It Ain't Exactly Hogwarts

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/5439386.

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<td>Published: 2015-12-16 Updated: 2016-04-01 Chapters: 17/? Words: 42107</td>
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It Ain't Exactly Hogwarts

by exclamtion

Summary

Stiles' relationship with his dad has been crumbling thanks to all the secrets and lies, but the final straw was when the kidnapping of Jackson led to the sheriff losing his job. When the sheriff decides to send Stiles away to boarding school, Stiles is afraid their relationship is damaged beyond repair. Depressed and guilty over everything that's happened between them, Stiles is determined to prove himself and to get a good report from the school so he'll be allowed to come back home.

But even here, he can't escape from secrets. There's wolfsbane growing in the school greenhouse, his teacher knows way too much about werewolves, and some of the students are more than they seem.

Notes

I will be finishing Hitchhiker, but this fic idea has been pestering me to get written and posted. It just wouldn't leave me alone.

The story follows canon mostly up until the end of season two. Jackson was still saved and Matt was killed, but the sheriff never got his job back. The whole concept of this story is that the sheriff decides to send Stiles away to school to separate him from whatever destructive elements have caused his recent behaviour, and to try and get him back on the right track. Stiles is suffering from depression and guilt in this story, so he's not his usual, sarcastic self for large parts of it. Basically, I'm horrible to Stiles in this fic. Things will get brighter though.

Because Stiles spends most of this story away from Beacon Hills, there are a huge number of original characters and most of the canon characters only show up occasionally. I don't
have any plans for pairings in this story. If that changes, I'll update the tags.
The bags sat on Stiles’ bed. His dad had packed them for him. Stiles wondered if his dad didn’t trust him not to sneak in something that was against the rules, or if his dad was concerned he’d forget something important, or if he just wanted to be more efficient and knew Stiles would get distracted if he packed for himself. Stiles opened up one of the bags and looked and neatly folded shirts inside. He glanced at his shelves, wondering if he should take some of his books.

“What about my laptop?” Stiles asked.

“The school provides computers,” his dad answered. There was no emotion in his voice. No anger. No hurt. Somehow that was worse than if he’d raged and yelled. It was like he’d already shut Stiles out. In the face of that, Stiles couldn’t even be upset that he’d probably be using computers with software installed that let the school track everything he looked up and every word he typed.

“Dad...” Stiles started for what felt like the thousandth time, but he trailed off. What could he say? He’d cost his dad his job and his reputation. He couldn’t explain that he’d kidnapped Jackson to protect people. His dad would never believe the truth. He didn’t believe a word Stiles said now.

“How long is it going to be for?” Stiles asked.

“You’ll finish off the school year there,” his dad answered. “After that, we’ll see. It will depend on your progress and the school’s report.”

It wasn’t like it would be for a whole year. It would be a couple of months and then he’d be back for summer. He’d be able to see Scott and Derek and everyone then. But would his dad decide that two months was punishment enough? Could Stiles even cope with that? His imagination furnished him with visions of a strict military school, demanding complete focus. Stiles wasn’t good at focus.

His dad picked up one of the bags and started down to the car. Stiles took the other, trailing after him. He didn’t have much choice about this. His dad wanted him to go to this boarding school to straighten him out. After everything Stiles had put his dad through, after nearly getting him killed by Matt and costing him all he’d worked for, Stiles wasn’t going to fight him on this. He’d tried apologising, he’d tried promising not to commit any further crimes, but his dad had been set on this and, for once, Stiles was going to do what his father wanted.

When they were on the road, the silence hung painful between them.

“Dad,” Stiles tried again. “I love you.”

“Love you too,” his dad said, but his voice still had that cold, distant tone. There was no warmth to those words. Was there any feeling behind them?

Stiles turned his head away, staring out at the passing trees, and blinked hard to keep the tears from falling. He wasn’t going to break down.

It was going to be a long drive.

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The stopped at a diner on the way and Stiles automatically started making comments about the merits of chicken over beef, but his words died in his throat. His dad didn’t say anything. When he
ordered the chicken burger, it didn’t feel like a victory.

