t be able to hold out forever.

Chapter End Notes

Been a while. I took a while off to focus solely on that minibang, but I could've had this chapter up before then if Peter wasn't so damned stubborn. The death was the last bit of
the chapter I wrote, so it probably doesn't fit right, probably feels a little off, out of place. But he's dead now. He's out of the way. I can worry about other things now. It'll be fine.

Minor edits 26/11/16
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

1) Sorry about the half-length chapter. I've been having a real hard time getting into it lately, so you're kind of getting a scene rather than a 4000-word chunk.

2) A couple of people have tagged this as Sterek in their bookmark tags, so I'd just like to set the record straight; this isn't going to be a Sterek fic. At the moment it's most likely to be gen.

Minor edits 27/11/16

There were claw marks on the edge of Stiles’ desk.

Coach was having a go at Greenburg – when wasn’t he – and that shouldn’t have been enough to set him off, it never had before, but now he was burning with some unexplainable fury, snarling quietly in the back of his throat. He’d always had minor problems with authority before - he didn’t like people telling him what to do, that was just who he was - but everything was spiraling completely out of hand.

Stiles had been having trouble all day, fighting off uncharacteristically violent responses to things that up until Sunday never used to bother him. It was probably a miracle he hadn’t completely wolfed out on anyone yet, but at this rate it was only a matter of time. His nails had elongated and strengthened without conscious thought, gouging marks where his fingers clenched at the desk’s edge; every breath caught briefly in his throat as he silenced the animalistic sounds which wanted to break free; and his eyes burned uncomfortably as he averted his gaze from the front of the room.

Coach was currently both the cause of his dilemma and his saving grace because, as usual, watching someone get chewed out was far more interesting to most of the class than actually thinking about economics or worrying about what anyone else was doing. No one paid his tense form any attention. Which would have been great about three days ago, but getting himself under control was no longer as easy as taking a few deep breaths and trying to be zen (and, actually, the whole zen thing could be super hard if anything happened in, like, 90% of his classes, but econ wasn’t usually one of them).

Regardless, Stiles took deep breaths, staring down at his desk. If he avoided eye contact with anyone, tried not to bite through his lip, and kept the tips of his fingers out of sight, he should be able to ride out the rest of class. He was… angry. But not at anyone or anything in particular, and other than the coiled tension in his muscles there was no instinctual feeling of action goading him on.

Score one for Stiles – he wasn’t about to flip out and kill someone.

It spoke volumes about the state his life had come to that that passed as a positive worth noting.

All in all though it was a half decent plan. Greenburg had really messed up on their last assignment, plus, from what Stiles had heard through the grapevine, there had been some incident during one of the most recent lacrosse practices, and Coach had probably been looking for a chance to vent his frustration for a while now (good thing Stiles was hardly an important member of the team, or Coach might just have been yelling at him instead). When he got worked up there was nothing anyone could really do but wait for him to run out of steam, and there was only, oh, fifteen more minutes left
of class. It ought to be distraction enough that no real work could be accomplished between the end of this argument and the end of the period. All Stiles had to do was keep his head down and hope he wasn’t asked any questions.

So, of course, that was when Danny, in the seat in front of him, knocked his pen off his desk with his elbow. Stiles twitched, a violent full-body shudder, when it hit the floor, the sound of hard plastic bouncing on linoleum rattling through him. It rolled to a stop next to his foot.

Normally he’d pick it up and hand it back, because Stiles was a nice person like that, and Danny was a friend – or teammate at any rate – and that was the sort of inconsequential nicety people who tolerated each other engaged in, only Stiles was mostly convinced that if he even attempted to pick the pen up he would snap it in half. Having to explain that didn’t seem appealing at any time, but the niggleing feeling inside of him that wanted to smash things and howl at the moon made it a particularly bad time for conversation. So he compromised.

With his foot, he nudged the pen out from underneath his desk, and guided it somewhat haphazardly towards Danny’s chair, where he was just starting to look back to locate it. The grate of the plastic scraping along the floor was loud in Stiles’ ears, but the sound was entirely inconsequential to everyone else, if they’d even noticed the pen go flying in the first place. He tapped the leg of Danny’s chair to draw his attention to it, not trusting himself to be able to accurately regulate the volume of his voice.

He thought he was safe. He caught the curve of Danny’s lips out of the corner of his eyes, slightly confused but mostly thankful as he leaned down to retrieve it. His gaze wandered, wondering if perhaps staring at the back of Danny’s head for the remainder of class might be his safest bet. And then, between one moment and the next, Stiles found himself staring straight into Danny’s eyes, the taller boy half-twisted in his seat and no longer jovial in the slightest.

Stiles watched Danny’s lips move, his voice a mere breath of a whisper but the words sharp in his ears.

“Your eyes are red,” Danny mouthed, and Stiles’ heart skipped a beat, skipped several perhaps (was he going to have a heart attack, after everything he’d been through, was this how it was going to end) because there was no way this could be happening, and why did he look so intense and not worried or freaked out or any of the myriad of things Stiles would probably feel if he saw unexplained glowing eyes.

There was a hand curled around his wrist, words pushing through the shock, assertive. It made the wolf bristle, but he clung to it. Instructions. That was something he could handle. Someone else taking control, just for a while.

“Calm down,” Danny whispered, “breathe.”

Razor-sharp canines dug into his lip. Stiles wanted to ask why, wanted to shrug him off and run away and maybe move countries while he was at it.

“Close your eyes,” Danny continued, unperturbed by the wild look Stiles was certain he probably had on his face, “Count to ten. I’ll make excuses for you. When you’re finished counting, leave. Find somewhere quiet. Don’t worry about your things.”

None if it was making any sense, but Stiles followed his instructions obediently, because Danny was ridiculously calm about this whole thing and it was a little bit infectious. He wasn’t in control, but he wasn’t losing control either. That was a decent middle ground that he’d cling to for now.
When he reached ten Stiles opened his eyes, pausing just long enough to catch a glimpse of a reassuring smile before bolting. His textbook ended up on the floor, and Coach’s confused shouts followed him down the hall, but for the moment he was finally out.

**oOoOo**

There really weren’t a ton of good places within school grounds for a jumpy werewolf to hide out, so Stiles turned to their old stomping ground, the boys’ locker room. It had housed many a werewolf meltdown, none of which were particularly good memories, but that’s what made it his automatic go-to place.

It was abandoned, as was usual outside of regular sports practice, and far enough away from the regular classrooms that he didn’t have to worry too much about people looking in on him. It was a blessing.

He collapsed in one of the shower cubicles, pressed himself against the cool tiles, and attempted to regulate his breathing.

Not for the first time, Stiles regretted his decision to head into school. He’d spent a frustrating amount of time over the last year or so keeping tabs on the werewolves in his life, and yet here he was, still over-estimating his own coping abilities. Exposure therapy was never the answer, even if it hadn’t been his intention when he forced himself out of the house.

Truth be told, Stiles was worried about Derek. Mildly terrified, actually. Because he hadn’t spoken to him in a few days, and he certainly never mentioned his plans to go all lone vigilante and murder the man’s uncle, and surely there was no way he didn’t know about what went down over the weekend, right? The authorities knew Derek was back in town, and therefore easily contactable, so even if he hadn’t had some werewolf epiphany about the shift in alpha ownership then the hospital or the Sheriff’s Department would have told him Peter was dead.

Derek was far from stupid. It was simple to put two and two together, especially with the rather brutal way Stiles had dragged his claws through-

For a moment, his vision swam. Right. Stiles had gotten so wound up that he’d forgotten he was trying not to think about the feel of hot blood rushing across his skin or the desperate gasping of a man who knew he was on death’s door but was unable to stop trying for one more breath, one more moment.

His claws, which had finally retracted back into regular nails, came back with a vengeance, cracking the tile beneath his palm.

This was counter-productive, all of it, every single line of thought that popped to the forefront of his mind, none of it was helpful, but he couldn’t just turn it off. Even back when the worst his mind could do to him was hey remember that super embarrassing thing you did two years ago, let’s replay that in surprising detail it had been impossible to shut it off, to twist his thoughts completely away from whatever thing he was avoiding that day.

Stiles sighed, long and low and wavering. Tilting his head back against the wall, he draped an arm across his eyes. “This is bullshit. I can’t believe Jackson wanted this.” He paused, snorted a short laugh; resisted the urge to smash his head against the wall repeatedly and with force. “Well, not this exactly, but dude, why. Guess I should be glad that Uncle McCreeperwolf could, once upon a time, take no for an answer.”

It wasn’t a comforting thought. Not really. It didn’t change the facts: that he’d killed a man (mostly)
in cold blood, even if it was, in the scheme of things, an easily forgivable act. Justifiable murder. For the greater good of Beacon Hills, perhaps.

He wondered if there would ever come a day where it didn’t make him at least a little sick to his stomach. He wondered what it would mean if that day ever arrived.

Stiles didn’t know how long he stayed like that, in the corner of the cubicle, eyes closed, breathing ragged. He only opened his eyes again, somewhat reluctantly at that, when he heard shuffling footsteps entering the room. Without the owner of the footsteps saying a single word, Stiles could tell it was Danny, though it was less from being familiar with how Danny smelled and more that Stiles’ bag smelled something like werewolf these days, and Danny was carrying it with him, as promised.

Danny was at the edge of the cubicle before Stiles could even decide if he should announce his presence or not. He was more perceptive than Stiles had ever given him credit for.

“I told Finstock you were ill. Naturally, he doesn’t want to be anywhere near you now, so he’s not issuing a detention or anything for running out like that.”

Danny didn’t sit down, choosing instead to lean against the edge of the cubicle. It was the laidback stance that kickstarted Stiles’ mind away from murder and guilt and back to Danny’s infuriating calm in the face of the unnatural.

Stiles stretched his legs out in front of him and stared up at Danny. “I don’t get you at all,” he said eventually, after allowing a certain silence to fall over them, in case Danny was about to break out into delayed confusion or terror.

If Danny was offended by the question, he didn’t show it. He just smiled a little, the sort of smile that told of secrets but also understanding, and said, “How so?”

Mentally exhausted, but more or less fully in control of himself once more, Stiles gestured somewhat helplessly at Danny, and then at himself, and finally at the space inbetween them. “You’re just too… calm, considering everything that’s happened today. Why are you not freaking out?”

“Because I’m a rational human being?” Danny offered lightly, before waving a hand as if to dismiss the statement. “I’m not going to say I’m not surprised. I am. Very surprised. Especially by the red. But I’ve long since come to terms with the fact that Beacon Hills is a weird place. People like you, the ones who have lived here all their lives, they’re very good at rationalising everything they see. They don’t notice things, not because they don’t see them, but because they don’t want to see them.”

“Acceptance and this ridiculous calm are different things though,” Stiles pointed out, more confused than he’d care to admit.

“Sure, that’s fair.” Danny shrugged. “Here on the Mainland everyone has very rigid ideas about what is and isn’t real, and they shut their eyes to anything that they believe shouldn’t exist. In Hawaii, everything was a lot more… fluid. Some people believed, some people didn’t, but there was none of the rigidity that exists here. If you’re open to the possibilities, seeing the real thing isn’t so much of a shock.”

“So… what you’re trying to say is that there are a ton of werewolves in Hawaii? That would be terrible, they’d probably be surfers and they’d smell like wet dog all the time.”

Danny laughed, shaking his head. “I wouldn’t know, you’d have to ask someone who lived there longer. Point of the matter is, Beacon Hills is only weird because people refuse to acknowledge the sort of things that live here.”
“Well I’m all for keeping it that way, honestly. I don’t need people knowing werewolves are an actual thing. There’s already one family of hunters in town, I don’t need to add a big neon sign that says werewolf this way.”

“Perfectly understandable.”

Stiles still wasn’t sure what to make of this whole calm, in-the-know Danny situation. It was only later, when they finished talking and parted ways, that Stiles realised what that implied. Danny had likely known all along about Scott and everything else, had known that he was dating a werewolf, had known about the cause of many a thing that was hurriedly explained away.

He wasn’t sure what to do with that knowledge either.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Minor edits 27/11/16

After the way things had panned out at school, Stiles was almost surprised to find that Derek wasn’t waiting for him when he arrived home. It would be just like the universe to kick him while he was down, after all, and what better way to finish off a bad day than with angry confrontations between werewolves?

Still, he’d take a win wherever he could find it at the moment.

He traipsed upstairs and threw himself on his bed, groaning into the covers. After two sleepless nights and two exceedingly draining days Stiles was absolutely exhausted. Still, he fought against the wispy tendrils of sleep that threatened to drag him under the moment he hit the mattress.

After much stopping and starting, Stiles managed to roll over onto his back, and, when that made zero difference to the drooping of his eyelids or the haze of please sleep oblivion peace rest please in the back of his mind, he forced himself up so he was sitting against the wall. There were things he needed to do before succumbing to sleep, plans that needed making, problems that needed solving.

For a moment he considered crossing the room to find a pen and paper, or perhaps to grab his laptop, because with his current mental exhaustion there was no way he’d be remembering any plans he made, but the thought alone brought forth protests from his entire body. Stiles was used to running on little sleep, not none at all.

His dad was supposed to be home for dinner tonight. Stiles was supposed to cook. He needed to go back downstairs if he didn’t want to raise suspicion. He couldn’t let his dad worry about him any more than he already was.

Even as he shuffled to the edge of his bed he could tell it was a lost cause. He honestly couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt this utterly wrecked, and the moments that came close were usually during life or death investigations (which inevitably became some sort of ambush).

Stiles didn’t want to sleep. He really didn’t. Not after what happened at school. But there was only so much longer he could force himself to stay awake without some sort of medical assistance, and he was not going to go there. No way.

The limitations of his body were often frustrating, but there was no point in dwelling on it.

With one last burst of energy that he really didn’t feel at all, Stiles kicked his shoes off, pulled off his jeans, and climbed under the covers.

He was asleep before he had a moment to try and talk himself out of it.

oOoOo

Stiles was happy. He felt… content. But also lonely. And frustrated. Confused perhaps. Agitated. He knew how to fix all of that. He took a deep breath-
Stiles jolted awake to the taste of blood in his mouth, a sharp pain in his tongue, and an ache in his jaw, teeth grinding together as he instinctively fought back what was no doubt intended to be a howl. Despite his sudden waking panic, the urge took a while to fade away.

It wasn’t until he turned to spit the blood from his mouth that Stiles noticed he was definitely not in his room, or, indeed, anywhere inside his house. He was standing, bare feet on cold, hard ground, in the middle of a street. As a kid he’d had a period of sleepwalking incidents, but the lock on the front door confined those all to the inside of his own house; he’d never once made it outdoors.

A chill raced through him; terror and a dawning realisation forcing his feet into motion. Silent and numb, Stiles sat on the edge of the sidewalk, hanging his head and covering his face with his hands.

This was entirely outside the realm of the list of expected side-effects he’d hypothesised might come about from being a supernatural creature. Lydia had been prone to trance-like states that one might liken to sleepwalking, but she was a banshee and those were death marches. Stiles was a werewolf and all he wanted was a piece of normality thank you very much.

Stiles’ head jerked up. Though he rarely had cause to come to this part of town anymore, as his gaze darted swiftly about, he realised he knew exactly where he was. This was the street Erica lived on. Her house was just across the road.

All of a sudden, Stiles found he could put a name to the ache in his chest. It was anxiety and loneliness and want, but it was all wrapped up in one thing: pack. As a beta it had been there too, but quiet, unobtrusive, easy to ignore. As an alpha it was… overwhelming. It was this primal urge, and it was confused by the memories of pack that Stiles possessed, a pack that he was ignoring or out of touch with or didn’t even know yet in this time.

Erica was familiar. A friend, now. A wolf, then. But somehow, always, pack.

In a way, Stiles was grateful. It seemed that, somehow, his subconscious mind and the grating instincts of his werewolf side had come to a compromise. Had he been moving purely on instinct Stiles rather thought Derek would have been the obvious choice; he had long been an important part of Stiles’ old rag-tag pack, but he was also a beta in the here and now who Stiles was familiar with. Yet the wolf sought out Erica, decidedly human Erica, over even Scott, who he had been strict with himself about not wanting to involve in this mess.

He didn’t want to be here, in his underwear, in the middle of the night, no. But out of everyone he knew, Erica was the person he was least worried about slipping up around.

Shaking himself, Stiles forced himself to his feet, weary and wary. He wasn’t sure how long he’d slept, but it hadn’t been the most restful; he still felt like shit. Chances were he wasn’t going to get any more sleep when he made it home. But, either way, he needed to get off the streets, in case his unlucky streak kicked in once again and someone saw him and called the cops.

The streets were quiet as Stiles headed home, dashing from deep shadow to deep shadow and avoiding the glow of streetlights as much as possible. Upon arrival, he discovered that he’d left via his bedroom window, rather than the front door, and found himself once again a little shocked at the courtesy his unconscious mind continued to display. Even as light on his feet as he generally now was, traversing the entire house to the front door would have been dangerous, and could easily have drawn his dad’s attention – Stiles got the feeling his dad wasn’t sleeping much better than he himself was, though he loathed to think he might be the cause.

It was nice that he wasn’t subconsciously trying to get himself killed, but it still needed to stop.
Once more Stiles was faced with a difficult decision.

Go to school. Don’t go to school. Talk to someone. Who?

He could vent to his dad, but not only would that needlessly worry him, but his dad wouldn’t be able to offer up any tips or guidance on how to deal with werewolf sleepwalking.

There was Deaton, but Stiles was in no rush to see the vet again (the feeling was probably mutual), and his brand of cryptic riddles in lieu of answers was not something Stiles could be bothered dealing with when he was running on so little sleep.

Danny was… an enigma he still hadn’t had time to wrap his head around. He knew things, but Stiles still had no idea how much, and this was some heavy shit to dump on a classmate.

In his heart he knew that Derek was his only option. Derek was the only werewolf in town, one of the only born wolves Stiles had ever known, and one of the few people in town equipped to deal with this supernatural nonsense.

But knowing what he needed to do and actually doing it were two very different things. At the mere thought of seeing Derek the guilt he pretended not to feel over Peter’s death began clawing its way out of the dark corner of his mind where he’d locked it away. Don’t get him wrong, the guilt wasn’t about ending Peter’s life. It was about depriving Derek of another family member.

People always said Stiles was reckless, but Stiles believed bravery was an important part of that. He wasn’t sure he had the courage to face Derek.

He didn’t really have a choice.

Stiles hadn’t really been sure where Derek might lurk during the hours he usually spent at school. He did have a life outside of being grouchy, after all. But maybe he didn’t, at this point in time, since Stiles eventually found him sitting on the charred front porch of the old Hale House.

He hesitated at the treeline, one hand pressed against rough bark. It was too late to turn back. It had been too late for at least half a mile. Nervous as he was, he’d hardly been tiptoeing through the woods. It was something of a relief, then, that Derek hadn’t come to meet him halfway.

If he turned around and left, the chance of Derek coming after him was less than 5%, but if he left now there was a chance he’d never come back. Stiles would never forgive himself for running away now. Even if he didn’t get any help, he still needed to come clean. He had so many conflicting thoughts and feelings about Derek Hale, but more than that, he felt like it would be betraying the Derek he used to know if he refused to front up.

He took several deep breaths, listened to the faint rumbling in the back of his head – content, he thought, because of the proximity to another wolf – and scolded himself silently for his indecision. Right now he didn’t have the right to be a coward.

Derek didn’t acknowledge his presence until Stiles was halfway across the clearing. Stiles used to think he was getting pretty damn good at reading Derek’s expressions, but now he was at a loss. He wasn’t sure if he’d ever seen Derek with such a carefully constructed look of neutrality. It was unnerving.
Could he hear the way his heart pounded anxiously in his chest? (of course he could, Stiles didn’t know who he thought he was kidding, there was no way he’d miss it.)

Stiles didn’t know how he was supposed to react to that expression. It would be easier if Derek was yelling, or glaring, or pacing, or something, anything but sitting there, blank and silent. Blank and silent was never good. Blank and silent was a lack of emotional output. Stiles needed information.

His stride wavered, slowed. Stiles folded his arms across his stomach, fingers clenched nervously in the fabric of his long sleeves. Briefly, he considered calling a greeting – silences were uncomfortable and he’d never done well with them – but words were not forthcoming. His tongue seemed heavy in his mouth, incapable of articulating any of the myriad thoughts racing through his mind.

Thankfully, Derek broke the silence when Stiles was only a few metres away.

He gazed steadily at Stiles, eyes unreadable. “Peter’s dead.”

Stiles opened his mouth to say something, anything, but nothing came out. He cleared his throat and looked away. Likely that was as good as an admission of guilt anyway, if there was any chance that Derek didn’t already suspect he had done it. He just couldn’t handle meeting that gaze head-on.

“The Sheriff told me, when he saw me in town yesterday. I already knew, of course, I could feel it happen… Murdered, apparently, though they aren’t too sure on the how or why.”

Stiles flinched. Though Derek had started out fairly monotonous, the anger and accusation were beginning to slip through. Of course, he had every right to be angry. Stiles had taken the choice away from him. Derek had said that Stiles should have a say in what happened, but that had definitely not been permission to do as he pleased.

“I’m sure you already know all of this.”

Stiles chanced a glance over at Derek when he trailed off. His heart sank.

Derek was hunched over, elbows on knees and head in his hands. His shoulders were slumped. He didn’t look mad; he looked utterly defeated.

“I…” Stiles’ fingers dug deep into his arms. He rolled his options around in his head, before giving up and sitting down on the grass. There were lots of things he ought to say, to try and explain himself, to beg for forgiveness, but what came out instead was, “I sort of wish you were yelling…”

Derek’s voice was muffled by his hands when he replied. “What would the point be?”

“Well… Maybe it’s sort of selfish of me, but I deal better with outright anger than this whole grief and disappointment thing.”

“Is that how I seem to you?”

“What? Sad and disappointed? Definitely. You sounded angry, before, but then you just sort of… stopped.”

Stiles had figured it was safe now to just stare at the top of Derek’s head. Then electric blue eyes were staring into his own and he instantly regretted the decision. He cringed as his eyes burned in response, as he was completely unable to prevent the primal, instinctive reaction.

“I am angry,” Derek reassured him, a faint growl to his words. He then straightened from his curled hunch and took a long, calming breath. “But Laura used to tell me to listen to what people had to say
before reacting. And the woods have seen enough of my frustration over the last two days that I think I can safely sit here and not punch you in the face. Yet.”

Part of Stiles was beginning to think he’d miscalculated, and perhaps he should have left Derek to himself for a while longer, but there was always a tipping point for this sort of thing. Waiting too long to confront it would be more dangerous than fronting up too soon. He might not be prepared for it, but he would accept whatever Derek dished out.

“There’s sort of a lot of stuff that needs to be said. Tell me where to start?”

“How about ‘why’?”

“Fair enough, I should have seen that coming.” Stiles gazed down at the grass. “I don’t really have a good reason, certainly not one you’d believe or understand. In the end there’s only really this: he killed someone – I don’t know how and I never will – and he was probably going to do it again. Regardless of whether or not his next actions would be murder or turning more random citizens, I felt I couldn’t take that chance. It wasn’t my decision to make. I know that. But I was worried about the consequences for Beacon Hills if I waited for you to decide on a plan of action. You were emotionally compromised by the situation. I was not.”

Derek slammed his fist down on the porch step. “You’re damn right it wasn’t your decision.” His chemo-signals were going haywire, but Stiles refused to attempt to decipher them. Being able to sense it didn’t give him the right to pry.

“You can punch me if it’ll make you feel better,” Stiles offered meekly.

For a long moment Derek seemed to consider the proposal. Back in the day he’d certainly had no qualms about getting violent with Stiles, even though he was an easily breakable human, his anger often getting the better of him. In all honestly Stiles was expecting him to go for it.

Derek sighed, unclenching his fist. “You’d heal too quickly. There’s no point.”

And that’s why he’d been punching trees. Right. That made perfect sense, in an angry and emotionally stunted kind of way.

“Okay, okay, what next?”

Derek studied him for a moment, scanning his face. “Does your father know?”

Did his dad know what? That Peter was dead? Of course he did, Derek had already acknowledged that his dad was the one who told him about it. Stiles knew what he was really asking, but the thought made him ill.

“I… I dunno.” His voice shook slightly. He cursed himself for it. “I haven’t seen him too much since then. His work hours can be unpredictable, especially when someone’s been murdered in a hospital I suppose.” His shoddy attempt at humour fell flat. Neither of them found the situation at hand funny. “He hasn’t said anything to me, or even mentioned it at all. It’s impossible to tell what sort of connections and theories he’s making about the whole thing since he can’t exactly put things like ‘related to a werewolf’ in his case files.”

“What will you do if he confronts you about it directly?”

Stiles flinched. These were all things he didn’t want to think about. He knew he’d said he’d beg for forgiveness after the fact, but this wasn’t self-defense. He had no idea how his dad would react.
“I… confess, I suppose. I imagine he’ll be furious, but he can’t exactly arrest me for it, what with all the supernatural stuff. Maybe he’ll kick me out? I don’t know if that’d be better or worse than him just being silently disappointed in me.” He really hated letting his dad down. They were supposed to stick together, but he kept messing up.

After a pause, Derek leaned back, looking out over the trees.

“Even though he’s been right here in Beacon Hills, Peter has, more or less, been dead to me for years. Werewolf or no, people don’t have a tendency to just snap back to themselves after that long in a coma. Other than extinguishing that last tiny shred of possibility for his recovery, this hasn’t actually changed an awful lot for me. More than anything I’m just frustrated that it had to come to this, that he took this out on Laura, and that the decision was ultimately taken out of my hands.” Here he stared pointedly at Stiles, who had the decency to look apologetic. “You, on the other hand, have sacrificed a lot by taking matters into your own hands. It would probably be wrong of me to add to that burden.”

Stiles frowned. This was not how he had been expecting things to play out. He’d expected to be roughed up a bit and shouted at. Had Derek always been this rational?

“You’d be well within your right to, though.”

“Agreed. But I know a thing or two about guilt and secrets and death. I don’t exactly relish the thought of making it worse.”

“Okay. Sure. Let’s say I take you at your word. What happens now?”

“Now, Stiles, you tell me why you really came here.”

Ah. That obvious was it? It was true that initially Stiles had been content with the thought of avoiding Derek indefinitely, but the alpha power fiasco had shut the door on that pretty quickly.

“Fine. I need your help.”

With the shift in topic, Derek leaned forward once more, elbows on knees and hands clasped in front of him.

“Help controlling your alpha abilities?”

Stiles shrugged and made a wiggling motion with his hand. “Yes and no. I don’t know about you, but I do not want to be an alpha. I am 100% not good alpha material. No way no how. So, short-term, yes, control, but long-term, I need to know how to get rid of it, pass it on to someone else. You, for instance.”

Derek snorted. “What, because I’m prime alpha material?”

“You know what you’re doing, and I trust you.” The statement came out a little more intense than Stiles had meant it to. Words were one thing, but it was harder to keep the emotional undertones from his voice. He trusted his Derek unconditionally, and a lot of life and death situations had built up to that. This Derek had done nothing, and was obviously startled by Stiles’ admittance. To save face, he quickly continued talking. “And anyway, it’s not like I know any other werewolves.” Half-truth. He knew a lot, but the ones around Beacon Hills were no longer (not yet) werewolves.

Another strange look adorned Derek’s face, confusion and disbelief and surprise, but he thankfully didn’t comment.
“Short-term then. What’s happened so far?”

“Let’s see. I’ve had about four hours sleep total since it happened. My senses are constantly in flux between ‘normal’ and too much of everything. I may have sort of freaked out at school yesterday and honestly teenagers are so unobservant. I feel sorry for whoever had to use my desk for the rest of the day. Oh, and I went on a creepy sleepwalk last night.” Stiles counted each thing off on his fingers as he recounted them, purposefully not going into too much detail.

“Do you sleepwalk often?”

“Not since I was a little kid. And never outside. Do you know how unnerving it is to wake up in the middle of some street twenty minutes from your house?”

“Hmm. What about school? You obviously didn’t attack anyone, or you would have been here sooner.”

“Yeah, no, it was mostly eyes and claws, along with lots of things being way too loud. I was agitated, and once I started feeling agitated it was nearly impossible to keep everything in check. Negative feedback loop and all that fun stuff I suppose.”

“Interesting. I’ve never had experience with alpha powers, so I didn’t think there’d be that much of a mental difference. Regardless of how you felt about it, you were very much in control of yourself before all of this. You had almost zero idea how to use your powers at will, but you were instinctually very good at keeping them at bay. My best guess right now is that there’s a battle for dominance in progress here. Omegas often fall prey to their more savage instincts, but it happens to pack wolves sometimes too. While you’re awake, you’re controlling it, more or less, but you certainly aren’t in control anymore. If you were, you wouldn’t have been sleepwalking.”

Stiles shuddered.

“Okay, that’s great and all, the psychoanalysis, but is there a way to fix this?”

“Probably. But I don’t know what’s causing it. It could stem from your reluctance to accept the position. It could be that you’re simply too new a werewolf to handle everything that’s happening. Or it might be rebelling somehow, as an alpha without a pack. I just don’t have the knowledge to accurately figure out what’s going on.”

“Wonderful.” Stiles fell backwards onto the grass, staring up at the sky. “This is just great. Fabulous. Good talk.”

Stiles could hear Derek grinding his teeth. His patience apparently nearing its end.

“What I’m saying is that we need more information. And an outside opinion, maybe.”

“More information? What more do you want?”

“Don’t worry about it. Just go home Stiles. And stop forcing yourself to stay awake, you should know that’s detrimental to your health.”

“Easy for you to say.”

Still, Stiles didn’t want to push things too much. Derek was being sort of helpful and more hospitable than he’d expected and trying his patience wasn’t going to get him anywhere.

He pushed himself up off the ground. “I’ll just be going then.”
Derek nodded, a silent dismissal.

Stiles was in no rush to get home. He’d left his phone there, which would undoubtedly be flooded with texts from Erica and Scott wondering where he was and what he was doing and why he was skipping so much school recently.

He was a terrible friend.
Chapter 10

Stiles went home. In the end, it was his only option.

Despite the surprising words of acceptance, Derek had obviously not been totally fine with everything, and Stiles wasn’t about to force his presence on him. He was grateful enough that their talk hadn’t turned into a fight; he wasn’t going to push it by lingering nearby.

School was a no-go. In Stiles’ experience, there was nothing worse than turning up partway through the day; that was the sort of thing that got people talking. If there was one thing Stiles didn’t need added on top of everything else it was senseless gossip at school; gossip was one thing when you were only sort of aware of it, and another thing entirely when you could hear all of it.

So, home it was. Still, he took the long way back, meandering about the woods for a time once he was fully out of earshot of the older werewolf. Being out in nature, distant from the sometimes overwhelming sounds of human life, gave him at least a semblance of peace.

It sometimes felt like an eternity had passed since he’d last known any actual peace.

Because he was exhausted and totally over pushing himself to the brink, Stiles decided to at least try and create some sort of cooperative understanding between himself and his uncontrollable new nature.

Derek had told him to try and accept the wolf.

Derek had told him to sleep.

Acceptance, well, he was at least trying to work on it. It was a big ask, and since Stiles still sometimes felt like he was standing at the edge of a cliff where putting a single foot wrong would spell his ultimate demise, it was a step he was still incredibly hesitant about taking. Sleep though, that was something he could really go for. So, as a sign of goodwill and all, Stiles didn’t even try and avoid sleeping that night.

As it turned out, he and the wolf were still not seeing eye-to-eye, and the whole sleepwalking thing was, unfortunately, not a one-time thing.

It wasn’t as aggressive this time, however. The primal, grating instincts which had washed over him the night before were all much duller now, calmer. There was less desperation lingering in his mind, replaced instead by reassurance.

Stiles found that he didn’t jolt into waking awareness in a panic. Instead, he merely blinked from sleep to wakefulness, somewhat resigned instead of afraid. A warm hand resting on the back of his neck anchored him in a sense of calm. He didn’t need to turn to know who the hand belonged to, just as he couldn’t bring himself to be annoyed or surprised by their presence.
He should have known his talk with Derek would ultimately lead to stalking. How else was Derek supposed to get a good insight into all of this when he wasn’t big on talking about emotions and Stiles himself was iffy about explaining anything?

Stiles inhaled deeply, allowing the scents of the night to relax his body.

Derek’s hand shifted from his neck to his shoulder, squeezing gently, before disappearing altogether. The older werewolf cleared his throat, loud in the relative silence. “So, where are we?”

In his mind, Stiles stumbled through levels of truthfulness, before settling on “a friend’s house.” He gestured vaguely about the street in general, not specifying which house they were there for, but Derek didn’t appear to mind.

“Is it the same place as last time?”

“Yeah.”

Now faced with the very real possibility that this sleepwalking was going to become a thing, Stiles found himself thinking he’d probably go along with just about anything Derek had to suggest at this point. He didn’t feel the same panic about being caught this time, but the more often he turned up about town in his pyjamas the more likely it was that someone would stumble across him.

“We should talk.”

“Right.”

“Somewhere else.”

“Sure, of course.”

Derek pulled away from his side, and Stiles meandered lazily after him.

It wasn’t the preserve Derek led him to this time – Stiles supposed he was thankful for that, given all the time he’d spent out there at night dealing with all the bullshit the supernatural world could throw at them – but the bunker. Part of him had forgotten that Derek hadn’t always locked himself away in the loft. This wasn’t the happiest reminder.

Despite being the one to request they talk, Derek didn’t seem in any rush to kick-start a discussion. He shuffled about the bunker, perhaps a bit tense, as though awaiting some snarky comment about his current living arrangement. Stiles couldn’t even remember if he’d ever been there before, and he was in no mood to pick a fight about something that petty. He tried to make himself comfortable on the ground instead, wondering how best to broach a subject he’d been wondering about without Derek accusing him of avoiding the current issue at hand.

He hung his head, playing with his fingers and staring at the ground. Sometimes direct was best.

“So, um, Derek. I was sorta kinda wanting to ask something about yesterday…” So much for not beating around the bush. Stiles flexed his fingers, forcing the words out. “Why did you ask me about my dad?”

The sound of Derek’s shuffled pacing ceased. In his mind’s eye, Derek was probably glaring at him, arms folded across his chest, projecting lots of surly macho werewolf vibes. He didn’t really want visual confirmation. And he wasn’t sure looking at him when he answered would make it easier to keep going down this line of questioning.
“About Peter?” Derek clarified, tone unreadable.

“Yeah.”

“Is my answer going to change something?”

Stiles sighed. Nodded. Shook his head. “I dunno… I’m still just trying to wrap my head around why I didn’t walk away with a broken nose yesterday.”

“I suppose you’re on the right track then.” Somewhere off to the side of Stiles, Derek started pacing again. It struck Stiles as a little disconcerting that he could tell the difference between the anxious tension from before compared to Derek’s present contemplative state. “You seem to care a lot for your father.”

“Of course I do!” Stiles wasn’t sure what that had to do with anything.

“Precisely. Moreover, it’s not exactly a stretch to assume that you care about his opinion of you.”

“Sure…”

He could hear Derek grinding his teeth. That made two of them that didn’t overly want to be having this conversation, yet they both continued putting one foot in front of the other.

“I was weighing my reaction against your sincerity, okay? You value your father’s opinion of you, but you were honestly willing to confess to everything if asked about it, which, by your own admission, poses the potential to destroy your relationship.”

That particular reminder was entirely unappreciated.

“If you had lied to me, or answered in some other way, well, we would have been having a very different conversation.”

Ah. Yes, Stiles imagined that that particular conversation would have involved lots of claws and far less aid. He chanced a glance across the bunker. Derek had his back to him.

“So an eye for an eye then huh?” Stiles wrinkled his nose after the words left his lips, reconsidering. “Or, more like, an eye for a heart? Because, uh, traumatic experiences aside, potential emotional damage doesn’t feel like a fair trade-off for a life. It feels like… you picked a flower from my garden after I uprooted every plant you own. Or-”

Stiles’ teeth clacked together as he shut his mouth suddenly, Derek groaning softly at his word-vomit.

“Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

That was a conversation closer if he ever heard one. Sure. He could deal with that. Except now the topic would inevitably change to what Derek had wanted to discuss when he led him here in the first place. Hadn’t they already had enough of a heart to heart for one day?

“Now that that’s sorted,” Derek turned, situating himself up against a wall, facing Stiles where he slouched on the ground. “Tell me about this friend of yours.”

“What is there to know?” Stiles thought he spied a muscle in Derek’s jaw tighten, so he hurried on. “No, seriously. What sort of details are you looking for here? Because while I’m all for this teamwork thing, there’s a lot of stuff I know you won’t care about, like how we used to read Batman
comics together at lunch.”

“Old friend then?”

“Um…” Stiles waved his hands in the air. “It’s complicated? We were friends in elementary school but then we sort of drifted apart and like a total douche I sort of started ignoring her? But we’re friends again now, kind of, at least I’m working on it. All this werewolf stuff is sort of putting strain on a whole lot of things at school. Secrets. Yay.”

Stiles caught a quiet murmur of “oh god he never stops does he?” and resisted the urge to smirk. He’d just told Derek he was going to babble on if he didn’t give him proper direction to focus his thoughts. It was Derek’s fault for not taking that seriously.

“What made you reach out to her again?”

Oh, that was a sobering question. Stiles hugged his knees to his chest.

“Guilt? Regret?” They were both true. Hopefully Derek would never find out what had inspired those feelings in him. He wasn’t sure he had it in him to explain the creation and subsequent destruction of Derek’s fledgling pack, a group of teens Derek didn’t even know.

Thankfully Derek didn’t question him.

“Okay. But you’re close?”

“I guess? It might be a bit one-sided though. I’ve got a whole lot of… stuff, emotions, whatever, going on, but I think she’s still sort of confused about this whole rekindling of our friendship. It’s comfortable, but we aren’t close like we used to be.”

“Her feelings in this aren’t really relevant. The wolf feeds off of your emotions, not those of other people. Logically, would she have been your first guess of who you might run off to in a daze?”

“No. Under normal circumstances the first person I’d go to would be Scott. That’s how things have always been. But he’s a realist and Erica is… flexible. I’ve been reigning everything in with much tighter focus in regards to Scott. I don’t exactly anticipate an overly favourable reaction from him if I slip up about all of this.”

Derek hummed, thoughtful.

“So this… Erica, she’s someone you’d be comfortable letting your guard down around?”

“Maybe?”

When he didn’t elaborate, a heavy silence fell over them. Stiles tapped his fingers nervously on his arms, uncomfortable under the look Derek leveled at him.

“Whatever you aren’t telling me, it’s probably important.”

For a moment Stiles froze, a startled, deer-in-headlights expression flickering across his face. How am I supposed to tell him that Erica used to be dead and I’m still struggling with some stupid separation anxiety style shit about her renewed existence?! But then he took a deep breath, and tried to consider all the non-time-travel related things that he hadn’t yet voiced.

“I may have been thinking about, uh, pack dynamics, and stuff like that, for the last while. Before, and particularly after the whole alpha thing. We’re the only werewolves in Beacon County, right?
And we aren’t even a pack, not really, not yet anyhow, if that’s something you’d want. We’re more of just two guys in a mutually beneficial working relationship that involves trying not to clue the hunters in on my existence in general. I’m totally down for being pack or whatever, of course, but that’s not the point. Two werewolves isn’t exactly a lot, right?"

“Not exactly, no,” Derek allowed, dragging his response out in a manner that managed to question every single word that came from Stiles’ mouth. “That would depend on where you’re going with all this.”

“Well, uh, three would be better, right? And, well, Erica’s epileptic, and I was thinking of maybe telling her about all of this? And offering her the choice? I mean technically I don’t need your permission, because hello, I’m the alpha right now, but if it was something you’d like 100% veto then that would put unnecessary strain on this whole cooperation thing and I’ve got enough of that going on already thanks.”

“You trust her that much?”

“Yes. Whether she says yes or not is irrelevant, I suppose. I need someone to talk to about all of this. You’re on one side and my dad is on the other and then Scott and Erica are somewhere else entirely. I need someone who’s familiar with all of it, you know? I don’t know if it’ll make things better or worse, because Scott’ll still be out of the loop and he’ll probably get even more frustrated at me, but I need a reprieve.”

Derek rubbed his chin, gaze cast down.

“The bite doesn’t always take.” Something bitter filled his voice; a remembered pain. “Sometimes the body rejects the bite. That generally ends in death. Do you even understand the risks involved?”

It’ll work, he thinks. He knows from experience. Her biology hasn’t changed, he’s just jumped back to before it happened. It worked once. It’ll work again. What he says, however, is a deadly serious “I understand.”

If Derek’s taken aback by his conviction, he didn’t show it. When he spoke again he’d switched tracks once more.

“If you’ve been considering all this, it might explain some of your behaviour. Somewhere in your mind you’ve already classified Erica as pack. As you’ve said, we aren’t a pack. We could be, but we aren’t. Wolves don’t generally cope well without pack. That’s why omegas often go off the rails. Alphas without packs probably experience that absence in a different way. I wouldn’t have expected it to be that potent, but maybe that’s just you as an individual. Humans can still be part of a pack. Those bonds aren’t as strong, but they’re still there.”

“So… it’s Erica’s fault I’m sleepwalking?”

Derek sent him a deadpan stare.

“No. What I’m saying is, maybe it’s for the best that you talk to her. Regardless of the outcome, if you accept her properly into your pack, it might calm some of the subconscious urges that have been overtaking your resting mind. You’ve caused a conflict within yourself, and you need to resolve it.”

Derek was starting to sound like Deaton. Stiles sighed.

“So, just to be clear, you’re giving me the all clear about discussing all of this?”

“Maybe leave me out of it. But it’s not my job to tell you what to do with your powers. All I can do
is hope that you’ll be discrete about things and not draw too much attention. Argent already knows I’m a werewolf. He doesn’t need to know there are also teenagers getting mixed up in all this.”

“Right. Okay. Yes.” Stiles jumped to his feet, antsy, mind racing. He’d had about enough of all this, and he figured Derek had probably had his fill of emotional chats for the next year (though he could also admit that he’d probably be forcing another uncomfortable conversation on the older man before too much time had passed). “Dude, thanks. For all of this. For everything.”

“Don’t call me dude.” There wasn’t as much bite to the protest as Stiles generally expected from Derek. That was likely a side-effect of all this awkward heart-to-heart stuff. Which was even more reason to high-tail it home.

“Sure, whatever. Talk to you later.”

“Try not to get into too much trouble.”

With that, Stiles took his leave.

**oOoOo**

Having already tried the good faith routine once that night, Stiles didn’t even contemplate going back to bed when he got home. It was late, or rather, incredibly early, but there were plenty of ways to better spend his energy that didn’t involve potentially more sleepwalking.

Tonight was a night for making decisions.

He’d already made one.

It was true that talking to Erica about all this was a thought that had crossed his mind once or twice, but he hadn’t really had the time to take a moment and really think it out. Until Derek brought it out of him. Now it seemed like a no-brainer. One way or another, it was something he needed to do.

Then there were things he’d been avoiding. Such as lacrosse.

He wasn’t sure how Coach would feel about getting emails from students at two in the morning, but no time of the day was ever good for receiving messages about players quitting the team. That was the strange thing about Finstock – if you didn’t make first-line you were pretty much benched forever, but even then, he didn’t like it when people left the team.

His economics grades were definitely going to suffer for this. But one day Coach was going to notice he’d stopped coming to practice; it was easier to just get it out of the way in one blow, instead of getting berated for skipping.

Quitting was going to make Scott mad. Stiles understood that he was confused, really, he totally got that, but he still wasn’t settled enough in the situation to try and smooth things over with him. He needed clarity, and space, and maybe a second opinion. He didn’t want to complicate Scott’s budding romance – *again* – but if maintaining his silence was only going to make their friendship crash and burn… Well, he needed more time to figure it out.

He settled himself at his desk and prepared to research until dawn.

**oOoOo**

Unrealistic though it was, Stiles had been hoping to avoid talking with Scott until Coach had talked to him about Stiles quitting the team. Then he’d only have to have one argument, instead of two
separate ones about skipping school and quitting without talking to Scott about it.

Stiles had made it to school earlier than usual, with the intention of finding Erica, but Scott was obviously thinking along the same lines. He’d barely gone more than a few steps into the building before he was being manhandled roughly into the nearest classroom. Resisting would have been simple. All he needed to do was plant his feet and his supernatural strength would prevent his asthmatic friend from moving him a single inch. But he wasn’t trying to aggravate Scott, no matter how things might seem to his friend, so he let it happen.

The moment the door closed behind them Stiles wriggled out of Scott’s grasp, mumbling irritably and smoothing out his sleeves. He walked a little way into the classroom, but Scott stayed by the door.

Stiles figured he should speak first, take control of whatever conversation was to come, but he couldn’t think of what to say. He couldn’t read the situation without looking at Scott, which he was hesitant to do, and cracking a joke when Scott wasn’t in a receptive mood would only lead to shouting that much sooner. Fighting with Scott, especially so early in the morning, was not something he enjoyed doing.

He sat on the teacher’s desk and stared out across the room, waiting.

“Is this how it’s going to be from now on?”

Stiles glanced over at Scott. He looked utterly defeated, slumped against the closed door, lacking the anger Stiles found usually accompanied being manhandled places.

“What are you talking about Scotty?”

“This. Am I going to have to start locking you in rooms just to get you to talk to me?”

Ah, there was that guilt again. Stiles bit his lip, supremely uncomfortable with the turn this was taking. Scott sounded so broken and betrayed and, above all else, confused, and Stiles didn’t know what to do about it.

“I just, I don’t understand what’s happening with you anymore Stiles. You keep skipping school, you don’t reply to my texts, you don’t answer your phone at all. You barely talk to me at school, you’re hardly anywhere long enough to try and talk to you outside of school. You keep saying I should hang out more with Allison, and while you sound genuine when you say it, it’s starting to feel like an excuse to spend less time with me. How else am I supposed to take it?”

Stiles jumped off the desk, hands flailing about in the air. This was bad.

“Shit. No, stop that, don’t be like that Scott. You’re my best friend. That hasn’t changed. Maybe my word doesn’t mean much to you right now, but I swear this isn’t me rescinding your best bro status.” He scraped his fingers across his scalp, frustrated. “This is just… It’s just…” He growled, low in his throat. It sounded more animalistic than he would have liked. “It’s complicated.”

“Then un-complicate it.”

“This really isn’t the time or place for this.”

“If not now, when? It’s impossible to predict whether or not you’ll be at school anymore. Do you really think dragging this out is going to help?”

“Scott,” Stiles snapped, slamming his hand down on a desktop. “I can’t right now, okay? I just can’t.
I can’t have this conversation, and I don’t want to argue with you. Can you just put a pause on this interrogation? I have to sort this out for myself before I even start trying to explain it to you.”

Scott was not making it easy to keep his secrets close at hand until he could make a rational decision about revealing them. Part of Stiles itched to just wolf out right there and then, to put the seriousness of the situation out there in the open, but that wouldn’t solve anything. At least, that’s what he told himself.

He glanced up, hand curling into a fist where it rested on the desk. Scott was visibly taken aback. Stiles hadn’t raised his voice, but his frustration was evident, and Scott was shocked by it. This January had not been a good month for their relationship.

“Sorry. But, can you just wait? Until I bring it up? Otherwise we’re just going to keep going in circles, getting mad and fighting without closure. I don’t enjoy fighting with you Scott. So can you be patient for me? Just for a bit longer?”

Scott was quiet, looking anywhere but directly at Stiles. He was still in front of the door, blocking the only convenient exit. Finally, he met Stiles’ gaze. “You promise you’ll explain?”

“Cross my heart. I’ll pinky swear it if you want.”

“No, it’s fine. But I will hold you to that. You can’t avoid it forever.”

The bell startled both of them. The room they were in wasn’t used first period, which was the only reason they hadn’t been interrupted. Early for Stiles didn’t exactly translate to early in general, and they’d used up all that free time shut inside an empty classroom, arguing. Now they were verging on late, and Stiles hadn’t even had a chance to find Erica.

He cursed his luck.

oOoOo

Thankfully they were all in different classes before lunch. Stiles didn’t think it would do anything to help his strained truce with Scott if he saw him sneaking off to talk to Erica in private.

If Erica was surprised to find Stiles waiting for her, she didn’t say anything about it. She’d been taking a lot of things about his behaviour in stride since that first day when he interrupted her solitary lunch. He wasn’t sure if that was a good thing, or if she just figured there was nothing he could do with himself that would anger or upset her more than ignoring her existence. Stiles really hoped it wasn’t the latter.

He led her to a corridor somewhere halfway between her classroom and the cafeteria. Students flowed around them, uninterested in whatever they were doing, headed off to enjoy their lunch break.

“What’s up?” she asked when they were still again. Stiles was glad she hadn’t asked where Scott was. She was always perceptive like that.

“This is going to sound like it’s coming out of the blue, but I need to talk to you. Are you free after school today?”

“Yes… But what’s this about?”

“Listen. It’s… big. And confusing. And important. And not something I can really talk about at school. Meet me in the parking lot after school?”
Erica scrutinised him, taking in everything, from the furrow of his brows to the slump in his shoulders, and the tension and nervousness that lingered in his voice.

“Fine. But only because I get the feeling this is going to be about why you’re so god damn confusing sometimes. Call it curiosity.”

“Good. Cool. Just… Don’t mention this to Scott? Please?”

“McCall wouldn’t believe my word over yours.”

“That’s not the point, but sure. Let’s just… go eat.”

They met up with Scott in the cafeteria. Erica kept her word not to mention anything to him, but she spent most of lunch glancing between the two of them, as though attempting to decipher their silences. She’d understand soon enough.
Chapter 11

The rest of the day passed both at a glacial pace and far too quickly for Stiles’ liking. He wondered how it was possible that he was already starting to have difficulty dealing with a full day of school, when it had only been a measly handful of weeks since he started skipping bits and pieces of class. The bite was supposed to heal illnesses and the like, but it had done nothing for Stiles’ ability to concentrate for long periods of time.

He paid only minimal attention in class, taking notes automatically but not processing anything he wrote. Once, when the bell rang, he didn’t even notice it until almost everyone else had left the room. After that, he paid a little too much attention, and had to clasp his hands over his ears when it rang, the sound echoing unpleasantly in his skull.

He was all over the place, because he was nervous about how his talk with Erica was going to go down. The material they were covering in class was old news as far as he was concerned; he could let himself worry about the supernatural details of his life instead of lessons he’d already lived through.

Getting lost in his own head had never really gone well for him in the past. Sometimes it gave him answers, but more often than not it ended in anything from self-doubt to nightmares. Today was more of a panic response; he could pretend to be optimistic all he wanted, but there was always a sliver of terror deep down that Erica would freak out on him. He wasn’t sure how he’d handle it if she did.

When school finished for the day, Stiles wasn’t afraid to admit that he was worried he was rushing into things. There were probably a ton of better ways to go about this. Maybe he shouldn’t be doing it at all. He didn’t exactly love being all lone wolf, but he was good at it. He could do it; keep everything bottled up inside. People loved saying that keeping things to yourself was a terrible coping method, but do you know what it was? Safe.

In the hallway he paused, a small, insignificant obstacle amidst the flow of students. He breathed in deep, slow, calming his racing heart and spiralling thoughts. He had made a decision, taken steps towards its realisation. Now was no time for a freakout. The only thing left was to see it through.

Shoulders squared, Stiles shifted back into motion.

Erica was already waiting for him next to his jeep. It was almost show time.

oOoOo

The drive was fraught with tension, but Stiles got the feeling it might have been a one-sided thing.

Erica had asked if he wanted to have this talk at her place, and he’d shot her down without a second thought – it was one thing to decide he was going to induct one of his oldest friends into the supernatural, it was another entirely to risk that conversation being overheard by any members of the
Reyes family. She hadn’t seemed offended, merely curious, and had settled into the passenger seat and fiddled about with the radio until she found something to her liking. Thankfully she knew when trying to talk to him was a fruitless endeavour.

They arrived sooner than Stiles had expected – he had a sneaking suspicion that he may have spaced out for a significant portion of the trip, saved only by muscle memory and the routine of driving home after school every day. His dad was still at work, which was great – he wouldn’t have to explain why he was now throwing this whole werewolf thing about willy-nilly – but also terrible – his dad could have been some good back-up if Erica decided he was going crazy.

Erica climbed out of the jeep once they were parked, but Stiles stayed in the car a moment longer, flexing his fingers and banging his head lightly against the steering wheel several times. Derek had told him to do whatever he wanted, but panic could be irrational at the best of times.

When he stepped out into the cool air Erica had the grace to pretend she hadn’t seen him beating himself up, even though she’d been eyeing the jeep when he hadn’t immediately followed after her. This was why he had picked Erica, he reminded himself. She could keep a secret, and she was rational and understanding without being overbearing or condescending. He just needed to keep telling himself that the worst that could happen was her being freaked out.

They’d be fine. Hopefully.

Stiles unlocked the front door and ushered Erica inside without a word. He glanced over at the living room, but ultimately led her up the stairs and to his room. There was a chance he was going to need visuals, and he shuddered to think what might happen if someone glimpsed him wolfing out through the window.

In his room, Erica stretched her legs out across his bed, and allowed Stiles two full minutes of fidgety pacing before breaking the silence.

“As riveting as this is,” she drawled, “I doubt this mysterious silence is what you wanted to hide from McCall.” She wasn’t looking straight at him. Her fingers toyed with the hem of her sleeves, giving off a practised air of nonchalance, but despite the sarcastic edge in her voice, her eyebrows were pinched in concern.

Even without trying to sort through chemo-signals and all that emotional crap, Stiles could tell that he was worrying her. He forced his feet to still. He dropped his folded arms to hang at his sides, but quickly crossed them over his chest again, at a loss as to what to do with his hands.

“Sorry,” he sighed. “It’s just, there’s no good starting point for this sort of thing. And it’s all well and good to say that I’ll explain it, but actually doing the explaining…” He threw his hands up in the air in exasperation, frustrated with himself. “I’ve already been through this once, that should make it easier, not harder!”

“Look. I don’t know what has you all riled up,” here Erica gave him a pointed look, “but maybe the best thing to do is just… say it? Explain later, instead of trying to build up to whatever has you so on edge?”

“You say that like it’s simple,” Stiles muttered lowly, running a hand across his still-too-short hair. Still, she had a point. He just needed to say it. He needed to find the words, look her in the eye, and just tell her.
“Do you believe in the supernatural?” He winced. That was neither straightforward nor an answer. His brain was panic-stalling.

Erica fixed him with a long, piercing stare, taking in his obvious agitation. “I’m assuming this is relevant, and not just some out-of-the-blue curiosity?”

Stiles nodded, jaw clenched.

“Okay then.” She leaned back against the wall, one finger tapping absently at her chin. “Ghost stories are fun, but I call bullshit on those. I’m not really sure what you want me to say? If this is leading somewhere, then… I can’t really imagine any sort of creature being able to keep their existence so well hidden, you know? Wouldn’t there be shit all over the internet otherwise? Of course, you’d know better than I would.”

Right, because Stiles was a prolific web-surfer and Erica most definitely was not. That wasn’t a full-blown denial though. He could probably work with that.

“There is stuff all over the internet,” he protested weakly. “I mean sure, most of it’s complete nonsense, but some of it isn’t.”

Erica raised an eyebrow and gestured for him to continue. He started pacing again.

“And I know that some of it’s real because I’m living it. Because some shit happened back at the start of January and now I’m not human Erica, I’m not, and it’s kinda driving me crazy because this wasn’t supposed to happen, and everything’s just sort of spiralling out of control-”

Erica interrupted what was gearing up to be a real confusing ramble with a sharp “Stiles!” She was leaning forward now, lips pursed, frowning but not upset. Concerned. “Stiles, you’re confusing me. What happened? What are you talking about?”

Stiles groaned, dragging his hand across his face. This time he’d wanted to try and explain with words, only it was very obviously not working, because he didn’t want to actually say the words. He was talking in circles and working himself up and frightening Erica, none of which he wanted to do.

*Actions speak louder than words.* It was starting to seem like all of Stiles’ conversations about the supernatural were going to begin with a demonstration. He wasn’t sure he liked that thought.

“Oh, okay,” he whispered, foot tapping nervously on the carpet. “Okay, okay, I can do this, lemme just…” He rubbed his hands against his jeans. Flexed his fingers. He closed his eyes, and breathed in deeply through his nose. “This is going to be startling.” It was the only sort of warning he could really give.

These days the wolf, the urge to shift, sat much closer to the surface. It was part of why he had been having more difficulty keeping it at bay while he was at school. For once it was convenient, rather than a nuisance, because beforehand he’d had a lot of trouble manifesting his wolf on command.

He was turned half towards the bed, but Stiles kept his eyes closed as he coaxed the wolf out, not wanting to see the look on Erica’s face as it happened.

The tingle in his fingertips as his nails turned into potentially lethal claws was something he barely noticed anymore. The pain in his jaw as his teeth changed while his mouth was clamped tightly shut, that was less easy to ignore. It ached, fangs scraping against each other, against the inside of his mouth. The sensation of bones rearranging themselves in his face, well, *that* was something he could do without.
Shifting without adrenaline pumping through his system meant he could really feel all the changes happening, and it was unpleasant. Hopefully he wasn’t going to make a habit of it.

Stiles tried not to listen, either, not sure he wanted to face Erica’s reaction full stop, but it was so much harder to dull his hearing when he was shifted. He heard her breathing hitch, a surprised stumble in her heartbeat, then relative silence for what felt like a really long time.

Erica took a breath – shaky on the inhale, steady on the exhale – and then she spoke.

“What.”

It definitely wasn’t a question. The word came out flat, a little disbelieving, a little confused, without the questioning lilt at the end.

Stiles opened his eyes, though with some reluctance. Erica’s heartbeat flickered again, no doubt at the glowing red that had replaced his usual whiskey irises, but outwardly she appeared calm. Or, as calm as one can be when someone they know has just shown their decidedly less-than-human side.

Cautiously, Stiles lifted one shoulder in a helpless shrug. “Surprise?” The word sounded strange when he said it, the tiniest hint of a growl present even though he wasn’t angry or trying to be intimidating. It was hard speaking regularly through a mouthful of fangs.

“Surprise indeed,” he heard Erica mutter to herself.

Stiles wanted to grimace but, well, he’d spent enough time looking at various other wolves to know that just about every emotion in the book looked ridiculous on a shifted face, what with the mouthful of sharp teeth and the nose thing and, just, pretty much everything. He willed the shift away. His face returned to normal, but his claws and eyes stayed put – another downside of his nerves and the lack of adrenaline.

He cupped the back of his neck with both hands, careful of his pointed nails. His gaze rested on a patch of his duvet, just off to Erica’s left.

“So, uh, explanation time now?” Stiles paused, but he wasn’t really waiting for an answer. He nodded to himself. “Explanation time,” he repeated, voice firmer this time, focusing on the fact that Erica hadn’t run off screaming. “How do I put this…? Ah. How about – werewolves are a thing. That’s probably where I should start, huh? Werewolves are a thing, and I’m a werewolf, and only-” he paused to count on his fingers “–five people know about it. Well, six now, with you. Lucky number six, or whatever. We could start a club. Or a gang. Whatever floats your boat I guess. I wonder what we’d call it. Probably something punny, otherwise what’s the point?”

“Stiles.”

“Sorry, yes, so not the point.” He sighed. His train of thought had been efficiently derailed, but a lot of his patchwork confidence disappeared along with it. “I’m not good at the explaining part,” he admitted quietly. “Can you, maybe, ask questions instead?”

“I suppose.”

On his bed, Erica slouched back against the wall once more, tilting her head back to look up at the ceiling. She hugged her knees loosely to her chest.

“I guess I’ll start with something easy. Who are the other five people?”

Easy huh? Stiles chuckled nervously.
“Uh, well, first off there’s my dad. He sat me down one night and was all ‘Stiles, are you having a teenage crisis-slash-rebellious period? Because I don’t have time for this right now, there’s some weird murders that need investigating.’ And I was like ‘Dad, you’ll be pleased to know that I’m not up to any weird teen rebel stuff; I’m not on drugs or anything. In fact, all that’s happened is that I maybe sort of got bit by a crazy werewolf while I was out in the preserve at night when I definitely wasn’t supposed to be.’”

Erica snickered in amusement as he not only mimicked his dad, but also himself. Stiles cleared his throat to try and cover his embarrassment.

“So, yeah, anyway, he’s sort of cool with it. Or something. Tolerant. Knows. Then there’s sort of the school guidance counsellor, Scott’s boss Dr Deaton, Derek Hale, and… Danny.” He almost whispered Danny’s name, hoping to gloss over that particular part, but it grabbed Erica’s attention immediately.

“Excuse me, Danny? As in, goalie for the lacrosse team Danny? Danny Mahealani? You told Danny before you told me?! Are you even friends with Danny?”

Stiles flung his hands out, happy to see that his claws were mostly gone now, trying to hold off Erica’s indignation for a moment.

“Hold up, hold up, I didn’t technically tell Danny anything. He’s always been weirdly perceptive. I guess he just knew enough stuff about all this in general to be able to tell what had happened. It’s hardly my fault if someone looks at me and their first thought is ‘that guy’s definitely a werewolf’! Although I may have… growled at him. Once. In class. That was probably pretty telling. Anyway! I don’t know why you’re complaining, since you now know and Scott doesn’t.”

Erica hummed thoughtfully at that, bringing her gaze down from the ceiling to eye Stiles curiously.

“I was starting to wonder about that. What with you making me promise not to tell McCall we were going to have a talk. You two are like joined at the hip or something – or at least you used to be. So what’s the deal there?”

Memories of how Scott had refused to believe his own lycanthropy until it was almost too late flooded Stiles’ mind for a moment, until he shook them off.

“There’re a lot of reasons. You’re a lot more open-minded about stuff than Scott is; he’ll go along with things in theory, but he gets kinda defensive if you start trying to put this sort of thing in a real-life light. I don’t want to accidentally mess up anything between him and Allison either, which I am almost 100% sure I would do if I started just unloading all of this werewolf crap on him. And I also… sort of, uh, had a proposition for you, I guess you could say.”

“A proposition?”

“Or an offer. Or whatever you want to call it.”

“And it has to do with werewolves?”

“Yeah.” Stiles sunk into his desk chair and spun around a few times, collecting his thoughts. “Being a werewolf… heals things.” Except it hadn’t done anything for Stiles, or for Liam. Mental health was apparently outside of the supernatural jurisdiction. “Listen, I know you’ve stopped taking your epilepsy medication. You can’t stand the side-effects, right? And nothing too bad has happened in the last few weeks, but you’re probably a little on edge without it. Not knowing when something might strike.”
As he spoke, Erica’s heartbeat picked up. Anger, surprise, confusion. He didn’t want to know for sure, wasn’t trying to pick things apart. Maybe it was fear? As far as he knew she hadn’t told anyone about it, after all.

“The point is, I could help with that. There are a lot of dangers that come with being a werewolf, but it would get rid of your epilepsy. You wouldn’t have to worry about it anymore. And you’d have me and probably Derek to help out with all the supernatural stuff. The wolves of Beacon Hills have to stick together and all that.

When Erica spoke again her voice was quiet, a little thin. “You’re saying… I wouldn’t have to worry about my medication, or getting taunted again from whenever my next public fit happens? It would just… stop?”

Stiles cringed at the reminder of that old video. Teenagers were cruel.

“It would stop. I swear it to you.”

“I…” She cleared her throat. Stiles thought he could smell tears. “Where does Derek fit into all of this?” she asked instead of voicing whatever thought had been on the tip of her tongue.

“Derek’s a rogue beta, straddling the line of being an omega really. He was in a pack, but it was just him and his sister, and his sister is, well, some shit went down and she’s dead now. He’s been teaching me, a little bit, and it’s like I said. We wolves should stick together. I’ve got some unfortunate first-hand insight into how a werewolf doesn’t like to be alone. I think we two could be a bit of a ramshackle pack, if he wanted. Or three, if you wanted it. Or just two if you did but he didn’t. He’s sort of a downer, but he’s mad and lonely, and I think that’s a bad combination.”

“Could I…” Erica shifted uncertainly on the bed. “Would it be all right if I met him? First. Before I think about trying to make a decision about all of this.”

“I don’t see why not.” Stiles reached for his phone, but paused, hand hovering in the air. “But I’d have to go track him down. I don’t actually have his number. Would you be okay with chilling here alone for a bit while I go find him?”

“Sure. I’ll just… watch tv or something. I’ll be fine.”

“Okay then. Feel free to do whatever. My dad won’t be home for another couple of hours. Hopefully I won’t be gone too long.”

For a second Stiles contemplated leaving via his bedroom window, just because he could, but it felt like overkill. There was no need to freak Erica out with an unexpected show of daredevilry.

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After he left the house, Stiles almost caught himself heading out in the direction of the Loft. It was so ingrained in him now that that was generally where to find Derek that he occasionally forgot that Derek hadn’t bought the loft yet. Luckily, Derek was still fairly predictable.

Some part of Stiles couldn’t help but pity Derek a little; in the early days – now – he spent so much time torturing himself, skulking around the burnt shell of his old family home. It made him easy to find, yes, but it was incredibly sad to witness, knowing what Stiles did about the whole thing. It coated every conversation they had near the house in a haze of sadness that he couldn’t seem to shake, no matter how he tried to ignore it.

Derek was upstairs when Stiles wandered into the clearing. He knew Derek would have heard him
coming, could hear him shifting about on the fragile floorboards, but he didn’t come down to meet him this time around. Stiles wasn’t sure he wanted to head up to join him. Going inside the house felt… wrong. Like disturbing a grave. It wasn’t his place.

Instead, he hovered on the porch, leaning lightly against the frame where the front door used to hang. Derek had stopped moving, awaiting whatever Stiles had come for.

“I talked to Erica,” he called softly, not bothering to raise his voice to reach the top floor. “I think it went fairly well. She didn’t freak out or anything, anyway. That’s good, right?”

Derek didn’t say anything in response. Stiles hadn’t really expected him to. That would constitute emotional small talk, and there was no way the handful of weeks they’d been acquainted was long enough for Derek to bother trying to engage in personal chit-chat without a reason. It took a lot of time and effort to worm your way that far into his defences. Stiles knew that from experience.

“She wants to talk to you. She didn’t really specify why, but I can think of a few potential reasons.”

His enhanced senses were supposed to mean that he wasn’t caught off-guard anymore, but obviously the silent movements of a born werewolf trumped the faltering hearing of a werewolf barely a month in the making. Derek stared down at him from the top of the crumbling staircase, having moved while Stiles was talking.

“What am I supposed to do about that?”

Stiles rolled his eyes.

“How about you come back home with me so we can all talk?”

“Is this about your little pack thing?”

“A little bit, maybe. I told her we could all be in this together, three wolves against the world, that sort of thing. Only if you’re into it, I mean. No point trying to force a pack into existence. I get the feeling that sort of thing doesn’t go down well.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re annoyingly persistent?”

“Probably,” Stiles allowed, “I get fixated on things. I can’t help it.” He watched Derek pick a path down the stairs, cautious but with the practised ease of someone who’s more than well aware of the safest spots to step. “But is that a ‘fine, I’ll come’ or a ‘fuck off Stiles’?”

“I suppose if there’re going to be more werewolves running about town soon I might as well know their faces.”

“Oh.” Stiles blinked in surprise. “To be honest I was expecting you to say no. But this is good. I can work with a yes. I’m hoping to get all this done before my dad gets back from the station though, so, uh, let’s go then. Like, right now.”

Derek huffed out a breath that Stiles was almost willing to classify as a laugh as he breezed by him out of the house.

“In that case, why don’t we make this a test of your speed?”

The suggestion seemed to come so far out of left field, offered with just the tiniest whisper of teasing, that Stiles actually gaped at him. Derek got as far as the bottom of the porch steps before pausing and glancing back over his shoulder. He raised one eyebrow just a fraction, a challenge.
Stiles was never one to back down from a challenge.

**oOoOo**

Derek won their little race. Stiles hadn’t anticipated any other possible outcome, but Derek looked secretly smug about it as they walked the last few metres up to the front door. He could only tell because he’d had a long time to become acquainted with the minute facial movements that encompassed a whole silent language of Derek-isms – although it helped that this Derek wasn’t entirely hostile towards him.

They found Erica almost exactly where Stiles had left her, sitting sprawled across his bed. A movie was playing on his laptop, but she wasn’t watching it. Stiles surmised she’d wanted something familiar to fill the silence that his departure had created, so she didn’t have to be completely alone with the reality altering information he’d dumped on her.

He knocked on the doorframe to get her attention instead of barrelling straight into the room. (He could be tactful sometimes, even if no one believed it.) When she glanced over Stiles smiled, and if it looked a little off, no one said anything.

“I’m back,” he announced needlessly, crossing the room to slump back into his desk chair. He waved a hand towards the doorway. “And I come bearing gifts.”

Derek glared, unamused, but it lacked a certain level of malice. It must have felt pretty good to run all-out like that if he wasn’t even getting properly annoyed.

Erica laughed a little. “I take it you’re Derek then.”

“The one and only!” Stiles chimed in before Derek had a chance to decide whether or not to respond. “Werewolf extraordinaire.”

“Right,” Derek said flatly. He leaned against the wall next to the door, one of the only parts of Stiles’ bedroom that wasn’t covered in random print-outs or posters or string. “Stiles said you wanted to talk to me?”

“Sort of. I wanted to scope you out, I guess. See what I might be getting myself into. Make sure you aren’t a douchebag.”

“Wonderful. Are all of your friends this pleasant?” He directed the question at Stiles, but Erica answered, a little smirk playing across her lips.

“Just telling it like it is.”

They studied each other in silence, at some sort of impasse. Stiles paused the movie and fiddled nervously with a pen, clicking it on and off again.

“I think I like her better,” Derek eventually decided. Stiles squawked in indignation, pen clattering to the floor.

“No fair! She’s only said like two things to you! Didn’t we just have a manly bonding session racing full-tilt to my house?! Does that mean nothing to you?” Stiles stuck his lip out in an exaggerated pout, folded his arms across his chest, and spun in his chair so his back was to Derek. “Traitor.” Quietly, though, Stiles was glad Derek had given Erica a thumbs up. He wasn’t entirely sure what the circumstances had been like the first time around, but he highly doubted Derek had picked Erica for a beta because he thought they might get along.
“Don’t be a sore loser Stiles,” Erica chided teasingly. “There’s enough hunky werewolf to go around.”

Stiles spun back around in time to catch Derek mouthing the word ‘hunky’ with a bewildered look on his face. *Yeah, he thought, we’re going to be just fine.*
Derek wasn’t overly keen on sticking around once Erica settled enough to start snarking at him – Stiles heard him mutter something about teenagers while he glared down at the carpet – but he stayed for half an hour or so while they walked her through a lot of the potential dangers of the bite and being a werewolf in general.

Because he was wary of saying something he wasn’t supposed to know, Stiles left most of the talking to Derek, who was giving some real blunt, no-holds-barred explanations. It was obvious he didn’t care about scaring Erica – in fact, that was probably exactly what he was trying to do: make sure she was tough enough. Stiles would complain, but he had to admit that it wasn’t a bad idea. He’d already been struggling to fully explain what she would be getting into, but Derek had no qualms about laying out all the facts.

One thing Stiles had been hesitant to speak about in detail was the hunters. Erica didn’t have any particular feelings about Allison, positive or negative, but he was worried she might do or say something that would make Scott suspicious if he told her about the Argents. It was his own fault then, really, that Derek took that decision out of his hands, and handed out a brief but bitter warning.

He held back on defending Allison in front of Derek, because there was no way he could know that in the here and now (and no glaringly obvious ways to bullshit an explanation of how he’d stumbled across it), but he ached to. Scott wasn’t the only person Stiles was trying to give a second chance; Allison didn’t need to be dragged into all of this, not in the convoluted shit-show of betrayal and violence that played out the last time around.

After Derek left (this time leaving his number, because Stiles was sick of traipsing through the preserve whenever he needed to talk to him) Erica stayed, sprawled out across Stiles’ bed. She was still brimming with questions, that much was apparent, but she didn’t voice any of them, and Stiles let her be. Instead of dwelling too much on werewolves, Stiles grabbed some drinks from the kitchen and put on another movie.

Erica lay on her side, hogging most of Stiles’ bed. Stiles sat on the floor and leaned back against the mattress, his laptop turned towards them on the desk. When Stiles passed Erica her drink, her hand was shaking, just slightly. In what his old Derek would likely have called a ‘rare moment of tact’, Stiles didn’t comment on it. She’d asked for time to process it all, and he would give her all the time in the world.

**oOoOo**

One positive to come from Wednesday’s mess was that The Great Reveal seemed to satisfy whatever instinctual part of Stiles had been causing his sleepwalking escapades. That was the sort of turn of events Stiles could get behind; sleep deprivation was only something he tolerated when he was doing it on purpose, foregoing sleep for research binges or monster hunts. Now it was a waiting game to see if it was enough for a permanent solution or if it was only temporarily satisfied.
Stiles hoped like hell it was permanent. If it wasn’t, if it somehow hinged on Erica’s decision, then he’d never mention it again, not even to Derek. The sleepwalking had been beginning to scare him, just a bit, but he would never put that sort of guilt on someone else’s shoulders – he would not pressure Erica into a decision, no matter what it did to him.

*Please, please let it be enough.*

**oOoOo**

Sleep issues aside, Thursday came with its own mix of ups and downs, both related and not to the previous day’s discussions.

Erica was quieter than usual. It wasn’t really something anyone else would notice, because aside from him and Scott no one really took an interest in Erica’s general behaviour, but it was there. It was a calculating silence, he realised come lunchtime, when the three of them were sitting together at the back of the cafeteria.

During their shared classes, he’d caught her watching him more than once, but after everything that they’d talked about it was only to be expected. What he’d been hoping wouldn’t happen – what he had known was going to happen – was the way Erica was pondering the curve of Allison’s back, eyebrows furrowed just slightly as though she were trying hard to imagine something.

This was why he hadn’t really wanted to mention the whole hunter thing – at least not to that level of specificity and not that bluntly. Because if Erica started acting noticeably strange towards Allison it would definitely catch Scott’s attention, and he’d want to know what was going on, and it would become yet another layer in the tangled web of careful deception and withheld truths that had become his day to day life.

Erica was probably trying to imagine Allison with a gun – that’s why she seemed a little confused. Stiles didn’t doubt she was capable of using a gun if the situation called for it, but she was really an archer through and through. He wasn’t going to tell Erica that though. Not now. Not yet.

Sometimes he really hated being right.

**oOoOo**

Lydia ambushed him after school.

Finding people lying in wait by his locker was starting to become a *thing*, as though it was suddenly the only way people could think of to drag him into conversations he didn’t feel like having. The development wasn’t one Stiles was sure he was all that happy about. It was only effective because he still sometimes struggled to say no to the one and only Lydia Martin.

Lydia leaned delicately against the locker next to Stiles, managing to appear effortlessly regal yet also as though she’d rather be almost anywhere else. He chose not to bother taking offence to that – he’d rather be somewhere else too, away from the loud, confining school hallways and away from the sort of questioning he was certain was about to begin.

Since Lydia wasn’t actually obstructing him in any way, and he was in no hurry to kick-start whatever conversation she had come to have, Stiles tried to ignore the heavy weight of her gaze as he unlocked his locker. He silently bemoaned that she’d planned for that; his locker door opened away from her, leaving him unable to hide behind it.

The longer Lydia maintained her quiet stare, the more Stiles felt the urge to fidget or shuffle his feet.
She always managed to appear so unreadable, and it didn’t help matters that Stiles still had no idea why she was so set on this little investigation of hers – he couldn’t get inside her head anymore, because in some ways this Lydia might as well have been a stranger to him.

When she did finally break her silence, it wasn’t what Stiles had been expecting to hear.

“Danny likes to think he’s subtle.”

He’d been beginning to think that she was just going to stare him into submission. The sound of her voice, carefully nonchalant but oh so very pointed, startled him. He smacked his hand on the edge of his locker, pausing his rummaging long enough to shake out the sting and glance sidelong at Lydia. Although she was affecting a disinterested look, as though discussing old, well-worn gossip, the spark in her eyes and the curve of her lips all dared him to interrupt, to ask, to speak up.

It was a trap. There were no two ways about it. Lydia was a master at twisting people and situations to her liking, and Stiles was no stranger to that fact. But if he ran – and he could and she would never be able to catch him – she would know she’d hit a nerve, and her persistence would only blossom.

Maybe he wasn’t at her level, but two people could play at this game of words. His hands moved aimlessly, fingers gliding over paper scraps and textbooks but no longer truly searching for anything; a pretense, to attempt to seem like he wasn’t carefully watching her from the corner of his eye.

“Has he been making bedroom eyes at Jackson?” Stiles tossed out casually, trying to infuse a level of calm and scandalised into his voice that he wasn’t sure he achieved. “That’s such a shame. I really thought he had better taste than that.”

Maybe that was a low blow, but Lydia had never had any illusions that Stiles liked Jackson, so the barb didn’t carry much weight. In any case, there wasn’t an ounce of offense in her expression; her lips twitched, like she wanted to smile but refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing it.

“As if.” She added an exaggerated eye-roll for dramatic effect, dismissing the idea with a wave of her hand. “But don’t you play coy with me Stiles Stilinski. For a cop’s son you don’t play innocent as well as you think you do. Danny’s hiding something from me, and I’m at least 95% sure that it has something to do with you. You could save everyone a lot of trouble by just coming clean.”

“Everyone?” Stiles abandoned all pretense of motion, more than a little confused at this new angle Lydia was taking. ‘Trouble? Who are we even talking about here? Aren’t you pretty much the only person in the entire school who cares about this mysterious ‘thing’ you think is happening?’ He quickly snatched the book he’d been looking for from the back of his locker, suddenly wary about the conversation. He refused to look at her, staring at his hands as he shoved the book into his bag. “Can’t you just believe in the 5%?”

Stiles knew the moment the words left his mouth that it was a protest too much. His fears were confirmed by the triumphant way Lydia held herself when he chanced another cautious glance in her direction.

“The very fact that you’re asking me to means that I’m right. You two are conspiring about something.”

The thoughtful motion of perfectly manicured fingertips tapping gently against Lydia’s upper arm sparked Stiles’ fight or flight instincts – he knew the answer would be flight. However, to Stiles’ immense surprise, Lydia seemed satisfied with whatever she had managed to gleam from him. At the very least, she wasn’t going to continue pushing him on the issue right then.
After a long moment of what Stiles was willing to call pure intimidation, Lydia turned on her heel and waltzed away without a single word of farewell. Once she was out of sight, Stiles slumped against the wall of lockers, wondering if this new life wasn’t even more complicated than when he’d been in a near constant battle for his life.

All this supernatural stuff refused to give him a break.

**oOoOo**

Friday started more or less the same as Thursday had.

Stiles had slept through the night – or, rather, he hadn’t gone on any new late night strolls at any rate; he couldn’t claim to have gotten much sleep regardless of that fact, but any sleep that kept him safely in his bed was better than sleep that ended out in the open. When he passed by Erica and Scott in the hallways before school started neither of them made any attempt to talk to him – Scott probably still frustrated by Stiles’ vague promise; Erica still lost deep in contemplation – yet he caught them both watching him during shared classes when they thought he wasn’t looking.

None of that was new. They’d done it on Thursday, and they’d keep doing it until they were satisfied somehow or another (though Stiles didn’t think he could say the same for his sleeping patterns – he was still paranoid about it all).

Given all that, Stiles had been caught rather unawares when Erica looped their arms together in the hallway and steered him pointedly away from the cafeteria at the beginning of their lunch break. He spared a single moment to imagine the increased suspicion unexpectedly skipping lunch would undoubtedly cause, in both Scott and Lydia, but it was ultimately of less importance than whatever Erica had in mind.

They wound up perched on the bonnet of Stiles’ jeep in the crisp air, lounging beneath the weak winter sun on cold metal. If the temperature bothered Erica, she made no note of it. Her fingers tapped absently against her leg, but she was otherwise outwardly calm.

Stiles allowed her to gather her thoughts without pressing her into conversation. She would speak when she was ready to. In the lull Stiles rolled his shoulders, attempting to dispel some of the tension that always built up in his body while trapped inside the school building with so many sounds and smells. It had never really occurred to him that he could just escape outside during his free periods – up ‘til now, going outside was generally just part of the process of escaping the school grounds entirely, whether it was to go home at the end of the day or to run off into the woods to skip class.

Erica pulled him away from his musings as she straightened from her slouch.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said. Like, a lot. And two days is probably nowhere near long enough to make a decision like this, but at the same time it doesn’t really matter how long I spend thinking since I’ll just be going round and round on the same points.”

Stiles hummed encouragingly before adding his own two cents. “As long as you remember that the decision is yours, time is probably irrelevant.” He’d lied to Peter’s face about not wanting the bite, and when he’d finally made his peace with the fact that he really didn’t want it anymore he’d had that decision ripped away from him. Whatever choice Erica made, he would stand behind it.

“Time is part of the issue though, I reckon. Because, Stiles, I don’t really want to die, but I want to live, and if I need to take a few risks in order to do that, well… I hate feeling like I have to live my life walking on eggshells, paranoid that something might set me off. This will let me do what I want with my life, right?”
“I won’t say it’ll be easy, but it will be different. The challenges are things we can work on together, and with time you’ll no doubt overcome them. You’re already strong here,” Stiles reached over and poked Erica gently in the forehead, “this will just allow your body to match that strength.”

Erica smiled, but it was still a little frail around the edges.

“You and Derek, you uh, said that the bite itself could potentially be dangerous. That sometimes the body rejects it. How likely do you reckon that is?”

That was a fear that would fester the longer she delayed making a decision.

Gently, Stiles wrapped supernaturally warm fingers around one of Erica’s hands, cradling it between his palms. “Derek is a pessimist. You’ll be fine, I swear.”

“Man, Stiles.” Erica sighed, the exasperated exhalation turning into a chuckle at the end. “You sound so freaking confident about it all that it’s hard to doubt you. When did you become Mister Reliable?”

“Hey, I take offence to that. For the record I have always been perfectly reliable. Probably.” He maintained serious eye contact for a few heartbeats before bursting into laughter. Erica grinned at him, less frayed, steady. The tense air from all their talk of death dissipated.

“I believe in you,” Erica said once Stiles was quiet again, her grin softening into a small smile but not disappearing. “I want the bite.”

“Okay. Then that’s what we’ll do.” Stiles closed his eyes, imagining the lunar chart he’d printed off and pinned to his wall. “Ideally we’d do it on a Friday after school, so you’d have the weekend to begin to adjust, but the next full moon is on Monday, so this weekend is too risky. You don’t want your first full moon being that soon after the change.”

“You’re the boss. Whatever you think is best. Although…” Erica glanced away, taking back her hand and interlocking her fingers. “I can’t exactly say I’m upset with the thought of waiting a whole week for it. Today might have been a little startling.”

Right. Today was a Friday. There was a difference between knowing that and realising it, Stiles found, as he hadn’t even really registered the immediacy the whole thing would have taken on if he wasn’t wary of the full moon.

“No, yeah, totally,” he agreed softly. “I’ll sort things with Derek for next week. All you have to do is figure out what to tell your parents to excuse you being gone most of the weekend. Werewolf lesson number one: creating good lies is an essential part of life. I’m not sure I ever really nailed that.” The quiet admission was equal parts wistful and bitter. Half-truths and secrets and lying too well and not lying well enough — they’d all been the basis of so much turmoil. Part of him rebelled against the thought that he was once again dragging people senselessly into this life of deception. But it wasn’t fair to anyone to claim he was overriding their free will. All he was doing, he had to remind himself, was laying out information. Erica made her own choice.

The warning bell rang, signalling that lunch was drawing to a close. Stiles launched himself off the jeep, for once actually graceful in his landing. He waited patiently as Erica slid to the ground. When she made to head towards the school building, Stiles grabbed her wrist gently, pulling her to a stop so he could impart some reluctant advice.

“In the coming weeks, don’t talk to me after school too much if Allison’s dad’s around. He’s suspicious of me because he saw me hanging about with Derek, and I’d hate for him to get it in his head to go after you. I need to know that you’ll be safe until you’re settled enough to protect
yourself.”

For a moment, it seemed like Erica was going to protest. What in particular she took offence to, Stiles would never know, because she swallowed back whatever she had wanted to say when she took in the look on his face. Stiles wondered if he looked as panicked as he felt at the thought of Argent looming over them, as though trying to piece together a puzzle.

Erica extracted her arm from his grip, but nodded in acceptance, before leaving him standing alone in the parking lot.

oOoOo

The weekend was a mess.

Without the distraction of needing to concentrate on control at school Stiles was quickly becoming a twitchy ball of aggression as the peak of the full moon drew closer and closer. It was only his second full moon full stop, and his first as an alpha, and the draw was still incredibly strong. Perhaps even stronger than the first one.

Yeah, Stiles was glad that werewolves didn’t actually go full-on beast under the moonlight and run about on all fours against their will every full moon, but he would have liked it better if the moon thing had been a total myth. Surely just being a supernatural creature was hard enough without being instinctively drawn to the lunar cycle.

After several snappish responses and a slammed door, Stiles’ dad seemed to realise it was better not to bother him too much. And Stiles felt guilty about it, because his dad hadn’t done anything wrong, Stiles was just antsy and nothing in his house smelled quite right and he felt unsettled.

To be an alpha was to be a slave to the moon.

That was what Stiles wanted to say, anyway. Except Derek had never been like that (but Derek didn’t count, he was a born wolf, he didn’t have to juggle so many new experiences at once). Scott had never been like that; not really, not after the first moon or two – Scott hadn’t had lunar control issues, he’d had emotional control issues.

And Stiles was, generally, on the inside anyway, more level-headed than Scott. Wasn’t he? He’d always been looking at the bigger picture, when Scott had still been worrying about how to juggle keeping his secret from his hunter girlfriend. (But Scott got better; once he started having to take responsibility for more people, he started trying to take a step back, but he would always think with his heart and not with his head.)

For as long as it was his role, Stiles needed to be an alpha who thought with his head. In order to do that, he needed to have control. But the moon sang to him. It was difficult to ignore.

oOoOo

It was with red cheeks and a healthy dose of self-loathing that Stiles climbed through his bedroom window in the early hours of Monday morning. He’d spent most of the night sitting on the roof, staring at the moon, hoping like hell that none of his neighbours would look out a window on the way to the bathroom and see his dark silhouette and glowing eyes stretched out on the tiles.

He had wanted to sleep, because the easiest way to ignore the pull of the moon was when he wasn’t conscious to process it, but his body had refused to cooperate with that particular plan of action. It would get easier to ignore as the months rolled by. He had to believe that. He refused to be held
captive by the universe.

Until that time came to pass, however, he was stuck with this endlessly restless feeling crawling beneath his skin. He didn’t want to wolf out, exactly, although his skin itched, as though it were pulled a little too tightly across his skeleton. Part of him felt almost lonely, though his father’s presence hadn’t helped that in the slightest, but another part of him wanted to be alone. Stiles wasn’t used to having such contradictory feelings; he hated it – couldn’t it have been about something less confusing?

One thing he knew for certain was that he wasn’t going to risk heading in to school. The precipice he could feel himself standing on meant if he went there was a very real chance he might just snap and try and throw a chair at one of his more frustrating teachers (maybe Mr Harris).

On any given day (so far) Stiles had found himself generally in control of himself – save his first few stumbling days of alphahood – but that also meant that he’d never really had to learn to cope. Coping was something that, as a beta, had come almost instinctually. Staying himself had posed no real challenge – in fact, it was utilising his new supernatural abilities that came with more struggle.

Perhaps it was a mind-set, a natural resistance he’d built up from living in the company of wolves. Whatever it had been, it was no longer strong enough.

When Peter died, it had been like someone flipped a switch, killing the power to whatever mechanism had been sheltering him from his baser instincts. Now, with the proximity of the moon, it was like his sensitivity dial had been cranked up to max; he wanted to turn it back down, but it was just out of reach.

“I hate this,” Stiles whispered into the quiet stillness of the house.

He made a note to talk to Derek about it when they met up in the evening. Although Derek had never had the dubious pleasure of being an alpha, there were surely still thoughts he could offer up in aid. What had things been like for Laura? How many bitten wolves had Derek actually met in his life? Could he even compare the two situations, born and bitten, or was he grasping at straws just as much as Stiles was?

If only he could calm his mind long enough to try and meditate.

With a long-suffering sigh, Stiles stretched out on his bed in the hopes of trying to chase a few hours of sleep while the sun was up.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Minor edits 27/11/16

Remember that I'm totally fine with you bugging me about my fics on tumblr if you feel like it.

“I regret everything.”

Derek refused to acknowledge Stiles’ admittedly slightly melodramatic entrance. Obviously he’d known Stiles was coming, as he’d made no move to attempt forest stealth in broad daylight, but it was almost disheartening to realise that Derek was already anticipating and strategically ignoring his outbursts. It was both familiar and achingly unfamiliar.

Stiles knew he had the worst sort of survivor’s guilt, and he probably always would. It wasn’t the sort of thing you could just shake, in the same way that he would forever be a little frayed from sharing headspace with an ancient, malevolent being. He just hadn’t thought it ran so deep that sometimes he felt guilty about the relative ease with which he’d fallen into cooperation with this Derek, when his camaraderie had once been a hard won privilege. They were becoming two very different people in his mind, and that carried with it a flavour of betrayal.