They drove on again. Stiles plugged headphones into his phone and listened to music, just so that he didn’t have to face the silence, but somehow he could still hear the oppressive weight of nothing just beyond the tunes. Something had fractured between him and his dad, and now there was this impassable gap between them. The worst thing was, Stiles knew this was all his fault. He should have just come clean to his dad about everything right from the start, right from the moment he found out about werewolves. He should have just told the truth. Then his dad wouldn’t be so disappointed in him.

The edge of the school was marked by a high wall tipped with ornate metal spikes. Someone had worked hard with twirls of metal to try and disguise the fact that this was basically a prison wall, built to keep people from climbing over it. There were trees inside and out, but Stiles noticed that none of the ones he could see stood close enough to the wall for anyone to use them to climb over. This didn’t inspire him with confidence about the school.

His dad stopped outside the heavy, iron gates and spoke into the intercom, explaining who they were. Stiles noted the security cameras above the gate and along the length of the wall. It was worse than what Gerard had done in Beacon Hills High. Stiles remembered the itchy, crawly sensation he’d had when those cameras had first been put in, the distaste at being constantly observed. He resigned himself to two months of feeling like that.

The gates swung open and his dad drove inside. The drive passed between lines of trees up to the large building. There was no sign that this was a school, other than the size of the building, four storeys high with lots of windows. At least there weren’t bars on the windows. The building looked substantially less like a prison than the outer wall had. Stiles climbed out of the car and lugged one of his bags up a set of stone steps between carved figures of griffins. He didn’t see the point of hesitating.

A tall, grey-haired white guy was opening the door for them. He smiled with more warmth than Stiles had expected, but he could just be putting on a good show for the parent.

“You must be Stiles,” he said. “I’m Dr Hawthorn, principal of this establishment.” He held out a hand. Stiles shifted his bag over to his other hand and shook, hoping for a calmly respectful expression. He didn’t want to make a bad impression on his first day. He dreaded to think what this guy had been told about him.

“John Stilinski,” his dad said, offering his hand to shake. “We spoke on the phone.”

“Of course. A pleasure. Please, come through to my office.”

The office was a nice room, all carved antique furniture and shelves crammed with books. Under other circumstances, Stiles might have studied the shelves to try and get a feel for his new principal, but he didn’t want to seem rude five minutes after his arrival. He sat down in a surprisingly comfortable chair in front of the principal’s desk, his dad sitting down beside him. There was a third chair empty beside him; presumably most students were dropped off by two parents.

“Now, Stiles,” Hawthorn gave another smile, “there are a few rules we should make clear from the start.”

“OK,” said Stiles. “Rules are good. I can do rules.”

Under other circumstances, his dad might give a snort of laughter at that, but there was silence
“We have a firm timetable,” Hawthorn said, “starting with a run at 6am. If the weather doesn’t permit that, it will be replaced by indoor athletic activities in the school gym. Breakfast starts at 7am but you will also have an opportunity to shower and change in this time. The first block of academic work runs from 8am to noon; we’ll work out your academic schedule later today. At noon, there is indoor athletic training, followed by lunch at 1pm. The second block of academic work runs from 2pm to 4pm. Dinner is served promptly at 7pm. The rest of the afternoon and evening is free time to spend on leisure, personal study projects, or group sports. We do encourage students to participate in at least one group sport. Saturdays and Sundays, you don’t have the academic blocks but the meals and athletic requirements remain the same, with the addition that we sometimes organise hikes on Saturday or Sunday afternoons if the weather is good. The hikes are optional but encouraged.”

Sport twice a day, every day, probably more often. At least Coach wouldn’t be able to complain about his fitness levels if he ever got back to Beacon Hills High School.

“Is the goal to exhaust us physically so we’re too tired to cause trouble?” Stiles asked, before he could think better of it.

“Our goal here is to promote healthy bodies, minds, and attitudes. Exercise is a part of that. Are there any injuries or conditions that would interfere with the physical activities?”

Stiles considered making up a dodgy knee to get out of morning cross-country, but he couldn’t lie with his dad sitting right next to him. “No.”

“Any allergies or special food requirements we need to take into account?”

“No.”

“I understand from your father that you take medication for ADHD?”

“That’s right. I need it to focus.”

“You usually control your own supply and dosage?”