Shaking away a sudden haze of melancholy, Stiles plastered a grin on his face as he rounded the last line of trees into the clearing. A smile wouldn’t hide his chemo signals, but Derek had never been particularly invasive with checking in on the emotional states of teenagers, and Stiles imagined he’d been a potent cocktail of ups and downs since the moment he woke up back in 2011.

“What,” he goaded, “that’s it? No questions? You aren’t even the tiniest bit curious?”

For that Stiles got a pointedly raised eyebrow and a no-nonsense stare tossed over Derek’s shoulder.

“Believe it or not, Stiles, but I don’t have some deep-seated desire to understand the inner workings of your mind, no matter how much you try and convince me otherwise. Also,” he continued, before Stiles even had a chance to open his mouth, “that wasn’t an invitation. You strike me as the sort of person who would launch into an explanation anyway if I don’t specify.”

Stiles laughed, because it seemed like what he was supposed to do, because it felt like a Normal Stiles Reaction to an acquaintance making scathing remarks about his personality, but it echoed in his ears, oddly bitter. Jaded. Because sometimes he did used to do that, rant about useless things just to rile people – mostly Derek – up. Only, he wasn’t sure he could do it anymore without it feeling forced somehow, or tinged with bitterness that they weren’t the right people on the receiving end.

Stiles turned away from Derek’s laser-sharp gaze before the once-more-downwards spiral of his thoughts could show on his face. Things were awkward enough between them already – that’s what happened when you went behind someone’s back to kill their unstable, murderous uncle. Letting Derek in on any of the myriad regrets in Stiles’ life would only make things worse.

It was only mid-afternoon. Stiles hadn’t intentionally come looking for Derek, considering they’d be
spending the whole night together, potentially with Stiles chained to a god-damned tree, or the old train carriage in the bunker. The morning’s attempt at scraping together a few hours of shut-eye had proven just as fruitless as the entire night before had been. Staring at the ceiling for hours had just made his room feel claustrophobic; he’d needed to get away, and his traitorous feet had led him unerringly towards the charred shell of the Hale house. Sensing Derek there hadn’t exactly been a surprise; was even, perhaps, the expected outcome.

When there were a lot of supernatural problems on his mind, Stiles tended to seek out Scott or Lydia for advice, but in the here and now Derek was just about the only supernaturally knowledgeable person he knew (excluding Danny and his unknown depths of historical lore) who didn’t either think he wanted to rip their throat out with his teeth (which was such a Derek cliché, but Stiles still had a lot of pent-up frustration from months upon months of Deaton being endlessly vague and he’d just sort of snapped, okay? First impressions weren’t really his strong point), or were actually on his list of people he wouldn’t mind giving a fist to the face (not that Stiles was into beating up girls, but Morrell was tough, she could handle it, and if he had to pick sides in the whole druid thing well, Deaton still seemed the lesser of two evils).

So there he was, with his head full of questions but his lips firmly sealed. Too many of his questions would, if he let himself voice them, inevitably lead into unanswerable queries about what Derek had felt when he’d been an alpha. That was a can of worms he was hoping to avoid opening forever, if at all possible. In the end, Derek’s stubbornness, his refusal to respond to Stiles’ goading, was actually a blessing. It was so much easier to keep secrets when people refused to ask.

Stiles picked a sunny patch of grass and sprawled across it. Once Derek seemed satisfied that Stiles wasn’t about to run his mouth off, he returned to whatever it was he’d been doing before Stiles barged in – Stiles wasn’t particularly interested in finding out what that was.

It was nice, lying beneath the winter sun, away from the tedious repetition of classes he’d already attended, and away from the people who had certain expectations based on long spans of interaction about how he should act. (Even if he shoved aside all the awful things he knew might still come to pass, it was almost impossible for Stiles to remember what he’d been like before werewolves took over his life.) Sharing space with Derek – insomuch as two people ignoring each other in a large clearing can be ‘sharing space’ – eased some of the clawing existential loneliness that had been plaguing him all weekend in a way his father had been unable to. He classified it with some frustration as a ‘Wolf Thing’, and tacked it on to his mental list of Side Effects That Had Better Lessen With Time. He would make an actual list, for science, but it would worry his dad when he inevitably stumbled across it.

If he didn’t get a handle on all of this quickly though, his dad would have bigger things to worry about than uncomfortable lists.

oOoOo

Stiles didn’t realise he’d drifted off to sleep until he was roughly dragged back to wakefulness.

When he opened his eyes it was dark. Not middle of the night dark; more a just-after-sunset lack of light. For a moment it threw him, since the sun had been warming his face what felt like mere minutes ago.

There was a dull ache in his side, which continued to fade even as he tried to concentrate on it. Derek had his back to him halfway across the clearing. Stiles could put two and two together. He’d been roused in typical Derek fashion via a foot to the ribs. That part didn’t surprise him. What did was that he’d slept at all.
Even with his (frankly unsettling) outdoor nap, which could only have lasted a handful of hours at most, Stiles didn’t exactly feel rested at all. His body felt a little sluggish, the way it always did when he’d been dozing, lax and heavy-limbed as his entire being being passively protested movement, but he could usually count on the time just after waking to allow him a calm mind, before it ramped up into overdrive the further from sleep he got. Now he just felt restless. The same restlessness he’d been feeling all weekend, but worse, again, with the sun gone and night drawing in on them.

“Get up,” Derek called. “We’re going.”

Stiles scrambled to obey, climbing to his feet and putting on a short burst of speed until he could fall into step just behind Derek.

In the back of his mind, he had a pretty good idea as to why he’d been able to catch a few Zs this time around, despite not intending to. Somehow or another, it all came back to pack mentality. This close to the moon, this soon after turning, all of those extra little things that made him wolf instead of human clamboured uncomfortably close to the surface. At home, he wasn’t safe, but here, his beta (of questionable loyalty and with no definite pack affinity, but theoretically pack all the same) had been watching his back, so to speak.

God, he really hoped those animal instincts would kick the bucket soon.

They ended up back in Derek’s favourite hiding spot – the abandoned rail bunker. (Stiles didn’t want to acknowledge the fact that he might very well actually be living down there at the moment. That was too depressing to think about, even for Derek.) Not for the first time, Stiles silently bemoaned the loss of Derek’s loft.

Even though he could no longer see the moon – or the sky at all for that matter – he could still feel it in his bones. Stiles felt jittery. Derek kept tossing him glares and looks of exasperation as he shifted from sitting to standing to pacing to standing to sitting again. Once upon a time he might have felt at least a little cowed by that, but now it just made him… unhappy. Because Derek was reprimanding him – albeit without words – despite him only being a beta wolf. He was upsetting the balance of power that Stiles didn’t really care about but that the alpha wanted badly to uphold.

Stiles shoved one of the muesli bars he’d crammed into his pockets in his mouth when he felt his teeth sharpening of their own volition, trying desperately not to snarl at Derek or do anything to push him over the edge of this strange sense of cooperation and abandon Stiles to his own fate.

“So…” Stiles hedged hesitantly once his mouth was empty. “How are we playing things tonight?”

For a moment Derek was quiet. Stiles thought he might have been ignoring him. He was fine with that – he was just trying to fill the silence, to get his mind to focus on something.

“Ideally I’d like to chain you up.”

Stiles blanched at that, the incessant tapping of his foot ceasing as his whole body froze up in protest. Derek continued without acknowledging it.

“I didn’t bother last time, though I had things on hand just in case, since you seemed remarkably self-aware. You’ve been notably off since then, however. If you were my beta, I’d restrain you. Since you aren’t… I’m going to go out on a limb and say that it might do more harm than good.”

Power plays. Right. Like with the glaring. Stiles could totally get that. Being restrained by a beta – especially a beta who wasn’t technically pack – would really do a number on an alpha’s ego, even
on a good day. This was not a good day.

“You could totally still, like, knock me out or something though, if I got out of hand. Right?”

“I’d prefer not to go there, if we can help it, but I suppose, if it comes down to it, I could. You’re not much of a fighter, and instinct can only get you so far.”

“Cool.” Stiles nodded, and tried to pretend that every word out of Derek’s mouth wasn’t making him feel like he was being backed into a corner.

This was why he didn’t want to be an alpha.

Stiles paced the inside of the bunker. Around and around and around in some hopeless endeavour to maybe, just maybe, wear himself out a bit before he snapped and got totally moon-drunk.

Every now and again he flexed his hands. Claws in. Claws out. Claws in. Claws out. Eventually he couldn’t will them away anymore.

After that, everything struck him all at once.

He was calm, heart racing a little, claws out, nose itchy. Then he turned. Derek came back into his line of sight. His eyes burned. His fangs tore at his lips.


Without conscious thought Stiles’ body moved, across the bunker, towards Derek.

The older man was alert in an instant, snarling but not meeting his eyes. Not submissive but not obviously challenging him.

It was aggravating. Something inside of him hated it.

They fought.

Neither of them were holding their punches. Derek didn’t need to – his alpha strength protected him from Derek’s precise fighting style – and Stiles wasn’t sure he was even capable of doing so.

It didn’t feel real. Stiles felt a little like a passenger inside his own head, unable to control his own body. It was the first time he had felt that so strongly as a wolf. It was different from when he had been possessed, but that didn’t mean it was better.

He knew now, suddenly, intimately, why he needed an anchor. Why his self-awareness and his knowledge weren’t enough to maintain control in the face of alpha-on-the-full-moon. There was so much more raw power, more supernatural instinct, more wolf. He still had his mind – human, intelligent, rational – but his link to his body was being overwhelmed by the powerful spirit he’d taken on upon Peter’s death.

Stiles didn’t know how long they exchanged blows. He could feel the pain, but it was muted, like sound from underwater. It didn’t concern him. Instead, he was trying desperately to grasp something that would work as his anchor.

He thought of his friends, together and individually, but no matter who he thought of there were too many feelings going in too many directions to be able to hold onto them. His determination was weak now, after making his first significant change to the timeline, too weak to help him with what
needed to be done.

Anger was out. Pretty much all his emotions were. He wasn’t Derek. He couldn’t do that, manifest a feeling with such force that it became his connection with humanity. Fear or regret, perhaps, could help a bit – he had those in spades – but using negativity to calm this rage was like fighting fire with fire.

*Think the opposite of Derek,* he tried telling himself. *You’re not Derek. You’re not Scott. Stop relying on what you know about them and think of something else.*

A face.

Satomi.

Her pack had had a mantra. For focus.

Focus was what he needed more than anything. Finding an anchor with emotional ties was difficult, but finding focus through words – that was something he could do.

He searched his memories, trying to find it, looking, looking-

There.


*The sun, the moon, the truth,* he thought frantically.

He repeated it to himself, over and over again.

Derek punched him in the jaw.

Stiles bit his tongue. Tasted blood. Swore.

The words sounded outside of his head. He’d spoken them aloud.

Stiles blinked. His awareness swarmed outwards in an instant.

Derek was standing across from him, eyeing him warily. Stiles ignored him. He spat blood from his mouth and swore some more, the words muffled by his fangs. His whole body was on fire, achy and bruised and sluggishly bleeding.

“You good?” Derek asked, actually sounding a little concerned.

“You didn’t try to leave,” Derek said a while later, in a tone that made it sound like it was supposed to be good news.

Stile gave him a look.

“I didn’t want to do this out in the forest in case you lost control, ran off, and I couldn’t catch you.
But you lost control, and you didn’t even try to bolt. You came after me instead.”

“You don’t have to sound so pleased about getting the chance to beat me up.”

Derek raised a judgemental eyebrow. It clearly read *you seriously think I like going around beating up teenagers?*

“I could handle it,” he said, not proudly, just like he was stating facts. “You saw me as a threat and stayed here, instead of going off to potentially get shot and killed, or to harm a human. I’m sorry but I’m calling that a win as far as I’m concerned.”

Stiles sighed, grimacing. Derek had a point. He hadn’t even stopped to think about whether Chris would be out haunting the woods. He still seemed tense whenever Stiles crossed paths with him on school grounds.

“Fine.”

Stiles lay back on the floor, trying to ignore how his entire body protested the movement, and wished that his stupid werewolf physique wasn’t basically immune to painkillers.

**oOoOo**

Stiles was very glad his dad wasn’t up to see him when he stumbled home, bloodied and bruised.

**oOoOo**

The moon’s pull on his soul lasted longer than Stiles expected as it slowly waned. Although he had already discussed missing school on Tuesday with his father, he ended up having to skip Wednesday as well. He could tell by the sound of his dad’s voice as he phoned the school yet again that he was both annoyed by this turn of events and worried about it. Stiles couldn’t fault him for that – it was a confusing time for both of them, but Stiles was more than familiar with this stuff by now, even if it was his first time experiencing it all first-hand; his dad, on the other hand, had had all of this dumped unceremoniously in his lap barely more than a month ago, and didn’t exactly have anyone to talk about it all with.

While the days leading up to the full moon had filled Stiles with an anxious, restless energy which prevented him from getting any semblance of rest, he wound up spending the majority of Tuesday, after arriving back home, either asleep or in a dazed, half-awake, semi-lupine state. Every time he woke up, he repeated Satomi’s mantra to himself, just to be safe. The tension and sense of anticipation that had previously plagued him had all drained away over the course of Monday night, leaving him exhausted but calmer than he had felt in quite some time, as though the alpha within him was finally satisfied about something, despite the wounds that were still healing as he dozed.

Tuesday’s sleep was peaceful and largely uninterrupted save for his own body’s desire for food, the calm in his soul chasing away any and all dreams, allowing him to recover from the weekend.

Once his body was no longer completely exhausted and trying to heal itself, the temporary calm loosened its grip on his mind. When he woke he no longer found himself partway to beta shift – nails a little too long, teeth a little too sharp, nose a little bit itchy, eyes sporadically aglow – which was something he hadn’t much noticed himself while he dozed, but that his dad had commented on when he stumbled down for dinner on Tuesday.

Even after mostly regaining transformative control over his body, Wednesday wasn’t so kind.

He woke in time to have breakfast with his dad before his shift, but the sight of his drooping eyelids
over red-tinged irises had the sheriff sending him back upstairs before Stiles even really had a chance to think about whether or not he was up for going to school. He accepted the verdict easily and went without a fuss.

By then he was in that in-between state where his previous over-tiredness had been assuaged with so much sleep that he wanted to keep sleeping, so in the beginning he forced himself to stay awake. Stiles started up a few brainstorm documents for essay assignments he vaguely remembered being assigned – he’d done more of his homework than usual during the weekend while he wasn’t sleeping, so there wasn’t really any left for him to focus on – and sleepily bemoaned the fact that he hadn’t been able to bring all his homework files back to the past with him. (Whether that would have been a good thing or not, he would never know – he got the feeling he might need the normalcy from time to time.)

When that stopped helping, Stiles took a much-colder-than-usual shower to try and shock himself into alertness. The temporary reprieve lasted until he was throwing together something for lunch. He could go for a run to try and settle himself, but he had no desire to draw unwanted attention. Instead, he flicked on the TV and sprawled out on the couch in the living room.

It didn’t take long for him to fall asleep again.

oOoOo

There was something warm and wet on his cheek.

Stiles scrubbed the back of his hand across his face and glanced down at it. A dark, reddish smear was smudged across his pale skin. He breathed it in and knew instantly what it was. Blood.

He blinked. Lowered his hand.

His surroundings snapped suddenly into focus as he shifted his thoughts outwards.

Derek’s loft. Full of possessions, devoid of life. Stiles was alone.

No. Not alone.

There was a shuffling sound. Bare feet on the cold floor. Something… dripping?

Stiles turned, slowly, on the spot. Someone was standing on the other side of the room.

The floor was red.

He smelled iron.

He blinked. In the millisecond his eyes were closed the figure had crossed the room.

Blue eyes stared down at him.

He blinked again.

Red eyes.

Blue.

They flickered, unsteady, back and forth. Blue-red-blue-red-blue-red-bl-

Stiles’ fingers twitched. He wanted to step back, to put distance between them, but his legs weren’t
listening to him. Nothing was listening to him.

He breathed in through his nose and gagged on the scent, hanging heavy and cloying in the air. Blood. More blood than he knew what to do with, more than he’d ever smelt before.

The dripping was louder now.

His gaze drifted without his permission, away from the eyes that held him captive (and he knew those eyes, damn it all, he knew exactly who this was, why they were there) and down, down to a tan neck covered in glistening red liquid.

He was surrounded by an impossible amount of blood.

This man was dead yet not dead. Red and blue. Glaring in accusation and staring in bemusement. He couldn’t speak – his vocal cords were ruined – but he had never needed words to get his thoughts across.

He reached towards Stiles. There was blood on his hands – on his shirt, his pants, his everything. His fingers caressed the side of Stiles’ face for a moment, sticky and wet and warm and leaving a trail in their wake, before they wandered down to his throat. His nails pressed in firmly; a warning. Holding him still.

His hand, his gaze, screamed at Stiles.

“This is your fault!” they cried. “You did this to me. I could have been great. We could have been great.”

Stiles couldn’t breathe. He was still, frozen in place, unable to react, to fight back or escape or even speak (to apologise?).

His pulse rushed in his ears. The fingers tightened.

Above him, Peter Hale smiled.

It was cold.

It was a promise.

oOoOo

A sharp burst of pain tugged Stiles violently awake.

In his attempts to escape the dream – nightmare – Stiles had fallen off the couch and landed awkwardly on the floor, one arm clpping the coffee table on the way down.

His heart beat rapidly in his chest, lungs heaving as he gasped in air.

Stiles was no stranger to nightmares. He had plenty of bad experiences for his mind to feed off of, plenty of regrets and danger and blood and pain and all of that. He was used to it. He thought he was used to it. He’d been dealing with nightmares for months prior to this new shitstorm; a couple more now was nothing to be surprised about.

But he couldn’t escape a niggling voice in the back of his head, a voice strengthened by this latest nightmare. Maybe killing Peter had been rash. Maybe he could have done things differently. Made better choices.
No. Stiles shook himself, carefully picking himself up from the floor. *I can’t let myself be swayed be things like that.* There was too much still at stake for him to allow himself to get swept away in renewed regrets and games of what if.

He just had to take things one step at a time.

-oOoOo-

Lunchtime Thursday saw Stiles herding Erica towards the mostly empty cafeteria table generally used by Vernon Boyd and *only* Vernon Boyd. (Boyd was a great guy, Stiles could vouch for that, but he naturally (and likely purposefully) exuded this sort of aura that kept most people at bay – kids only bothered him if they wanted something, and he seemed fine with that.) He sat at the edge of the bench on the opposite side and end to where Boyd sat, eyeing them a little oddly, and pulled Erica down beside him. They sat pressed together at the hip and shoulder, heads bowed, and kept their voices low as they picked at their food.

“Allison’s dad was in the car park when I got here so I couldn’t say this this morning, but, what the hell Stiles? You just disappeared for three days – don’t think I’m not mad at you for ignoring all my texts yesterday.”

Stiles smiled a little sheepishly, but it was half-hearted at best. Erica frowned at him, but he could tell she was more worried than upset – for the time being, anyway. He let the smile drop; it obviously wasn’t fooling her.

“Sorry. Tuesday was planned – I forgot to warn you that I’d be staying away from school then. Monday was pretty touch and go. I’m still getting used to, you know, everything, and in the end I deemed Monday too much of a risk. Yesterday, well, that was my dad’s decision actually, but I can’t say I necessarily blame him. I still feel a little… off today, but I’m in control of everything again, and that’s all I can really ask for.”

He paused, turning a little more to meet Erica’s gaze head-on.

“My eyes don’t look weird do they? The irises? I can’t always tell.”

She squinted at him, frown not lessening in the slightest, and shook her head.

“You look a little tired, but not, you know, glowy.”

“Good. That’s good then. Tired is something I can deal with.” He breathed out slowly and looked back down at the table.

“Is that… common then?”

“Nah.” Stiles waved off her concern. “It’s only my second go-about, and I’ve got a lot of stuff going on right now. You don’t have to worry about racking up absences. You’ll be fine.”

Erica tugged lightly on the hem of Stiles’ shirt, voice pitched even lower, showing a tinge of concern.

“How do you know?”

*Experience*, his mind whispered. “Call it an educated guess,” he said instead.

She huffed at the non-answer, but when Stiles glanced up at her, her frown had become a wry smile. That was more like it.
They spent the rest of lunch talking about lighter things – homework and people and movies and whatever else came to mind – until they decided to get a move on and beat the pre-class hallway rush.

As they left the cafeteria, Stiles threw a glance across the room to locate Scott. He caught sight of his friend looking awfully bewildered, sitting across a table from Lydia. Scott was busy gaping, but Lydia was watching them leave. The thought that she was observing them didn’t sit well with Stiles; Lydia was good at getting what she wanted, one way or another, and Stiles still hadn’t figured out her end goal.

The nightmares were back once more.

Blurry and indistinct, Stiles awoke early in the morning feeling deeply unsettled. Although this time the details evaded him, he could take an educated guess.

Peter. Again.

Scott was quiet on Friday.

Stiles didn’t notice at first, because they were mostly in class, and he was busy worrying about his after school plans, but come lunchtime it became glaringly obvious that something was up.

A quiet Scott was a Scott who was trying much harder than usual to figure something out. Back in the day that wouldn’t have been an issue, because it almost certainly wouldn’t have directly related to Stiles in any way – he used to be a pretty open book after all – but now… Now it was a reason for some concern.

Non-interference seemed the best way to go, so Stiles did his best to ignore it, but as lunch dragged on – and the uncomfortable silence that had fallen over the trio with it – it became harder and harder to pretend he couldn’t tell that Scott obviously had something to say.

Beside him, Erica was equally on edge. She didn’t know the ins and outs of Scott’s personality the way Stiles did; he’d just picked a really bad day to decide to put his brain to use. She hadn’t said a word about what they had planned for the weekend, but he knew she was tense about it regardless – it was impossible not to be.

With a sigh Stiles shifted in his seat, trying to come up with the best way to approach whatever was going on with Scott before it started getting seriously out of hand. Scott interrupted him before he could come to a decent solution.

“Stiles,” he said, a slightly nervous tone to his voice and a strange look on his face. “We’re buddies, right?”

It felt like a rhetorical question – they’d already had their friendship argument the other week, and Scott wouldn’t bring it up so publicly – but Stiles nodded anyway.

Scott’s gaze drifted over to Erica for a moment, before he stared determinedly at a point Stiles guessed to be just over his shoulder.

“I know we’ve been a little…” He trailed off, waved his hand vaguely in the air, shrugged, and discarded the thought. “You know I’d have nothing against it, right? So you’d tell me if you and
Erica were dating, wouldn’t you?”

Erica made a strangled, choking sound, caught somewhere between a derisive snort and a startled laugh.

Stiles, who had started getting concerned by Scott’s back and forth train of thoughts, froze, utterly confused as the words floated around in his head. He smacked Erica lightly in the arm out of reflex, but was otherwise at a complete loss. The accusation – okay, accusation was a strong word, it was more of an… observation? The comment, anyway, seemed to come way out of left field. Stiles had no idea how to respond. Thankfully, Erica did.

“Seriously? Dating? Us?” She laughed, waving her hand in denial, but there was still a strain to the sound. Stiles dismissed it as lingering surprise.

Stiles was glad she’d taken the lead. If he’d allowed himself to react he might not have been able to bite his tongue against the urge to grab at the convenient cover Scott had so unwittingly handed up to him. It wasn’t something he wanted to do – he was trying to keep his lies to an absolute minimum, especially in regards to Scott – but his self-preservation instincts sometimes got the better of him.

“Yeah,” Stiles added, pulling himself together. “Where’d that come from?”

Scott was visibly flustered by their reaction. His gaze wavered, eyes flicking over to where Stiles knew for a fact Lydia was sitting, probably watching this all play out. All of a sudden it made sense. The why was still lost on him, but the what was plain to see. Lydia had planted the idea yesterday, taking advantage of his need for private conversation, and had sat back to see what would come of it. He knew she was still curious, but he hadn’t expected her to drag Scott into the fray.

Was she taunting him? Trying to spur him into action?

Her curiosity was a dangerous thing. He needed to head it off somehow; he just didn’t know how yet.

“Well then,” Stiles said, trying for teasingly cheerful and hoping his tension didn’t seep through. “You can tell the red-headed goddess fuelling your imagination that if she wants to tease me there are better ways than this.”

Scott flushed a dark red, averting his gaze to the table. He mumbled something under his breath, about curiosity and “just want you to be happy.” Stiles forced himself to laugh it off, to change the subject, to try and put it from his mind for the time being.

Today was too important to allow himself to be distracted by Lydia’s little games.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Minor edits 27/11/16

One day it won't take me two months to write a chapter. Today is not that day.

Follow my new writing tumblr for progress updates and fic chat.

After school, Stiles and Erica holed themselves up in the school library for half an hour or so, half-heartedly taking a stab at some of their weekend homework.

Stiles wasn’t willing to take any chances with Chris Argent – not now – so they were biding their time, waiting to make absolutely certain that he wasn’t hanging about on school grounds when they left. He didn’t care much for his own safety – he could handle himself, especially if the man wanted to play mind games (because Stiles knew so much more about the Argent family than the man would ever expect, and wouldn’t it be justice to see him scared of Stiles for once?) – but he wasn’t about to risk drawing Argent’s attention to Erica. She didn’t deserve to be subjected to his laser-focused suspicion; all she wanted was to be healthy and to belong. Stiles refused to let her be persecuted for that.

Erica did actually manage to get a bit of homework done – she was mostly just following Stiles’ lead in regards to the Argent situation, and she didn’t have any of the context to fuel her paranoia like Stiles did – but Stiles had only managed to waste a perfectly good notebook page by doodling all over it while staring alternately between the clock on the wall and the window.

When he was satisfied that enough time had passed, Stiles shoved his things into his bag, grabbed Erica’s gym bag (he’d asked her to bring some stuff so they wouldn’t have to make any awkward pit-stops to her house to possibly face Parental Questioning), and led the way out into the parking lot.

oOoOo

The house was empty when Stiles pulled into the driveway. Since his dad was on the day shift at the moment it was to be expected, but Stiles wasn’t going to deny that he was a little relieved. He hadn’t exactly told his dad about the recent shift in the Beacon Hills hierarchy (the change in his eye colour had been noted but not questioned, which Stiles put down to his dad’s reluctance to know more about werewolves than he needed to), or about the offer he’d made to Erica, so anything that meant avoiding or postponing a confrontation about it all was a good thing in Stiles’ book.

He and Erica crossed the short distance between his jeep and the house in silence. She could have waited in the jeep – he didn’t plan on being inside for long – but Stiles felt that perhaps Erica, like himself, was a little wary of being alone on a day like today.

Although he’d been feeling a bit off all day, Stiles hadn’t realised how nervous he was until he found himself stuck in a losing battle with the lock on the front door. The keys were gently pried from his fingers, and Stiles’ vision was suddenly full of Erica’s worried face. Keys in her pocket for the moment, Erica took Stiles’ hands in her own, cradling them and stilling the minute trembles that shook his fingers.
“Are you sure everything’s okay? You were tense in the library too.”

Stiles took a deep breath, held it, and slowly let it out, trying to release some of his nerves with the motion.

“I don’t really know what I’m doing,” he admitted with a shrug. Erica didn’t need to know that he didn’t just mean werewolf stuff; he planned on keeping the burden of his existential dread and confusion locked carefully away in his own mind forever.

Erica squeezed his hands reassuringly. “Well, neither do I. So I guess we’ll stumble blindly forward together.”

Looking at her earnest expression Stiles was struck with a newly-familiar wash of guilt-grief-fondness. Thankfully the fondness tended to win out over everything else, but the guilt and the grief were still there, lingering at the edges, always waiting for a moment of weakness where they could take hold.

He shifted his hands in her hold and squeezed gently back.

“Sure,” he said, grateful but unable to commit. “Batman and Catwoman, on a new adventure.”

He didn’t smile. Neither did she.

Taking the statement for what it was – gratefulness but also an end to the topic – Erica slipped her hands out of Stiles’ loose grasp. She retrieved Stiles’ keys from her pocket, but didn’t return them, searching out the door key and unlocking it herself. *I believe you*, she didn’t say, *but you’re not fine.*

In the moments her back was turned to him Stiles rolled his eyes, but he couldn’t deny the warm burst of affection as she fussed over his shaky mental state. He’d become so accustomed to everyone being in the same tortured, semi-defeated state as him that someone being genuinely worried over anything short of someone bleeding out was a little bit shocking sometimes.

He didn’t want to go back to that, if he could avoid it.

Erica dangled the keys in front of his face when she was done, then dropped them into his waiting hand.

“So, oh great and fearful leader, what are we here for?”

Stiles ignored the teasing as they headed inside.

“I’m going to grab some stuff from upstairs. Derek’s place isn’t exactly what you’d call homely, and since we’ll be there all night we might as well try and be comfortable. While I do that, there’s a bunch of junk food I stashed under the sink to hide from dad – you can pretty much help yourself if there’s anything you want to bring.”

“Roger.” She gave him a cheeky salute and slinked off into the kitchen.

Erica really was a blessing, Stiles mused as he headed up the stairs. She was level-headed and didn’t let her emotions dictate her actions in the same way that Scott did. If Scott got wind of any of this, or caught Stiles in a moment of emotional exhaustion, he’d refuse to let it go until he got a satisfactory explanation – Erica understood that things were give and take, and not talking about something didn’t mean you didn’t trust someone.

He still hadn’t figured out what to tell Scott. He was using Erica as a distraction to avoid the whole
situation, but he’d have to come up with something soon. Scott was patient, but everyone had limits – and that patience would be tested by the thought that Stiles was finding it easier to talk about things with Erica these days than with him.

Stiles clenched his jaw, shook his head, and headed for the linen cupboard. He fished out a couple of blankets, closed the cupboard, and carried them into his bedroom. The blankets he shoved haphazardly into a duffel bag, along with his recently assembled werewolf-grade first aid kit, a change of clothes, and, after a moment or two of thought, his notebook full of things to come, which he had started using as a journal to keep track of how things were changing.

Erica’s voice floated up the stairs. She was adapting quickly – she hadn’t shouted, just raised her voice a little, giving it purpose to catch his attention. “Are you nearly done up there?”

Stiles didn’t answer; just zipped the duffel bag shut, slung it over his shoulder, and headed back down the hallway.

Downstairs he ducked into the kitchen, grabbed a box of muesli bars, and added them to the small collection of food Erica had gathered. They were going to buy something for dinner on the way out – Stiles knew the bunker wasn’t exactly equipped for food storage, and he didn’t really know what Derek did for food these days, but he was a grown man and he could look after himself – everything else was just snacks and maybe breakfast. Stiles had found that his hunger could be unpredictable now, so it was better to be prepared.

“Ready?” she asked again, prompting, not impatient. She cradled the food carefully in her arms and waited while Stiles made sure there wasn’t anything else he’d been meaning to grab.

“Yeah,” Stiles confirmed eventually. “Yeah, we’re good. Let’s go.”

Derek wasn’t in the bunker when they arrived. Stiles had sensed the nearly oppressive emptiness and silence of the space before they made it inside, but the confirmation was a little unsettling. It wasn’t a place he exactly loved being, but it was worse like this. He wasn’t thrilled that Derek was off somewhere, but he trusted that he’d be back eventually.

He dumped his stuff on the floor by one of the cold concrete walls.

“So, this place is really, uh, something,” Erica commented dryly as she followed suit.

Stiles snorted. “Yeah, I know, it’s a real 5 star werewolf hideout. Still, at least it’s secluded.”

“Does Derek know you’re using his, uh, place, or have you conveniently organised this for when he was gone?”

“Oh ye of little faith,” Stiles chided, climbing up into the train car and gesturing for Erica to follow. “I’ll have you know I specifically asked for adult supervision on this. It’s not my fault if he decided to go on a run or whatever.”

Stiles settled in one of the seats that was still more or less intact, and patted the cushion next to him. Erica sat almost reluctantly, and forcefully wrapped Stiles’ arm around her shoulders.

“Adult supervision, huh…” The pep in her voice from Stiles’ house was gone now. The bunker seemed to have stripped her of her faux-cheery mask of confidence. He could understand that. It was easy (easier) to fake a smile and a laugh in the light of the sun. Underground or at night, that was a different story.
He tugged her gently sideways until her head rested against his shoulder.

“I know I’ve said this before, but you’re really under no obligation to go through with this. We can go back home, watch a movie and pretend this never happened. It’s your choice.”

Erica exhaled shakily against his sleeve.

“I know. You’ve been pretty vocal about it. And I am… worried. I trust you – that’s not the issue. It’s just, well, it’s one thing to hear about it, to see it, for it to be you. It’s another thing for it to suddenly be me. There’s no pretending none of this is real once I’m fully a part of it. But—” her voice grew stronger as she continued “—you said it would heal me. That I’ll be able to live my own life. And that, more than anything, is what I want. If the price for that is a few frazzled nerves, well, I’m sure I can cope with that.”

Stiles smiled sadly into her hair. She was so, so strong, and she shouldn’t have to deal with any of this – her illness or the bullying or the danger he was about to pull her into. But the only thing he could do was respect her choices and support the outcome. She would be a werewolf, and she would have a target on her back, but Stiles would protect her. He had that power this time. He could do it.

He didn’t voice any of that though. He just whispered “Okay.”

They sat together until Stiles heard Derek making his way into the bunker.

Stiles had known from the start, before he even suggested the bite to Erica, that he would be supremely uncomfortable doing it himself. Unfortunately, he was the only one who could do it, so the next best thing had been to ensure that Derek was there to supervise things. It wasn’t that he thought he would somehow lose control, or fuck things up – he just couldn’t do it alone. He needed the silent support that Derek could provide, even if it just meant he happened to be in the same room. Otherwise he wouldn’t have gone through the effort of setting everything up in the bunker.

“The Big Bad’s here,” Stiles whispered, knowing full well that Derek could hear him. He squeezed Erica’s shoulder before standing up and shuffling out of the train car. He tried tossing Derek a teasing smirk, but he was pretty sure it fell flat, since the furrow of Derek’s brow that accompanied his mandatory frown was deeper than usual, and had a confused edge to it.

He flitted across the concrete to meet Derek halfway across the bunker, keeping him, momentarily, away from Erica.

“Where’ve you been?” Stiles asked, pitching his voice low so Erica couldn’t hear them and hoping Derek would follow his lead.

Derek’s face shifted – concerned, confused, annoyed – but answered quietly in a level tone that portrayed none of it.

“I’m not late. You didn’t set a time.”

Stiles’ shoulders sagged because yeah, that was true, but he couldn’t help that he was antsy.

“Sorry, I just...” he waved his hands about, as though he could explain the conflicting jumble of nerves if he just gestured enough.

Derek inclined his head in what probably counted as a nod, but said nothing. Typical. No harsh words or teasing but no words of comfort either. A small, nostalgic smile curled his lips for a moment before Stiles banished the thought.
“Well, you’re here now, so I guess it’s show time.”

Derek rolled his eyes, glanced over at the train car – Erica was standing in the empty doorway, watching them – and walked over to the opposite wall, leaning pointedly against it. The floor is yours, his eyes said.

Shaking his head, Stiles pointed Erica over to a sturdy crate, and walked over to rummage through his duffel bag. He retrieved the first aid kit, but left the blankets alone for the time being.

“Should I be worried?” Erica queried lightly when Stiles set it down next to her on the crate. He flushed slightly, embarrassed. It was sort of big, even if it was still mostly empty. His intention was to have a bit of a wolfsbane collection for emergency healing, as well as a store of mountain ash and whatever other nifty stuff he could get his hands on (or maybe nick from Deaton, whatever worked best) that would help with supernatural issues, along with a bunch of regular old human medical stuff like bandages and disinfectant. He wasn’t optimistic enough to think that he’d be able to keep the group human-free forever, and when that happened they were going to get hurt. There was no avoiding that.

“Nah, you’ll be fine in the morning. It’s just, super healing doesn’t kick in until you are a werewolf, so it’ll take a little while. Best to disinfect it and keep it wrapped until it heals.”

Erica nodded and looked away while Stiles fished out some gauze, medical tape, antiseptic and fabric bandages. It felt a little wasteful, but better safe than sorry. When given the chance, he was never going to be half-arsed about a person’s well-being again.

“Okay, well, uh, whenever you’re ready then I guess.”

Erica stared down at him at that. He imagined he looked hideously pale – that’s how he felt anyway.

“I’m ready when you are,” she said gently.

Taking a deep breath, Stiles rolled up one of her sleeves and cradled her bare forearm in his hands.

When it came right down to it, there was no elaborate ceremony or ritual or anything when it came to creating a werewolf. Stiles didn’t really know how it was usually done – he’d been ravaged in the woods and the only times he’d been even partially witness to a turning it was never voluntary, never a gift given with express permission and consent rather than a curse forced upon someone.

He would have felt better about it, Stiles mused idly, if there had been a ritual. But werewolves were creatures of action, never one to stand on ceremony, and rituals were the realm of druids.

Beneath Derek’s watchful eye, and with Erica’s free hand resting encouragingly on his shoulder, Stiles called out to that uncomfortable, restless part of him where the wolf lurked. His eyes burned, his teeth lengthened, his skin stretched. He ran his fingertips over Erica’s arm, reassuringly, but he wasn’t sure which one of them he was trying to reassure.

Holding her still Stiles leaned forward and sank his fangs into her forearm. Erica hissed out a pained breath, and her fingers clenched in a death grip on Stiles’ shoulder, but she otherwise stayed silent.

He pulled carefully away when the scent of blood made his nose itch, one hand reaching for fabric to staunch the flow while he turned his head away to spit out the blood that had gotten in his mouth. Derek grumbled unhappily at that, but Stiles ignored him.

“Okay,” he said when his mouth tasted a little less like copper. “That was terrible, but everything’s fine.” He splashed some antiseptic carelessly across her arm, hoping not to prolong the pain. He
cleaned her arm as gently as he could, then stuck down a square of gauze, and covered everything in a layer of bandages.

Stiles shoved the first aid kit off to the side, gently pried Erica’s hand from his shoulder, and drew her into a careful hug.

“I’m never letting you do that again,” she muttered into his ear, “so that better have worked.”

He refrained from reminding her that if it didn’t work she would die. It would work. There was no point worrying her.

“Absolutely,” he said instead. “Never again.”

oOoOo

Although she hadn’t exactly lost a lot of blood, Erica still seemed a bit woozy and rather pale. Stiles forced her to eat a muesli bar and drink some water; while she did he gathered up most of the blankets he’d brought along and made a make-shift bed at the back of the train car on one of the benches. It was best if she just slept it off.

“Don’t mess with the bandage,” he instructed as he helped her to her feet. “Leave it on until tomorrow evening, to be on the safe side.”

“Yes mom,” Erica snarked, a little tiredly, willingly allowing Stiles to tug her across the bunker. When she saw the nest of blankets she sighed, but gave Stiles a fond look. “I don’t see a bed for you. Do you plan on sleeping at all?”

“Of course!” Stiles chimed brightly, pushing her firmly down onto the bench. “But you’re exhausted and I’m not, so you’re going to sleep now and I’ll sleep later.”

It was clear she didn’t believe him in the slightest, but his hands were shaking just slightly, and she didn’t protest. Stiles fled from the train car when it was clear she would stay put.

oOoOo

02/11/2011

It’s been just over a month since I woke up here and I still sometimes think I’m dreaming.

Whenever I see Erica or Boyd or Allison it feels like if I take my eyes off them, if I turn away, then when I look back they’ll be dead again. I’m coping, for now, but I’m scared. Scared that I’m never going to get used to this. To them. Alive again. Untainted (for now). And if I don’t, if I can’t adjust, well... I’m not sure how long I can last like this.

I’m trying, dear god am I trying. The last thing I want to do is let something slip, to worry Erica (worry her more than I already am). I wouldn’t wish that knowledge on anyone.

Every time I make a decision, every time I open my mouth, I’m changing something. I’m spinning the cogs of fate further and further away from what I know, from what is familiar, and further into the murky uncertainty of an unknown future.

I said I would protect her, but I can only protect her from what I know. And every day I know a little less.

It’s only been a month but I’ve already forgotten what it’s like not to have even an inkling of what
tomorrow may bring. That scares me too.

Stiles tapped his pen against the page a few times, considering, before he clicked the pen off and shoved both it and the notebook back into his bag. Putting his thoughts on paper was uncomfortable sometimes, but he needed to keep track of himself. Of his thoughts, his actions, his changes, his mental state. Not his nightmares though. Writing those down would get him nowhere.

He focused his attention on the steady beating of Erica’s heart and tried to relax.

It had already been several hours since she fell asleep, but Stiles had been resisting the urge to follow suit. His nightmares were almost a nightly occurrence at the moment; he didn’t want to have one in front of the others. That wasn’t the only reason though. Despite all the evidence he had that Erica’s body would adapt fine to the bite, the frantic, uncertain part of himself was worried that, if he fell asleep, he’d wake up to find her dead.

Stiles glanced over at Derek. His eyes were closed and his breathing was steady, but Stiles could tell he wasn’t asleep. Maybe he couldn’t let his guard down enough to sleep in their presence. Stiles wouldn’t be offended if that was the case. They’d only known each other for barely a month after all, and Derek didn’t trust easily.

The thought did make him feel a little guilty though. Derek seemed like Stiles in the fact that he didn’t get as much sleep as he should. Stiles didn’t like the thought that he was now a factor in Derek’s sleeplessness.

Stiles pulled the last blanket close around his shoulders and settled in for a tense, sleepless night.

**oOoOo**

Like Stiles had known she would, Erica lived to see another day. That didn’t stop the swell of relief that washed over him when she stumbled, still half-asleep, out of the train car mid-morning.

The first words out of her mouth were “I’m hungry,” and Stiles laughed, throwing a bag of chips at her and promising they could go out for lunch later. If he didn’t have advanced healing there would have been dark circles below his eyes, and he was thankful there was no way for Erica to know he hadn’t slept (unless Derek decided to tell her, of course, but that was unlikely).

“Everything’s looking A-OK, right Derek?”

Derek glared at him, sighed, and straightened up. “Yes, she’s fine. Congratulations, you have your first beta.”

“Woah there, are we really doing this now? You know this whole alpha thing makes me uncomfortable, and that we could be pack if you wanted, and that I am in no way trying to build a pack. So don’t make this into some weird milestone thing, or you’re officially uninvited to lunch.” If he was standing, Stiles would have put his hands on his hips just to emphasis his point.

“I was unaware I was invited in the first place,” Derek pointed out, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh course you were,” Erica butted in cheerfully. “It’s a celebration, the whole gang’s supposed to go.”

Stiles wasn’t sure whether to be amused or horrified by that proclamation. Derek appeared similarly distressed.

“You’ve got strange friends Stilinski. Barely twelve hours in and she’s already all buddy-buddy.
You know that’s not how things work, right?” He directed the last part to Erica, who simply shrugged.

Stiles glanced between the two of them and smiled.

“Oh, come on Sourwolf. You don’t have to be best friends, but what’s the harm in one trip to the diner? Pack or not, we’re all in this together now.”

“You’re not going to stop asking until I say I’ll go, are you?”

“Well,” Stiles said, pushing to his feet, “I’m not going to push the issue, but this is like, Erica’s supernatural birthday or something. Can’t say no to the birthday girl.”

“Technically that was yesterday,” Derek pointed out, but he didn’t sound too annoyed, merely resigned.

Erica smirked. “That’s a yes then.”

“Fine, fine, as long as you remember to take all your junk with you when you leave.”

“Aye aye Captain.”

Stiles could feel Derek glaring at him as he headed into the train car to collect Erica’s blankets. His whole body was shaking in relief – lunch would certainly do him a world of good. And Derek would probably be good entertainment while they ate, if Erica’s jovial mood continued.

One step down, a million more to go.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Uh... sorry??

This entire year in general so far has not been great for me writing-wise, but even so, damn, I did not think it would take this long to finish an update.

I've started making progress update posts on my new tumblr though, so if the wait starts dragging on again you can look there to see what's up (I might actually remember to use the damn thing if I have actual followers)

Although Derek had followed after them when they packed up their stuff and left the bunker, Stiles hadn’t actually believed he was going to come along for lunch. He’d taken the move as an escort out to his jeep, to make sure they didn’t leave anything behind or get lost or get attacked or whatever. Derek getting into the jeep had not been a part of the plan, but Stiles liked living uninjured enough not to say anything. Erica… didn’t quite have those same survival instincts, if the amused looks she kept shooting him from the backseat during the drive were anything to go by.

Instead of acknowledging her, Stiles cranked up the radio and tried not to ponder how strange a trio they would make to anyone they saw in town.

oOoOo

They parked two blocks down from their destination.

It was a diner which Erica was apparently fond of, and that Stiles had never frequented before werewolves became a point of fact in his life, but had made ample visits to after. They had cheap food and decent portion sizes, all important factors in choosing places to dine out with your insatiable werewolf friends.

Stiles didn’t know if the place existed before Derek left town, or if he’d stumbled across it in the time he’d been back, and he didn’t ask. Derek offered no opinion either way of his own free will. Erica seemed content simply leading the way.

They ended up seated at a small, round table, where everyone was technically seated across from everyone else and Stiles didn’t have to worry so much about potentially having to keep Erica away from Derek. Since their first meeting Stiles had been on tenterhooks, just waiting for her to say something leading or embarrassing that Derek would be less likely to just shrug off. Depending on how Erica worded things (and in this new, less stressful situation where Derek wasn’t an angry alpha seeking power and might actually be capable of decent human interaction) Stiles imagined they could either be pretty good friends, or she would permanently be getting on Derek’s nerves. A dangerous waiting game indeed.

Trying not to let his imagination run off into his possible impending doom, Stiles glanced over the menu. He pretty much had the whole thing memorised, but it was best to double check – it would be incredibly embarrassing to try and order something that wasn’t on the menu yet, and Erica would never let him live it down.
They ordered their food – a toasted sandwich and a side of curly fries for Stiles, a burger for Derek, and a pancake stack for Erica with extra bacon – and then sat in a surprisingly comfortable silence while they waited for it all.

Stiles should have known that Erica’s silence was a bad omen, but he was too busy being grateful that she wasn’t poking at Derek when he had nothing to distract or placate him.

When their food arrived all focus shifted to eating – this was technically a brunch outing after all, and they were all hungry.

The peace only lasted about five minutes.

“You know,” Erica said leadingly, gesturing absently with her knife, “I still don’t really get you two.”

Stiles blinked at her in confusion, a curly fry frozen halfway to his mouth, and a feeling of dreadful anticipation washing over him. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“You guys! Just, everything! This whole buddy-buddy thing you’ve got going on.”

Erica stared imploringly at him. Stiles shoved a handful of curly fries in his mouth to stall for time. Rather than denying their friendship outright, Derek too was watching him carefully. Although it was hard to tell, it was clear that he was also more than a little curious about Stiles and his attitude.

Stiles knew that these were dangerous waters. There was just no simple and sane way to explain why he had over a year’s worth of hard-earned affection for a man he’d supposedly barely known for a month. An inkling of foreboding shot through him, but he pushed it back, swallowed through the momentary panic, and took a long sip of water.

“Are we?” Stiles eventually asked instead. “Buddy-buddy that is.”

Derek snorted derisively off to his left, which was a resounding no. Erica’s stare shifted down a few notches to discontent, frowning at him over her maple-drenched pile of pancakes.

“Obviously not in the same way you are – were – with McCall, but still, I would’ve thought so until right now…” Stiles met her gaze evenly even though he wanted to look away. He didn’t need to feel so attacked just for having feelings.

“It’s more like a… mentorship?”

Derek gave him another strange look, but Stiles ignored it. This felt a lot closer to the perceived truth, so he’d roll with it while he could.

“A tough love, ‘don’t screw this up or I will end you’ mentorship,” he amended after a moment of thought.

“That’s… more realistic,” Derek allowed with a shrug. “If that’s how you want to put it. Personally I prefer ‘upstart new-born refuses to respect his elders’ but that works too I suppose.”

Erica let out a startled giggle. Stiles’ jaw dropped in surprise at the tease which, if anything, only made Derek’s smirk wider. He floundered about for some sort of comeback, but came up empty-handed.

“God Stiles,” Erica bit out, giggles gone but laughter still clear in her voice, “you know you have to respect your elders. You don’t want the old man over here to kick your ass.”
For a second Stiles was pretty sure he stopped breathing. He glanced over at Derek. His smirk had slipped, lips parted just slightly, staring wide-eyed at Erica. He looked torn between amusement and offence. Stiles imagined this was going to become a common struggle.

“If I have to respect Derek then you have to respect both of us,” Stiles pointed out hastily. “Because, you know, hierarchy of seniority. Derek’s top dog and you’re just the new kid on the block.”

Erica shrugged but shook her head. “I’m not sure how this stuff goes where you’re from Stilinski, but isn’t the alpha supposed to be top dog? I mean, if it’s up for debate then I’d like to throw my hat into the ring as well and we can leave this all up to a vote, but something tells me it’s not as democratic as all that.”

And there went the light-hearted mood.

If there was one thing Stiles did not want to talk about right then it was leadership and his part in it. He exhaled heavily through his nose and turned his attention back to his food.

Derek mumbled something vaguely reprimanding about not saying alpha in public before the conversation died down altogether.

In all honesty Stiles felt pretty bad about ruining the mood. It had been really interesting watching Derek and Erica interact – he’d never really been witness to anything he’d call friendly interaction between Derek and his betas before things went to hell, and it felt like he was seeing a new side to both of them. Stiles had always known Erica could be snide and snarky and teasing, but she rarely showed it, especially to people she barely knew. The whole werewolf solidarity thing must have been liberating for her.

It was what he’d wanted – for her to be safer, healthier and happier – but getting close to people with so many secrets held close to his chest was also isolating. Even with everything that was currently going down with Scott, Stiles was only now coming to truly realise that.

Once the food was gone the trio didn’t linger in the diner. They paid in silence, and Derek parted ways with them at the entrance. He didn’t say anything, but Stiles guessed he was just going to run back to the bunker or the house or wherever else he wanted to lurk today. Eyeing Derek’s retreating form for a long moment, Stiles tossed about the idea of heading straight home, but ultimately shrugged it off, turning to walk down the street in the opposite direction to where he had parked.

“Sorry if I was an epic downbuzz back there,” Erica piped up, a block into their mindless meandering.

Stiles flexed his fingers, frustrated at having made Erica think it was her fault.

“It wasn’t you,” he assured softly. “I’m just… touchy, about positions of power. And being in those positions. And having ‘power’ over anyone else. And lots of other things. Sorry. Maybe let’s not use the a word anymore though?”

Erica hummed curiously, but acquiesced easily all the same.

They wandered the streets for a while, no destination in mind. Stiles’ only motivation had been to get a bit of air before heading home, but since Erica had offered up no protest to the idea, they lingered longer than he had originally intended, slowly letting go of some of the tension he constantly carried about with him in the cool air.

Stiles was finally starting to feel a little less stressed about everything, so of course that was when
they ran into Allison and Kate Argent exiting a shop as they headed back towards the jeep.

The duo were turned towards each other, heads tilted down as they talked amongst themselves, so Stiles noticed them before they noticed him. He considered turning tail and doubling back to find an alternative route, but even as his stance shifted to do exactly that Allison lifted her gaze and Stiles knew he’d been caught. She made a sound of surprise and stepped out in front of them, forcing them all to a stop on the sidewalk.

“Hey,” Allison greeted, offering a smile. “You’re Stiles, right? Scott’s friend? We share some classes but I don’t think we’ve ever spoken before.”

“No, I don’t suppose we have,” he returned lightly, very determinedly not looking at Kate. “Out shopping?”

“Yeah. My aunt hasn’t been here in a while and, since I guess I’m still pretty new myself, we’ve been exploring the stores together.”

“Great.” Stiles glanced almost pleadingly at Erica. “That’s great.”

Erica, who had been standing a few paces behind him, observing, stepped up to Stiles’ side and placed a hand on his arm.

“Hate to break this up,” she said pleasantly, “but we’re running late for something.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.” Allison’s gaze travelled between Stiles and Erica in curiosity. She mumbled “I thought Scott said they weren’t dating,” under her breath, and Erica huffed a quiet laugh that only Stiles could hear.

Kate stepped in with a wide smile, eyes piercing – Chris very well may have talked to her about him, which was just another reason on the list of reasons why he should try and stay far, far away from her. “Come now Allison, we should leave your friends to their day. Is there anywhere else you want to go?”

The two Argents delved into another shopping discussion, and Stiles took the moment to slip around them, murmuring a farewell just to seem a little less rude. It took a concentrated effort to walk at a normal, non-suspicious speed down the street. Finally reaching the jeep was an immense relief.

Stiles had never been happier that Derek wasn’t into window-shopping or mindless weekends with teenagers. If he was still with them then things would have rockets from 0-100 real quick.

“You are so not as subtle as you think you are,” Erica commented once they were both in the jeep. “It was so obvious that you were wildly uncomfortable. Is that why you’ve been avoiding her at school?”

Stiles started the engine with a frown.

“Well sorry about that. Thanks for the assist though. Even if it probably means Lydia will be giving us even more weird looks next week.”

“Hey, did you hear me say date? No. It’s hardly our fault if she already had the thought in her head.”

“Touché.”

They were halfway to Stiles’ place when she spoke again.
“So you have been avoiding her then?”

“What?”

“Allison.” Stiles could see her staring him down from the passenger seat. “You didn’t deny it. Why?”

“It’s complicated. Would you believe me if I said I just wanted to stay off the Argents’ radar?”

“Hmm… Nope. Maybe if you weren’t encouraging Scott to befriend her, then I’d buy it. But forcing your BFF to make a new friend and then avoiding that friend is super suspicious. I know you said she isn’t in the know about hunters and stuff, but don’t you think that’s the sort of thing she might complain about over dinner? ‘Mom I made friends with this guy but his best friend won’t even look at me. I think he hates me.’”

Stiles grit his teeth. “I don’t hate her.”

“No? What then?”

“I said that it’s complicated.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll quit prying.”

“Thank you.”

“Someday you’ll tell me on your own.”

Stiles groaned.

oOoOo

Sheriff Stilinski was a little suspicious at the prospect of Erica staying the night – oh no, a boy-girl sleepover, how scandalous – but since staying home and watching movies was a happier thought than Stiles roaming the streets at night looking for crime like he sometimes did, he allowed it without making a fuss.

Stiles was glad for it, because sneaking her in and out of the house was not only way more suspicious, but would have been a real pain in the butt. If his dad had said no, he probably would’ve just sent her home – the next full moon was far enough away that he wasn’t particularly worried about the repercussions of being unsupervised right after getting the bite; he trusted that she would be fine – but he was glad she was allowed to stay.

He wasn’t currently sure whether or not he wanted sleep or company, but company might keep him from sleep or soothe the edges away from nightmares. Stiles didn’t want people to be worried about him, but that wish quite plainly wasn’t happening.

Ever since town Erica had started giving him long, appraising looks every now and again. He knew she wouldn’t ask again – she was good at keeping her word – but that wouldn’t stop her from trying to come to a conclusion on her own. There was absolutely no way that he could open his mouth and say ‘she’s dead because of me’ and also no way that she would ever come to the correct conclusion without context, so, while it was mildly uncomfortable, he left her to her own devices.

They watched movies and ate junk food and slept – Erica a lot, Stiles a little – and in the morning, after some exercises to help Erica centre herself and start to learn about her enhanced senses, they did it all again until it was time for Erica to head home for the first time all weekend.
Now that first contact had been made, it was a lot harder to justify brushing Allison off without coming across as an absolute jackass. Instead, Stiles limited himself to responses only, and tried to avoid crossing paths with her inside of school whenever possible.

Allison had obviously told Scott that they’d met over the weekend, because Scott seemed momentarily distracted from the fact that Stiles was with-holding information from him and was instead trying to figure out whether or not to be happy about the fact that Stiles was now personally acknowledging Allison’s existence to her face. As much as he wanted to tell Scott that everything was fine, the different line of thinking was great for buying time to come up with answers he still didn’t have, so he kept his mouth shut on the subject.

Erica was withdrawn on Monday, learning to adjust to the volume of lunchtime chatter and the school bell, but she still had something sharp or sarcastic on the tip of her tongue ready for whenever anyone looked at her funny. People were quickly learning that sickly Erica Reyes (not so sickly anymore) was a firecracker with a dagger-sharp tongue who should not be crossed.

Stiles only wished they had learnt that earlier via actual polite interaction instead of being judgemental assholes.

Stiles could feel Lydia’s gaze burning into him whenever they were in the same room.

The fact that Lydia and Allison were friends was terrible for his well-being. They had 100% been talking about him, and there was nothing he could do about it except cross his fingers and hope they quit being so damn obvious about it before Jackson decided to take offense and get involved.

Thankfully, Lydia seemed to have approved Danny as some sort of go-between – she was probably using the time to improve her attempts at prying free information that he wasn’t willing to give – so Stiles had been, at least temporarily, spared the headache of navigating a conversation full of traps while keeping a wary eye out for errant lacrosse players and their unpredictable tempers. Talking to Danny wasn’t necessarily any less confusing, but at least it was safe.

“How goes the investigation team?” Stiles quipped when Danny sat down across from him during Tuesday’s Scott-free lunch. Erica snorted and sent him a bemused look. He’d told her that Danny was aware he was a werewolf, but he hadn’t been super forthcoming on the related details, like how Lydia had been hounding the both of them for information.

“How goes the investigation team?” Stiles quipped when Danny sat down across from him during Tuesday’s Scott-free lunch. Erica snorted and sent him a bemused look. He’d told her that Danny was aware he was a werewolf, but he hadn’t been super forthcoming on the related details, like how Lydia had been hounding the both of them for information.

“Mildly frustrated but persistent.” Danny shrugged. He glanced at Erica in question.

“She’s fine, just keep your voice down. The walls have ears and all that jazz.”

“Sure...” Danny’s gaze cut between the two of them as he came to his own, likely accurate, conclusion of the change in dynamic.

“Anything interesting?” Stiles prompted, leaning forward to lessen the distance even if he didn’t need to be any closer to hear him.

“Well, as I’m sure you’ve guessed, Allison told Lydia about whatever happened over the weekend. Lydia’s pounced on the fact that you’re all weird around Allison and I think she’s going to try and use her as a trump card to startle some answers out of you. I’d like to think you’re smarter than to fall for that, but it’s really no skin off my back if you mess up. This is just fair warning.”
Stiles swore under his breath. Lydia didn’t know how cruel it was to use Allison against him. Still, they’d be getting nothing from him.

“You need anything to report back?”

“Nothing incriminating, obviously.” Danny’s gaze shifted over Stiles’ shoulder to where Lydia and the rest of the gang were sitting halfway across the room. “Do you want me to encourage or dissuade the rumour about you two dating?”

“I should’ve known that’d come back around again,” Erica muttered, sounding equal parts wistful and resentful. Stiles wrinkled his nose at her tone but shrugged it off.

“Dissuade…?” Stiles hedged, looking to her for a second opinion.

Erica rolled her eyes. “What, am I suddenly wearing the pants in this relationship? Yes, dissuade, whatever. Guys and girls can be friends, people, don’t kick up a fuss.”

Danny laughed. “Dissuade it is then.” He stood from the table and walked off without so much as a by-your-leave.

When he was well and truly out of hearing, Stiles turned back to Erica.

“You know your opinion matters, right? Regardless of whether it’s about everyday stuff or supernatural stuff. It’s not about anyone ‘wearing the pants’.”

For a long moment Erica’s face took on a stubbornly defensive edge, her body tense, before she sighed heavily and slumped forward.

“I know, I know. It’s just… this is all still kinda weird for me.”

“Talking to people?”

She glared at him. Stiles raised his hands in surrender.

“Having people care about what I have to say. It’s been a while since that concept applied to me. I know it’s been a couple of weeks now, and hopefully things go up instead of crashing and burning, but sometimes it’s hard to compute that I’m not just being tolerated.”

Stiles tugged her into a quick side-hug. He felt sad and protective and guilty because he was so glad that she was even alive to be having those doubts in the first place.

“I’ll always care,” he said, instead of the flood of apologies that coated his tongue. “Derek might not care in the traditional sense, but he listens, and he’s not dismissive of serious things.”

When Erica chuckled it caught in her throat, but they both pretended it didn’t.

On Wednesday, after startling awake in the early hours of the morning from yet another nightmare – hazy and indistinct this time, but which swung wildly between blotchy colours and full cinematic renditions from night to night – Stiles dug out his little notebook of futures past and tried to reorient himself.

Given that he’d so instantly and without thought of repercussion dived into changing the timeline, he was mostly just letting himself get swept away in the current of events. For the first week or so he’d pretty much been hoping that, at any moment, he might open his eyes and find himself back where
he came from, surrounded by the friends he’d left behind. Unless he was in a god damn coma (which he wasn’t sure whether it would be better or worse than the whole time travel thing) then the whole dream scenario thing had run itself into the ground at least two weeks ago.

He was trapped and that was that. But what was he doing with himself?

Not enough.

It felt like an eternity, but seeing Kate in town over the weekend had really brought a lot of things back into focus. It had only been two weeks since Derek nearly died and Stiles had broken into the Argents’ house, but other than the occasional glimpse of Chris in the school car park he hadn’t seen or heard much from the hunters since then.

That realisation immediately set him on edge.

Chris wasn’t generally a ‘shoot first ask questions later’ kind of guy unless in a particularly aggressive situation, but that was when he was working alone. Kate didn’t have a shred of sympathy in her body, and she would hunt them to the ends of the earth if she felt like it.

Stiles could only pray that Chris hadn’t shared his suspicions about him with his sister. He supposed that if he had, she wouldn’t have hurried Allison away so quickly on Saturday – she would’ve wanted to observe him, poke at him, intimidate him; she knew plenty of ways to do so without making her niece unduly suspicious.

Still, even with everything he knew about Kate, everything she had done and everything she would do if given the chance, Stiles didn’t know if he wanted to kill her. (Because that had gone so well last time.) In the middle of the night he could still sometimes feel the way Peter’s blood had splashed across his hands, a phantom sensation that wouldn’t leave no matter how often he scrubbed at his hands. He didn’t know if he could do that again. At least not so soon.

Derek would. If given a reason and the chance, Stiles had no doubt that Derek would willingly snuff out her life. She had a lot to answer for in regards to the Hale family, after all. But if they just charged in, guns blazing, Chris would come after them in turn and there would be no end to it all.

God, what Stiles wouldn’t give to hand over the knowledge and responsibility to someone else. But it was his burden to carry. His and his alone.

He would steer them through it, alive and in one piece and with as few enemies as possible. He swore it.

Whether he could live up to his own expectations, well, that was another thing entirely.
The sun rose on Wednesday morning proper to a wide-eyed Stiles, thrumming with tension and anxious energy, who had already been awake for nearly three hours before the sun even began its ascent into the sky. Having spent those wakeful hours in serious self-contemplation, Stiles found himself brimming with determination yet still lacking a tangible goal.

There was, of course, his bottom line, his ultimatum: protect them all. But putting that vague sense of protectiveness into action against the always-shifting flow of time? A more difficult task indeed.

Deep down Stiles knew things needed to be sorted with the Argents, sooner rather than later. He also didn’t want to wind up on unnecessarily bad terms with Chris (and, he supposed, Victoria) in the process. Going out of your way to make enemies was definitely not the best way to play it safe in a place like Beacon Hills, where danger arose from inside the town just as much as it came in from outside.

It was something he needed to talk to Derek about, but it was a conversation for another day (or, at least, another time). There was someone else he needed to talk to now.

**oOoOo**

Having already forewarned Erica that she’d be spending lunch alone, Stiles felt a lot less guilty about ambushing and manhandling his best friend out to the bleachers (again) at the start of their lunch period. Scott had put up a mild protest initially, caught completely off guard by Stiles completely dropping the not-quite-avoidance-but-totally-still-avoidance stance he’d taken in their interactions for the past week or so, but otherwise followed in relatively complacent silence.

“Can we talk?” Stiles asked once they were there, only just realising that he’d secreted him away with absolutely no explanation.

Scott leaned back against a support pole with his arms across his chest, a mild expression on his face. “I don’t know, *can we?”*
Stiles sighed at the poorly hidden vitriol. “Scott.”

“Right, sorry.” He glanced away, guilty and apologetic, but otherwise stood firm. “Is this it then?”

“Not exactly.”

Scott looked back at him, eyebrow raised in obvious question.

“Look, this is me trying to be a considerate friend while figuring out whether it’s better to be a considerate friend or to be totally and transparently honest.”

“Why do you make it seem like those are two mutually exclusive things?”

“Because they kind of are?” Stiles kicked at the grass and looked up at the winter sky. “I said before that it was complicated, yes? And it is. But here’s the thing: if I tell you, I might end up putting you in a totally unfair position where you have to pick sides. I don’t want to make you have to pick.”

He glanced back to try and gauge Scott’s reaction. Scott looked bemused, but his tone was incredulous when he spoke.

“So this is you, what, trying to protect me?” His arms fell to his sides and his hands clenched helplessly at empty air. “I thought that was why we didn’t keep secrets from each other. Or am I not trustworthy enough to make my own decisions anymore? You promised you would explain.”

“I will, I am!”

“No, this is you trying to run away.” The hard undertone in Scott’s voice disappeared. “What are you so afraid of?”

Grinding his teeth, Stiles bit back his knee-jerk reaction to argue. Scott wasn’t wrong. Stiles was afraid of what might happen if, when, he came clean. Stiles had always been the one to jump into otherworldly things – Scott had refused to acknowledge his own existence until it was completely unavoidable. He had been far happier not knowing.

“If I told you I was at odds with the Argent family, what would you do?”

Scott floundered at the apparent change of subject. “The Arg- Allison’s family? They’ve only been here like a month and a half, how could you possibly have beef with them?”

“I told you it was complicated,” Stiles pointed out again. “What would you do?”

“Is that what you meant about picking sides? Is that- Is that why you won’t talk to Allison? But why would you encourage me to talk to her if you have issues with her family?”

“For the same reason I don’t really want to be having this conversation Scotty. I want you to be happy.”

“Stiles, look at me.”

With some reluctance, Stiles obeyed, meeting Scott’s steady gaze head-on.

“It’s just a crush. If there’s something seriously wrong, something that’s making you uncomfortable, I don’t have to hang out with her. I can get over it. But you’re not going to tell me what’s wrong, are you?”

“That’s the point, Scott! I know you’d sabotage your own chances for happiness in a second if I said
the right words, and I don’t want you to do that. That’s why it’s better if you don’t know any of the details.”

“And if I want to be able to make my own informed decisions, as is my right?”

Stiles whined distraughtly in the back of his throat.

“Why can’t you just take happiness at face value and pretend I never brought any of this up?”

“Because, Stiles, I know you. You’ve been weird since we got back from Christmas break, and maybe you’re trying to protect other people but who’s going to protect you?”

Damn Scott and his stupid kind-heartedness and his loyalty and his puppy dog eyes. Could he not just be selfish for one minute and let Stiles protect his blissful ignorance?

“Are you going to tell me anything?” Scott asked.

“…” Stiles was really regretting his early morning confidence that this was a good idea. “My issues with the Argents don’t have anything to do with Allison – she doesn’t know that there are issues or what they’re about.”

“But you’re still worried about me being forced to choose, even when Allison has no idea what’s going on?”

Dragging a hand down his face Stiles tried not to sound as frustrated as he felt.

“It’s the domino effect Scott. If I tell you, you might start acting weird, and she might find out what’s going on, and then there’ll just be a whole lot more trouble than there needs to be. That’s when the ultimatum would pop up.”

“From you?”

“From her parents, technically.”

“Why are you so sure it’ll be an issue?”

“I just don’t want you caught up in the middle of this shitstorm between me and the Argents before I have the chance to try and de-escalate it, okay?”

That gave Scott a moment of pause.

“You’re going to try and fix things?”

“That… is not exactly the word I would use, no, but I am going to attempt to get things back on neutral terms.” Stiles shifted restlessly, wanting the conversation done with but knowing that he couldn’t just end it like that. “Listen, I know you’re getting frustrated waiting for me to get my shit together, but if we’re going to have this talk I want to have at least attempted to make the situation a safe one for you to wander into. Because knowledge is dangerous, yeah? And I just want you to be safe, even if that means you’re angry at me.”

“That’s a pretty selfish way to look at things,” Scott said, resigned but not angry.

“And I’m a selfish, self-serving person, yes, you’ve known that for years. You’re the angel to my devil or whatever.”

Scott laughed. “Mom does think you’re a bad influence sometimes, but that’s a little extreme don’t
“You think?”

“Well, your mom is right. I’m a terrible influence, but you love me anyway. Just trust me on this?”

“What happened to ‘knowledge is power’?” Scott hedged, testing the waters. Stiles made a face and he retracted the question. “Right, right, never mind. But, just so you know, this is only tipping the scales from annoyed to worried. I’m worried about you, Stiles.”

“Isn’t everyone?” Stiles muttered, obviously talking to himself but not quite low enough to escape Scott’s hearing. Louder, he continued, “Everything’s fine. Everything is going to be just fine. Don’t worry your pretty little head over it, ‘kay?”

“When has that statement ever instilled calm in anyone ever?”

“It’s happened! Probably.” Stiles tugged his phone out and checked the time. “You should probably head back if you want a chance to eat before lunch ends.”

It was an obvious end to the discussion. Scott eyed him carefully, but didn’t try and dig any further. Neither of them wanted to get into another fight.

“Are you coming then?” he asked, taking a few steps away from the bleachers and turning to watch Stiles.

Stiles – riled up and melancholic and stressed – glanced towards the school buildings but shook his head.

“Nah, I’m not hungry.”

“Right…”

He could pinpoint the moment Scott gave up on him. Even though Scott was only abandoning his attempts to get him to eat, Stiles felt it like a trembling precursor of things to come. Scott was faithful and loyal and better than anyone deserved, but he expected reciprocity. If Stiles continued to shut him out then, eventually, Scott would stop trying. Stiles didn’t want to reach that breaking point; he needed to get things sorted until he felt stable enough, safe enough, to open up again. And it needed to be soon.

He spent the rest of school in a daze.

Texting Derek and requesting a meet-up would be way more efficient than wandering about looking for him, but Stiles enjoyed the peace of the woods, and it was nothing so urgent that he couldn’t spend an extra half hour soaking up the calming presence of nature before a potentially volatile conversation.

In the end, he ran into the older man purely by accident. Derek had been in the middle of a run and Stiles found himself along his route. There was no doubt in his mind that Derek would have completely ignored him and kept going if Stiles hadn’t called out to him; even then the look Derek pierced him with screamed rather loudly that he had better things to be doing, but then Stiles started talking, and for once got right to the point.

“I want to talk to Chris Argent.”

Derek’s jaw clenched at the sudden suggestion; his eyebrow crept up in demand of an explanation.
“I know you don’t trust the Argents, and with good reason, but I want to try and put us on neutral terms. Make a treaty or something, maybe. Something to lessen the tension from two opposing forces living in close quarters.”

“Parley?”

Stiles brightened. “Exactly!”

“And you think this will work why?”

“Because of my sparkling personality?”

“Stiles—” Derek visibly bit back whatever was going to follow – undoubtedly an insult of some sort. “Why are you even asking my opinion?”

“Haven’t we already been over this? Even if you don’t want to be buddy-pals, you’re still like pack. I’m not trying to start trouble. This area was home to your pack long before I came along; just because I’ve got red eyes and not you doesn’t mean I’m gonna trample all over that history.”

“You—” Derek pinched the bridge of his nose. “You’re an enigma. But I guess I can’t say I entirely disapprove. What exactly are you planning?”

Stiles rocked back on his heels.

“Well, once it’s organised – if he even agrees to it in the first place – then I’m going to try and feel him out. About the fire, that is. See what he does and doesn’t know, where he stands, how he feels about it. That probably won’t stay a friendly talk, but if we open his eyes then even if nothing else pans out he’ll at least have to question things.”

“You want to turn him against Kate.”

“I mean… more or less, yeah. Settle the long-standing historical issue, then we can get on to how everything’s currently all hunky-dory and no one’s running around rabid and he can quit staring at me like I’m going to self-destruct.”

“You see him a lot?”

“Just crossing paths at school. He hasn’t tried raiding my house again if that’s what you mean.”

Derek huffed and shifted on the spot, itching to get back to his run.

“That’s beside the point though. Are you okay with it?”

“…” Derek pondered the question with a weighty seriousness. Stiles didn’t begrudge him it. He knew Chris better than Derek did. From Derek’s perspective there were so many different ways things could go to shit. Was it worth the risk? “Just him?”

“Just the three of us,” Stiles confirmed easily.

“You want me to be there?”

“Of course. Dude, we literally just went over this: it’s your town too. Plus, you know, you’re the guy with all the evidence.”

“…Why did I ever think it was a good idea to talk to you?”
“Because I needed help and you know I’m right?”

“Cocky alphas get overthrown.” Derek turned his back to Stiles, getting ready to head off. “Just text me when you figure out what you’re doing.”

“Will do.”

And then he was gone, putting on an unnecessary burst of enhanced speed to get away from Stiles before he could potentially turn to a different topic of conversation. Stiles shook his head, thoroughly amused, and turned towards home. The plan had technically been okayed, now he just had to convince Argent it was something worth agreeing to.

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After a quiet dinner – his father was working late and had yet to make it home – Stiles was working on a stack of vaguely familiar homework assignments when his phone buzzed on the edge of his desk.

**Are you going on Friday?**

It was from Erica.

Stiles wrinkled his nose in confusion. She couldn’t possibly be referring to the meeting with Argent, because even setting aside the fact that he still had to actually talk to Chris and get him to agree to the meeting in the first place, he’d made it clear (at least, clear enough that Derek wouldn’t bother mentioning it to her if they happened to cross paths) that she didn’t need to know anything was happening; if she knew but wasn’t invited he wouldn’t put it past her to just show up anyway, and that would only cause trouble since he was trying to keep her off the radar.

But that still left Stiles floundering. Erica usually offered at least a little bit of context in the lead-up to random questions like that. He shrugged and sent a text back.

**Going? Friday??**

Then he turned back to pondering what the appropriate level of sarcasm and satire was for Finstock’s latest assignment.

This time he didn’t get a text. His phone rang with an incoming call. He rolled his eyes and answered it.

“Do you seriously expect me to believe that you don’t know what Friday is?”

“Hello to you too Erica,” Stiles responded, laughing lightly at the scandalised tone of her voice.

“I know you’re a serious space-head what with all this Twilight stuff, but really? Are you that disconnected from school?”

“So it’s a school thing?”

A frustrated groan was his only answer.

“You asked ‘if’ so it’s not a compulsory thing.”

“Oh for god’s sake Stiles. The winter formal.”
“Oh…”

He checked the calendar on his laptop and for once looked at the dates instead of just the days. He’d been here for almost two full months.

Memories flooded unbidden to the forefront of his mind. The winter formal, regardless of the fact that he’d actually been able to dance with Lydia, practically his biggest life achievement at the time, had not been a happy night. It had been filled with death and violence and hospitals and no one had come out the other side of that night entirely unaffected.

“No,” he said, more harshly than he intended but with unwavering certainty. “No, I’m not going.”

Erica hummed in acknowledgement, curious and startled in equal parts, but she didn’t ask for a reason or question his vehement tone.

“Movie night then?”

He shook the image of Lydia’s bloodstained dress away and smiled wryly.

“Sure. Movie night. We don’t need their pop music to have fun.”

“Exactly.”

They talked a little while longer, Erica switching back to chewing him out for not noticing all the chatter and posters and whatever else around school that should have clued him in to what time of year it was. He took the teasing with good cheer, unwilling to get into any of the myriad reasons for his detachment from the social calendar, and when they ended the call he turned back to his economics homework with a handful of new realisations.

No one was going to get mauled at the formal this year. In taking fate into his own hands, he had made sure of it. Everyone would have a nice night, free of supernatural interference, and no one would be scrambling for makeshift Molotov cocktails in the preserve.

Nightmares and insomnia would never be enough to make him regret this particular outcome, even if he himself wasn’t participating in the festivities. Movies and junk food and a silent vigil for things-that-were seemed much more comforting.

oOoOo

Stiles didn’t even have to ask Scott to stall Allison after school – they were deep in conversation about the formal by the lockers when Stiles hurried passed them. He was relieved, for the first time since coming back here, to see Chris’ car outside. Chris didn’t pick Allison up every day, but he was still around more often than not. For once it made things a hell of a lot easier.

He raced down into the parking lot, rounded the car and knocked on the driver’s door. Chris gave a double-take when he saw him – Stiles gave a cheeky wave – and rolled the window down with a hard frown.

“What are you doing, Stilinski?”

“Give me your number.”

“Excuse me?”

At any other time Stiles would’ve laughed at the look of pure incredulity that crossed Argent’s face,
but he was sort of on a time-limit.

“Cell phone. I want to parley but I don’t want Allison to see us talking so we can’t exactly hash out the details or get into an argument about why we should even parley in the first place here and now. So, number. Now. Please.”

“Parley?”

Stiles groaned. “God you’re as bad as Derek.” He shoved his phone pointedly in Chris’ face until the man reluctantly accepted it. “Number, unless you want to explain to Allison why we’re talking.”

Chris’ frown returned at the mention of Allison; even if Stiles didn’t know what he knew it was obviously a sore point.

“I’m going to regret this aren’t I?” Nevertheless, his fingers moved across the keys for a moment before he handed Stiles back his phone.

Gaze darting over the school entrance in a quick Allison-check, Stiles put a hand to his heart and adopted an innocent expression. “Work talk only, scout’s honour.”

If Chris Argent was the sort of person who rolled their eyes at teen antics, he definitely would have. Instead he just gave Stiles a Look and rolled the window back up.

With a sigh of relief that he hadn’t put up more of a fight, Stiles headed back inside.

oOoOo

Stiles prided himself on the fact that he didn’t immediately text spam Argent the moment he got home. He could have – there was nothing stopping him. He could’ve relieved so much stress with petty payback that Argent wouldn’t even have known was payback. But let it be said that Stiles was fully capable of putting the mission first.

Mission. He laughed dryly at the thought. This parley situation was certainly going to be a mission.

So he went home, worked on some homework, and generally wasted time for a while until what he deemed was an ‘appropriate’ time of day to start harassing an adult via text message.

Silver bullets, yay or nay?

Okay he never promised he was going to be completely mature about it. He would be, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t slip some snide remarks in beforehand. Argent didn’t reply straightaway, but when he did Stiles had to applaud his forward thinking.

Stilinski this is a spare phone and I won’t hesitate to throw it away if you’re ceaselessly juvenile.

Right, right, parley talk only.

Why do you keep going on about a parley?

What, you don’t like that word? I can call it peace talks if you want but that’s lame.

Sorry, sorry, irrelevant right?

We – well ‘T’ I suppose – want to propose a meeting.
We?

Me and Derek. I mean mostly me but he’ll be there too.

And I should care about this why?

Because we’re all here living in BH and we don’t want to fight for no reason?

Unless you do actually want to fight.

You don’t strike me as a killing-for-sport sort of person but I’ve been wrong before.

So, talk? Yay or nay?

Chris didn’t respond for a while after that. It didn’t matter much to Stiles if he wanted some time to think – or if he just had better things to do. If he didn’t respond before Stiles turned in for another less-than-restful sleep then Stiles would just spam him with texts tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after, until he offered up an answer one way or the other.

Persistence was one of Stiles’ many skills.

There was a text waiting for him after dinner.

Conditions?

First: just you, me and Derek

Second: don’t tell anyone about the meeting

Or, well, you can tell your wife why/what if you really want but not where/when

And please10000 don’t tell Kate ANYTHING

That might sound like a strange condition rn but please

Third: no weapons. Just a peaceful talk, I swear you’ll go home in one piece

Although if you show up excessively armed or with backup I’m not holding Derek back

Cause that’s just reaping what you sow man and I ain’t getting in the middle of all that

Is there some urgent reason behind all of this?

Why does there have to be a deeper meaning?

Can’t we all just be friends? :D

Ok nvm dumb question sorry

But for real tho, isn’t sooner better than latter if we want to hash out cohabitation rules or whatever?

Don’t kill people is a fine rule – one that’s been broken recently.
That’s not my fault!!!

Look we can talk about that during the meeting

If there’s going to be one

Have you decided?

I do require a clearer view of the situation than I currently possess. Fine, I’ll agree to your stipulations, but put one claw out of line and it will not end well.

And the same to you

Ugh I’m not trying to be threatening nvm ignore that

I’ll text you a time+place later

Stiles had sort of expected a confirmation but all he got was radio silence. No matter; he had the all clear from both parties, however reluctantly. Now they just had to actually get through the meeting without doing irreparable damage to their potential working relationship and making ferocious lifelong enemies of the Argent family and any and all hunters who would ally with them.

Derek wasn’t quite as ‘rip your head off, tear your throat out’ aggressively angry as Stiles remembered him being, but that didn’t mean Stiles wasn’t going to have to play peacekeeper.

De-escalation was not one of his best skills.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

In which Erica and Stiles ditch the formal, and a meeting is held.

Chapter Notes

And I'm back again. Next update will be in at least two weeks (not that any of you were really expecting me to get my shit together enough for two updates that close together) because I have an assignment due then and I still have to read an entire book for it. This girl is not cut out for formal writing of any sort, so it's gonna be a painful time.

Also, me and serious conversations don't seem to get along, so the last part might not be great. But it is longer than usual, because I didn't want to cut the talk in half or squish it down or condense it or whatever when it was hard enough to just write it in the first place.

Friday was, in a word, interesting.

While Stiles had definitely checked out and totally missed most of the preparation and build-up hype about the formal, even if Erica hadn't reminded him – and then proceeded to mock him about it for an entire day – it would have been pretty impossible to miss now. The entire student population was buzzing with an almost electric energy as last minute formal prep spilled out into the hallways and basically every conversation Stiles walked by.

Scott swung rather alarmingly between being giddy with excitement and pale with nerves as the day ticked on. Stiles had gathered, through Scott’s disjointed rambling and some helpful input from Erica, that he and Allison were going to the dance together – it sounded like they were going more as friends than as romantic dates, but together was together and the nature of it wasn’t going to help Scott’s nerves regardless. There wasn’t really anything Stiles could do to help other than mumble encouraging platitudes, but even if there was it was sort of a lot of fun watching Scott get so flustered over something so utterly normal for once.

The fact that he wasn’t having to sneak around behind Finstock’s back this time was nice too. 

Unfortunately the excitement levels only rose higher and higher as the day dragged on, and by lunchtime not only Erica with her newer, more sensitive ears, but Stiles too were absolutely done with being crowded inside with a bunch of excited hormonal teenagers. They ended up having lunch sitting in Stiles’ jeep with the low hum of the radio keeping them company as they congratulated each other for the grand decision to stay far away from the formal.

oOoOo

Being in charge kind of sucked, in Stiles’ professional opinion.
Stiles was sitting backwards on his desk chair, slouching over with his chin resting atop the back, phone clasped loosely in his hands somewhere in front of him.

He had homework sprawled out across his desk behind him, but it was nowhere near as important as sorting things out with Argent. Except they could only get to that point if Stiles decided on a meeting time, and also didn’t totally fuck everything up during the meeting.

Derek might not be great at diplomacy either, but at least he was a proper adult, even if he didn’t really act like it, skulking about in the woods all the time. Attempting to put treaty negotiations into motion should be a responsibility left to the adults, not to the lost and confused teenager with, supposedly, barely two months of exposure to the supernatural. But, as much as Stiles wasn’t keen on shoving his foot in his mouth, he could see why Derek wasn’t all that interested in trying to sort things out on his own. His history with the Argents was turbulent, and while he was playing lone wolf he only had to look out for himself; the payoff from a confrontation wasn’t worth the effort or the turmoil.

Which all circled back, once again, to leaving all the decision making up to Stiles.

He slouched further, pressing his forehead against the backrest.

“Being the responsible one is terrible,” he murmured forlornly.

Then, taking a fortifying breath, Stiles brought his phone in close to his chest, staring accusingly down at its bright screen in the darkened space between his torso and the chair.

**How does tomorrow sound?** He typed out slowly, watching the words stare back at him before eventually hitting send. Argent would probably find it more than a little abrupt – the timing, not the text itself – but regardless of how much Stiles sort of didn’t want to do this, he also wanted to get it over and done with one way or another.

**I don’t have plans** was the ambiguous reply Stiles received maybe ten minutes later.

Stiles rolled his eyes at the non-comital tone. Even if he wasn’t interested in the possibility of a treaty there had to be so many other things Chris wanted to know that he’d have the chance to at least ask about, even if those questions might not be answered. He would come, of that Stiles had no doubts.

**How’s 2PM?**

The next response was much prompter now that Argent was actually paying attention to the burner phone.

**Where?**

For all Stiles’ bravado (false though it may be) that gave him pause. They could meet, conceivably, anywhere. Most public areas were of course automatically ruled out, with too much possibility of being overheard, even if being around uninvolved civilians might squash any of the more violent tendencies of the two older men. Private areas were a step up. Hell, they could even have the meeting at Stiles’ place, except he’d sort of implied that they’d be meeting at some sort of neutral ground. Actual neutral ground would be incredibly hard to come by, but it was safe to say that the Sheriff’s house – given that it was the Sheriff’s own son organising the meeting – was definitely not on that list.

He could be petty and air grievances with his choice of location about events that hadn’t yet happened. He could pick the Nemeton, but then he’d have to give directions and even then the
The damned tree was always so difficult to find when it was in a mood or it didn’t like you. Take the finicky tree out of the equation and most other areas of the woods were the same level of not-worth-the-effort.

It was underhanded, and for sure didn’t count as neutral territory, but it was away from the well-populated parts of town and Chris definitely knew the way.

*The Hale House?*

And okay, maybe it was also a test of his willingness to comply. If Argent had a better place in mind then cool, they could go there, but Stiles could admit to a sort of vicious pleasure at the idea of shattering Chris’ worldview at the very scene of the crime. It wasn’t a kind thought, but Stiles wasn’t a kind person. Maybe he had been *before*, but *after* everything was just a little bit darker, and if that meant he was more willing to call someone out on their shit then that was just the way things were.

*Fine.*

Blunt and to the point. There was no beating around the bush with Chris Argent. He was definitely a man of action.

On second thought though, Derek might not be super pleased about that particular turn of events. Stiles shrugged off the thought – that’s what he got for leaving Stiles in charge of arrangements – and relayed the time and location to Derek as well. Then, because Derek might actually be annoyed and Stiles wasn’t in the mood for that sort of negativity, he turned his phone off.

Stiles still didn’t feel like working on any homework, but academic *déjà vu* was an excuse that definitely wouldn’t fly with his dad if he skipped out on too many assignments or his grades dropped from inattention, so he resettled himself in his chair – facing forwards this time – and plunged reluctantly into that scholastic frustration known as homework to kill some time.

*oOoOo*

When Stiles opened the door that evening he couldn’t help the surprised laughter that bubbled forth at the sight of Erica standing barefoot and irritable on the porch in a dress that was much fancier than anything she’d normally wear, a pair of flimsy heels dangling from one hand and her phone in the other.

“Sorry, was this a black tie movie night?” he asked, grinning unrepentantly. He placed a hand over his heart, on top of his faded graphic tee and lamented. “I’m afraid I must’ve missed the memo, I’m woefully underdressed.”

Erica snorted and shoved her shoes at him.

“Haul ass loser, it’s cold out here.”

Stiles obligingly swung the door the rest of the way open and stepped out of the way, setting her shoes down in the hallway.

“Seriously though.” He locked the door behind them and followed as Erica trailed upstairs.

“Ugh.” Erica made several violent hand gestures and shrugged. “When I told mom I was going out tonight she got it into her head that I was going to the formal but I was too embarrassed to tell her I was going alone or something stupid like that. But she seemed so excited about it, I didn’t have the heart to set her straight. It was a bitch getting here from the school though – if I wasn’t a werewolf I might actually have frozen out there.”
“She take lots of pictures?”

“You know it. This is the first time I’ve been healthy enough to even think about attending one of these stupid dances, so she kicked up a big fuss about it. Buuut she didn’t give me a curfew so that’s neat.”

She dropped her phone on Stiles’ bed and started rummaging around in his dresser.

“Get me a coat-hanger, would you?”

“Right away, your majesty.”

He ducked out of the way of the pair of socks Erica lobbed at his head and grabbed an empty hanger from his wardrobe, hanging it on the door handle.

“Don’t mess up my room too bad, yeah?”

She paused in consideration. “We’ll see.”

The whole situation would’ve been even funnier if his dad was home. He’d probably be so hopelessly confused.

Stiles smiled, amusement softening into fondness, and backed out of the room with a flourish, closing the door and letting Erica have her space. A flicker of bitter melancholy curled his lips – nostalgia and regret and missed chances, things never done or said or experienced, wrong turns and bad ends – but he brushed it away as he headed back downstairs to finish preparing the lounge. This was his chance to replace the night of the formal with memories that were of a less catastrophic variety, and he wasn’t about to let his angst about futures-past or his anxiety about tomorrow ruin it for him.

The lounge was pretty much junk food central.

(Stiles was so going to have to hide all the rubbish somewhere until trash collection or his dad would complain about Stiles binging on all the things he wasn’t allowed to eat.)

He’d ordered a couple of pizzas and bought popcorn and too many chips and some random lolly mixes because he couldn’t even remember what sort of things Erica liked; there was also chocolate covered liquorice and just chocolate in general, because you could never go wrong with a bit of chocolate.

It was total overkill for just two people – even if those two people were both werewolves – but Stiles just wanted things to be, well, nice. Maybe he was unfairly projecting his emotional turmoil on Erica, and he was trying to stop letting his guilt dictate his actions, but he kind of thought they both deserved it. Little bubbles of happy memories where they didn’t have to worry about anything. Was it wrong to want that?