Stiles nodded. He felt a terrified knot in his gut at the thought that they might try to take control of his medication. What if they were the sort of people to consider medication a crutch to be avoided? What if they didn’t let him take his pills and then punished him for lack of focus? A spiral of ‘what if’s circled his brain, but Hawthorn didn’t seem to notice his fear.

“We have a very strict policy on drugs around here,” Hawthorn continued. “You will keep control of your medication but if you sell or give any to another student, there will be severe punishment.” Stiles wasn’t worried about that; he needed his medication too much to think about selling it. “You will have a safe in your room. I suggest keeping your supply there, but keep an eye on the levels. Even safes are not enough to discourage some of our more troubled students. If you suspect someone is taking any of your medication, you must inform a member of staff immediately.”

“Or, let me guess, severe punishment?” Stiles could help the trace of sarcasm in his tone.

“Precisely. Is there any other medication I should be aware of?” Stiles shook his head. “Any religious requirements that need to be accounted for?” Stiles shook his head again.

They continued on for a little longer, then Hawthorne got into more general rules. Cell phones were only allowed in the afternoon and evening, after end of the academic blocks. Use of a phone
outside of these times would result in the phone being confiscated for at least a week. Weapons or anything to make fire were banned. Students were expected to help out with clearing dishes on weekends and there was a rota. Limited switching of slots to be with friends was acceptable, but anyone found shirking duties would receive, big surprise, severe punishment. Stiles bit down on the urge to ask what exactly was considered a severe punishment.

Students were not allowed to leave their corridors after lights out, or go into another student’s room at night. Students were not allowed into another student’s room without permission from that student. Teachers’ offices were similar. Most of the rules were straightforward and to be expected. Violence and bullying were to be reported immediately. Apparently those sort of behaviours were not tolerated in any way here. Hawthorn was very firm in his tone, staring hard at Stiles as he said that, and Stiles wondered what he’d been told about the Jackson incident.

The rules were eventually finished, and Hawthorn offered to show Stiles up to his room. Stiles was surprised that the principal would give the tour himself. Stiles’ dad followed behind. He’d barely spoken during the meeting. They went up a flight of stairs and along a twist of corridors that Stiles was sure to forget. Fortunately, the accommodation corridors had the names of all occupants written on a sheet on the door. Each corridor consisted of ten bedrooms, with shared shower and bathroom facilities at the end. Stiles’ bedroom door had his name written up on a little slip next to it.

The room wasn’t bad; at least he wasn’t expected to share with a roomful of guys. There was a bed, a closet, some drawers, and a small desk under the window.

“I thought the school provided computers,” Stiles said, looking at the empty desk.

“In the library,” Hawthorn said. “We did have computers in the bedrooms for a short time, but a large number got infected with viruses thanks to students downloading personal files from some less than reputable websites. So now the computers are in public areas. If you wish to engage in personal activities, you’re welcome to use your phone, or I suspect you could get printed materials from your fellow students, but I make it a point not to know anything about that.”

For a fraction of a second, Stiles almost liked this guy. He wasn’t being at all condescending or superior about the fact that teenage guys would be using porn.

Hawthorn gave them a quick tour of the school, pointing out other accommodation corridors, teaching rooms, science labs, the big library, the teachers’ offices. Stiles saw some people around. A group of three students were in one of the teaching rooms, while a black woman talked them through some chemical formulae on a board. Another room had half a dozen teenagers holding conversations in French, while a teacher looked on. Stiles saw through windows into the teachers’ offices that some members of staff were in there, engaged in one to one conversations with students. There were more students in the library, working alone or in little clusters, but there were no signs of big classes. Maybe the afternoon slot was for homework and stuff, and the classes would be in the mornings. Stiles supposed he’d find out.

Hawthorn showed them the well-equipped gym and the dining room, before leading them back to the foyer. He smiled at Stiles’ dad.

“Do you have any questions about the school or Stiles’ place here?” he asked.

“No. Thank you.” The two men shook hands. Stiles’ dad turned to Stiles and pulled him into a stiff hug. “I’ll call you tomorrow and see how you’re settling in,” he promised. Stiles nodded and swallowed around the lump in his throat.
Stiles watched the door shut and waited for Hawthorn’s friendly demeanour to shift, but the man remained smiling.

“Well, Stiles,” he said, “we should get you sorted with your academic levels.”