She wasn’t the only person he had those sorts of feelings about, but at the moment she was the only one he could act on those feelings with without feeling burdened by the secrets he held close to his chest, and so he was admittedly taking full advantage of her presence.

Stiles was sitting on the couch, fiddling with the DVD remote, when Erica came back downstairs. She’d ditched her dress and pulled on a pair of his sweatpants and one of his shirts, but she’d left her make-up and hair mostly intact, likely to save the effort of trying to redo it before she went home.

He shelved his negative thought spiral for the day, turned to her and teased, “You sure I shouldn’t go find a tie?”
Erica rolled her eyes and smacked him in the back of the head as she came around the corner of the couch.

“A mere tie could never match the grace of this eyeliner.”

Stiles conceded to her point with a soft grin. It was some pretty great eyeliner.

“You should do mine too, we could match.”

The look Erica sent him as she settled into a comfy position on the couch cushions was wide-eyed with surprise. She seemed to be trying to gauge his level of sincerity, but Stiles wasn’t giving her any hints. Eventually she huffed a laugh and jabbed one vicious nail into his upper arm in retaliation.

“It’s a shame, but I didn’t bring anything with me. Another time perhaps.”

“Sure,” Stiles agreed cheerfully, before letting the subject comfortably fade out.

Before he could let himself get too comfortable Stiles climbed to his feet and gestured vaguely at the DVD collection beside the TV.

“You can pick the movies tonight. I have wonderful taste in movies, but I don’t want to pick something you’re not in the mood for because that would just ruin the whole point. So that responsibility is on your shoulders now. You up to it?”

“Is that a challenge, Stilinski?” Erica asked, flashing sharp canines in a predatory grin.

“If you like.”

They watched three movies, ate all of the pizza, made a solid effort to get through the rest of Stiles’ junk food buffet, and didn’t say a word about any of their supernatural woes all evening. A successful evening all round.

When Erica went upstairs to change back into her dress, Stiles cleaned up the lounge and secreted away all the leftovers in places he hoped his dad wouldn’t look for at least the next couple of days. Then, because he could totally be a gentleman if he wanted to and it would be sort of shitty to make Erica walk home when he had a perfectly good car just sitting there in the driveway, he shoved on a pair of shoes and found his keys.

His dad’s police cruiser was just pulling into the driveway when they stepped outside; it seemed his shift had ended more or less on time for once, or he just hadn’t opted for any overtime like he was wont to do more often than was probably healthy.

Stiles had maybe sort of expected him to be home later than he was supposed to be, so may have neglected to even mention his plans with Erica to his dad in the first place.

His dad stared at them in bemusement: Erica in her flashy dress and her elaborate hairdo and Stiles in his lazy day lounging clothes.

“Stiles,” he said, managing rather impressively to keep the confusion out of his voice in exchange for pleantries. “Erica.”

“Sheriff Stilinski,” Erica returned with a nod, both a greeting and a farewell rolled into one.

Stiles could see the questions flitting across his father’s face, itching to be asked, so he butted in before he had the chance to decide what he wanted to as first.
“Hey dad. I’m just gonna take Erica home, I’ll be back in a bit.”

“Right,” John said, watching Erica climb gracefully into the jeep. “Uh. Drive safe.”

“Always do,” Stiles assured as he pulled open the driver’s door, which was a blatant lie. It was clear his dad didn’t buy it for a second either, shaking his head in long-suffering resignation.

Stiles laughed as he pulled out of the driveway.

The last thing he heard before they hit the street was his dad muttering to himself.

“Wasn’t tonight supposed to be the formal?”

oOoOo

For the first time since the Peter Incident Stiles actually managed to have both a sleep uninterrupted by rude awakenings from nightmares or a general sense of panic, and to get what was generally considered to be a healthy amount of sleep – maybe still not healthy for a teenager, but healthy for someone’s standards, which was still better than usual.

It turned out that watching silly movies and eating junk food and just generally not thinking about all the shit in his life was kinda therapeutic. For now anyway. Maybe he should try and make that a regular thing; lord knows he needed the sleep.

The good vibes from a well-rested body and mind only lasted for about as long as it took him to turn his phone back on, however. Derek had texted back, and while he wasn’t annoyed – or at least hadn’t said as much in his texts – they popped Stiles’ happy bubble with the reminder that reality didn’t stop just because he was in a good place for once, and that yes, that meeting he had organised was still a thing that was happening.

That really sent his entire morning into a downward spiral.

John didn’t have to go into the station today, so he was there to bear witness to Stiles’ manic motion as he flitted about the house, trying to burn off some of his unrelenting anxiety about the whole thing. The few times Stiles actually glanced at him when they crossed paths in the house it was clear that his dad wanted to say something – maybe just ask if he was okay – but he always moved on again too quickly for his dad to grasp the words, let alone say them aloud. Because the thing was, if his dad actually asked, there was a good chance Stiles might actually just tell him what his plans for the day were – all the sordid details that would make his dad want to accompany him around with his gun in case Chris got any ideas in his head to get trigger-happy.

He appreciated the concern, but he was trying to make his life less complicated, not more so.

oOoOo

Stiles arrived at the Hale House over half an hour early, his lunch sitting like a lead weight in his stomach, but of course Derek had beaten him there.

“I know you have the bunker,” Stiles said in lieu of a greeting, “but I’m still not totally convinced that you don’t just sleep here.”

Derek sent him a Look, eyebrows working overtime to emphasise just how much he didn’t appreciate Stiles’ sense of humour.

His loss.
Stiles shrugged unrepentantly; the motion was jittery with nerves as he crossed the clearing in long strides. When he reached the charred porch he sat down on the edge, digging his fingers into the wood to keep himself there. His body itched to pace about, but if he let himself start he wasn’t entirely convinced he’d be able to stop again, and that wasn’t the kind of weak face he wanted to confront Argent with.

“If it freaks you out this much,” Derek began, an uncertain amount of time into their mutual waiting silence, “then why are you trying so hard to make this happen in the first place?”

Stiles was unashamed to admit that he may have jumped a bit at the sound of his voice; the question had been entirely unexpected.

He hummed thoughtfully, glad that he could do at least that much without sounding like a nervous wreck.

“I will never not be at least a little bit terrified of Chris Argent. That’s just the kind of guy he is.”

Derek didn’t say anything, but his silence was more prompting than dismissive.

“I could put it off. I could wait and wait and wait until I’ve hashed out a complete plan of action and a neat little list of things that need to be said. I could try and wait until my first reaction after every interaction with the man wasn’t instant regret and paranoia. But even if that somehow helped? Even if I could get my shit together well enough to make and execute a plan without freaking out? That’s time the rest of his family have to realise that something’s wrong. And maybe my trust is wearing a little ragged, but I wouldn’t be hedging my bets on any of them being too merciful if they stumbled across something they decided they didn’t like.”

“No. I’m not suicidal, jeez.” He flapped a hand irritably in Derek’s direction. “But don’t you think maybe I’m half the problem? They’ve known about you since the beginning, but some upstart teenage newborn who is also an alpha running about town unchecked? I imagine that might upset a few people.”

“Then don’t get found out.”

Stiles huffed out a dry laugh. “Why yes, thank you Derek, the thought hadn’t even crossed my mind. In fact I was planning on marching right up to their house and introducing myself, but I guess I should cancel those plans? What a shame.”

For a moment Stiles could’ve sworn he heard Derek laughing, but when he turned to look the alarm on his phone went off. He silenced it with a swipe of his thumb, and when he looked back up Chris was making his way out of the treeline.

It was meeting time, and his chest felt light and loose, some of the overwhelming tension having vanished into nothingness during their talk.

Stiles sent a wry look over his shoulder. Derek, standing with his arms folded in the crumbling entryway, cocked an eyebrow in faux-innocent query.

“Don’t think I don’t see what you did there. We’re coming back to this friendly stress-relief business later, but for now, I guess it’s show time.”

He straightened up but stayed seated, Derek a comforting and looming presence behind him. Chris stopped a handful of metres away from the porch; close enough for easy conversation but not so
close as to seem threatening.

“All right, here I am.” It looked like no one was in the mood for a simple hello today. “What did you want to talk about so damn badly?”

Stiles bit his lip. Chris’ tone wasn’t overtly hostile, but he still clearly wasn’t thrilled to be spending part of his weekend traipsing through the preserve to cavort with werewolves. He resisted the urge to glance back at Derek for reassurance.

“Well… When we’re finished with what we have to say you might not exactly be in a talking mood anymore. If there’s anything you want to know, it’s probably best you ask first.”

“Because that’s not ominous at all.” The hunter sighed. “Fine. I can work with that.” He was silent for a moment, sorting through what he wanted to know and what would be best to start with. “You claim you haven’t hurt anyone?”

Stiles nodded slowly.

“That bus driver. The police can claim some freak animal attack or whatever as much as they like, but I don’t buy it. That was one of your lot. Who did it?”

Of course it was straight into uncomfortable territory. Stiles shifted uncomfortably.

“That was… Peter. Peter Hale.”

Chris’ gaze flicked up to Derek then back down.

“Isn’t he in a coma or something?”

“Actually, he’s kinda…” Stiles cleared his throat. He still didn’t really like saying the words out loud.

“Dead,” Derek finished for him. “He’s dead now.”

“Yeah,” Stiles said into the heavy silence. “He was comatose, and then he killed some people, and now he’s, well, you know. But he killed that bus driver.”

“I see…” Chris looked a little thrown. But that wasn’t unreasonable, Stiles supposed – they must have known at least of each other, back before the fire. Any time someone throws the death of an acquaintance in your face, however long-abandoned or distant the relationship in the present, you’re bound to be thrown a little off-kilter.

“Yeah,” Stiles said into the heavy silence. “He was comatose, and then he killed some people, and now he’s, well, you know. But he killed that bus driver.”

“How did he die?”

Stiles cringed. Chris narrowed his eyes at him, clearing reading every twitch he made and putting together his own conclusions without Stiles even needing to open his mouth. But he needed to say it. He’d promised Derek he wasn’t going to run away from what he’d done, and while he’d predominantly meant that in regards to his dad, this counted too.

“I killed him, okay?”

Chris frowned.

“Why?”

Mouth twisting into a scowl, Stiles slammed an open palm down on the charred wood.
“Just, *because*, okay? Because two months ago I got attacked in the woods and then I found out my alpha was killing people and I wasn’t down with that. And yeah, an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind or whatever. I *know*. I freakin’ killed someone, okay? And maybe he sort of really deserved it but maybe he also didn’t but I did it anyway because how else do you stop what essentially equates to a sleepwalking killer ‘wolf?’”

Fingers brushed against the back of his neck; not forgiveness, but comfort. He slumped, the hard-won peace from a few minutes ago already escaping him.

“I’m sorry you had to do that.”

Stiles jolted in surprise, staring up at Chris with wide eyes.

“Look, I don’t know what sort of person you think I am, but no kid should have to make that sort of decision, let alone have the weight of a death on your shoulders. Everything else aside, you didn’t deserve that.”

Intellectually, Stiles had always known that Chris was no Gerard, but experiencing that from a different part of his life, when he was still all happy families and his own life hadn’t yet started falling apart, it was still a little unexpected. Then something clicked in his head, and he dropped his gaze again.

“Ah. I think you may be projecting your worries for Allison onto me, but I suppose any kindness, no matter how misplaced, is better than disdain.”

Chris’ frown, which had gained an edge of grief and sympathy while Stiles threw about his self-recriminations, hardened again.

“Why would I be worried about Allison?”

Choking back the bitter laugh he wanted to give to that, Stiles boldly met Chris’ gaze head on.

“Because you don’t want her to be a hunter?”

“Even if that were true, if there’s nothing here to hunt then why would I be worried?”

And there it was, the inevitable crux of the conversation, one of the major reasons Stiles had even wanted to meet in the first place. It was time to talk about Kate.

“You know she’s in town because I told you she was coming, and you’ve met her literally one time – Allison told me. What could you possibly think you know about my sister that I don’t?”

Ah, now Chris was getting defensive. His faux-casual, non-aggressive stance had shifted into something taut with tension. Part of Stiles begged to pass the baton over to Derek, but that was probably a terrible idea. So was Stiles letting himself talk with his nerves and discomfit overriding his filter, but he was the one who had started this.

“You didn’t *tell* me, you *warned* me. With a dash of threat too, but I can ignore that. D’you know that she shot Derek, basically the first night she got into town? Dude’s just trying to live his life, but little miss trigger-finger seems more than happy to try and put a bullet between his eyes. After all, he’s one of the ones that got away.”
He hadn’t meant to say that last part, honest; he could be more tactful than that, but talking about
Kate – heck even just thinking about her – always riled him up.

Behind him he could sense the shift in Derek’s mood at the turn in conversation. In front of him he
could see the clenched muscles of Chris Argent’s jaw as he ground his teeth.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Chris spat, vitriolic but also confused. Wary.

The atmosphere was stifling; the air was so thick with tension and restrained hostility that Stiles
found it difficult to breathe. But he couldn’t afford to back out now. He needed to see this through to
the end, even if Chris decided he was never speaking with them again.

“How would you describe your sister, Christopher?”

“Kate is a prolific hunter; skilled and efficient.”

“Ruthless, perhaps?” Stiles coaxed. “Cunning? Devious? Patient enough to play the waiting game?
Willing to entangle herself with her target for information and then, say, set their house on fire?”

Immediately Chris’ gaze focused on the broken house behind them. He always had been quick on
the uptake.

“Is that an accusation, Stilinski?”

“An accusation?” Stiles tapped a finger against his chin and glanced up at Derek’s blank expression.
“Was that an accusation? I’m sorry, I thought we were just listing Kate’s character traits.”

“My sister may be a lot of things, but she’s no cold-blooded murderer.”

“Yeah… See I don’t think your heart was really in that just now. If you truly believed that with every
fibre of your body, you wouldn’t have bothered warning me about her. You didn’t have even the
first bit of proof that I wasn’t still human, so why would she have any reason to be interested in me?”

“You saying it’s a crime now to give a courteous heads up?”

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Stiles let out a heavy sigh.

“Look, I’m sorry. I’m not trying to antagonise you, I swear, I’m just not good at all this stuff.” He
clenched his fists in his lap. “It’s just, you sister isn’t the person you think she is. Or, she’s exactly the
person you hoped she wasn’t. You might not want to hear this, and I don’t exactly rejoice in being
the bearer of bad news, but these are just the facts. Kate? She orchestrated the deaths of Derek’s
entire family. There were regular humans in that house. You know there were. Even if there weren’t,
you knew the Hales. What is your family motto?”

“… We hunt those who hunt us.”

“Exactly. Did their pack, their family, ever pose a threat to you, to the town?”

“Hey now.” Chris held his hands up, angry and confused and oh so frustrated. “No one’s saying that
it wasn’t a horrible, tragic incident. Don’t go putting words in my mouth kid. What I don’t get is why
you’re so adamant that it was Kate’s fault.”

“I guess expecting you to just believe us was naïve. You’re not the sort of man who jumps too
quickly to conclusions. I’m not saying you have to take everything I’ve said at face value. Just…
keep an open mind, and keep a watchful eye on her. Even if you don’t believe us about the fire, you
might be able to get a better grasp on what sort of person she is, and then act accordingly.”

There was a moment where Stiles was convinced Chris was just going to turn around and storm off. He was a little surprised he’d actually stuck around for Stiles to say his piece.

“I hope you’re not expecting me to thank you for telling me this.”

Stiles laughed lowly. It wasn’t a happy sound.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m a realist. I would never be so optimistic. I’ll understand if I never hear from you again. But can I make a request before you leave? Two, I guess.”

“You can ask. Whether I’ll listen depends on what you want.”

“I don’t think these will be too hard for you to accomplish. Please keep that motto of yours close at heart, and try as hard as you can to keep Allison out of this mess.”

“All I want is for Allison to be safe and happy. Telling her that one of her classmates isn’t human accomplishes neither of those things. You have my word.”

“Okay then.” Stiles grimaced, because a fake smile wouldn’t be bought or appreciated by either man. “That was unpleasant, but I guess I’ve mostly said all I wanted to say. I hope you find an answer that you can believe.”

“Stay out of trouble,” Chris snapped. His harsh tone could be forgiven, considering the circumstances.

The hunter left without another word, but the scent of his emotional turmoil lingered heavy around the house for a long time.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

In which Stiles has a one-sided conversation, and adds something new to his to-do list.

Chapter Notes

My Greek exam is on Thursday and I haven't started studying for it yet so here's a chapter instead?

“Sorry for all this,” Stiles said eventually, seated on the porch with his back against the remnants of a wall, staring up at the sky. “Making you talk to Chris. Being a hot mess. Dragging you around.”

Out on the grass, where he had been going through some faux martial arts katas – not anything Stiles recognised, but the likelihood of them being official katas from any one school was pretty low in the first place, so he wasn’t surprised – Derek came to a standstill and glanced over at him.

“Technically,” Derek started, dragging the word out with an edge that was a little bit teasing and not the slightest bit frustrated, “I did agree to be a part of this meeting.”

Rolling his eyes, because Stiles would always call bullshit when he saw it, Stiles dragged his gaze down to eyeball him and gave him a deadpan stare.

“You mean I badgered you into it.”

The corner of Derek’s mouth tugged up just a little, loose and amused as he shrugged a shoulder.

“Semantics. If I’d said no you hardly would’ve dragged me here.”

Involuntarily, Stiles let out a noise somewhere between horror and surprise. He might have been a bit of a reckless go-getter as a human, but he’d never have dared to try and manhandle Derek if he’d been truly against whatever Stiles was trying to do.

“I’m kind of worried you might rip my throat out if I tried something like that,” Stiles blurted out. Then he clamped a hand over his mouth, muttered a heartfelt curse under his breath, and hoped that it hadn’t come across as distasteful.

The damp heat of his breath on his skin felt, momentarily, like blood. Stiles shoved the thought away as quickly as it arose, locking it in the corner of his mind dedicated to traumatic memories and things he’d rather not think about.

Derek, the oldest and most experienced werewolf he currently knew, had definitely sensed his momentary descent into panic, if the pinch of his eyes was anything to go by, but, like always, it didn’t seem worth it to brave the word-vomit that would eventuate if Derek tried delving into his emotional state.
If he’d sensed it, Scott would’ve asked. And since Stiles really didn’t want to talk about it, he was glad to have some people around who knew what it was like to want to keep things to themselves.

“Glad you know which one of us is stronger,” Derek retorted. It fell a little flat; he’d waited just a few seconds too long to respond, caught up in Stiles’ distress and deciding whether or not to get involved, but Stiles laughed anyway.

Laughing was better than freaking out, at any rate.

The conversation tapered off after that, but they stayed there together for most of the afternoon.

Derek stayed out in the clearing, doing whatever it was he usually did to help maintain his powerful werewolf body, exercising in peace with unusually quiet company.

Stiles stayed in the shade of the house, his thoughts drifting, zoning in and out of attentiveness as the sun made its way across the sky.

When the sun hung low in the sky over the horizon, afternoon quickly descending into dusk, Derek crouched on the old wood and slowly coaxed Stiles away from his thoughts.

“Go home,” he said, when he was certain that Stiles was looking at him and not through him.

Blinking up at the sky – the day really had run away on him – Stiles had to concede that Derek made a good point. Except he didn’t think he was quite ready to go home, or to be enclosed by walls and floors and ceilings at all.

His lips formed an agreement, but his conviction was weak and wavering. Derek gave him just enough of a look to say that he wasn’t buying it, but he didn’t push. Stiles wasn’t his responsibility, and Stiles wasn’t asking for his concern. They both knew that. That’s why, despite the fact that Stiles was still a veritable stranger to Derek in most of the ways that mattered, their pseudo-friendship worked.

Derek stood back up, towering over Stiles’ seated form.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” he urged instead of repeating his initial recommendation.

Stiles gifted him with a small smirk and a lifted eyebrow.

“That depends, what’s your definition of stupid?”

Stepping back onto the grass with a sigh of totally exaggerated exasperation, Derek shot back, “Probably anything you think is a good idea.”

Stiles laughed a little, because that sort of banter was reassuring; it settled something deep inside of him, even if only for short periods of time. It hadn’t been a great day, but Stiles had a long history of bad days, so he knew better than most that not every single moment of those bad days had to be terrible. When he was alone again there would be nothing to laugh about, and if he ran into Chris before the man came to a decision then the whole day would come back to him in HD with director’s commentary, but he’d smile and soldier on.

They went their separate ways.

Stiles did not go home.

oOoOo
The sky continued to darken, from dusk to evening to *night*, but Stiles continued to meander mindlessly – first around the preserve, then the outskirts of town, then anywhere that wasn’t home – his feet moving one in front of the other with no destination in mind.

Distantly, he realised he was hungry, but it only registered on the outskirts of his awareness. He would eat when he got home, for sure, he just didn’t know when that would be.

His attention waxed and waned as he wandered the streets. Eventually, when he blinked back into focus, he found himself slipping into the cemetery.

“Sounds about right,” Stiles muttered to himself on an exhale.

Technically the cemetery was closed, but that had never stopped him as a human preteen, and it certainly wasn’t going to stop him now. All that meant was that he would be genuinely alone and free to talk or act however he pleased without fear of being overheard or overseen.

This was hardly his first night-time sojourn through the cemetery, but it had been more than a little while since his last visit in general, and, more notably, it was his first visit since he took that final step – unwilling as it had been – across the line that had separated him from the supernatural beings he was acquainted with.

As he moved between the rows of gravestones, feet following a long ago memorised path towards his inevitable destination, he noticed that there was an almost-tangible weight hanging over the cemetery – a physical manifestation of the grief that had seeped into the ground itself as the cemetery continued to grow. It tugged at his heart, phantom fingers of remembered sadness, but there was also something strangely cathartic about the feeling. As strange as it might sound if he ever tried to explain it to someone else, it was proof that the people laid to rest there mattered; that people cared about them, were sad to see them go, but also that they were remembered.

There were a lot of people who were gone who only had Stiles left to remember them. Mostly that was because they had yet to die, but that didn’t mean their deaths should be forgotten.

Instead of stubbornly shoving all the grief and unease into the back of his mind and the bottom of his heart like he usually did, here in the cemetery Stiles allowed himself to feel it all properly, in its entirety.

Cemeteries were for grieving, and remembering, and, he added as he reached a gravestone with a familiar name carved into it, they were for communing harmlessly with the dead.

Claudia Stilinski’s grave was more or less exactly how Stiles had expected it to be: the stone was reasonably clean, but weeds encircled the base of it, and there wasn’t a flower in sight. He could probably count on one hand the amount of times his father had visited after he resurfaced from his drinking stupor, and Stiles, although he had visited a bit more often, hadn’t exactly had the money to buy any flowers to leave for her when he came by.

He couldn’t say with any accuracy how long it had been since his last visit in either timeline, but he knew it had been more than a year. Looking down, he promised himself that he’d come back sometime soon and clean the place up a bit.

Shifting, Stiles sat down on the cold ground and leaned back against Claudia’s gravestone. Tilting his head back to look up at the night sky, Stiles was quiet for a few moments as he simply breathed in and out and watched his exhalations become momentary puffs of mist on the cool air.

“Is death – the afterlife I suppose – a linear concept?” he asked quietly, apropos of nothing.
Then he closed his eyes, shook his head, and laughed.

“Sorry. I should at least start with a hello, right?” A breath in, a breath out. “Hey mom. I know it’s been a real long time since we last talked, so I’m sorry this isn’t going to be a fun one, but I just… You’re kind of the only person I can talk to about all this without someone looking at me like I’ve lost the plot.”

He offered a wry grin that teetered on the edge of a grimace to the stars.

“Beacon Hills is a crazy place. I don’t think enough people know or appreciate that fact. So much weird shit goes on under everyone’s noses and no one notices. Dad didn’t have a clue until I shoved it in his face. Did you?”

He sighed.

“I’m never going to know the answer to that, so I guess there’s no point dwelling on it. In case you didn’t, I guess I should fill you in a bit. So, werewolves are a thing. And so are kitsune and skin-walkers and wendigo and possibly just about any supernatural creature you ever stumbled across in books. I mean, don’t quote me on that, I’m no expert on what does and doesn’t actually exist – I’ve only got personal experience to go off of – but the point is that humans aren’t the be-all end-all of existence.

“It’s weird, right? But at the same time it makes total sense. All stories have a basis in fact or whatever. ‘Course, me and Scott had to go find out about all that the hard way. I think I’ll spare you most of the details; I don’t want you to get too worked up about stuff that hasn’t happened yet – stuff that isn’t going to happen. Well, whatever’s within my ability to prevent, anyway.

“Maybe I’ll put it like this. I’ve seen so much death and destruction over the last year and a bit – hell, I was the cause of some of it – but none of it has happened yet. We were fighting – well, I say me, but I was just the breakable human then, and maybe I wasn’t technically supposed to be there at all but, well, you know me – this ridiculous, otherworldly creature that was fucking with the natural order of things around town, distorting the flow of time and all sorts of whacked out shit like that. We were fighting it, and it, it spoke to me, maybe? I can’t really remember it well, it’s all fuzzy. But it hit me with… something, and then I wasn’t there anymore, but here.

“So maybe you can see where I’m coming from when I say I can’t talk about it with anyone else. They’d throw me in Eichen House, you know? And I’ve spent more than enough time in there for one lifetime, thanks but no thanks.”

Stiles relayed his story slowly, in soft tones, letting everything he was feeling and had been denying himself – the anxiety, fear, panic, grief, confusion – wash over him.

“People died, in my time,” he continued, voice cracking for the first time. “People who I cared about, people I barely knew, people I’ve passed on the streets. But here, now, they’re all still alive. It’s like living in a town full of ghosts. So I cling to Erica like she’s the only thing keeping me from drowning, because I can hug her too tight and hear the rush of blood in her veins and know she’s okay but I can pretend it’s just a wolf thing if she asks. And it takes every drop of my willpower not to turn tail and run whenever I see Allison.

“It’s the people who didn’t die, too. None of my friendships from then exist now. None of them are ever going to become the people I left behind, and I’m trying so hard to treat them as different people, but you can’t just turn off a year’s worth of memories. I can’t help that I know things about them they’ve never told me, and they can’t help that I look at them and selfishly wish they were someone else. And it’s terrible that even the tiniest part of me is making it their fault, because they
don’t know, couldn’t possibly know, and I have no intention of ever trying to tell them, because how unfair would that be?”

Tears pricked at his eyes – grief, frustration, loneliness – and Stiles let them come.

“I’m trying to keep them safe without imposing this hot mess of angst and memories on them, but I just… I don’t know how. I’m not supposed to be the secret keeper, you know? I run my mouth and I don’t always pay attention to what I’m saying and then before you know it I’ve said something I’m not supposed to know. I’ve already messed up a bunch of times. I need someone in my corner, someone to help me keep a leash on things and figure out what to do, but that’s an inexcusable burden to place on anyone’s shoulders.

“Everything’s a mess. A part of me really wants to ask: am I doing the right thing? Or maybe, more than that, do you think I can do it? Fix things?”

Stiles tilted his gaze to the ground, and scrubbed the warm tear tracks off his cheeks with his sleeve.

“It’s okay. I know you can’t answer me. I think… I think I just really needed to say that all out loud. To get it off my chest. Hopefully it’ll help me clear my mind. I’ve lasted over a month, it’s too late to stumble now.”

Shifting to his feet Stiles turned around and ran his hand gently along the top of the gravestone.

“Thanks for listening.”

He didn’t exactly feel better. In truth, he felt drained – both mentally and emotionally. But this too, he figured, was a sort of grief. It was difficult to move forward without acknowledging the loss and allowing yourself to be sad about it. While it was hardly an express lane to happiness, it was certainly an important first step towards some sort of stability.

Standing up Stiles stretched, dispelling the small ache in his neck from the stone and the chill in his bones from the cold ground, and as he did he heard a sound he’d been ignoring come into focus. It wasn’t quite rhythmic, but it was routine, and mechanical. Someone was operating some sort of machinery somewhere out in the cemetery.

Curious, despite all the trouble curiosity had ever gotten him into over the years, Stiles wandered off towards the source of the sound. As he drew closer he began to notice something else as well: that not-quite-scent he’d come to equate with sensing emotions. This was different to the weighty saturation of emotion that the cemetery itself held; the new sensation was sharp, bitter perhaps, a little acrid, and Stiles knew instinctually that it was pain.

That put caution in his steps. A person could be in pain for so many different reasons. He didn’t know if it was old or new, physical or emotional, brief or continuous. If someone was being attacked, he liked to think he’d be able to hear it beneath the machinery – otherwise what was the point of enhanced senses?

Stiles slowed when he spotted light, and stopped along its edge, just close enough to see but not enough to be seen. It was a worker, digging a grave. The situation made sense – prepare the gravesites at night when you’re not disturbing anyone – and Stiles would’ve left it at that and headed home, but the pain-scent lingered there, and Stiles couldn’t leave well-enough alone.

He inched closer, carefully, circling around to remain out of sight, until he could catch a glimpse of the worker themselves. When he did he hastily pushed a hand to his mouth to bite back the reflexive outburst and backed off further into the shadows.
Guilt sung through his veins.

It was Isaac.

Sheriff Stilinski only took Sunday shifts occasionally.

His tendency for overworking was something Stiles had complained about at length for a long time, and more Sundays off call than on was the compromise they had eventually come to.

That meant they both knew he wasn’t going anywhere today, and that meant that Stiles could try and kick-start something he’d been mulling over since slinking home from the cemetery the night before.

Stiles was up before his dad – he’d gone to sleep late and vague nightmares had woken him early – and decided to enact step one of his shaky plan to enlist his dad’s aid: bribery. He made pancakes, and even, with some reluctance, cooked up a few pieces of bacon to go with it. The bacon would, of course, instantly put his dad on alert, but he was also a man starved off fatty foods who knew better than to look a gift horse in the mouth.

As he’d expected, the scent of cooking bacon wafting through the house brought his dad promptly into the kitchen, still sleep-soft and rumpled but mostly awake. When Stiles put a cup of coffee on the table in front of him he stared down at it, anticipation and suspicion warring with each other, until he sighed and shrugged and wrapped his hands around the warm mug.

“Morning Stiles,” he said, instead of immediately questioning him.

Stiles smiled and rolled his eyes. “Morning dad.”

He placed the stack of pancakes in the centre of the table and rationed out the bacon to make sure his dad had zero chance of sneaking more of it than Stiles was willing to let him have, and then sat down opposite his dad and grabbed a pancake off the stack. Giving him a suspicious up-and-down glance, his dad followed his lead.

For most of breakfast, Stiles stayed quiet. He’d suddenly realised a little way through that it had been a long time since they’d last done this sort of thing, and he didn’t want to ruin it by jumping into serious talk too quickly. Unfortunately, having known him his entire life his dad was rather adept at reading him, and if the bacon hadn’t been suspicious enough on its own he still would’ve known there was something Stiles was trying to accomplish with this breakfast.

John let him keep his silence until Stiles was picking absently at his fifth pancake, and then leaned forward over his own empty plate, hands around his mug of coffee.

“Is there anything you’d like to talk about?” he asked, not pushing, just letting him know that he was ready.

Stiles tore his pancake to shreds, ate a bit more of it, then pushed his plate away and met his dad’s gaze.

“What do you know about the Laheys?”

“The Laheys?” John raised a hand to his chin. He was frowning, but Stiles knew he was concentrating, digging through memories to try and figure out why the name was familiar.

“They live near Jackson,” he offered.
John snapped his fingers. “Right. Coach Lahey.”

Stiles nodded.

“The station gets noise complaints and the like about his place every now and again. Why, what’s wrong?” He visibly hesitated, then added, “Is it a, you know, wolf thing?”

“Yes, dad, because bacon is code for a supernatural emergency.” Stiles gave a dry laugh and shook his head. “No. It’s just… Did you ever follow up on any of those reports?”

“Every time. It’s standard procedure, you know that. What’s this all about?”

“What’s your opinion of Mr Lahey?”

“Well, he’s hardly the friendliest guy I’ve dealt with, but he’s never been obstructive.”

“Well sure, it would be stupid to get too worked up by a police visit, and I don’t think he’s that stupid.”

“What brought this all on? Is it something I should be worried about?”

“I- Yes. I saw Isaac yesterday – Isaac Lahey – and I just, I remembered some stuff, and saw some stuff. Obviously, you know, ‘my werewolf eyes saw something’ isn’t lawful evidence or whatever, but remembering meant I could talk to you and maybe you’d be able to think of something.”

“Stiles,” John cut him off, exasperated but mostly worried, “what happened with this Isaac kid?”

“Right. His dad’s abusing him.”

John became stone-faced, expression serious and grim.

“You’re certain?”

“I don’t have physical evidence, and Isaac definitely won’t say anything, he’s terrified of his dad, but I know.”

John nodded, and Stiles relaxed a little, glad he was being believed.

“I’d have to check the records at the station, but I’m sure at least some of those complaints were probably along the lines of domestic disputes – loud arguments and the like. If they were all prompted by similar scenarios, then it’s not implausible. Without something new I don’t have any grounds to reinvestigate the string of old complaints though, since nothing suspect ever popped up. It would be an abuse of power to randomly start investigating open-and-shut noise complaints.”

“I know. I’m just worried about him. Mr Lahey is not a good man, and Isaac shouldn’t have to deal with that until he’s eighteen, or however long after that it takes him to get out of that damned house.”

Stiles had never exactly been best buds with Isaac, but he’d heard about his dad. That was one death Stiles wouldn’t have minded a repeat of, but this time around there was no kanima stalking the streets. That was on Stiles. He was saving everyone a whole lot of trouble on that point, but he was also endangering Isaac. That wouldn’t stand.

“I wish I could promise to do something, but my hands are tied at the moment.”

“I know.”
“Listen. Keep an eye out on the kid at school, okay? It’s not the best start, but if you see anything suspicious, it’ll be setting groundwork, proof that it isn’t a one-time thing.”

“I will. Maybe you should set up a patrol around their neighbourhood? If you’re suddenly a whole lot faster to respond to calls about the house he might slip up.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” he agreed. “But, Stiles. Don’t get your hopes up. It’s tricky, investigating this sort of thing. Unless you can get Isaac to file a report, then unless we get lucky this could be a very long waiting game.”

“I know dad. But thanks for listening.”

John frowned and tilted his head a little, eyeing Stiles up and down.

“You do know you don’t have to cook me breakfast to talk about something that’s worrying you, right?”

Stiles could only be glad that the bags under his eyes weren’t nearly as dark as they would be without his healing, or his dad would definitely want to talk about his nightmares next.

“Are you saying you didn’t want that bacon? That’s good to know, I’ll make sure to stop buying any sort of bacon at all then.”

“Stiles!”

He laughed as his dad tried to argue for his right to bacon, but inside he was worried. Without the kanima, there was just Isaac, and he refused to let Isaac suffer for decisions Stiles had made.
When everything’s said and done, Stiles could only take life one step at a time, regardless of how much foreknowledge or ill begotten insight into his peers he possessed.

It was easy to know things as facts, but hard to grasp the threads that linked one thing to the next, and harder still to scrounge up the necessary proof for other people to believe what he knew.

Even with everything he’d experienced, the good and the bad, the old and the new, the past and the never-to-come future, Stiles was just one guy. He could only calculate his own actions. Everything else spread out in unpredictable ripples from every action he took. In another lifetime he wouldn’t have had to think about it – that was just the way the world worked, decisions that had unknown distant consequences – but when you were trying to guide a group of people – heck, a whole town – down a specific path – or at least off of a different path – that was when you had to start paying attention.

Stiles was used to dealing with problems one at a time, in a constant stream of one thing to the next. This whole multi-tasking thing was tugging him in a lot of different directions at once and he sometimes lost himself figuring out what should happen next.

Most of the time, Stiles wished for some sort of magic cure all, but he supposed that one crazy death-defying timeline miracle was all he was going to get. If he wasn’t so committed to his little fix-it crusade this re-life would be a hell of a lot easier, but he’d never be able to live with the guilt if he just kicked back with all that knowledge in his head and let things play out as they would.

And so he marched stoically ahead, one foot in front of the other, and fervently hoped that his divergent path didn’t lead somewhere darker than it once had.

oOoOo

Stiles didn’t expect to hear back from Chris Argent anytime soon, which thankfully put at least one of his issues on the back-burner for the time being.

Without anything definitive from Argent though Stiles was still caught in limbo about what or how much to tell Scott. Deep down – okay not even that deep really – Stiles didn’t want to be the person to info-dump the supernatural on his brother from another mother. He hadn’t exactly taken to it well the first time, and Stiles wasn’t sure he could deal with Scott thinking he was crazy right now.

Maybe he’d have to recruit some aid; but that could come later. The actual face-to-face explanations, that was. There was no reason he couldn’t give him a little nudge in the right direction first.

Stiles hadn’t exactly taken the time to read through that book Danny had mentioned to him but, given everything he’d learned so far this go-around, he trusted that Danny would know good information from wild rumours and fanciful human make-believe. So, that in mind, he made a quick pit-stop to the public library before school – he was very possibly the first non-employee through the door and it was the quickest in-and-out trip he’d ever made there.

Scott could be eternally patient if he believed in and trusted whatever he was waiting on, but it hadn’t exactly been a stellar friendship on Stiles’ behalf lately, letting Scott drown himself in his love affair so he could work on supernatural issues behind his back. The least he could do was offer an olive
Because he’d made that spur-of-the-moment detour to the library before class, Stiles didn’t have a chance to give the book to Scott until lunchtime. That meant he had to do it in front of Erica, which made him feel oddly self-conscious.

Taking the book out of his bag Stiles placed it on the table between them and slid it across so it sat in front of Scott. After glancing at the cover, Scott stared up at him with wide, confused eyes, making no move to accept the book, which gave Erica ample time to decipher the upside-down text.

She snorted out an unattractive laugh, gave Stiles a knowing look, and punched him in the shoulder. It hurt more than he expected it to; whilst Erica was doing pretty well adjusting to the new sensory input, her supernatural strength was harder to monitor, and her control slipped more around himself and Derek since she knew they were made of sterner stuff than the average human.

He thought he’d hidden his flinch pretty well, but the bare-there breath of an apology proved otherwise. Scott however was none the wiser, having mostly adjusted to his and Erica’s oddly – from an outside perspective – physical new friendship so as to ignore moments like this.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” Scott asked, gesturing unnecessarily at the book between them. “I didn’t miss some weird assignment did I? Is that what this is?”

Stiles shook his head. “Nah. It’s more of a personal project. I want you to read this, but pretend it’s like a history textbook or something: take everything at face value and accept it – at least hypothetically – as recorded fact. I can’t really tell you anything else ‘cause of that thing I mentioned having to talk to Argent about, but this is, you know, tangentially related to it.”

Erica had gone still had the mention of Chris Argent and she whipped around in her seat to stare accusingly at Stiles. He ignored her heated whisper – “What do you mean you talked to Argent?” – and met Scott’s gaze head-on.

“Spooky local legends have something to do with Allison’s dad? Stiles, you know he’s a firearms dealer, right? I don’t get what this has to do with anything, not Mr Argent and certainly not with you.”

With a tired sigh, Stiles shoved the book a little more emphatically in Scott’s direction.

“Just read it, okay? Read it and pretend for one second that humanity isn’t alone.”

Visibly reluctant, Scott shoved the book in his bag, but he only looked more confused. “Are we talking about aliens now? Are you and Mr Argent weird UFO chasing buddies or rivals or something now?”

Erica snapped out of her vitriolic mumblings about being left out of the loop and choked on air.

“Aliens!” she snickered, hunched forward, shoulders shaking in amusement. “Shit that would be so weird.”

Stiles glared at both of them. Erica was annoyed and Scott wasn’t yet ready to listen to what Stiles had to tell him, but at least they were all getting along somewhat civilly. It was more than he could currently say about their pack and Chris Argent.
Somehow, Stiles had never noticed the intensity of Coach Finstock’s lacrosse tunnel vision until he found himself watching it from the outside. Isaac was on the lacrosse team, so the best time to observe him without coming across like a total stalker was during practice, but Stiles had been wary of catching Coach’s eye and being subjected to some good old verbal abuse about quitting the team. It turned out he needn’t have worried, because Coach barely even glanced at the bleachers, let alone for long enough to zero in on Stiles sitting in the top row.

Scott however did notice, and he half-waved half-beckoned to him, confused. He had every right to be. What was the point of quitting the team if he was just going to watch practice anyway? But Stiles could hardly tell him the real reason, for quitting or for being at practice, so he’d just have to remain confused.

He caught Danny’s gaze as he scanned the team for Isaac. Stiles just shrugged at his raised brow and that was that. Being supernatural didn’t suddenly mean Danny cared more about what Stiles did with himself, and he was sort of grateful for that. It helped knowing that change didn’t have to be dramatic all the time.

When he paid attention, Isaac was easy enough to pick out. There was a slight hunch to his shoulders, even in uniform, and he subtly shifted himself away when people came too close to accidentally jostling him.

Stiles had never known Isaac before he became a werewolf, before he was cocky and brusque and sarcastic, like his supernatural resilience could protect him from the world. He had no idea why he would want to play a sport as physically violent as lacrosse at BHHS usually was, when he shied away from touch whenever he could.

Maybe it was a cover? I got these bruises during practice. No, I’m definitely not being abused.

Maybe he’d always liked lacrosse, and was trying not to let his home life ruin something he enjoyed?

Theorising wouldn’t exactly help anything, and the only person he could get those answers from was Isaac himself, who definitely wouldn’t be interested in sharing.

Digging his way through the scents of sweaty teenagers and hormones (super gross) he focused on that pain he remembered from Saturday. It fluctuated during practice – injuries flaring up? – but it never seemed to completely disappear, nor reach any particular heights. To Stiles it seemed like a resigned sort of pain, a lingering sort that you got used to having. If you were used to being hurt it would take something big to significantly register.

It pissed him off that no one had noticed.

It pissed him off that Jackson probably had noticed at some point but hadn’t cared enough to do anything about it.

It pissed him off that he couldn’t entirely blame Jackson for it. At most he might’ve tried looking into it once, and if Isaac brushed him off, he’d have left it alone. They weren’t friends, and it shouldn’t be up to teenagers to try and right all the world’s wrongs.

And sometimes kids were the only option, and their word would always mean less than an adults. But now, Stiles was onto the Lahey Situation, and more than just Stiles, he had his dad on his side. Unfortunately he sort of needed to get Isaac on board as well, or he’d just start denying everything again, but he’d figure it out. That was what he did. He strategized, made connections, and forged onwards.
He’d figure it out. He had to.

**oOoOo**

“I’m mad at you,” Erica announced from atop his jeep when he finally called it quits on his lacrosse stake-out. He was simultaneously relieved that she felt confident and secure enough to admit that to his face, and dreading the conversation to come.

Stiles unlocked the doors and got inside but made no move to start the engine. Erica slipped into the passenger seat, slammed the door behind her, and crossed her arms.

Allison’s car was long gone, so there was no harm in having this talk in the somewhat privacy of his car instead of waiting to get home.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were going to talk to the hunters?”

Straight to the heart of it then.

“Erica, listen.” Stiles stared at his hands, clasped around the steering wheel just so they had something to do. It wasn’t always easy staring anger in the eye. “Do you remember how I said he was suspicious of me, and that it was best he didn’t see us together so that suspicion didn’t carry over to you too?”

She mumbled an affirmative.

“If I had told you I was meeting with him, and that you weren’t allowed to come, you would’ve been angry and probably would’ve followed us anyway. If he’d seen you it might’ve derailed the conversation and he might’ve switched tracks from considering how much his family actually followed their code to wondering how many new werewolves were currently running about town courtesy of either Peter or myself. That’s a dangerous road.”

“So let me get this straight. This is you going: ‘Erica I’m withholding information from you for your own safety!’ Right?”

There was an edge to her voice that made Stiles wince because yeah, he’d been on the receiving end of that bullshit before and it was never a good feeling.

“It’ll just sound heartless if I say it was something bigger than that, but that is basically the bare bones of it, yeah. And I know, okay? I know that people making decisions for you is totally shitty and it sucks and I should try to have more faith in your self-control and all of that. I get it. But this is a delicate balance right now and I refused to risk putting you on his radar. I won’t apologise for that.”

The air inside the jeep was heavy and stifling.

“Part of me wants to say ‘I’m a werewolf now, I can look after myself,’ but I guess that’s the problem isn’t it?”

Stiles glanced over at her. She offered him a crooked smile.

“I can’t honestly say whether or not I would’ve stayed put if you’d told me. Even now I’m kinda itching to move. You should face the enemy at full power, or something like that. But you went alone.”

His guilt must have been palpable, because Erica narrowed her eyes at him.
“Did you take Derek?!”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

Stiles rolled his eyes, shaking off the tension and reminding himself that he wasn’t technically in the wrong.

“Because what we talked about had a lot to do with the history between the Hale and Argent families. Derek deserved to be there because I was discussing his family, and you weren’t there because Derek should be allowed to choose when and how much of his tragic family story he shares with you, and not have that choice taken out of his hands just because I know more of it than he realises I do and I accidentally ran my mouth.”

“I-” Erica’s breath whooshed out of her all at once and she slumped back against the seat. “I feel like you’re just making excuses now but I would’ve felt shit butting in on family business.” The look she shot him was still heated, but different now; Stiles couldn’t read it. “I’m still mad but just… don’t do it again. Explain stuff before and not after the fact, and have a little more faith in my decision making skills. Trust goes both ways – you’ve got to try and meet me in the middle rather than keeping it all to yourself.”

Stiles laughed, soft and humourless.

“I knew I wasn’t cut out for this. I’d gotten so used to having to hide my pessimism and justified realism in the shadows, out of sight of blindingly optimistic people, that I keep forgetting that there are people I can reach out to who won’t automatically veto the most prudent course of action.”

Being the realist to Scott’s optimist had always been a delicate balance. Scott always insisted on seeing the best in people, while Stiles had been intimately aware of the darkness that lurked inside of people. All he’d ever been able to do was prepare, alone, for the potential backlash every time something crossed into Beacon Hills.

Erica’s words were hesitant when she spoke again.

“How long have you known about the supernatural?”

In lieu of an answer, Stiles bared his teeth at her in a grin that was many things, but none of them happy.

“Do you want a ride?” Stiles asked, pointedly changing the subject. “You’re not the only person I should probably explain myself to today – might as well get it all over and done with.”

Erica gave him a lingering stare, searching, but for what Stiles wasn’t sure. She didn’t seem satisfied with whatever she found. Without a word she gathered herself and got out of the jeep.

oOoOo

Up until talking with Erica Stiles really hadn’t had any inclination to go talk with Alan Deaton. In fact, he’d been purposefully ignoring that glaring issue rather happily, since he’d have been perfectly happy to never see the man ever again.

Unfortunately, the likelihood of him happily going about his life as a part of Beacon Hills’ supernatural community and never having to consult with him on anything ever was woefully low. For all the help the Argents’ family bestiary would be if they forged an alliance, and for all that Stiles
had already personally encountered several of the entities that would potentially make their way into Beacon Hills yet again, Deaton just knew more things. He had contacts and access to outside information that Stiles had no way of getting on his own.

All of which boiled down to this: Stiles had to suck it up and go apologise for breaking in and also maybe breaking that table.

Scott didn’t work on lacrosse days, so there was at least one thing to be thankful for, because he wasn’t overly interested in lingering until closing time again. He just wanted to go in, say his piece, and then go very far away.

It seemed the universe was on his side for once, as the clinic didn’t have any customers hanging about when Stiles parked across the road. He killed the engine but it still took him several minutes to drag himself out of the car.

The bell over the door jingled merrily when he walked in as he let the door slam a little too hard behind him. Deaton was out back. Stiles noticed, with a vague sense of amusement, that the mountain ash counter was fully locked down this time; it seemed like Stiles may have reminded him that it paid to be cautious.

The druid-turned-vet was prompt to come investigate his new visitor, but stayed firmly in the doorway leading out back when he saw who it was; safe behind his barrier.

Stiles allowed himself a small, rueful grin at that. Deaton had never been cautious around him as a human – standoffish perhaps after the Nogitsune, but not cautious.

As a master of appearing unruffled at all times, Deaton merely stared him down, face blank, before saying evenly, “I see you still haven’t acquired an animal in need of my services, Mister…”

“Stilinski.”

Deaton’s eyebrows shot up a hair in surprise. Throwing around the Sheriff’s name after some casual B&E was a kinda gutsy move after all.

“Mr Stilinski then. Is there something you wish to ask, or should I be prepared to replace a few chairs when you get your claws into them?”

Stiles inhaled deeply, held it, and breathed out slowly. He was used to this game and he wouldn’t let Deaton get under his skin this time.

“Actually, I’m here to apologise.”

“Oh?”

Polite curiosity. Was Deaton really so opposed to appearing personally invested in anything?

“Yes. I was… not in a great place, emotionally, when I came by before. And you remind me of someone-” (are that someone) “-who I’ve always butted heads with. A volatile combination, I suppose.”

“Indeed.”

“And, uh, sorry for the table? I would offer to pay for it or something but let’s be real, I’m just a broke high schooler. And since you didn’t report the incident to the Sheriff’s Department I’m guessing you didn’t find it that worrisome. Or just not worth the hassle. The supernatural and the law
don’t exactly fit nicely together.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you talk a lot Mr Stilinski?”

Stiles snorted. “Only all the time.”

“I see.” A smile. Professional, unfeeling, disingenuous. But not threatening. “I would ask how you knew about me but I get the feeling I wouldn’t like the answer. Shall we perhaps start over? My name is Alan Deaton. I’m a druid, but my primary occupation is that of a veterinarian. You?”

It was a struggle not to roll his eyes, but he managed it. Stiles should’ve known it would go something like this. If Deaton wanted revenge or something in a similar vein it would go quiet, unexpected, and magical.

“Stiles Stilinski. Two month old werewolf and moody high schooler.”

“See?” Deaton’s smile widened a smidgen, but it still wasn’t warm. “Observing societal niceties isn’t such a terrible thing, is it? Now, was there anything else you wanted?”

Stiles shook his head emphatically. “Nope, that’s it. I’m gonna go now.”

Deaton watched on, faintly amused now instead of wary, as Stiles backed up to the door, pulled it open, and dashed out across the road to his jeep.

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The next few days fell into something of a pattern.

With everything still silent on the Argent front, Stiles’ days included lots of strange looks from Scott as he assumedly began picking through the book, day-dreaming during old, barely remembered classes, and keeping an eye on Isaac.

They didn’t really share any classes and he wasn’t in the least bit familiar with Isaac’s timetable, so this mostly involved seemingly spacing out while trying to keep an ear out for him at school, and attending lacrosse practices to monitor his physical state.

Scott seemed to have shifted from being confused to being resigned to not understanding anything Stiles did these days, so he’d stopped reacting whenever he saw Stiles somewhere he hadn’t expected him to be. It helped Stiles feel a little less guilty at least, so that was nice.

Isaac’s old-pain scent persisted through the week, though Stiles hadn’t expected anything different. Watching his mannerisms from afar wasn’t really helping much, which was frustrating him more than it ought to – what had he really expected to learn skulking about in the bleachers?

What he really needed was to actually interact with Isaac, to try and get a feel on his mental state and work his way into something resembling trust, but that would be difficult. As someone prone to distrusting people, compounded upon Stiles recently rekindling his friendship with the oft-bullied Erica Reyes, any overt moves Stiles took to try and get close to Isaac would be met with fierce suspicion, and they had no friendly history to fall back on.

Staking out the Lahey house until he could catch them in the act would be so much easier, but even if that would be the crowning jewel in this plan, Isaac still needed to be willing to testify against his father. A one-time act wouldn’t hold as much weight if Isaac remained tight-lipped about the rest. If he couldn’t coax it out of Isaac he might actually have to try and beg Jackson to come forward as a witness too, and that might actually be worse.
Maybe he should try and get a hold of his work schedule? (Or perhaps, more accurately, check bookings at the funeral home.) Sure, hanging around the cemetery at night might come across as all sorts of weird since he wasn’t contractually obliged to be there, but being alone might make Isaac more talkative. The dark might help too. Stiles always felt it was easier to talk about bad things in dark places, where it was harder to catch anyone’s eye or see their expressions.

Actually, Stiles decided, it was probably better to consult with his dad before starting any new stalking ventures. It could, after all, backfire on him spectacularly.

And so Monday became Tuesday became Wednesday and suddenly it was after school on Friday and Stiles was no closer to grasping anything than he had been when the week began. All he’d found was a newfound distaste for his supernatural ability to sense someone’s emotional state – he was uncomfortably, intimately familiar with the feeling of Isaac’s pain now – and an urge to strangle Mr Lahey that was a little more violent and a little more real and held a little more intent now than when he might’ve thrown that phrase about before the possession and the void.

He knew how to squash that feeling, of course; he could restrain himself just fine. But it was there, and he acknowledged it, and he hated it for what it represented, what had been taken from him, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t use it. If he hadn’t already been dead-set on helping Isaac, he could’ve used that violent anger as determination enough to see it through anyway.

He would see it through.

Chapter End Notes

I always have to end with something unnecessarily dramatic sounding, because otherwise it feels really abrupt? Sorry about that.

Here I just thought I'd point out, since we're heading into turbulently legal waters, that I have basically zero understanding of how family law or CYFs works where I live, let alone how CPS works in the US, and I have zero interest in frying my brain researching law for the sake of fanfic, so if you could refrain from pointing out any legal fallacies you might stumble across later on then that would be much appreciated. Thanks in advance.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

What? Two chapters in a week? Has turning 22 made me into a better person? (It has not.)

Anyway I’ve made it to the end of my little timeline-plot-outline thingy I had going - which I only vaguely half followed in the first place - so I’m really winging it from here on out until we hit the end stretch which is the only thing I actually have plans for.

Because Stiles had demanded that this week’s pack meeting be at his place instead of at the train depot or the Hale House ruins – and he was going to make that a thing, okay, no matter how much Derek protested that it wasn’t necessary; it wasn’t even about meeting to share information, not really, it was going to be mandatory bonding time and if they wanted him in charge they’d have to put up with hanging out until someone wanted to relieve him of his position – late Saturday morning found the trio of werewolves seated in the Stilinski’s lounge.

Derek, as the one who had put up the largest protest to the get-together – though surprisingly not the location – was sitting in one of the armchairs, arms folded. He was still wearing that leather jacket of his, which might have made him look even angrier than usual to an outsider, but Stiles could tell he was only a normal level of annoyed, and perhaps even a little tired. Stiles didn’t know what the guy did with his spare time and it was none of his business. But he made a note to maybe schedule the next meeting in the afternoon.

Erica on the other hand had immediately made herself at home on the couch, her feet in Stiles’ lap. She had been more than happy to get away from the Reyes household for a while – “Mom hasn’t stopped badgering me about the formal all week. It’s like she’s suddenly decided it’s worth trying to live vicariously through me.” – and if it meant being at Stiles’ place instead of somewhere dark or dank or creepy out in the woods then all the better.

The Sheriff had an afternoon shift and had been puttering about in the kitchen when Erica and Derek arrived. He had sent Stiles a Look – somewhere between fond amusement and resignation, one of his most practiced looks – because Stiles might have forgotten to mention he’d invited company, but otherwise had nothing to say about it. Had this been before he told his dad about Derek being a werewolf, his reaction might’ve been quite different, but he’d obviously decided to stick everything related to their werewolf trio off to one side and try not to worry too much about the more innocuous things like hanging out in his house.

Stiles was almost entirely convinced that Derek would try to maul him if he made any quips about starting the meeting, so he decided to just dive straight in instead.

“I haven’t heard anything back from Mr Argent yet. I’m not expecting him to, but Derek, have you heard from him?”

Derek’s gaze lingered pointedly on Erica before he replied, “No. And you’re right, he’ll definitely come to you, not me.”

Stiles brushed his thumb back and forth over the exposed skin of Erica’s ankle where it rested in his
“Cool. Just checking. And you don’t have to give me that look, Erica knows all about it now. I accidentally mentioned it in front of her and she called me out. It was a whole thing.”

Derek appraised him in silence, before he nodded. “Good. You’re entitled to secrets, but if you’re trying to build a pack then you have to let the members in on pack-related matters.”

Outwardly, Stiles gaped dramatically at him. Inwardly, he rolled his eyes. Derek was so full of shit sometimes – and he didn’t even mean in a contradictory words vs actions kind of way; the guy could claim not to be cut out for leadership all he wanted but at least he knew how a pack was supposed to work.

A sharp nudge from Erica’s elbow brought him out of his head. She was smirking over at him.

“There, you’re outvoted. Two against one. No more secret dealings.”

“Didn’t I already promise I’d talk to you about it next time?”

“But now if you break it Derek’ll come after you with his eyebrows of doom and disappointment.”

They both ignored Derek’s baffled outcry of, “My what?”

“Okay, okay, moving on.” Stiles turned back towards Derek. (And damn he really should’ve sat at the other end of the couch, it would make his life so much easier.) “I promised Scott I would try and explain what’s been going on to him after we hash things out with Argent – given that it ends on a somewhat positive note and not with all of us dead or something. I’ve been trying a different angle to try and get him in a more open-minded state of mind before then, but I don’t think it’s really working.”

“It’s been hilarious,” Erica interjected. “Stiles gave him some book on local legends or something and told him to pretend it was a history book. Pretty sure McCall thinks you’ve gone totally crazy. The looks he kept giving you whenever you so much as alluded to the book? Priceless.”

“A book? Is it even accurate?”

“I don’t know! I haven’t read it, okay? But Danny recommended it to me so I figured it had to at least be better than most.”

Stiles couldn’t immediately work out why Derek suddenly looked so pained, but then he asked an unexpected – though in retrospect one he should’ve seen coming a mile away – question.

“Stiles, how many people know you’re a werewolf?”

“Uh…” Stiles laughed nervously, and the fingers circling Erica’s ankle clenched involuntarily. “You two, my dad, Chris I guess, Danny, because he helped me out when I had a bit of a meltdown after Peter- well, after Peter, and… the vet and the school guidance counsellor.”

“The vet?” Derek asked, incredulous and confused, only to be overrun by Erica sputtering, “The guidance counsellor?!?”

“Hey,” Stiles protested, raising his hands in surrender. “In my defence, they’re both druids, although I don’t know if either of them are current practitioners.”

Derek was looking at him like he was some unruly kid who didn’t understand the concept of rules.
“That doesn’t mean you should just go around telling people.”

“To be fair, they both found out before Danny, and I wasn’t in the best mental state when I went to talk to them. January wasn’t really a good time for me.”

“Plus,” Erica tagged on, “Apparently Mahealani already knew about supernatural stuff anyway, so it was kinda no big deal to him.”

“Yeah! Plus I didn’t actually tell him. He saw me, came to a conclusion based on the available data, and helped me stay under the radar until I cooled off.”

“Fine, fine.” Derek waved the issue away. “I suppose it’s less people than I feared. This Scott kid will be the last one?”

“That’s the plan, yeah. Unless we find someone we collectively think would benefit from it. But I doubt that’ll happen soon or often.”

Erica nodded in approval and Derek shrugged, which at least wasn’t a negative reaction.

“So I’m not in trouble, great!” Stiles clasped his hands in front of him and leaned forward in his seat. “There’s one other thing I wanted to talk about.”

Derek sighed, but it was obviously exaggerated, and Stiles couldn’t resist a little smile at that. Me thinks the wolf doth protest too much, he mused briefly – there was no way Derek was as averse to the idea of actually being pack as he insisted he was; Stiles would wheedle the truth out of him, but that was for another day.

“I thought we should have a discussion about who should be the alpha.” Stiles held up a hand to ward off any immediate interjections. “I know I’m the alpha, now, and I don’t exactly know how to make that shift hands without death being involved, but let’s put the logistics aside for a moment.”

“Aren’t things fine like this?” Erica asked, genuinely curious and a tad confused.

Stiles shrugged helplessly. “I don’t think I’d be anyone’s first choice as leader. I’m reckless and occasionally impulsive and I often lack a brain-to-mouth filter. I know how to do things by myself but I’m not great at coordinating teamwork. Following instructions is easier.”

“I know I’m even newer to this than you are, and I don’t know how things work in proper wolf packs, but isn’t that fine? No one’s asking you to be a dictator or a king or anyone who stands above everyone else and gives orders. You just happen to be the one with the red eyes, and sometimes when we argue it’s uncomfortably like arguing with a teacher, but it’s not like there’s anything physically compelling me to stop. You’re technically in a position of power or authority over me, but it’s not like you’re going to use it. Isn’t that better than a whole bunch of other potential outcomes?”

Coming from a human perspective Stiles totally got what Erica was saying. As a turned wolf he had a different idea of how a pack should function and what his role within it all was, but that didn’t necessarily mean it was bad or wrong. Derek and Peter had only gotten particularly snappy with Scott when he was being stupid or deliberately obtuse, but they’d never commented on how he acted as an alpha – at least not to his face or in front of Stiles.

“As the oldest and most experienced one here, I was actually thinking it should maybe be Derek but… thoughts?”

“I don’t want it.”
Stiles’ breath stuttered in surprise at the blunt admission.

“My whole life I was raised with the knowledge that Laura was going to be the next alpha. My mother trained her, and I was left to do my own thing, and I was perfectly happy with that. I didn’t want to be in charge. Peter might have scoffed at my lack of ambition, but he never suggested I might be the better choice, even when he enjoyed tearing into Laura as much as he liked tearing into me. There are plenty of things about this whole situation that I regret, but I’m not unhappy that I missed out on Peter’s alpha spark. It’s strange knowing that it isn’t in the family any longer, that there’s no more Hale Alpha, but it’s a burden I’m not sure I’d have been ready to shoulder. Maybe if you were someone else I’d be more conflicted about it, but I think it’s safe with you.”

Erica whistled long and low. This might be the first time she’d ever heard him say so much in one go, and with such unexpected conviction too. Stiles wasn’t any better off, gaping unattractively until Derek flushed a little under their scrutiny and looked away.

“Would you rather I kicked up a fuss about it?” Derek asked, sounding sort of put out.

“No,” Stiles said slowly, pulling himself together. “I just never realised you weren’t interested in it. I know you never really complained about it or anything, but I figured that might’ve had a bit more to do with you not seeing the benefit in killing me, rather than flat out not wanting it.”

“Sometimes I think you have a death wish.”

Stiles laughed awkwardly. He wasn’t convinced he could truthfully refute that, and he wasn’t keen on finding out.

“So, now that we’ve inflated your ego, are we all in agreement that Stiles should remain the alpha?”

Stiles squeezed Erica’s ankle and smacked her in the arm.

“Fine, fine, I get it, it was a stupid question, none of you care who’s in charge.”

While Erica laughed at his discomfort and embarrassment, Stiles rested his head against the back of the couch and stared up at the ceiling.

Honestly? He truly hadn’t been expecting zero resistance. It was a discussion no one had ever had, back then, but if the question had been voiced he didn’t think the decision would be so unanimous. Of course, at the moment there were only two opposing voices in the situation, so it wasn’t hard to believe they’d agree on an outcome to anything he proposed, but he hadn’t been expecting their answers. They were certainly more convinced than he was – or, at the very least, any minor aspirations they might have had about leadership were vastly outweighed by whatever dreadful consequence they individually imagined was involved in it.

“Is that it then?” Derek asked, pulling Stiles’ gaze back down to him. “Can I go now?”

A devilish smirk curled Stiles’ lips.

“As your recently democratically appointed leader, I forbid you from crawling back to your depressing place of residence until nightfall. Today is a movie day!”

Derek buried his face in his hands, and Stiles caught a low mumble of, “Is it too late to change my vote?” But other than a vocal protest Derek didn’t make any motion towards leaving, and Stiles was going to count that as a win. If he really wanted to leave, he would, and nothing Stiles had to say would stop him, so maybe he was actually a little happy to have an excuse to avoid spending the day lurking in the woods or whatever.
Stiles was fully prepared to forcefully drag Derek into this tiny little pack for real, even if he fought tooth and nail against it, but maybe it wouldn’t be so difficult a fight after all.

“Stiles…”

Peter’s slow drawl of his name filled the dark space Stiles found himself in, surrounding him, engulfing him.

“Why did you kill me?”

Not wounded or angry or upset: just curious.

Stiles couldn’t speak. He didn’t know if he just couldn’t get any words out or if he wasn’t permitted a voice here, in this place. Peter’s domain.

“I can see the darkness in you. We would have been wonderful together.”

Two red eyes in the dark. A flash of teeth. A hand, invisible but solid, against his throat.

“You would’ve helped me get vengeance. You aren’t afraid of killing.”

Claws pressed into the skin of his throat. Pinpricks of pain. Blood welling to the surface.

“The void suits you.”

Words whispered beside his ear. The hand around his throat clenched tightly. Stiles couldn’t breathe. He stared helplessly into those red eyes until his vision faded.

Between one moment and the next, Stiles went from asleep to awake.

That was not the first dream of its kind that Stiles had had.

Dreams of Peter came in three forms. Nostalgic ones, about a living Peter and his reluctant aid. Traumatic nightmares, filled with violence and blame. And ones like this, the dark ones, coaxing, lightly regretful but never furious like the true nightmares.

It was only the nightmares that still had Stiles starting awake partially shifted or choking back shouts. Everything else was, depressingly enough, kind of par for the course these days, and didn’t offer much more than a disruption to his sleep, and occasionally something to think about while he lay in the dark.

Stiles knew Peter was dead. That was an undeniable fact. But that didn’t change the fact that, while the nightmares of bloody deaths were the most unsettling, these ‘softer’ dreams had him on edge as well.

No one had ever been privy to the intricate details of whatever Peter had done to Lydia to anchor himself to life. No one knew if it was a premediated decision – choosing Lydia – or if it had been a bit more random, if it might have tried to reach out to anyone Peter had bitten. Maybe it wouldn’t have worked at all, if she wasn’t a banshee, if she wasn’t uniquely connected to death.

Stiles was halfway convinced Peter was haunting his dreams from the afterlife. He never asked for anything, just complained and made observations and poked at Stiles’ insecurities. Was it some kind of punishment? He couldn’t bring Peter back so he was going to harass him forever more?
It was, oddly enough, hardly the least plausible thing to occur in his life if it turned out to be true, and
not just his guilt complex and the void and the taint the Nogitsune left inside of him ganging up to
mess with his head.

Should he be glad then, that this Peter was only in his head, and not a literal ghost following him
about in his waking life?

2/27/11

The Isaac Situation is more difficult than I had anticipated.

I have to wonder: would it have been easier if I didn’t remember, didn’t know the Isaac after his
dad? If this was something I’d just noticed and decided to investigate on my own whim or whatever,
instead of something I’m already deeply aware of that I now have to find tangible proof for?

I watch him now and I think of him with Derek, with Chris, and I can’t figure out if this situation is
heading towards something better or worse for him.

I want it to be something better. Obviously. Otherwise I wouldn’t bother trying – I can’t honestly
claim to be that much of a Good Samaritan.

Will legal procedures be better than an unexpected death – a vengeful murder?

It’s the stuff like this that really makes me feel like I’m playing God here. What gives me the right to
waltz in here and change things? Nothing, that’s what. It happened, and it’s what I’m doing, but it’s
not something I’m entitled to. There’s no higher power to say I’m doing the right thing, that I’m
justified.

Tomorrow I could step out the door and accidentally fuck everything up, and I’m pretty sure there’s
no third chance here.

There’s no way I can stay out of it, so I guess there’s only one thing I can do: don’t fuck it up.

2/27/11

There was a funeral on Monday, so Stiles was throwing a little bit of caution to the wind as he
headed out to the cemetery again after nightfall.

He wasn’t just going to try and catch a glimpse of Isaac – that’s just what made tonight a convenient
time to go. This time he was bringing some flowers as a bit of an apology to his mother for the
morbid and emotional rant he’d subjected her to upon his first visit in such a long time.

His dad still didn’t know that he’d been by once, let alone that he was visiting her again now. Stiles
didn’t want to seem like he was trying to guilt-trip his dad into visiting her grave; not only would it
be hypocritical but it would be cruel. There was no law that said grief or remembrance had to take
place in a cemetery – there were times Stiles would’ve happily never set foot in there again – and
there was no right way to live your life after a death.

If he never came, Stiles wouldn’t hold it against him.

Not anymore, anyway.

If he had the time or energy or skill, Stiles might have cleaned up the headstone a little; instead he
merely laid down the flowers and sat in contemplative silence for several minutes.

If he focused, he could hear the mechanic rumble of the digger. Stiles wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or worried. Late-night escapades before school days always wore down on you – Stiles was well-versed in that feeling with all of his lonesome investigations – but at least if he was at the cemetery then Isaac was away from his father.

“You’d know how to do this,” Stiles said, apropos of nothing, directing the thought skywards. “You were always good at that sort of thing.”

Getting to his feet Stiles meandered towards Isaac’s dig-site. He wouldn’t talk to him unless he was spotted, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t escort him home from the shadows.

**oOoOo**

The first thing Scott did when he saw Stiles on Monday morning was shove the book of legends into Stiles’ hands.

“I still have no idea what the point of that was, but I’ve finished it. Danny laughed when he saw me carrying it around and Lydia won’t stop giving me these long, searching looks – which is really weird and I think Jackson might want to kill me – and Allison was just regularly confused like I am. I’m not going to ask because I know you won’t explain, but dude? This is weird.”

Stiles laughed, fingers curled around the edges of the book.

“Scott, buddy, this whole year has been weird. Don’t tap out on me now.”

Scott watched him with no small amount of concern, but he certainly couldn’t refute Stiles’ statement. Even if it had been for seemingly different reasons, 2011 had been a doozy for both of them so far.

“I don’t think I can handle a whole year of weird,” Scott admitted.

Holding the book to his chest with one arm, Stiles patted Scott reassuringly on the shoulder.

“Don’t worry about it. I reckon things’ll calm down soon enough.”

Scott clearly didn’t believe him, but that was fine. Stiles was basically just standing there with his fingers crossed hoping for some peace and quiet, so the doubt wasn’t uncalled for.

Keeping under the radar and not drawing attention to Beacon Hills was theoretically an easy thing to do, but you never knew who might be passing by and what might catch their attention. If things went the way Stiles wanted them to, there shouldn’t be any major supernatural upsets this year.

But Stiles knew better than to expect things to go to plan.

**oOoOo**

Stiles knew that Allison had driven herself to school today – he’d seen her car outside – so he was more than a little surprised to find Argent’s shady black SUV in the parking lot after classes let out.

He was even more surprised when, after Allison went to investigate, she made a beeline for Stiles and said, clearly confused, “My dad wants to talk to you.”

Stiles nodded slowly, adjusted his bag, made a vaguely affirmative noise, and marched to his
potential doom.

After climbing into the passenger seat Stiles turned to take in the tense line of Chris’ body.

“Hey, wha-”

“Put your seatbelt on.”

Stiles startled at the order, but did as he was told, settling himself properly into the seat.

“Okay, we’re going for a drive then.”

Chris stayed silent as they pulled away from the school, Allison – the most confused of them all – watching from beside her own car.

While normally Stiles liked – often needed – to fill silences like this with inane chatter, he reined himself in. Christopher Argent was a man who was all business pretty much all the time, and Stiles wasn’t interested in purposely pissing him off. There were very few possible reasons for this little car ride, after all, and none of them were exactly sunshine and rainbows.

Eventually Chris pulled over by the edge of the road, on the outskirts of town. He killed the engine, but made no move towards unbuckling his seatbelt. Stiles followed his lead. They wouldn’t be leaving the car.

“Kate did always like to brag about her hunts,” Chris began, without prompting. “I always found that a little… off. We were saving lives when we hunted, but I never revelled or rejoiced in them the way she did. It wasn’t something you did because you enjoyed it, it was something you did because you were the only one who could.”

Stiles very carefully didn’t ask how many of the hunts he’d ever been on had been given to him by Gerard. That was a whole other pile of bad mojo that he didn’t want to get into right now, or possibly ever.

“I didn’t ask her straight up, obviously, I’m no rookie, but the way her face lit up when she talked about the fire… I haven’t seen her in a while – we haven’t spent long periods of time together much since Allison was born – but it’s hard to forget that particular way she talked about things. But this was excited, euphoric, even for her. She’s too smart to claim responsibility for it to my face, but she wasn’t afraid to compliment it, and bemoan the fact that there were any survivors at all. I couldn’t say anything – what do you say to something like that?”

“Humans died in that fire,” Stiles said, voice soft and low.

“I know,” Chris replied, even softer. Then he shook himself, and his tone hardened. “I could never condone that fire. It was murder, plain and simple, regardless of who was home. And I’ve always been wary of Kate’s quirks. I don’t like to think about how much of that is inherently her and how much she might’ve learnt under Dad’s tutelage – neither of those are pleasant thoughts. But even if no one else in this god damned family follows the code, I do. It’s a restriction as much as it is guidance, so we don’t go around leaving bodies in our wake wherever we go.”

Stiles had never talked much with Chris Argent before – never had a reason to – but he thought he could see why Isaac felt safe going overseas with him. He was a man of conviction and compassion just as surely as Gerard was sadistic and cruel.

“What does that mean for us then?”
Chris looked at him for the first time.

“I’ll try and keep Kate away from you. Victoria is a very by-the-book hunter. If I tell her I’m worried about Kate she’ll keep a close eye on her. All I can promise is to leave you alone provided you don’t draw undue attention to yourselves.”

“That’s all we need. Thank you.” Stiles paused, but continued with his next thought regardless.

“What about Allison?”

Chris’ gaze was steely, his voice sharp.

“Are you offering unsolicited parenting advice?”

Stiles held his hands up in front of him, sinking into the seat.

“I just think that it’s better she hears it from you rather than Kate. I’m not saying induct her into the lifestyle, just… You want her to be able to protect herself, but trust me when I say that it’s hard to protect anything when you don’t know what you’re supposed to be protecting it from.”

“What happens with Allison is none of your business.”

“I know,” Stiles acquiesced, then fell silent.

After a brief pause, Chris turned the key in the ignition and turned back towards town.
Erica and Derek were both in his room when Stiles made it home and he could barely bring himself to be surprised by it.

“Erica said you were kidnapped,” Derek said the second Stiles appeared in the bedroom doorway.

Incredulous, Stiles turned to Erica, who was a little flustered but entirely unrepentant.

“You basically were!” She protested, throwing her hands in the air.

This was honestly so far from anything he’d expected to happen today that for a moment Stiles was completely lost for words. He tossed his bag carelessly towards the corner of his room, sat down on his desk chair, and spun around to face his two visitors.

“If this is your reaction knowing that we’ve been talking to Argent then I’m not sure I’d want to know what would’ve happened if you hadn’t found out.”

“Abduction,” Erica said shamelessly. “I’d’ve called your dad. Can’t have adult hunters taking underage werewolves from school grounds all suspicious-like.”

“Well.” Stiles pursed his lips, suddenly infinitely thankful of his slip-up with Scott last week.

“Thanks for not getting my dad involved, I guess? And Derek! Surely you understood the situation well enough not to buy into Erica’s dramatics?”

If Stiles squinted, he’d almost say Derek looked embarrassed.

“Their family is untrustworthy. It was better to be safe than sorry.”

Burying his face in his hands, Stiles sighed in exasperation.

“Okay, whatever. But next time, remember this: no hunter – especially an Argent – would be stupid enough to pick up a target from a public area, in full view, after telling someone who they wanted to talk to. If I’d gone missing after that he would’ve been the very first suspect. True, I wasn’t expecting that to be how our conversation continued on, but it was a pretty harmless show he put on. Other than, you know, whatever weird rumours that’s gonna kick off at school.”

Running back over what he’d just said, Stiles groaned.

“Oh god not more rumours, the ones about Derek were bad enough.”

“Oh man, please let me be there when Lydia accuses you of being Argent’s toy-boy.”

Derek choked on air at Erica’s teasing proclamation. The feeling was mutual. While Stiles doubted it was a scenario Lydia would seriously consider, he wouldn’t put it past her to say something of the sort anyway – it sort of felt like some kind of petty revenge for all the confusion Stiles had (and still was) put her through when he’d told her he wasn’t obsessively in love with her anymore.

The whole supernatural secret keeping gig was doing a bang-up job of deepening the murky waters of his high school reputation.

“On a serious note,” Stiles continued, pushing aside Erica’s comment and hoping it would be quickly forgotten, “Argent basically just wanted to say that he believes us about Kate, because she’s such a psychopathic bitch that she isn’t even trying to pretend she’s not still stoked about the whole thing,
and that he’ll try and keep her attention away from us. As long as we don’t draw attention to
ourselves, then he’ll watch our backs.”

“Huh.” Erica frowned. “I was sort of expecting something more dramatic. More confrontational.”

“I think our initial meeting was dramatic enough.”

A pillow smacked Stiles in the face. Erica was highly unappreciative that he kept bringing up the fact
they’d had a meeting without her.

“Also, because we were trying to keep you on the DL, Argent doesn’t know that you’re supposed to
be part of his protection detail Erica. But that will probably still work in our favour. If you get
kidnapped – please try not to get kidnapped – he’ll most likely work under the assumption that you’re
human, so he’ll rescue you anyway. As a ‘known associate’ it’s not implausible for you to be
snatched as bait, and he knows now that a trivial detail like humanity won’t stop Kate from doing
whatever she pleases.”

“Play human and wait for rescue. Fine.”

“That’s only after. Please, for the love of my sanity, try as hard as you possibly can to avoid getting
kidnapped in the first place.” Stiles would beg if he had to, he wasn’t above it. He couldn’t exactly
appease her since he wasn’t sure specifically what part of all this she was annoyed about, but he
could still plead for her safety. “Actually, that goes for you too Derek. I know you’re an adult and all
but no getting kidnapped! Plotting a two-person rescue mission for you would be even harder than
plotting one for Erica, so please don’t put me in that position.”

There was a long moment where both of his packmates – tentative or otherwise; Derek was going to
forfeit his right to choose soon if he kept obediently coming every time one of them called for him –
stared at him in silence, the lingering sense of amusement dissipating in the wake of his plea. Erica’s
expression was achingly fond – Stiles had an inkling that she sometimes forgot that they were friends
again and whenever he said something that emphatically confirmed it she was caught a little off
guard – and Derek was… surprised?

Stiles blinked, just to make sure he was seeing it right, then narrowed his eyes, gazing back in
contemplation. It was a sad day indeed if Derek was genuinely surprised over someone being so
vehemently worried over his own well-being, even after the last two months. He’d known from
observation that it had taken Derek a long time to be properly comfortable with himself again, but he
hadn’t been able to see how deeply some things ran.

“And obviously I’ll do my best to avoid it too,” Stiles added to break the silence. “Been there, done
that, got the t-shirt. It’s not something I’m keen for a repeat of.”

The rapid downturn in their emotional state made Stiles seriously uncomfortable. He hadn’t expected
such a visceral reaction to that careless statement. Before either of them could form the words, Stiles
waved away his last statement and quickly steered them in a different direction.

“Anyway, as flattering as it is to know you were both worried, I’m sure we all have better things to
do than sitting around in my room doing nothing.”

At first Stiles didn’t think they would be willing to let it go. He had somewhat of a tendency to pick
stubborn friends, and both Erica and Derek radiated obvious displeasure at being dismissed so easily
after he dropped a bomb like that on them. The duo being suddenly and fiercely in sync meant good
things for their future as a pack, but terrible things for Stiles if they refused to leave. Thankfully,
since it wasn’t a time-sensitive issue they were content to leave it be and dig deeper at a later date.
Erica’s first full moon came and went with surprisingly little drama.

Other than having to sneak out of her house on a school night without drawing attention to herself, the night was far tamer than Stiles had expected it to be. Not that he had a lot of personal experience with new betas.

Derek was still the most experienced among them, and he took the lead with restraining Erica and coaxing her into a calmer mindset and explaining the concept of anchors in more depth.

The alpha instincts inside of Stiles had calmed somewhat now that he had a beta he could truly call his own, and he could feel the shift from the unsettled rage he’d felt at the last full moon spent only with Derek, to a more protective sort of violence, now that things were coming together.

Through a tiny bit of trial and error, they learned that as long as Derek didn’t do anything that seemed to challenge Stiles’ position while he was under the sway of the moon, things wouldn’t devolve to teeth and claws like the previous time.

Eventually Stiles wanted to get a handle on that, too, because as a human he had no qualms deferring judgment and decision-making to someone with more experience, but progress was progress and Stiles was happy with anything at the moment, when he felt like he hadn’t been able to move forward yet.

“I saw Scott with that book,” Danny said quietly on Wednesday morning when their paths crossed before class, both alone for once. “Does that mean you’re telling him about-” he made a vague hand gesture that could loosely be translated as ‘everything’ “-or were you just bored? Because watching his face while he read was certainly entertaining but I’d like a heads up about how vague or avoidant I have to be around him.”

“He saw you laughing at him,” Stiles informed him with a shameless grin. “I’ve thought about it for a while now and I’m going to tell him. Maybe on Friday? I’d like the weekend as a good buffer in case he thinks I’m a lunatic and he never wants to talk to me again.”

Shelving the light-hearted teasing for another day, Danny stared him down seriously and said, “As much as it may freak him out in the beginning, I don’t think he’s the kind of person who’d run out on you just for that.”

Stiles sighed. “I know. I’m just worried what might happen between the reaction and the acceptance or apology. He can be just as stubborn as I am; if he blows up in a bad way it might take a long time – or something drastic happening – to get past the aggressive WTF phase to accepting that this is just life now.”

“For what it’s worth, you have my help if you need it.”

Stiles looked up at Danny, who practically exuded calm and serenity like 99% of the time, and he thought about how Danny had always ignored or pretended not to notice all the supernatural shenanigans that started – for him – when Jackson was bitten, and ended when he disappeared after the last vestiges of the alpha pack finally left town, and the offer felt like a significant turning point. It was weighted in a way Danny would never know, because a few pieces of the puzzle were sliding into place for Stiles – the Danny who didn’t know becoming the Danny who feigned ignorance and preached an almost druidic level of non-interference.
Danny was offering to cross the line from observer to participant if Stiles asked it of him.

Stiles vowed then and there to never abuse the lifeline he’d just been handed.

“Thank you,” he said, meaning it in so many more ways than Danny would fathom.

Maybe something in Stiles’ voice caught Danny’s attention, because he smiled at him, and it was softer than any expression Stiles could remember Danny ever giving him, in this time or the other. He clasped a hand briefly on Stiles’ shoulder, then waved a silent farewell, merging into the sea of students now filling the corridor.

oOoOo

Stiles was pretty sure that the only reason Lydia hadn’t confronted him about that scene on Monday was because Allison had said something to her – either information to satiate her curiosity, or she’d asked her to leave it alone. If it wasn’t so likely to come across as weird, Stiles would have thanked her for it.

That being said, while no one had verbally questioned him about it, he felt eyes on him more often now. Even if Allison could potentially temper Lydia’s quest for answers, there was no doubt in his mind that openly meeting with her father like that had only made Allison wary and curious too.

There was no telling what Chris might have told her if she’d asked. He could say it had to do with the family business, which was technically true, but in Allison’s mind meant the sale of firearms, which Stiles shouldn’t have any part in. He could refuse to indulge her curiosity, but that was incriminating in and of itself, because that always meant you had something to hide.

Stiles honestly couldn’t decide if it would be easier or more difficult if Allison knew her family were actually hunters, just like he’d been having so much difficulty deciding whether it was better to come clean to Scott or keep him in the dark.

For Allison’s sake, he hoped Chris gave her a gentle Hunters 101 introduction, if only to save her from the potentially traumatic and definitely more hands on experience she’d get if Kate got there first. Whether or not it was good for Stiles’ livelihood and well-being wasn’t really the point in that equation – it was Allison’s mental well-being and her sense of familial trust that would be put to the test.

If she ended up with all the facts and decided he needed to be put down? Well, she might just be the one person Stiles thought deserved the chance to be his judge, jury and executioner. A life for a life, the only sure-fire way to be rid of the deep guilt he’d never fully be able to shake. But, when she wasn’t mad with grief and rage, Allison was a reasonable and level-headed person, and Stiles was fairly certain it wouldn’t come down to that.

She deserved to know about her family legacy. Stiles could only hope Chris let her.

oOoOo

Other than Erica being a bit more subdued than normal in the couple of days following the full moon, everything seemed to be business as usual insofar as school was concerned.

That is, until lacrosse practice on Thursday.

Stiles was in the stands again, because Coach still hadn’t told him to get lost and it was the easiest way to keep an eye on Isaac. No one paid him any attention anymore, if they ever had in the first place. Even Scott had stopped bothering to wave whenever he saw him there, accepting without
explanation that this was just a thing Stiles was doing at the moment and it wasn’t worth getting worked up over every single time.

He’d only just sat down, really. The team were just launching into warm-up drills. Nothing out of the ordinary.

But then Greenburg knocked into Isaac – more a bump than a shoulder-charge, but still with some force behind it – and Isaac just crumpled. He hit the ground with a fierce burst of new-old pain that momentarily had Stiles’ head spinning – that’s what he got for being hyper-focused on a single person – and didn’t get back up.

It was a truly inopportune combination of injury, exhaustion and exertion – one extra stimulant had sent him over the edge.

Stiles found himself on the field almost before he’d even made the decision to move, body reacting without permission but thankfully keeping to human – if unusual for Stiles himself – speeds.

The players were all stunned into stillness, staring in wide-eyed confusion at Isaac’s semi-conscious form and doing absolutely nothing that might be considered even halfway helpful other than, Stiles supposed, not crowding him.

Finstock only seemed to snap out of his own shock when Stiles charged by him to crouch at Isaac’s side. He blew his whistle sharply several times and yelled for the players to get back to practice – albeit at a new distance for the time being – and then stared somewhat incredulously at the two teens on the ground.

“Bilinski!” he cried, taking a step closer but obviously unsure what to do. “What are you doing here?”

Stiles didn’t even spare the energy to roll his eyes at Coach’s constant mangling of his name. He rolled Isaac onto his back with gentle hands and guided him into a seated position, resting a hand on the back of his neck, drawing away some of his pain to help him clear his head.

When Isaac opened his eyes he stared up at Stiles in shocked confusion.

“I’ll look after Isaac, okay Coach?”

“If.” Finstock floundered for a moment, but then nodded sharply. “Right. Go to the nurse’s office Lahey. Don’t come back until you can walk without falling over.”

In Coach speak that meant something along the lines of ‘get some rest.’

“How can you stand?” Stiles asked quietly, his words for Isaac’s ears only now as Coach Finstock wandered away. “We don’t have to go see the nurse, but getting off the field’s probably a good idea.”

He waited until Isaac nodded slowly, not wanting to startle him. Telegraphing his movements, Stiles carefully pulled one of Isaac’s arms over his shoulders, making sure to keep in contact with him the entire time so as not to disrupt the pain drain. Then he wrapped his other arm around Isaac’s waist, and waited for the other teen to decide when to stand. There was no need to rush.

Eventually they made it to the boys’ locker room, where Stiles sat them both down on a bench. No one had been in the stands other than him today, and they had been closer, but the locker room offered more privacy.
“You quit the team,” Isaac said softly, his first words to Stiles during the entire exchange. “Why are you helping me?” Even though there was an underlying bitterness to his tone, he didn’t shrug off the hand Stiles still had resting against his lower back. “And why don’t I hurt?” The last question was almost a whisper, as though he was reluctant to admit to being in pain in the first place, like Stiles might immediately launch into an interrogation about its source.

“I can help whoever I want,” Stiles told him, making sure to keep his tone something closer to neutral rather than the blunt sarcasm or the myriad of other harsher tones he was used to using around the old Isaac. “And… would you believe me if I said magic?”

Revealing the supernatural to Isaac wasn’t really in his game-plan, but like this it was just a joke. Sometimes it was hard to remember that people joked about that sort of thing all the time and no one ever took them seriously; not everything that came out of their mouths had to be a reveal risk.

Isaac scoffed, then cringed like he wished he’d held back the urge.

“How ridiculous Stilinski,” he muttered, and then, even quieter, “Maybe I have a concussion? Would that numb pain?”

It was shit like that that meant, even though Isaac had been a total asshole, Stiles still sort of wanted to wrap him up in a blanket and protect him from the world.

But only on rare occasions. And he would never admit it out loud to anyone. Especially not Isaac.

With great reluctance, Stiles took his hand back. There was no point in letting Isaac get worked up about more serious injuries that he definitely didn’t have. That would only lead to a self-treatment disaster, because no way would his dad be okay with Isaac going to get checked out at the hospital.

He could tell the moment the renewed pain registered with Isaac, because his entire body suddenly tensed up. Stiles hadn’t even realised he wasn’t tense until suddenly he was again. He knew from experience that having too much pain taken from you could leave you a bit light-headed or loopy in the moment, but Isaac hadn’t even been in that much pain to begin with. Maybe he’d been too stuck on the mystery of his disappearing pain to be on the defensive?

Stiles brushed his hands along his legs, brushing off invisible dirt, before getting to his feet.

“You should really get some rest. I guarantee Coach doesn’t expect you back today. Take a nap somewhere, I don’t know.”

Isaac stared at him, suspicious now, but Stiles just shrugged off the accusatory look.

“Anyway, I’m heading off now. See you ‘round, Isaac.”

Without waiting for a response, Stiles headed back out to the bleachers to grab his bag.

Well, at least he’d talked to Isaac now, and the guy hadn’t run screaming in the opposite direction. That was progress he hadn’t anticipated making today. And while it hadn’t exactly given him anything useful to give to his dad, it did mean Isaac might not be entirely opposed to his presence the next time they interacted.

Baby steps.

oOoOo

Stiles hadn’t asked Erica to come, but he had invited Scott over in front of her, so he was more
resigned than surprised to find her waiting for them at Stiles’ place after school on Friday. If she was going to come anyway she could’ve just hitched a ride instead of making a point to beat them home.

Scott was adorably confused when he climbed out of the jeep to see Erica sitting on the front porch, and he didn’t get any less so when, instead of sending her away, Stiles simply ushered her into the house once he unlocked the door.

His soft “what?” was largely ignored as Erica made herself at home in the lounge and Stiles reached back to tug Scott into the house.

“I thought we were hanging out today,” Scott said, sitting when Stiles pushed at his shoulder but not looking overly pleased about it.

“Technically, yes,” Stiles allowed, sitting on the couch next to Erica. He didn’t bat an eye when Erica immediately put her feet in his lap in what was fast becoming her favourite lounging position. “But maybe not for the reason you were imagining.”

“Do you mean…” Scott’s expression shifted from hurt and confusion to suspicion.

“Yes. I mean I’m going to tell you what’s been going on and why I made you read that book.”

“And Erica is here why?”

Stiles sent a teasing glare her way before answering Scott. “Because she’s a busybody, but also because this concerns her as well and she likes being involved.”

“And Mr Argent?”

“Well…” Stiles stretched the word out excessively long, gesturing vaguely. “He’s peripherally involved in all of this, but he’s not the main issue, so don’t worry too much about it.”

“Worry? Is it something I’m supposed to be worried about?”

“I’d rather you weren’t, but that’s really up to you.” Stiles clasped his hands and rested them atop Erica’s crossed ankles. “Now, for starters, what did you think of that book?”

“Uh… That there are a lot more local legends than I thought there would be? I still don’t get why you wanted me to read that.”

“We’ll get to that. Did you think about what it might mean if they were real?”

Scott tilted his head, watching Stiles as Stiles watched him.

“That we would be kind of screwed if that many different things were happening in Beacon Hills? I don’t know, Stiles! It’s not like I can just turn off my logical brain and pretend wendigo and werewolves are real.”

Erica hummed. Stiles couldn’t really explain why that set him on edge, but there was just something scheming about the sound.

“And what if I did this?” she asked, totally carefree, and Stiles knew what she was about to do the instant before she did it but there was nothing he could do to stop her.

He had gone for the show-not-tell route when he told her about werewolves, maybe turnabout was fair play.
Scott jumped violently and crashed out of the armchair at the sight of Erica’s beta shift. She ran a clawed hand across Stiles’ head and let out a laugh warped by her fangs before dropping the shift.

“What the fuck was that?!” Scott whisper-shouted from the floor, his voice shaky and his heart jack-rabbiting in his chest. Stiles really hoped this wasn’t going to set off an asthma attack – the guilt would be relentless.

“That was Erica being rude, but it was also why I asked you to think about that lore as though it were real.”

Even as he said the words though he knew they were meaningless to Scott. This was no longer the time for explanation, but for de-escalation.

Pushing Erica’s feet off his lap Stiles crouched on the floor, bringing himself eye-level with Scott without moving forward to touch him.

“Erica’s not going to hurt you, and neither am I. I just need you to breathe now, okay Scotty? Breathe in and out.”

Scott’s eyes were wild and panicked, but he nodded shakily, and he didn’t seem to be headed towards hyperventilation. That was a plus.

Stiles slowly coaxed him back into a semblance of calm, both of them on the floor, Stiles talking in a low murmur, mostly nonsense, and not drawing excess attention to Erica.

“What was that?” Scott asked again when his heartbeat was nearing its normal rate, his tone feeling like the calm before the storm.

Stiles sat fully on the ground, resting back against the couch.

“Like I said before, this has to do with the book. So, Scotty, what do you think that was?”

Coming to conclusions on his own rather than being spoon-fed information might’ve been more Stiles’ style, but there was no harm in trying it out.

Scott swallowed nervously. Stiles noted that his gaze refused to settle near Erica.

“If I was just going from the book?”

Stiles nodded.

“Then… I’d say some sort of shifter.”


Scott looked at him like he was crazy.

“I thought werewolves were more of a curse thing. You know, full moon? I didn’t think they were self-aware shifters.”

“Are the intricate details really the issue here Scott, or are you just nit-picking to stall and hope I say I was just pranking you?”

“… Both?”

Catching Scott’s gaze Stiles inhaled deeply and readied himself for an uphill battle.
“Listen, Scotty, this is me telling you what you wanted to know, okay? Maybe the evasion and the 
lack of information was putting a strain on our relationship, but I think it was probably better for you 
to not know or understand. But that’s me taking away your right to choose, and if I thought you were 
a significant safety risk then yeah, that’d be justified, but I just didn’t want to freak you out and get 
you tangled up in things you didn’t need to know, and that’s not fair.”

Scott buried his face in his hands, muffling an odd distraught squeak and a low murmur of, “This 
can’t be real.”

Stiles let him have his moment. Better he freak out here than somewhere else.

When Scott came back to himself his eyes were sharp again but his emotional output was all over the 
show.

“You said Mr Argent was involved in this? Please don’t tell me he’s supposed to be a werewolf too.”

Stiles laughed a dark laugh, recalling the fate of Allison’s mother once-upon-a-never.

“Not quite. The Argent family are a notorious hunting family, and I’m sure you know I’m not talking 
about game hunters.”

“…werewolf hunters?”

“Hunters of all things supernatural, really, but in this case yeah, werewolf hunters.”

Scott fell silent again, digesting the new information, and when he spoke again it was on an entirely 
unexpected tangent.

“And you just willingly got into his car with him and drove off who knows where?”

Erica dropped her phone in surprise. Stiles rested his hand against his forehead in despair.

“God, you’re just as bad as Erica.”

“If we’re agreeing on something then you know it was a shit idea Stiles,” Erica interjected coolly 
from the couch.

“Oh come on, we’ve already had this talk.”

“McCall hasn’t.”

“And we don’t need to have it again.”

“I think we should have it as many times as it takes until you quit doing reckless shit without back-
up.”

Off to the side, momentarily forgotten by the two werewolves, Scott burst into a helpless fit of 
giggles.

Stunned, Erica and Stiles stared at each other, then both turned to look at Scott.

“S-Sorry,” Scott gasped, sounding both apologetic and scared and amused all at once. “I’d never 
have imagined werewolves having petty arguments.”

“You know what?” Erica said, going back to her phone. “I don’t even want to know what you 
imagined a werewolf to be like on their human days, I’ll probably just be insulted.”
“Probably for the best,” Stiles agreed.

When Scott got his laughter under control he finally got up off the floor and sat back down in the armchair, Stiles following suit.

“I don’t know what to do with any of this,” he said, twiddling his thumbs nervously.

“You don’t have to do anything,” Stiles assured him. “I had information that I thought you deserved to know, and now you know it. That’s all. Just, don’t talk about it to anyone other than us or Danny, okay? Crazy Kate’s in town and we don’t need any gossip getting back to her.”

“Crazy Kate?”

“A story for another time, maybe. Do you still wanna hang out?”

Scott shook his head slowly. “I think I’m just gonna… head home. This is kind of… a lot.”

“Yeah, no kidding.”

Stiles rose with him and walked Scott to the door.

When he was gone Stiles flopped back onto the couch.

“That could’ve gone worse.”
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

In which there is an unexpected bookstore excursion, a heart-to-heart, and the author continues to wish she’d sorted out all this Isaac stuff before it was time to write it.

“I’m really worried about Isaac,” Stiles murmured helplessly over breakfast on Saturday morning.

Stiles and his dad were eating breakfast together, as they often did in the weekend whenever his dad wasn’t on the night shift – in which case he was usually still asleep. In a rare fit of stress-baking Stiles had even made pancakes – with fruit salad on the side and a veto on maple syrup for his dad – without any specific ulterior motives.

Learning to let himself lean on his slowly expanding support network was difficult, but, baby steps, right?

The clink and scrape of cutlery against plates paused. John put his knife and fork down and studied the exhausted slump of his son’s shoulders and the desperation that sometimes momentarily flickered across his face.

“Has something happened?”

Stiles poked listlessly at his own pancake and shrugged.

“Not, like, a definitive something. Isaac collapsed during practice on Thursday. It was unexpected, but I think in the end it was just a really bad day, and Greenburg picked a bad time to decide that shoulder-checking someone was easier than walking around them. He didn’t say anything about it, but it hurts to watch, you know?”

John nodded. Being a cop – especially being the Sheriff – wasn’t all sunshine and roses, and Stiles had seen enough from the side-lines to know that his dad would definitely empathise with him. It wasn’t that he was looking for validation, he just wanted someone to listen, and his dad was the only person who knew what he was trying to do.

“So, what are your plans?”

“I don’t know.” Stiles shoved his plate away and pillowed his head on his arms on the table. “I just… I think it’ll take way too long to get him to trust me sincerely and I want him away from Coach Lahey right now. Except, you know, kidnapping is illegal, and if I try and do anything to him he’ll just take it out on Isaac which is entirely counterproductive, and I keep going around and around in circles in my head about it but I’m not getting anywhere.”

“You really are seriously worried about this kid.”

Stiles nodded, although it wasn’t really a question.

“I almost want to ask what happened to spark this… protective streak, but something tells me I won’t get a straight answer, if I get an answer at all. Stiles, you know I’m on your side with this, but I also have to work within the confines of the law. Bending or breaking the rules might be quicker, but it’ll
only work against you in the long run.”

“I know,” Stiles sighed into his arms, frustrated. He didn’t want to ask his dad to actively break the law, especially since he’d have his hands full with legal dilemmas the moment a hostile supernatural being stepped foot in town. He just didn’t know what he was doing.

Stiles respected the law and all that it stood for, but sometimes it just didn’t work for him. Like that time they stole a police vehicle and abducted Jackson. That didn’t mean he couldn’t still draw lines in the sand about who he was willing to drag into his schemes and who would be best served far away from them.

“How much fabricated testimony is too much fabricated testimony?” he mumbled irritably into his sleeve.

“Any, kiddo. Otherwise we wouldn’t bother calling it fabricated,” his dad chided.

“Yeah,” Stiles said, begrudgingly acknowledging that fact with a flippant wave of his hand. “But I don’t mean fabricated like lies, necessarily. More like… time-scrambling testimonies?”

“Do I want to know?”

“It’s like… Say someone noticed something was off, but didn’t act on it. Then something does happen, they don’t necessarily notice it this time, but they report it anyway. They apply their old concerns to the new situation. It’s not a lie, it’s just not the entire truth either.”

“That’s a lie of omission,” John pointed out almost reflexively. “It’d probably be for the best if I don’t know too much about whatever it is you’re planning. Just remember, the stronger the case the better.”

“I know. Thanks dad.”

It was a little bit insulting and also a bit flattering to think that his father assumed he already had some nefarious plot ready to be put in motion, but the unfortunate truth was that, save for maybe blackmailing Jackson somehow, he had absolutely nothing. And damn did the admission rankle him.

Because Stiles was trying to be a good friend and had entered a self-imposed period of radio silence to give Scott space to digest and consider everything he’d learned less than twenty-four hours ago, he didn’t really have a lot going for him as far as the weekend was concerned.

Yes, there were other people he could hang out with.

Kind of.

Two at a stretch.

Maybe Danny if he asked real politely.

But as much as his wolf seemed to revel in how much time he had been spending with Erica, both in and out of school, sometimes a guy needed a break. It was just unfortunate that his usual go-to for filling time – research, of some sort or another – was exactly what he was trying to avoid.

If breakfast had told him anything – other than a reminder to keep talk of semi or dubiously legal actions to a minimum – it was that he needed to get out of his head, out of the house. Stewing on his
own with no new incoming information and at a loss for how to proceed would only mess him up further, and he didn’t need the emotional downward spiral that would likely accompany getting too worked up about it.

That was how he ended up in town, hoping a little window shopping might help him switch gears.

But with shops, as always, came other shoppers. And for the most part, that was fine; ordinary people, strangers, going about their day. But even when Stiles was looking for a distraction, he was always on the look-out for a handful of particular scents that would be a cause for alarm.

Kate Argent really was shameless, wandering about town without a care in the world draped in her ever-present cloak of gunpowder and wolfsbane.

Thankfully she didn’t seem to be following him – simply another person going about their own life – but Stiles was more than half-convinced that it was only because she hadn’t yet spotted him. He was unfortunately well-versed in just how much of a hands-on approach to hunting Kate liked to take, and she and Gerard had never shied away from roughing up a perfectly human Stiles; if she had even the faintest inkling of suspicion about him, staying far, far away from her was in his best interest. Even a seemingly genial interrogation of one of her niece’s acquaintances was a scenario he’d really rather avoid, at least without neutral buffers.

Trying to guess her trajectory, Stiles ditched the main street, turned a few corners, and ducked into an old second-hand bookshop a couple of blocks over.

The bookshop was an older, slightly claustrophobic place – not a store designed to appeal to bored youth. You couldn’t see the counter from the doorway, hidden away as it was behind a multitude of slightly mismatched bookcases and shelving, the aisles between which always felt just a tiny bit too narrow. Something about the place made Stiles feel like he’d be totally unsurprised to find some ancient or priceless tome sitting next to a battered copy of one of Shakespeare’s plays.

Come to think of it, although Stiles had definitely been there a few times before, he wasn’t sure he’d ever ventured inside before werewolves became a part of his day-to-day existence. He had definitely gone poking around for anything that might resemble factual magic books, or for anything that might help add to the Argents’ bestiary. It had been hard to know what to look for when Deaton wouldn’t let Stiles look at any of his books for reference.

For almost a minute Stiles simply stood at the front of the store, breathing in the smell of old books as though he was trying to drown out the lingering wolfsbane residue in his sinuses. It was a calming scent that reminded him of research, of being focused. His heartbeat slowed from its nervous uptick after the Kate Encounter.

“I know I said no research,” Stiles muttered to himself when he felt settled again. “But since I’m here, I might as well give it the old college try.”

Regardless of whether or not he found anything of worth, a day spent digging through a bookstore was better than a day spent moping and worrying about Isaac and Scott.

At least, that was the plan.

You’d think that at this point in his life Stiles would really be more aware of the fact that his plans rarely came to fruition in their intended manner. Usually that was because the more people were involved the harder it was to keep everyone on track, but sometimes it was also his own fault.

Today he blamed the books.
When he initially decided to stick around, he had chosen a random section of shelving near the door to start nosing about in. Somewhere along the line Stiles and his ADHD had perfected a sort of hyper-focused distraction state – which often led to hours on Wikipedia jumping from one entry to another without rhyme or reason instead of researching whatever topic he was supposed to be writing an essay about – and he fell into it again here, pulling books from the shelves at random, flicking through them, occasionally lingering.

He was somewhere much closer to the back of the store than the front when he distantly heard the door open again – possibly for the first time since his arrival; it didn’t seem like it had a large customer base. His only reaction to that was to absently scent the air for wolfsbane, and, not finding any, he turned back to the book currently in his hands. Saying he was reading it was an exaggeration – it was in Latin – but it was heavily illustrated and had piqued his interest as a possible resource if he could find anyone willing to read it for him (or if he wanted to spend hours crying over google translate).

A startled intake of breath off to his left shook him from his page-turning. Stiles was mostly certain that apart from the owner, the only people in the store were Stiles and the newcomer, so if they were surprised about seeing him then maybe he should’ve been paying more attention.

“Oh,” Stiles said, first in his head and then out loud, when he straightened up and recognised who was staring at him. “Hey Isaac.”

“…Stilinski.”

Isaac schooled his expression impressively quickly once he realised he had Stiles’ attention. He had a pretty good poker face but, unfortunately for Isaac, Stiles had a lot more data to work from than just his facial expression.

Optimistically, Stiles wanted to say that Isaac was more surprised by this chance encounter than panicked, but after their little talk in the locker room it could honestly go either way, depending on what Isaac was doing here and how he’d interpreted Stiles’ actions back then.

“Come to find some renaissance era literature?” Stiles asked lightly, gesturing widely with the hand still holding the book. Books with near indecipherable titles and sun-faded covers surrounded them.

Isaac gave him a long, searching look, then shrugged. “Sure, something like that.”

In other words, not at all.

Stiles could just be projecting, but he imagined maybe Isaac had come to this store for the same reason Stiles had made his own unplanned trip: avoidance. School and work both kept Isaac out of the house and away from his father, but the rest of the time…

Well. Pushing the issue would be counter-productive. Stiles could let him pretend he’d come here for the books instead of for sanctuary.

“I didn’t know you could read Latin,” Isaac said eventually. His tone was caught somewhere between tentative, curious, and mocking.

Stiles honestly never thought he’d miss Isaac being such a sarcastic little shit until he had to hear all the hesitation in his words all over again.

“I can’t,” Stiles admitted gamely. He glanced over at Isaac, but he had his back to him, running his fingers idly along the spines of the books in front of him. “At least, not enough to read something like this.”
“What’s the point then?”

“Excuse me, are you saying I can’t handle a little hard work?”

“Well.” Isaac turned slightly towards him, a facsimile of a smirk ghosting across his face. “You did quit the team without ever making it off the bench.”

Stiles clutched dramatically at his chest with his free hand, feigning shock, until Isaac rolled his eyes and turned away again.

“Touché,” Stiles muttered. He wasn’t particularly friendly with anyone on the lacrosse team other than Scott and Danny, and he hadn’t spared much thought to what his sudden departure from the team might look like to everyone else. God, if Jackson wasn’t so pissed right now over Lydia not dedicating all of her attention to him, he might actually have been pretty smug about – in his mind – running off some of the team’s deadweight. “Still, brains over brawn.”

“Says the guy who just admitted his Latin was useless.”

“Rude.” Isaac wasn’t exactly wrong though. Stiles had never really had time to try and learn Latin; the extent of his knowledge was less comprehension based and more an amalgamation of keywords he’d memorised to help locate potentially useful passages for someone else – often Lydia – to translate.

They talked for a while, still the only customers in the store, trading barbs and insults with increasing fluidity. They must have been an odd spectacle for the owner, but neither of them seemed to really care, passing the time wandering the aisles with their backs to each other and their focus divided.

Stiles didn’t end up buying the book, and Isaac laughed like it was an admission of his incompetence.

It wasn’t until he was halfway home that Stiles realised the significance of what had just happened. Running into Isaac had been a total coincidence, but not only had Isaac stayed put instead of darting away again, but he’d initiated and participated in a conversation with Stiles without being prompted.

That might not seem ground-breaking to anyone else, but considering they’d almost never spoken to each other before Thursday, and Isaac’s understandable reticence to let people too close, it was like some sort of miracle.

Maybe that store was more of a safe place for Isaac than he’d thought? Or maybe the school just made him uncomfortable? There were lots of prying eyes and ears, and his dad used to work there, so maybe it just held a lot of bad connotations. It would be best not to jump to any conclusions or make any assumptions off of less than a handful of interactions, but that wasn’t what was important here.

If Isaac was at least semi-willing to be around him, maybe it wouldn’t be as difficult as he’d anticipated?

oOoOo

Stiles sat in the entrance to the train depot and stared up at the dark evening sky.

He’d bought take-out for Derek and himself on the way over, because he was feeling generous and melancholy and motivated and exhausted all at once, and he’d wanted company and also wasn’t entirely convinced that Derek wasn’t just living off the land somehow.
Derek had been confused and appreciative, and hadn’t told Stiles to get lost, so he’d made himself at home.

Now though, with the food gone and the night settling in, there were questions drifting about the edges of Stiles’ mind, and his mouth didn’t seem interested in keeping those thoughts to himself.

“Do you ever think about your family?” he asked softly. “Other than in a rage and grief sort of way?”

It was a topic Stiles had always been idly curious about, but there had never been a good time to ask. Now probably wasn’t a good time either. He wouldn’t mind – wouldn’t even be surprised – if Derek shut down the conversation before it could begin.

Enough time had passed that Stiles was willing to pretend he’d never opened his mouth in the first place when Derek finally spoke.

“It’s… hard not to fixate on what was lost. On missed opportunities.”

It wasn’t really an answer one way or another, but it was probably more truthful for it.

“The hospital is always the first thing that comes to mind when I think about my mom,” Stiles continued, taking the reins of the conversation. “And honestly? It was ages before I could face it, could stop wishing I could just forget everything that had happened. To be able to remember the hospital and then move past it. To say yeah, that was a pretty shitty time, but there was some pretty great stuff before all that. I’m not sure if my dad’s there yet, but that’s fine too. Everyone’s different.”

“I don’t—”

“I don’t think Peter was ever going to get to that point.” Not without dying to help clear his head. “Leaving him alone here didn’t help, but I don’t think staying would’ve done much good either. Physically he might’ve healed up faster, maybe woken up sooner, but I think it would’ve taken something truly monumental to uproot his grief-fuelled anger.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Derek’s voice wavered just a little as he asked, a show of vulnerability that tugged at Stiles’ heartstrings.

That man needed a therapist so badly, but Stiles was what he had, and so he’d do his best.

“Because I think you need someone to tell you that it’s okay to still feel all that grief and anger and sadness. That there’s no schedule or timeframe for overcoming tragic events, and everyone heals at their own pace. But also, you maybe needed a reminder that their deaths aren’t the only legacy they left for you. One day, in your own time, in your own way, you’ll be able to remember the good things without immediately being crushed by matters of life and death.”

Stiles tracked the path of a cloud drifting across the moon, giving Derek the chance to consider whether he wanted to continue Stiles’ spontaneous makeshift grief counselling or move away from it.

“… My pack was my family,” Derek said slowly. “In the literal sense. Every single pack member was one of my relatives. After the… After, I didn’t think I’d be able to stand reaching out to another pack for guidance or whatever. Thankfully, Laura felt the same way, so it was just the two of us against the world. When I was a teenager I honestly didn’t think I’d ever want to join another pack. Now though… I might finally be starting to understand that joining a new pack doesn’t mean I’m replacing my old one. It just means I’m moving forward.”

Stiles spun around to face Derek, because this felt like a discussion that should probably be had face
“Listen. I know I’ve been kinda vocal about that issue, or whatever, but I hope you know that it always has been and always will be completely your decision. It’s an open invitation, and neither the offer nor my friendship are conditional. You can go your own way and I won’t be offended. Worried, I guess, but not upset.”

“I know,” Derek said. He sounded a little incredulous but he was smiling, just a bit, as though they hadn’t just been having a heavy chat about grief and self-healing.

“Derek?”

“Not every alpha out there is a good or even kind alpha. You hear stories from time to time. But I know you’re not like that. If you were you’d probably have just stayed with Peter and we wouldn’t even be talking now. But you’re very adamant about people having choices and that their opinions are important.”

“Consent is sexy,” Stiles said reflexively.

“Right. You don’t pressure me about deciding and you don’t care about pack hierarchy. If I was going to start making new connections like that, you’re not a half-bad person to start with.”

Stiles blinked tears out of his eyes and sent Derek a slightly wobbly smile.

Hearing Derek being emotionally vulnerable and open, even reluctantly or only a little, was somewhat of a sucker-punch to the gut, because it was so different. Derek – his Derek, the old Derek – had only really just reached the point where he was sometimes openly positive instead of just openly negative before Stiles, well, ended up back before it all.

Part of him hated that he’d never get to see that Derek heal, grow into himself, while another part rejoiced that he could help this Derek more, sooner.

Finally, Stiles took a deep breath and said, “You’ve got all the time in the world to figure out what’s right for you.”

Stiles got home fairly late that night, but all up it had been a pretty good day, and anyway, sleep was for the weak.

OoOoOo

On Sunday Stiles holed up in his room, turned his phone off, and scoured his memory, trying to remember anything he could about the small amount of information Cora had given them about her life before being snatched by the Alpha Pack.

Her being in Beacon Hills wouldn’t make her any safer than she would be anywhere else – she’d probably be in more danger – but if he could find her and reach out and that’s what she decided to do, well, Derek deserved that chance, and so did Cora.

OoOoOo

Stiles ended up at school way earlier than he needed to be, anxious about Scott’s reaction now that he’d had the weekend to mull it all over.

He sat on the hood of his jeep, flicking restlessly through a textbook, and watched the students arrive and the parking lot fill up around him.
Surprisingly enough it wasn’t Scott or Erica that found him first, but Allison, who sidled up beside his jeep with her Disney Princess dimples and a sheepish expression on her face.

The sum of their interactions thus far still barely equalled the introduction paragraph of an essay, but it wasn’t exactly from lack of effort on her part. Stiles just couldn’t seem to stop feeling conflicted around her long enough to engage her. But, since they hadn’t spoken since Chris whisked him away from school grounds, his curiosity was temporarily winning out over his flight response. It seemed as good a time as any to hear whatever she wanted to say.

“Good morning Stiles.”

“Morning. What can I do for you on this fine…ish day, Allison?”

Her smile brightened when Stiles actually allowed himself to do more than nod or mumble a few words.

“It’s nothing bad, really, I just… My dad didn’t do anything weird when you talked, did he? Ask strange questions? He’s very protective and he can be sort of intense sometimes, and I don’t know why he would single you out when there are people I talk about way more – no offence – but it seems like he did?”

Stiles laughed a little, choking back the bitterness that threatened to rise with every second he spent with her. Allison really was precious, and fierce, and a good person even though Stiles had been kinda shitty to her so far. She of all people hadn’t deserved to have had her life cut violently short.

“I’m not offended,” he assured. “It didn’t technically have anything to do with you.” Briefly he wondered how much he could get away with saying without accidentally pissing Chris off.

“So it wasn’t about me to begin with but you did talk about me,” she deduced.

Stiles shrugged. Chris could get pissy all he wanted but Allison at least deserved to know that there was something she didn’t know, even if he wasn’t allowed to go into the details.

“Correct. It’s about your family history. I think he should tell you, but I promised to respect his parental authority to decide whether and when to talk to you about it, so I’m not allowed to say anything else.” Leaving it at that was dangerous though, so he added, “Keep this between you and your dad though, yeah? You can bug him about it all you want, he’ll only get annoyed at me, but don’t go asking anyone else, promise?”

Allison had her thinking face on, her eyebrows furrowed, but she nodded at his request. Maybe she was taking this more seriously than she normally would because it was the first time Stiles had ever said so many words to her in one go.

“I’ll trust him to tell me.”

“At least that makes one of us,” Stiles muttered as he watched her head inside.
I only started writing this chapter yesterday, which is a good speed for me, but also terrible because I waited a whole month before even trying to start the next chapter. But then again, no one ever accused me of being a prompt updater.

After his unexpected – and perhaps ill-advised, if Chris decided to take it the wrong way – parking lot chat with Allison, Stiles didn’t end up having time to try and talk to Scott without risking being late to first period. And since he was trying to maintain a good attendance record when he could to give himself some wiggle room with the school for supernatural incidents that wasn’t something he could really justify.

Scott didn’t share Stiles’ first class of the day, but they did share second period, and while that wasn’t anything even close to enough time to talk, it was perfect for trying to get a read on the situation.

Throughout class, Stiles kept one ear on the teacher, and otherwise spent most of his attention watching Scott out of the corner of his eye. As far as his senses could tell, Scott seemed to be in a relatively stable state of mind – heartbeat normal and no particularly acrid or fluctuating emotional tells – but he kept staring at Stiles and then glancing away suddenly as though he hadn’t realised he was doing it and didn’t want anyone to notice.

Well, subtlety never had been Scott’s best skill. For anyone trying to get a read on him? That was good. If he was trying to keep a secret or employ his poker face? Terrible.

On the unending scale of potential reactions, it seemed fairly tame and more positive than negative; he wasn’t outright ignoring or avoiding him, and those had also been two completely plausible outcomes to springing werewolves on a Scott McCall who wasn’t himself already a part of the supernatural world.

If that was the case, then Stiles was content to let Scott take the wheel this time around. There was no need to push the issue until Scott was prepared to talk about it

Crossing paths in the hallway, Stiles offered Isaac a small wave in greeting. Isaac didn’t return it, but he did dip his head slightly in acknowledgement, even if he did look a little bewildered while doing so.

Perhaps he’d likened their bookstore hangout to something of a dream?

It was still progress.

While Scott may have deemed lunchtime, and the cafeteria in particular, too risky, he had zero qualms about following Stiles back to his jeep after school instead of heading to his own bike.

Obviously this could only mean one thing: Scott was ready to talk it out.
“Do you want to talk and drive, or is it cool if we just stay here?”

Scott fumbled with the door-handle and glanced at Stiles across the roof of the jeep.

“Is it… safe? To talk about it here?”

Precious Scott, so naïve, so nervous.

“Dude it’s fine, chill out. Only other weres can eavesdrop unless you start shouting or something. Get in and we’ll talk.”

Nodding numbly, Scott obeyed.

When they were both seated Stiles locked the doors – no surprise passengers today thanks – and turned towards Scott.

“So, where do you want to start?”

Scott still wouldn’t meet his gaze for extended periods of time, but he’d settle into normalcy again eventually.

“Are you sure this is safe?”

Stiles rolled his eyes. “I can drive around if that’d make you feel better, but if you freak out on me again we might crash, and then what?”

The thought of accidentally instigating a traffic accident was enough of a deterrent for Scott; he backed down without another word.

“Friday wasn’t some weird fever dream, was it?”

Stiles hated to crush that hopeful, questioning lilt, but…

“What do you think, Scotty?”

Scott slumped in the passenger seat with a slight spike of anxiety.

“There goes the easy way out,” Scott muttered morosely.

This was going to get ridiculous quickly if Stiles indulged Scott in his melancholy too much, and he wasn’t interested in playing that game today.

“Buddy, listen. You know I wasn’t going to tell you. But you were annoyed that I was keeping secrets and I couldn’t sufficiently explain why it was better you not know without just straight up telling you. If I hadn’t told you, you’d still be mad. Now that I have, you’re understandably confused and shaken up about it, but you’re also being a real Debbie Downer. You know this doesn’t actually change anything about your own life, right?”

“Doesn’t cha- Stiles, the girl I like is from a family of people who want to kill you. How on earth does that mean nothing’s changed?”

Damn Scott for choosing a logical approach for once.

“Look. Allison doesn’t know anything about hunting, okay? And Mr Argent’s only looking to bring the pain if I kill someone or something like that. As long as you don’t talk about this shit in public places, or within like 300 metres of Crazy Kate, then it’ll be fine. Okay?”
“Who even is Kate?”

“Right. Kate is Allison’s aunt. And she will 100% come after me with intent to maim at the very least if she hears so much as a whisper that I’m even in contact with a werewolf. So, no Kate, if you would.”

Scott stared wide-eyed at him, aghast.

“Stiles!”

“What?!”

“Stiles, none of this is even remotely close to okay. You’re in serious danger!”

“And my dad has a list of my top suspects if I get injured out of the blue. I’m not going into all of this blind, Scott. I know what’s happening, where the lines are drawn, who to avoid. No one’s taking me out easy, and if they do, I’m going down fighting.” Stiles closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “This is obviously stressing you out. I could theoretically lock away your memories of this information, but then we’d just be back where we were the week before last, and it would cycle over and over again until eventually I just stopped telling you. And that’ll be stressful for everyone.”

“Erase my-? Okay, setting aside the fact that you’re apparently magic now too and can obliterate people or whatever, just, how are you so calm about all of this?”

“You mean besides the fact that I’ve had two months to digest all this information? You know me, I roll with the punches. Research, establish facts, accept facts, move on. It’s not a deal I can renege on at any time. It’s not even a choice I made. It’s simply my state of being now. A fact of life. You either get bogged down in the details or you move forward. I’m moving forward. What are you doing to do?”

“You can’t seriously expect me to just smile and move on, can you?”

Stiles softened, shaking his head. “Of course not. I’m not asking you to snap your fingers and be fine with it. I’m just trying to get you to understand that there’s no point in getting riled up about it, okay? You can take as long as you like to be okay about it, but I need you to not be panicky. Or is that asking too much?”

“I can be calm,” Scott protested.

Stiles arched an eyebrow sceptically.

“Okay maybe not right this second, but that doesn’t mean I can’t.”

“I know, buddy. Just take your time. Are you good for today though?”

“As long as Erica doesn’t pop out of the bushes or something on my way home.”

Stiles snickered.

“Don’t worry about her, she can control herself. She was just teasing.”

“She looked like she wanted to eat me.”

“Exactly.”

Scott didn’t seem convinced. Stiles gave him a gentle shove and a smile.
“Go home. Do normal things. Don’t think about all this too hard. The more you go in circles the worse you’ll convince yourself it all is, so just watch a movie or something instead. You’ll feel better.”

“A movie,” Scott repeated.

“Yeah. Maybe make it something Disney though. You want happy vibes.”

“Sorry about changing your entire worldview, go watch a movie instead.” Scott smiled helplessly. “I don’t know why I was expecting anything else from you.”

“Because you know I know best.” Stiles unlocked the doors. “Now shoo, you have better things to be doing than moping on school grounds.”

Scott allowed himself to be ushered out of the jeep without protest.

**oOoOo**

Allison turned out to be both far more of a go-getter and far less patient than Stiles had remembered her being.

When she had said that she would trust her father to tell her about their secret family history, Stiles had interpreted that to mean she would believe in him and wait him out. In actuality, that turned out to mean that she would keep her promise not to pester anyone else, but she went straight into confrontation mode when she managed to snag a private moment with Chris.

How did Stiles know that?

Because Chris called him late on Monday night, having come straight from said confrontation to take his frustration out on the apparent instigator.

“What did you say to her?” was how Chris opened the call, anger and weariness both evident in his tone.

For a long moment Stiles considered simply hanging up, but intentionally ticking off the one hunter on his side would be a bad start to this little treaty thing they had going, so he squashed the urge.

“I didn’t break any of my promises, Scout’s Honour.”

“Maybe not the spoken promise, but you certainly ignored plenty of the subtext considering the argument I’ve just been through.”

“I didn’t give her any details. I didn’t reach out to her, she came to me. She was worried you might have been interrogating me about her school-life or whatever. But she’s Scott’s friend, and I’m trying to cut back a little on all the lying in my life, so I told her a version of the truth with the actual details omitted, and said she should talk to you about it if she wanted to know. She told me she would trust in you to tell her. This is not what I thought she meant.”

A long, staticky sigh was Stiles’ answer.

“She’s always been stubborn. I suppose I should’ve expected this sort of thing from her, if she ever caught wind of it all. I just didn’t think it would be this soon.”

“Look, I know you said it’s none of my business, and that’s totally still true. But, Allison’s tough, you know? She won’t shatter just because you let her in. And sorry for repeating myself, but it’ll be
easier for her to make informed decisions about all this if you explain it to her instead of Kate getting her murdery hands on her first.”

“… Kate is still my sister.”

“Right, okay, no casting aspersions on her character or whatever. Gotcha. Are we done then? ‘Cause I was actually in a good place to sleep for once but if you keep using your Angry Dad Voice on me much longer I’m gonna be up until like 2AM.”

Another sigh, this one more exasperated and less fond.

“Don’t blame me for your insomnia,” Chris shot back, but he did also hang up, and that was all Stiles had really been asking for anyway.

oOoOo

The rest of the school week was a tame and uneventful passage of time, something that really shouldn’t have seemed as surprising as it did.

Scott still had plenty of things to think about and mull over for himself. He spent less time with Allison and was notably quiet around Stiles and Erica. (Stiles had also caught him sneaking wary glances in Erica’s direction, but had decided not to point it out, because Erica would get far too much enjoyment out of it.)

Stiles made sure to continue acknowledging Isaac whenever they bumped into each other at school, both testing the waters and constantly reminding Isaac that Saturday had been a real thing that actually happened, and while Stiles wasn’t going to make it weird he wasn’t just going to pretend it hadn’t happened.

Whenever he crossed paths with Allison she was always either frustrated or determined, which he equated to her new goal of getting information out of her father. It didn’t seem like it was going well, but they were both stubborn people, and one of them would have to give in eventually. Stiles had no idea who to bet on.

oOoOo

Stiles spent most of Saturday holed up in the bookstore, but Isaac never showed.

Of course it wasn’t going to be that easy.

oOoOo

Derek’s current lifestyle was an issue that had been grating on Stiles for a while now.

If the guy secretly had a motel room somewhere in town? Great. That would be super wonderful and would stress Stiles out way less. Except even without getting anyone to try and hack his accounts and track his spending, the mere fact that he was always either at the train depot or somewhere near the Hale House whenever Stiles went looking for him said more than enough about how he was spending his time.

For a week?

Yeah, okay, Stiles could allow that. Everyone went through rough times, and it wasn’t like Derek had come back to Beacon Hills with the intention of staying. If you didn’t want to draw attention then staying off the radar was a good plan.
Except it had been two entire months and nothing was changing and it was actually sort of sad?

But Stiles knew well enough that if he went up to Derek and straight up told him he needed to find somewhere to live he would get all defensive and growly and ultimately nothing would come of it. Instead of telling him he needed to somehow implant the idea in Derek’s head so that it seemed more like natural progression and less like an accusation.

Which is how Stiles’ throwaway ‘Mandatory Pack Bonding Day’ comment turned into Operation: Make Sure Derek Eats Real Food At Least Once a Week, a scheme best covered up by lazy pack movie days.

-oOoOo-

Stiles wasn’t embarrassed to admit that he got a little too into the idea.

He still wasn’t sleeping as much as a healthy teenager ought to – though he was getting by just fine – but he got up just a tad earlier than necessary and went stupid crazy baking movie snacks and making a giant-ass lasagne and salad for lunch.

He would let his dad have one slice of brownie for the inconvenience of waking up to a house full of baking smells, but whatever wasn’t eaten over the course of the day was getting forced into Derek’s hands before he left, no excuses.

And, okay, when he’d messaged Derek about it last night he’d been a little worried that things might be awkward after their emotional heart-to-heart the previous weekend, but he hadn’t kicked up a fuss about the invite and had accepted easily enough, so that was that.

It was a day of bonding, and relaxing, and forgetting for a moment that dangerous people were in town who would come down on them in an instant if they got the opportunity.

It was also a day that tested John’s self-restraint, because he didn’t have to work and was instead stuck in a house full of food Stiles wouldn’t let him eat.

And, underneath it all, it was the first step in Stiles’ plan to subconsciously remind Derek of the joys and comfort of proper living arrangements and, even deeper than that, subconsciously on Stiles’ behalf as well, to remind Derek, and perhaps himself, that it was okay to have nice things and be happy even if bad things have happened.

Lord knows they both sometimes needed that reminder.

-oOoOo-

Chris Argent either had less willpower in the face of his daughter than Stiles had imagined, or he had taken Stiles’ badgering to heart and decided to talk of his own free will.

Stiles wasn’t sure which option was less terrifying: the fact that Stiles may have actually convinced him to do something, or the fact that Allison was an ultra-powerful secret weapon.

Methods aside, they’d obviously had a long talk over the weekend, because Allison simply would not stop glancing at him whenever they were in the same room.

So, no, Stiles wasn’t particularly surprised when Allison waylaid him on the way out of school. He was mildly annoyed, because getting ambushed after school all the time was starting to wear a little thin, and it also drew attention, but he couldn’t really blame her if this was about what he thought it was.
“My dad told me a whole bunch of crazy stuff and I need to talk about it with someone who won’t look at me the way I was looking at my dad.”

Bingo.

“Did you drive to school today?”

Her doe eyes blinked at him in confusion at the non-sequitur.

“No? Dad dropped me off.”

“Tell him to pick you up from my place then. I’d drive you home but I’d rather not risk bumping into your aunt, if it’s all the same to you.”

Her confusion didn’t last long. She’d always been better at picking up conversational undertones and reading between the lines than Scott was.

“You’re free to talk then?”

“Absolutely.”

Stiles could only be glad that Allison texted her father on the way, because Stiles had no desire to hear Chris’ tone voicing whatever admonishments about this side-trip he had responded with to make Allison’s expression twist. She very pointedly put her phone in her bag after that rather than back in her pocket. Hopefully her father wouldn’t be banging down Stiles’ door in the next twenty minutes looking for her.

“I’ve never been to your house before,” Allison commented rather unnecessarily after they arrived.

“Well, it’s hardly an auspicious first visit, but welcome to Casa de Stilinski.”

With that, Stiles unlocked the front door and motioned Allison inside.

Somehow, seeing Allison in his house rather than in school was a little less overwhelming. Her existence itself still blindsided him occasionally, but the school was full of phantom memories of her that had a tendency to darken his mood if he lingered on them. But Allison had almost never been to Stiles’ house before; she’d always been wrapped up in Scott in one way or another, whether it be sneaking around with him or fighting with him or even just hanging out with Isaac when he was staying with the Mc Calls, and Stiles hadn’t exactly figured into that equation anywhere.

It was nice to have something that belonged solely to this Allison in front of him.

“Do you want anything to drink?” he asked genially, as though he hadn’t just been lamenting a ghost.

Allison glanced back over her shoulder at him from where she’d been peering at some of the photos in the living room.

“Oh, water I guess?”

Stiles poured two glasses of water and set them down on the coffee table. This wasn’t a conversation he felt like bringing to his room.

Allison murmured a soft thanks and sat only when Stiles did, lowering herself into the armchair closest to the side of the couch Stiles had thrown himself into.
“Okay then. What have you learned and what do you want to know?”

Allison’s wandering gaze shifted and sharpened, her countenance suddenly tense.

“My dad told me that werewolves are real and that my aunt is a murderer, but he wouldn’t tell me why you knew when he didn’t want to tell me.”

“Huh. I wasn’t really expecting him to refuse to tell you. Guess he’s more serious about it than I thought.” Stiles clasped his hands and stared straight at Allison. “Before we talk about me, I want to ask one thing. Have you accepted those first two things as fact?”

Allison nodded decisively. “I’ll admit that I don’t exactly see Kate a lot, and she’s never struck me as an overly malicious person, but I also know that my dad loves her, and even if he were prone to joking around this isn’t the sort of joke he’d make. He gave me no proof, but I know what kind of man he is, and I trust that knowledge, even if everything else just sounds crazy.”

Stiles smiled wryly at that.

“You’re far from the only person who’s hopped aboard this particular crazy train in recent times. I guess answering your question would be killing two birds with one stone, so I don’t really mind, but has your dad warned you about discussing all of this?”

“He basically said not to talk about it, but especially around Kate or my grandfather. I thought that last part was weird, since we literally never see him, but that just means it’s an easier promise to keep.”

Kate’s death was what brought Gerard to town last time; Stiles could only cross his fingers and hope that idle curiosity didn’t draw the man in regardless.

“You weren’t worried about bringing it up with me though?”

Allison looked at him as if he’d said something incredibly stupid.

“You’re the one who told me he was keeping secrets. If anyone should be safe to talk to, it ought to be you, right?”

“Okay, that’s fair.” He leaned back and made his posture as non-threatening as possible. “Your dad and I were talking because he’s the most trustworthy and code-abiding hunter I know – not that I exactly know a whole ton of hunters – and I wanted to enlist his help in keeping your aunt far far away from me and the sole local survivor of Beacon Hills’ largest and most mysterious home arson case.”

“Arson…” Allison clenched her fists.

Stiles had no idea what details Chris had or hadn’t shared with her, but he’d told her Kate was dangerous, and Stiles was sure she could put two and two together.

“Yeah. Kate isn’t exactly fond of people like us, even if we’re just peacefully going about our day-to-day lives.”

“You’re not human.”

A simple statement and an even simpler affirmation.

“Exactly.”
“That’s…”

“Unbelievable? I can show you, but people tend to panic, and it’s not the most attractive look.”

Allison was only indecisive for a moment. Then she sat up straight, met his gaze head-on, and said, “Show me.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Relaxing his hands, Stiles focused inward, on that wild and restless part of him that he nowadays associated with his wolf, and called out to it, drawing it closer to the surface. He could always tell he was in a full beta shift because instead of just one or two sharper teeth, his entire mouth always felt fit to burst with teeth that had no business residing in a human mouth. It wasn’t impossible to talk like that, but Stiles also wouldn’t recommend it unless it was really important.

There were a lot of alarming things about seeing a beta shift for the first time. A weird new facial structure. Claws. But what seemed to draw Allison’s attention the most were Stiles’ eyes.

Blood-red and glowing just ever-so-slightly, they could certainly be an eerie sight to behold, but Stiles had personally always been more weirded out by the whole facial change scenario. Still, to each their own.

Stiles let her absorb the sight for a minute or two, then released the shift.

“Unsettling, right?”

Allison stared at him, then seemed to crumple inwards all at once.

“Part of me was sort of hoping you’d tell me my dad was just losing his mind. It’s a lot to take in, not just all the secrets and the family legacy but Kate and you… I mean, what am I supposed to do with myself?”

“You pay attention, and make your own judgments, and don’t let anyone tell you what you should be thinking. Hunters aren’t automatically bad people, or the enemy, or whatever. It’s just that most of them don’t much care for the code your family is supposed to follow, or for peace-keeping, or for co-existence. People are more interested in the letter of the code rather than the intent behind it and they like to use it as justification. But you don’t have to be like that. Go your own way. Hell, start a revolution. You’re strong, and you’ll kick ass in whatever you decide to do with yourself. But nothing has to be definitive, especially right now.”

“Dad was right,” Allison said, voice watery but unwavering.

“About what?”

“He said talking with you was a strange experience. Sometimes you’re so childish, but at the same time it’s like you know so many things that maybe you shouldn’t, and also sometimes you just seem so sad. Like everything good in the world is gone and you’re all alone.”

That meandering thought struck a little too close to home; Stiles couldn’t help flinching.

“What can I say? I’m just an old soul.”

“You’re doing it right now,” she said gently, and now she sounded sad. “You won’t tell me even if I ask, so I won’t. But, Stiles?”
He hummed encouragingly, avoiding her gaze.

“I may still not really get what’s going on at the moment, but I know one thing for sure. Being a werewolf doesn’t make you a bad person. I’ve seen enough today, and heard enough at school, to know that much at least.”

Stiles didn’t really know what to say to that, so he picked up his glass and took an unnecessarily long drink. Allison smiled softly at the evasion, as if it was proving her point.

“I’m going to tell my dad he can come get me now, before he gets too antsy and comes storming in looking for me.”

Stiles snorted into his glass, because yes, he could totally see Chris ‘why does my daughter keep dating werewolves’ Argent doing exactly that.

“I’m sorry if this talk didn’t go the way you wanted it to.”

“Don’t be silly. You gave me information, which is what I came to you for. It’s not your fault that supernatural things exist.”

She stood and leaned in for an unexpected hug, which Stiles returned automatically.

“But don’t think you can get away with ignoring me at school all the time anymore,” she said as she pulled back, voice teasing but threat real. “No excuses.”

“Uh, sure…?”

Was Stiles just digging his own grave? Or would this actually be a good step towards moving on with his life? His nightmares would suggest the former, but for the sake of his sanity he hoped it was the latter.

A car horn blasted aggressively from out in the street.

Stiles rolled his eyes.

“Your knight in shining armour is here to rescue you from the big bad wolf, milady.”

“This lady needs no rescuing, but alas, it seems I must go. Fare thee well, you grouchy puppy.”

Spluttering indignantly as Allison laughed her way out the door, Stiles suddenly understood why everyone used to hate it when he made dog jokes all the time.
Yo! Sorry about not getting anything up last month. I was binge-watching KHR and then, you know, my head was filled with KHR thoughts, and I needed to try and get rid of some of them before getting back into this.

Here’s the thing about keeping secrets.

People *notice*. Humans are more perceptive than anyone really gives themselves credit for; it is only the realm of polite society and respecting boundaries – and respecting the secret keepers themselves – that stops most people from acknowledging or acting upon the things they perceive.

Another thing about secrets is this:

The more people there are who know something, the more obvious it becomes that there is something to be known.

People don’t like being left out.

**oOoOo**

Scott’s blatant confusion when Allison greeted Stiles the next morning and Stiles actually responded like a functional human being instead of awkwardly dashing off was *almost* worth the piercing daggers Lydia was glaring at him, bearing witness to their interaction from down the corridor.

It sent a chill up his spine and made him feel inexplicably restless – hunted, almost.

If there was a live countdown somewhere displaying the levels of Lydia’s patience and irritation, Stiles imagined they might both be verging dangerously close to the red zone.

His peaceful days were surely numbered.

**oOoOo**

“Wait, so Allison knows about your-” Scott gestured vaguely at his own face, voice pitched low as he leaned forward across the cafeteria table.

He might have thought he was being secretive or something, trying to have a heads-together discussion, but he just looked more suspicious.

Stiles nodded. He wasn’t looking at Scott.

Seated beside him, as had become their usual, Erica was methodically – silently – tearing apart a bread roll that Stiles didn’t think she had any intention of actually eating.

It was a damn good intimidation tactic. She wasn’t even using her claws.

Most of Stiles really didn’t want to ask, but what kind of alpha – what kind of *friend* – would he be if
he didn’t take the bait and ask what was wrong?

Waving a hand to pre-emptively cut off anything else Scott might’ve been about to say, Stiles sucked in a breath and turned bodily towards Erica.

“Uh, Erica…? What’s, ah… Why are you angry?”

Nailed it.

Erica snorted inelegantly and sent him a sharp look.

“Oh, no reason. I should’ve known better than to assume you would keep a promise.”

“Prom- oh.”

“Yes, oh.”

Stiles draped himself over the table with a heavy sigh.

“I didn’t tell her!”

Erica clicked her tongue disbelievingly.

“I didn’t! Ask her yourself, she’ll back me up.”

“Maybe you didn’t say the words, but she left knowing something she didn’t when she arrived, no?”

Stiles turned his head and met her gaze, unfaltering.

“Allison isn’t an idiot. She had information, clues, and she put the pieces together for herself while we talked. Look, I know I said I’d be less reckless and consult you guys more about this sort of stuff, but what was I supposed to do? Turn her down? ‘Sorry Allison, would totally love to help you process all this stuff your dad told you, seeing as I’m the only person that you know knows, but I’ll have to postpone this until I get the okay from my pack.’ Yeah, that would’ve gone over super great.”

“I just-” Erica splayed her hands out across the table, abandoning her mangled pile of food. “It makes me nervous. When you do stuff like that.”

Stiles sat back up and turned towards her, taking one of her hands in his.

“I know. I’m sorry. After all the things I said about being careful and watching your back, in the end I’m the one who’s having the most trouble following my own cautionary advice. It’s not fair of me to follow different standards. But you can also understand, can’t you? That as well-meaning as our pact to talk things over is, there are situations where it doesn’t work. You don’t have any reason to trust my judgment, but I do know what I’m doing. Most of the time.”

Erica shrugged, still upset, but she curled her fingers around Stiles’ and he guessed he was forgiven.

Scott, who had been watching their back-and-forth in an awkward silence, obviously disquieted, said, “So Allison…?”

Stiles rolled his eyes and glanced at his best friend, who never had and likely never would connect with Erica the same way Stiles had yet still let them have their moments without interfering, despite burning with curiosity about other things.
“Yes, Allison knows about me. She’s cool with it, for whatever measure of ‘cool with it’ a person – particularly an Argent – can be after being thrown straight into the deep end. I mean, as far as I can tell, Chris really did give her more or less the whole run-down, so she not only found out about the supernatural, but that her family have been hunting for generations. But she’s a tough cookie. A little something like this won’t break her.”

Scott spluttered incoherently.

“Break?! I just wanted to know if she was upset or anything! Why’d you have to say that?”

“I’m just trying to be realistic Scotty. It’s a lot of information to process – you can vouch for that – and if you’re not in a good place it could really mess you up. But she’s fine, and Chris is on her side and he’s fine, so everything’s just… fine. Okay?”

“And… okay?”


oOoOo

For days, Stiles could feel Lydia’s burning gaze heavy on him whenever they were sharing the same space, be it hallways or classrooms.

It was so intense that even the wild lupine part of him felt stalked, hunted. As an alpha – hell, as a werewolf in general – he was supposed to be predator, not prey. His wolf hated it. Stiles dreaded the next step.

oOoOo

The next time Stiles got a chance to talk with Isaac, it was quite by chance.

As time had passed Isaac seemed to grow less startled by Stiles’ persistence in greeting him in the mornings if they saw each other and just generally acknowledging his existence, but he still hadn’t been returning any of them.

(With the way Jackson sometimes stared at Stiles like he wanted to strangle him with his bare hands – thanks a lot, Lydia’s determination – Stiles couldn’t really blame him for wanting to keep his distance.)

Stiles had made a detour to the library after school, and was passing by the boys’ locker room on his way out, when he caught an unexpected hit of Isaac’s now-familiar old-pain scent.

It wasn’t a lacrosse day, so Stiles hadn’t even considered it, but he couldn’t blame the guy for hanging around school as long as possible.

If he wasn’t so hell-bent on seeing this through, Stiles would’ve just continued on home, but he was, so he pushed open the door and slipped inside.

Isaac was seated on one of the benches nearer the showers, his back towards the entrance, obviously not expecting to be disturbed. Stiles felt a little bad about shattering that illusion, but less so when he saw what Isaac was doing.

Stiles made sure his footsteps rang out like a normal person – he wasn’t trying to sneak up on Isaac.

(He’d discovered somewhat by accident – startling his dad one too many times – that sometimes
when his mind was preoccupied, his lupine instincts reached out and took control of his movement. He still couldn’t walk quietly when he was actively trying, but by god could he do some good stealth when he didn’t mean to.)

Isaac froze at the sound, his tension a visible thing.

Keeping his body language loose and friendly, Stiles edged around into Isaac’s line of sight.

A little bit of the tension slipped away when Isaac registered that it wasn’t a stranger or a teacher or someone he knew would make things worse, but his general confusion about Stiles’ recent behaviour wouldn’t let him relax all the way.

Broadcasting his movements, Stiles knelt down on the floor in front of Isaac and took his free hand, immediately beginning to drain some of his pain to try and determine how bad off he was today.

“You look like you could use a hand,” he added, as an explanation.

Isaac narrowed his eyes at him, suspicious, but it was true enough that it was difficult to effectively wrap a wrist with only one hand.

From the feeling Stiles was getting through their contact, he would wager a guess that it was sprained. Looking closely, Stiles thought Isaac’s fingers looked pretty banged up too.

A hot flash of anger rushed through him, before he stubbornly pushed it down.

Isaac had been in the freezer recently.

“I’ll hold it in place, you wrap. Teamwork.”

For a long second, Stiles was sure Isaac was going to refuse him anyway. As someone attuned to watching for emotional cues, there was probably little chance that Isaac had missed the way Stiles examined his injuries, or the momentary anger.

But then his shoulders slumped, and Isaac bit out a tired, “Fine.”

So, together, they patched him up.

Not for the first time, Stiles regretted not spending more time trying to figure out his magical abilities. Surely healing poultries was a thing in the magical community, right? It couldn’t all just be barriers and mixing poisons and antidotes.

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“Why are you doing this?” Isaac asked eventually, when they were done and Stiles had to back off, no more excuses left to him for maintaining physical contact to drain his pain.

“Can’t a guy just want to help out another guy?” Stiles countered, reminiscent of their first talk that day during lacrosse.

Isaac snorted in disbelief, which, yeah, okay, in the team at least there were plenty of guys who weren’t at all interested in the well-being of their teammates.

But Stiles wasn’t even on the team anymore! He’d like to not be held up to their standards anymore.

“I’m serious. People shouldn’t have to deal with shit on their own, in isolation. If you really, absolutely want me to back off, then fine. I’ll respect that. But I’m here, and I’m offering, and you don’t have to get up in arms about it.”
“I’m not up in arms about anything!” Isaac protested.

“Not in so many words, no. But I can tell you don’t like being helped. Or is it more being seen?”
Isaac twitched. Stiles imagined it was a bit of both, plus an (un)healthy dose of shame about the circumstances. “I’m not going to ask why you’re hurt. I don’t imagine you trust me enough to tell me even if you wanted to. But I’m always around if you need me, and I can be a good listener as well as a good distraction.”

“I don’t need your help.”

“Maybe not,” Stiles allowed, getting to his feet. “But that doesn’t mean it’s not okay to want it sometimes.”

With that, Stiles took his leave, not wanting to push his luck.

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Somehow, Lydia had realised that Stiles wouldn’t want to talk about things at school.

On a day when Stiles had made a shopping run after school, and his dad had a night shift instead of an afternoon shift, Stiles came home to find Lydia Martin seated at his kitchen table, nursing a cup of tea and exchanging polite but distant conversation with his father.

Even his dad, who often made leading comments about Stiles’ lengthy romantic obsession with Lydia, could tell that the visit was something more serious, something that wouldn’t take kindly to being remarked upon.

(Maybe Lydia was just that bad at small talk when she was waiting for something.)

With a concerned expression, John left them alone in the kitchen, heading upstairs, but Stiles knew he’d be around if he needed him.

He hoped he wouldn’t need him.

Lydia stared him down, sitting prim and proper on one of the wooden chairs as though it were a throne. She looked expectant. Like no matter what sort of fight Stiles put up, she had come here to tear down all his arguments and finally get the answers that had been eluding her for the last two months.

She cut her gaze towards the chair his father had just vacated.

Reluctantly, Stiles sat.

“Let’s skip the part where you pretend you don’t know why I’m here or what I want to know,” Lydia began, without so much as a ‘hello’ or a ‘sorry for ambushng you in your own home.’

Since Stiles would never have been able to out-bullshit Lydia’s bullshit radar on something like this, he wasn’t about to protest.

“Let me start with this. I’m not presumptuous enough to assume I’ll ever know everything there is to know about everyone in our school, let alone our year, nor would I care to try. Most of those people mean less than nothing to me. You and Scott McCall used to be two of those people.”

Stiles winced at the bluntness, but it wasn’t like it was new information to him. He really hadn’t ever been on Queen Lydia’s radar until everyone got entangled in the supernatural, and that pattern was
continuing even now.

“But not only are you conspiring with Danny about something that he refuses to enlighten me of, now you’ve gone and dragged Allison into it as well. What could possibly be so important that my own best friends won’t utter a word of to me, but will absolutely go talk to you?”

And that was the thing, wasn’t it? Scott was less jagged edges and self-assertion than Lydia, but he’d been put-out and annoyed about Stiles secreting away to do stuff with Erica and Danny and refusing to tell him any of the details. With more of Lydia’s inner circle getting dragged into what Lydia was obviously dubbing Stiles’ Secret, it was no wonder that she was so adamant that someone clue her in.

She didn’t need to know.

Allison had needed to know – it was a family legacy. Danny had already known. Erica was Stiles trying to find the good pieces of the future while trying to steer them away from the bad. Scott, well, Stiles had tried keeping Scott out for his own peace of mind, but he’d succumbed in the end.

Wasn’t he supposed to be done with making choices for other people?

Clearing his throat, Stiles decided to leave Lydia’s fate up to her own free will.

“Listen. You like the world that you know, right? You understand the laws of the universe, the physics of it all, scientific limitations. The sorts of things that can and cannot be done. The facts of humanity’s abilities.”

Lydia arched a dubious eyebrow.

“Those sort of things are set in stone, right? The sorts of facts and beliefs and understandings that hold true for your entire lifetime. But if we tell you what everyone’s hiding from you, those rules change. You’ll have to recalculate the entirety of how you see the world. That’s not a decision you should make just because you think you finally cornered me.”

Lydia blinked slowly across at him before taking a pointed sip of her tea. Stiles could practically hear her brain whirring away as she tried to piece together some sort of hypothetical conclusion from Stiles’ warning.

Eventually she sighed, admitting defeat.

“And that’s supposed to mean what, exactly?”

“That I think you need to take a step back, have a good think about whether you really need to know, and if you’re still dead-set on it in a week or two, tell Allison that she can share whatever she wants with you at her own discretion.”

Because Stiles really did not want to be the person fielding Lydia’s questions when she – almost unquestionably, this was just stalling at best – demanded her answers. Allison didn’t really deserve that position either, but at least they were friends, and Lydia would probably go easier on her.

Lydia left not long after that, because she was more than smart enough to realise that Stiles wasn’t going to accidentally let something slip just because she was lingering in his house, the way he might have just three months ago.

(When she was gone, he sent Erica and Allison both a heads up, so Erica could chew him out over text, and Allison knew to be expecting Hurricane Lydia at some point in the near future.)
(Jackson aside, that was as far as their two friend groups extended. That had to at least count for something, right?)

Stiles spent the weekend – outside of their totally now-mandatory weekly pack gatherings – wracking his brain, trying to remember the names of the various supernatural beings that they had either personally encountered on semi-friendly terms, or who had been some of Deaton’s acquaintances and contacts.

He wanted to exchange information outside of Beacon County – to track sightings of Deucalion’s Alpha Pack, for instance – but he didn’t dare reach out willy-nilly.

He needed to know who was trustworthy.

Isaac believed in Stiles’ self-proclaimed ‘magic hands’, no questions asked.

With nothing else to occupy his time with, Stiles still came to watch almost every lacrosse practice. No one paid him any attention for it anymore; even Scott, now that he actually understood why Stiles had quit in the first place, no longer sent him odd looks when he caught sight of him.

He wasn’t even doing it to try and keep an eye on Isaac anymore.

But when Isaac got charged by one of the muscle-headed jocks – the sort that liked to take Coach’s ‘use your aggression on the field’ advice far too much to heart – and fucked up his ankle, his face whipped straight to the stands when Coach started shouting about going to the nurse’s office.

Apparently not quite everyone had taken to dismissing Stiles’ presence.

Correctly interpreting the look as a summons, Stiles went down to meet him.

Later, when Isaac was seated with his leg propped up and an icepack draped over his ankle, he held out an expectant hand in Stiles’ direction.

Bemused, Stiles took it in his own, dulling Isaac’s pain almost automatically at this point.

When Stiles asked why, Isaac, frowning and not looking in his direction, mumbled something about how it was ‘more effective than pain killers,’ before falling silent.

Stiles allowed himself an amused smile while Isaac had his back to him. Most people would ask more questions about a strange phenomenon like this, but for Isaac, it was discreet and convenient and meant he didn’t have to use too much pain medication, and that was more important than trying to figure out how it worked.

It wasn’t really what Stiles had been expecting when he said he’d always be around to help out, but at least Isaac was still reaching out.

Stiles’ impatience was always worse when it revolved around things he himself could be doing but wasn’t.

So, in the spirit of Alastor Moody’s motto of Constant Vigilance, Stiles added evening runs to his
daily routine.

If his route just so happened to take him past the Lahey house twice a night, well, that was his business and his alone.

**oOoOo**

“Lydia hasn’t asked me anything yet,” Allison said, apropos of nothing, as she sat down next to Scott at lunch. “It’s actually sort of freaking me out.”

“I guess we should be glad she’s seriously thinking about whether or not she wants to know…” Stiles glanced over his shoulder as he spoke, looking for Lydia across the cafeteria. “But this might also be some sort of psychological punishment for keeping secrets from her.”

“If she doesn’t ask,” Erica said, “No one bring it up. End of story.”

She was still miffed about Lydia joining the list of people being let in on their world. Stiles was just glad she hadn’t brought it up with Derek – he didn’t need Derek thinking he was an exceedingly reckless teenager with no self-preservation skills when he was trying really hard to prove he wasn’t. (Even though he totally still was.)

Other than her initial irritation – which was less to do with Allison personally and more to do with Stiles, if they were being honest – Erica had taken fairly well to Allison occasionally ducking in to say hey or hanging out with them a little more rather than Scott going to her now that Stiles was willing to talk to her. Stiles imagined she’d been getting bored of being the only girl in the group.

“I don’t know if I’d be able to hold out if she came after me,” Scott admitted softly. “She can be very…”

“Intimidating,” Stiles supplied. “And I wouldn’t worry about it Scott. I told her to talk to Allison, so she’ll either talk to Allison, try and guilt-trip Danny, or circle back around to me. You and Erica should be safe.”

“What about Derek?”

“She doesn’t know about Derek. Other than possibly still thinking he might be my secret older boyfriend or something. Just ‘cause I said he wasn’t doesn’t mean she believed me.”

“Plus,” Erica added, “It would be way too much effort to track him down. And even if she did, she’d just get the eyebrows.”

Stiles snickered.

“Too true.”

Allison and Scott exchanged confused looks, suddenly out of the loop once again, but Stiles and Erica were too occupied imagining a hypothetical confrontation between Derek and Lydia to be of any help.

**oOoOo**

This weekend’s pack gathering was an intervention.

Stiles had mentioned it to Erica beforehand and she was all for it.
He’d given Derek time to start sorting things out on his own, but Stiles had to draw the line somewhere.

Perhaps he could sense the atmosphere when he arrived. Derek hovered hesitantly in the doorway, one foot inside and one still on the porch.

Honestly, using his stupid natural-born wolf senses on them to ruin the suspense; did he not trust them at all?

Erica darted forward, snatched Derek’s hand, and tugged him inside.

“What’s happening?” Derek asked warily.

(Stiles was so glad that he’d remembered that speech intonation was a thing; nowadays Derek only dropped his verbal punctuation when he was in a bad headspace.)

“Halo tournament,” Stiles said, because it was still true – intervention then gaming.

Derek threw him his most sceptical look.

Laughing, Erica led him to the couch and shoved him back into the cushions. The fact that Derek still let her, even though he suspected they were plotting something, said a lot about how far they’d come. Even as two werewolves, Derek could easily overpower Erica if he really wanted to.

“A Halo tournament which I’m going to win,” Erica corrected, slipping into the kitchen to retrieve the folder Stiles had put together.

“In your dreams!” Stiles called after her. “Sorry Derek, don’t hold it against me when I leave you two in the dust.”

Derek nodded slowly, suspiciously, but he no longer seemed like he was about to disappear, so that was good.

Erica reappeared, a competitive fire already burning in her eyes, shoved the folder into Stiles’ hands, and took a seat next to Derek.

“Oh, I want to preface this by saying that I respect your autonomy, but dude, sometimes your priorities are really out of whack.”

Derek responded with an automatic “Don’t call me dude,” before processing what Stiles had said. He frowned. “What?”

“A house, Derek! Proper living conditions!” Stiles spread the contents of the folder out across the coffee table: newspaper listings and print-outs of rental properties in Beacon Hills. “You’re supposed to be the adult here, but let’s be real for a moment, you kind of suck at adulting.”

Erica didn’t have Stiles’ epic skills in reading Derek’s expressions, but Stiles could see the quick-flutter rush of emotions. Anger-embarrassment-resignation-appreciation-uncertainty.

“None of us know what your plans are, really. That’s why they’re rentals and not houses for sale. But either way you need somewhere to call your own, for however long you stay, and since I know you’d refuse if I offered you our spare room this is where we’re at.”

“I like these ones best,” Erica chimed in, rearranging several of the print-outs into a small group. “But you’re the one who has to live there, so…”
Derek was quiet for a long time. Stiles and Erica made harmless conversation that included him but didn’t require his participation as they debated pros and cons about the places they each individually liked best.

Eventually Derek reached out, brushing his fingers over the pages closest to him.

“I… You’re right. I was ignoring it. I still wasn’t sure if I wanted to stay here, where everything happened, and the idea of a place to live just made it seem more permanent. But that’s not really the best way of looking at it, is it? Having somewhere to live doesn’t mean I’m trapping myself here. It’s just – what did you say? Part of ‘adulting’. So, I guess it wouldn’t hurt to take a look at them.”

Over Derek’s bowed head, Stiles and Erica grinned at each other.

Derek ended up winning the Halo tournament.

Stiles would have to add ‘unexpected gaming skills’ to his mental profile.
This update is roughly half-length, because I'm really not getting much writing done at the moment

Having Allison hanging around slowly started a merger between Stiles’ motley crew of Erica and Scott and Allison’s cooler friends, aka Lydia, with Danny tagging along and Jackson grumbling away in the background.

It wasn’t quick, and it wasn’t all at once, or even all the time, but Allison apparently didn’t see the point in trying so hard to split her time between the two, so she dragged them all together for convenience’s sake.

That was Stiles’ take on it anyway, since Allison wasn’t interested in offering up any explanation, simply smiling winningly if anyone tried to bring it up and then changing the subject.

It wasn’t a bad thing, having more people around, but it sure stirred up a lot of complicated feelings on a more personal level. And that was without taking into account the fact that they could no longer talk so freely about certain matters, because Lydia still hadn’t asked and there was no way in hell Stiles was letting Jackson catch even the slightest whisper of it; he wasn’t interested in giving Jackson anymore reason to be angry at him, and no one needed a repeat of the kanima.

Still, without his notice and without any real intent to, Stiles found himself withdrawing into himself during those times when their group was larger than normal, a silent onlooker instead of an active participant.

It was no one’s fault, exactly, and it wasn’t even that he was unhappy. Stiles just… didn’t know what to do with himself.

Back in January Stiles had drastically cut back on social interaction in ways he hadn’t even totally noticed himself – classmates he might’ve talked with but never really hung out with had suddenly become just faces in the crowd – because he didn’t remember how to be the person that he used to be, the person he was supposed to be. It had been easier – although not safer like he’d kept telling himself – to surround himself only with the company of people who had once understood why he was the way he was, even if they didn’t know now.

So he’d kept his circle small, clenching desperately to them like they could fix the broken things inside of him and light up the dark spaces, or at least give him some sort of normalcy or feeling of belonging when he often felt like an imposter in his own life.

Allison, dragging people with her like a force of nature, had stolen his agency, his chance to make a decision about when and how and who he would consider branching out towards, opening up to. He wasn’t mad about it. In some ways it was reassuring, having someone else make a decision for him, because Stiles couldn’t always be trusted with matters of his own mental well-being. It would just… take some time to adjust to the change.

oOoOo
Stiles still needed Derek to keep a watchful eye over him during the full moon – mostly for his own peace of mind, and the safety of not being alone – but Stiles was starting to understand himself better, and the more he understood, the better his wolf decided to behave.

In the beginning Stiles had felt like his human self and his new supernatural self were somehow existing on two separate wavelengths; two opposing forces battling for dominance. In actuality Stiles was more willing to liken it to a sort of misunderstanding between the two.

As a human, Stiles functioned (mostly) on rational decision making and logical thought processes. Wolves, especially wolves that were just unexplainable imprints in a person’s mind, ran more off of instincts and desires.

So it started making sense to him that his wolf tended to get antsy and agitated, especially around the full moon when it could assert itself more under its own power. Stiles was aware of many potential dangers to his pack, but because in general they weren’t immediate threats or even things he could track Stiles had made the decision to set them aside other than to stay on the lookout for them. The wolf lacked Stiles’ human foresight and long-term planning abilities, and only knew that there were threats that weren’t being dealt with.

Once Stiles clicked on to that it was easier to find a middle ground that kept everything calmer, regardless of what phase the moon was in.

If only everything was that easy.

oOoOo

Even though he’d given Lydia free reign to ask Allison whatever she wanted about the situation, part of Stiles had still been waiting for Lydia to bring her questions straight to him instead.

That part was the voice in the back of his head that was almost always right, even when he desperately hoped it wasn’t.

Getting intercepted on his way to lunch and dragged to an empty corridor at the far end of campus wasn’t really how he had expected it to go down though.

Stiles was tired enough from the full moon the previous night and the general lack of sleep that accompanied full moons at the moment that he didn’t kick up a fuss about it or even offer up any sort of quip to get the conversation rolling.

Lydia looked him up and down, lips pursed in discontent at whatever she saw – Stiles may not get lingering dark circles under his eyes from his poor sleeping habits anymore, but that wasn’t the only way to look bedraggled and generally less than 100% - but she had dragged him away for a reason, and she wasn’t going to let Stiles’ condition deter her from her purpose.

The question that eventually left her lips however wasn’t the one Stiles was expecting to hear.

“Is Allison in danger?”

Thrown off-balance, Stiles blinked stupidly at her until Lydia’s stare sharpened to a glare.

“Not any more than she already was as someone currently living in Beacon Hills.”

Not that that was an entirely accurate or truthful answer, but it wasn’t really a lie either. Knowing things was dangerous, but in Allison’s case Stiles would wager that the not knowing was more dangerous. After all, there were surely more people around than just Peter with grudges against
families like the Argents, and if you don’t know there’s something to be wary about then you never
have your guard up.

“What about Danny?”

“Danny? He should be fine.”

Two blatantly different answers, which Lydia would read into however she pleased. Stiles was too
tired for mind games.

“In that case, I think… At least for the time being, I don’t want to know. But, I still have the right to
change my mind at any point in the future.”

“Sure.”

Stiles didn’t bother pointing out that she would only be able to change her mind one time. There was
no un-learning what they would tell her. She already knew that. It was why she was saying no.

oOoOo

Suddenly it seemed like, all at once, all of the extraneous little problems – not that all of them could
really be called little – that had been begging for Stiles’ attention and tugging him in seemingly every
direction at once had up and disappeared.

As if Lydia’s decision was some sort of milestone, Stiles found that, outside of the constant
underlying danger of exposure (particularly exposure to Jackson freaking Whittemore), the only issue
he had yet to garner any sort of closure or result for was his plans regarding Isaac.

That of course didn’t mean he was any closer to his goal, but it did mean there were less distractions
floating around, at least for now, and that could only be a good thing.

oOoOo

Because so much of Stiles’ plan basically revolved around sitting back and waiting for an
opportunity to strike, he found himself with a lot of free time on his hands.

There were any of number of things, really, that he could do with this time. Join a different sports
team or a cultural club at school. Coax Derek into giving him training sessions. Be more social and
less of a terrible friend.

But it wasn’t quite that easy to let himself live blissfully in the present. There were plenty of worries
that lingered in the back of his mind: Deucalion, the Nemeton and the Nogitsune, Eichen House’s
accursed supernatural ward, and any number of potential territorial invasions from god knows what
kinds of supernatural entities, known or unknown, friendly or hostile.

So, in lieu of begging Christopher Argent for a copy of their family’s bestiary – which he probably
wasn’t supposed to know existed and which would only serve to anger their one adult ally – and
because Stiles super did not have any sort of photographic memory from the time when they did
have a copy of it in their possession, he was getting down and dirty trying to piece together
something potentially useful on his own.

Unfortunately, his knowledge of dead and obscure languages wasn’t much to talk about, which is
what led him to spend another day lost in the stacks at the second hand bookstore.

Looking for and flipping through Latin and Greek lexicons and grammar books – which, oh man,
there were so many, some old enough that Stiles was genuinely concerned that they might crumble into a useless mess from his mere touch – was a harrowing experience. Honestly. Stiles’ level of respect for Lydia’s own Latin knowledge ratcheted up a few more notches from the mere exposure, and he hadn’t even started trying to burn any of the knowledge into his head yet.

(Stiles had a lot of random and useless knowledge floating about in his head, he could admit to that, but the commitment of learning a language in comparison to the addictive subject-hopping of Wikipedia binges had always put them pretty low down on his list of ways to spend time.)

Stiles was sitting shamelessly on the shop floor, surrounded by every language book he’d managed to locate in the shelves stacked up around him, comparing them all on physical quality versus price, when someone else entered the store.

Another person might’ve been embarrassed at the thought of being caught having made such a mess – which he would fix before he left, but for now was his workplace – but Stiles was long past being ashamed of anything involving the pursuit of knowledge.

Plus – a stifled snort of laughter caught his attention – Stiles knew exactly who it was that had caught him.

“Good morning to you too Isaac,” Stiles called, gaze not shifting from the book currently in his hands.

“Afternoon more like.”

Blinking in surprise at the rebuttal, Stiles slipped his phone out of his pocket. He’d been there longer than he’d thought.

“Huh.”

“You’re such a nerd,” Isaac murmured.

Stiles probably wasn’t supposed to hear it. There was no cruel bite to it like it would have if someone like Jackson had said it; for Isaac it was practically fond. Maybe this whole bonding thing had been working out better than Stiles had thought.

“Knowledge is the spice of life. Or, you know, something like that.”

Another snicker accompanied Isaac’s lazy footsteps.

In a place like this there was no sense of obligation to keep a conversation going, and no sense of awkwardness in prolonged periods of silence. Maybe that was why Isaac was softer here?

Stiles was two books further through his piles when Isaac drifted back in his direction.

He wasn’t expecting anything in particular to happen, so he was startled when he felt Isaac sit down behind him, their backs just barely touching. Stiles made sure his posture didn’t broadcast his surprise – Isaac would be hyper sensitive to any tension Stiles displayed, given this bold and uncharacteristic move, and that would just mess everything up – but there was no denying that he was, in fact, surprised.

“Find anything good to read?” Stiles asked, voice light.

Isaac only offered a noncommittal hum in response, but he didn’t move, so Stiles had somehow managed to maintain this fragile equilibrium.
Stiles could say with absolute certainty that something like this would never happen at school. There were far too many variables, and he knew in a vague sense that Isaac’s grades were part of his issues with his dad, so it was no surprise that he wouldn’t feel all that comfortable on campus.

Isaac must come here often enough to know that the customer traffic was practically non-existent, or at the very least, that the sorts of people who actually came inside were more interested in their personal pursuit of books than what anyone else might happen to be doing.

They stayed like that, back to back but in their own little worlds doing their own things, until Stiles’ stomach started kicking up a fuss about having missed lunch.

_The curse of a fast metabolism_, Stiles grumbled to himself as he climbed slowly to his feet. The burning rush of pins and needles through his legs was unfortunately not the sort of malady his werewolf constitution saw fit to save him from.

Before the bite he totally could have powered on through for the entire afternoon – even if it was an unhealthy decision and the sort of thing health professionals would frown upon – but now his body was a lot more aggressive about letting him know he was messing up somehow. It took a lot of energy to keep his body running werewolf hot, after all.

(It wasn’t like he’d fall into a sudden faint or become anaemic if he didn’t eat, but the embarrassment of a persistently growling stomach was sometimes punishment enough.)

Although, for the sake of his mental sanity, perhaps letting his stomach dictate his day wasn’t the worst decision in the world. His brain was threatening to melt if he kept straining his eyes on all the old-timey fonts without taking a break.

Stiles hadn’t finished going through his stacks yet – a miracle in itself, honestly where did all those books even come from – but there were a few promising looking tomes that he left on the floor as he went about returning his hoard to their shelves.

Even without looking over at him Stiles could sense Isaac’s relaxed demeanour receding after he stood, but Isaac stayed quiet so Stiles didn’t comment on it either while he tidied up.

Part of Stiles wanted to buy all of the books – variety was the spice of life and all that – but the rational part of him remembered that he needed to keep an eye on his spending, so in the end he only bought an introductory grammar book.

One step at a time was fine. There was no rush to piece together a new bestiary.

Coming back from the register, Stiles took in the rigid line of Isaac’s shoulders and the way he had a book held close to his face, eyes unmoving.

It had been nice spending time together in the calm quiet of the bookstore, but seeing him shrink back into himself so immediately was heart-wrenching.

Taking a deep breath, Stiles shook off the melancholy that Isaac inspired in him, and extended an invitation.

“I’m gonna go find something to eat. Do you want to come get coffee or something?”

Isaac jolted at the sound of his voice. If he’d been expecting Stiles to say anything at all, it would have been a casual farewell, not this.

Slowly lowering the book he had been pretending to read, Isaac stared up at him in confusion.
“Coffee? I’ll pay. Unless that book’s too riveting to put down of course.”

“No? I, uh…” Isaac glanced down at the book in his hands like he wasn’t even sure what he’d been reading.

“It’ll be fine,” Stiles assured, but he meant so much more than those simple words. It was hard to tell how much of his tumultuous subconscious feelings regarding Isaac’s entire existence stayed safely locked away and how much might’ve come through in his awkward tone, but Isaac’s gaze was sharp, and Stiles never had been any good at guessing what sort of conclusions Isaac would come to in any given situation.

“You’re paying?”

Stiles nodded amiably.

Isaac didn’t verbally offer a negative or a positive response, but he climbed to his feet and shoved his book back into a random shelf, and that was really an answer all on its own.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

In which there is a coffee date, and things get weirdly domestic for a while.

Chapter Notes

I haven't written basically anything for anything since whatever I last uploaded in August (oops) so I guess this has been a long time coming. Sorry that it's more of a half-length chapter, but progress is progress.

I have an avoidant personality, so you can tell that I cope with stuff like writer's block just ~super well~

Aaand since it's New Year's Eve, I hope everyone's 2019 is better than their 2018.

“You’re a really weird guy.”

Stiles glanced up over the diner booth at his companion, who had decided to offer up this comment immediately after Stiles took a (possibly unreasonably) large bite of his panini. Mouth full of food and unable to protest, Stiles cocked his head inquisitively.

“Well, for starters, all of this.”

Chewing languidly Stiles rolled his eyes and twirled his free hand in the air, gesturing for further details.

Isaac huffed out a low breath that might’ve hidden a laugh. Slumped in the vinyl booth seat he had his hands wrapped around his half-empty mocha, absorbing the lingering heat.

“No, really. I know you were going on about people helping people or whatever the other day, but I just don’t get it. I don’t get you.” His face twisted into a slight grimace momentarily before smoothing out again. “I’m not complaining, okay? You’re just a confusing weirdo.”

When Stiles’ mouth was empty, he took a slow, unhurried sip of water.

It was true that from Isaac’s point of view – from everyone’s point of view, really – Stiles’ sudden and unexpected interest in him didn’t have a logical basis in anything anyone could pinpoint. There was just no easy way to come out and say that Stiles had known Isaac in a now-alternate future where he’d learned a thing or two about the guy that he would probably never have shared had the situation not forced his hand in so many ways.

Even if he did have the words for it, making Isaac think he was losing his mind would only be counter-productive in Stiles’ efforts to help.

“Are you looking for any particular answer here? Because I’m not sure what you want me to say. It’s
not pity and it’s not a dare. That aside, do you really need some deep meaningful reason to talk to someone? People’d never make friends like that.”

“I didn’t ask for a philosophy lesson,” Isaac drawled, unimpressed but not offended. “But whatever. You’re probably right.”

Although it sounded like a concession, Stiles didn’t think Isaac was truly willing to drop the topic just yet. That being said, Stiles’ verbal opinions may no longer be a necessary variable Isaac would use to form his own conclusions. That was fine. Stiles wasn’t here to regulate anyone or anything.

“Of course I am. Now shut up and enjoy your free drink.”

Isaac kicked him under the table. Stiles laughed.

oOoOo

When Stiles received a text from Derek on Sunday containing a street address and nothing else, he was somewhat torn between suspicion and curiosity. Of course, given that those two feelings were his default reaction to most things these days, it wasn’t saying much. The thing that was really needling at him was that Derek practically never started conversations – and there were plenty of times atop that when Derek would straight-up ignore whatever messages Stiles had sent to him – so that meant that, good or bad, surely this had to be something big, right?

So, of course, Stiles didn’t tell anyone about the text and proceeded to head straight to the address he’d been given.

Pulling up at the address Stiles found himself looking up at a house – and it was an actual house! Not some abandoned building or crime scene or whatever other sort of place Derek might send him off to. It was a two-storey house somewhat on the smaller side of things, and Stiles was confused for all of the time it took him to climb out of the jeep, before he spotted the tail-end of a Camaro peeking out of the open garage and a sudden realisation washed over him.

Stiles had told Derek to go find somewhere actually habitable to live, and it looked like Derek had actually followed through.

(Unless he had actually been called here to help cover up a murder or something, but Stiles couldn’t smell any blood and he liked to think that Derek was far better behaved than that.)

With this new sense of understanding some of Stiles’ curious impatience dwindled and he leaned back against Roscoe for a moment, taking in another sweep of the scene without the urgency of questions rattling around in the forefront of his mind.

The house was situated on the far edge of the main residential area, in a suburb Stiles wasn’t particularly familiar with. If he peered around the house he could glimpse a forested area a little ways off – probably not a part of the preserve that held any of the marked walking tracks, but whether or not it was technically open to the public was pretty much irrelevant if you were a supernatural beastie who just wanted to get away from civilization for a moment or two.

All in all it was far less suspicious and disheartening than the idea of Derek stubbornly making his home in the half-abandoned industrial district all over again.

(Although Stiles didn’t recognise the property from any of the listings he’s compiled as ideas, he liked to think his input had forced Derek to reconsider the differences between having a roof over your head and having somewhere to call a home.)
Satisfied, Stiles pushed away from his jeep and wandered towards the house.

He knocked on the closed front door once, because he had manners, but then opened the unlocked door without waiting for a response or permission, because a) Derek would have known he was there before he even parked, b) Derek had technically invited him and so was expecting him, and c) because it was the sort of harmless petty vengeance he could extract against all the times the other Derek had snuck into the Stilinski house uninvited.

When he found Derek the wolf sent Stiles an exasperated glance at his presence, but given that he was basically elbows-deep in some kit-set furniture nightmare he had to have been at least a little relieved that Stiles hadn’t bothered waiting for him to answer the door.

“What are you doing?” Stiles asked incredulously, his mouth running off without permission as he stared down at the strangely domestic scene Derek had unintentionally created.

It seemed for a moment like Derek was going to refuse to answer, but given that he’d been caught red-handed and all he just sighed, his shoulders slumped, and mumbled something about how he was “making a bookcase.”

“Do you even have any books?” Stiles asked, not ‘Do you even read?’ because he knew that Derek did enjoy reading, but he also knew – or at least had assumed – that Derek didn’t exactly bring anything with him from New York, and his reluctance last time around to commit to anything – the idea of staying in Beacon Hills even though it took him a long time to ultimately leave again, the concept that he was allowed nice things, or even things in general – Stiles hadn’t really expected that sort of home-making practicality.

Derek rolled his eyes and said “It’s called decorating, Stiles.” But he also sort of looked like he wanted to kill something, which was a sentiment Stiles could sympathise with.

“Hand me the instructions,” Stiles said as he sank to his knees next to Derek and the mess of wood and screws. He wasn’t expecting the instructions to help – they almost never did – but he needed to at least see what they were attempting to achieve before he tried to help.

oOoOo

It always amazed Stiles, he thought to himself when they had finally put together something that actually looked like a bookcase, how a thing that ought to be so simple could always turn into something so unnecessarily complex.

Sure, it gave you a real nice, aggressive sort of sense of accomplishment once you were done, but it wasn’t really a sufficient prize to outweigh the seemingly endless despair that could overwhelm you while you were in the middle of it.

Sprawled out on his back on the carpet, Stiles watched Derek move the wooden monstrosity into the corner of the living room.

(It was actually a fairly nice piece of furniture to look at. Stiles might have appreciated it more if he hadn’t been part of the construction process.)

A thought occurred to Stiles as Derek took a step back to check on the positioning, and he pushed himself up off the floor with a sly grin.

“We have to have a housewarming party.”

For a fraction of a second Derek’s entire being seemed to freeze up. Then, half-turned towards him,
Derek glared.

“It’s a rental,” he said gruffly, like that was some sort of excuse, as if you only celebrated a move when it was into a property you now owned.

Stiles stuck his tongue out in retaliation, because he might have been the alpha and technically closer to adulthood than anyone knew, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t allowed to be immature sometimes.

“Does that mean no one’s allowed to visit?” Stiles asked, poking and prodding, playful but also serious. “Why did you bother sending me the address then? I wouldn’t have badgered you about it if you’d wanted the privacy.”

Exhaling harshly Derek dragged a hand across his face, flapping the other dismissively in Stiles’ direction.

“I know,” he said eventually, moving to sit on the couch. Stiles followed suit, curling into the opposite corner. “But you were right, about me needing somewhere real to stay. It’s a little easier to feel like an actual person again with running water and electricity.”

“If you want this house to be a safe space, a place for you and you alone, that’s okay, you know? You’re allowed to want that, and you deserve to have that if it’s what you want.”

Derek shot him that weird fond-exasperated-disgruntled look Stiles was becoming familiar with receiving whenever he tried offering up life advice to people noticeably older than himself. With most people Stiles would allow the look to be a cease-and-desist order, but some people – people like Derek – needed the push.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Sure it’s not,” Stiles allowed, only half believing him.

“It’s not,” Derek insisted.

Stiles eyeballed Derek sceptically but switched tracks without comment.

“Don’t feel like you can’t leave Beacon Hills either, okay? I didn’t say you should find somewhere to live in order to tie you down here. Being in town can’t be easy for you. I wouldn’t be surprised if you wanted or needed to get away for a while. Lord knows it’s been years since my mother died and I still can’t stand spending time at the hospital.”

“…You do realise that I’m the adult here, right?”

Stiles smiled and shrugged.

“By which you mean you’re older than me? Sure. But that doesn’t mean you’re good at adulting.”

Stiles paused for a moment. “Not that many people are good at adulting. But hey, I’m just trying to be supportive! You’re not supposed to complain about that.”

“Never said I was complaining,” Derek protested gruffly, even though it was a total lie.

“Fine, fine.” Stiles threw his hands up in the air, feigning frustration. “Is that a hard no on the housewarming then?”

Derek stiffened minutely again and Stiles laughed.

“Oh man, you’re just frightened of that term aren’t you? ‘Housewarming party.’ How scandalous.
You know I’m not old enough to drink; do you really think we would trash your place?”

“You’re a menace,” Derek growled, but it lacked any real malice.

“Don’t be a spoilsport. It would be just like movie night: you, me and Erica, only here instead of at my place. Nothing scary about that, right?”

“It’s not like I can do anything to stop you.”

“You can,” Stiles rebuked, voice soft but steely-firm. He didn’t elaborate by adding any of the countless things he had ever thought or wanted to say when Derek was being particularly down on himself. The choice was enough for now.

Derek shoved lightly at his shoulder, more brotherly than dismissive.

“Call Erica if you must,” he said. “Since you’re already here.”

Stiles smiled at that, small and soft and private. Derek was a work in progress; he’d find himself again eventually, but Stiles wanted to help him get there sooner this time around.

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