He took Stiles down a corridor which hadn’t been part of the main tour. A number of doors were labelled as testing rooms, with little green and red boards on the door that could show whether they were available or occupied. Hawthorn picked one and flipped the board over to occupied and then ushered Stiles inside. The room was tiny, with a single computer and a chair in front of it. Hawthorn fired up a programme on the computer and the words ‘Initial Assessment’ lit up the screen.

“Don’t you have my academic file from my old school?” Stiles asked.

“We’ve found this to be much more useful. We have a very flexible approach here and this test will identify strengths, subjects of interest, and areas which require additional support. It will start with a series of basic questions on the standard subjects but will get progressively more difficult based on your answers. For every question, you have a space to answer, but also options to say that you have been taught something but have forgotten, in which case we can arrange some refresher materials, or to say that you haven’t been taught something. There’s no shame in admitting to not knowing something. In fact, the whole point of this test is to reach a point where you don’t know the answers so we can see what gaps in your knowledge we need to fill. There is no benefit in cheating, but I should inform you that the room is monitored and this machine doesn’t have access to the internet so you can’t Google anything. I’ll leave you to it.”

Stiles sat down at the computer as the door closed behind him. He clicked the button to start the test. The first few questions were ridiculously easy. There were some arithmetic questions a three year old could probably answer, some insert-a-word sentences, a multiple-choice history question asking him to give the year that the First World War started, and so on. As promised though, the questions got rapidly more difficult. The topics jumped wildly, from chemistry to algebra, but that somehow worked for Stiles’ random way of thinking. He ploughed through, only occasionally having to mark that he didn’t know something, then the questions started getting weird.

There were some language questions, where some text was displayed and Stiles had to type in the language and pick a translation from a multiple choice list. That was fair enough for French and Spanish, but the test threw in a Latin one and then what looked like Norse runes and, to Stiles’ astonishment, what looked like the elfish script from The Lord of the Rings books. There were a few other scripts Stiles couldn’t identify and, after pressing the ‘I don’t know’ button a few times, the language questions stopped coming.

What astonished Stiles and froze him in his seat for several seconds was a question that came up on the properties of plants. It asked for uses for the mountain ash tree and one of the options listed in the multiple choice section was ‘protection from supernatural creatures and energies’. Stiles stared at that answer for a long while, wondering what the hell this question was doing in the middle of a serious test. In the end, he clicked the button, and moved on with the test.
And now we meet some of the students. This is going to be an interesting story because there are so many original characters. I'm just hoping everyone will be able to keep track of who's who.

Stiles was sitting in front of Hawthorn’s desk again, watching the man flip through some printed sheets that offered the scores from the test. Stiles tried to read the results upside down while he waited for Hawthorn to speak, but he didn't know the significance of some of the little bars that stretched across the pages.

“Well, your scores look good for the core academic subjects,” Hawthorn said. “Average or above average for what we’d expect from someone of your age and background. Chemistry is a little below average.”

“Mr Harris was a jerk,” Stiles said, feeling the need to defend that grade. “He was more interested in picking on some of us than actually teaching us.”

To his surprise, Hawthorn nodded, “Given the rest of your marks across the science subjects, a poor teacher would fit. We’ll arrange for a few refresher packages to cover the work your old teacher should have taught you and I expect you’ll be caught up in no time. I’m not concerned about any of the others. Your economics scores in particular are looking good.”

“That teacher really knew how to make his lessons interesting.” Stiles was going to miss Coach. He could yell at times, sometimes being almost as bad as Harris when someone raised his ire, but he truly wanted to help people and he made the classes fun. When Coach got upset with someone it was because he felt they weren’t living up to their potential and he wanted to get them back on track in his blustery way.

“I’m not concerned about your standard academics,” Hawthorn went on. “From these scores and what your father told me, I expect you will be up to the level you should be or higher across the board by the end of the year. Therefore, I think we should discuss elective subjects. Given the time we have left this semester, I doubt you’ll be able to get college credit for anything, but we could set the scene with some introductory work in preparation for if you return next academic year.”

Stiles tried not to think about the implications of being here next year, but frowned at another part of what Hawthorn had said. “College credit? I’m not even a junior yet.”

“As I said, I doubt there’ll be time this year, not unless you put in a significant amount of private study time, but there are some subjects you could consider as electives. A study of myth and legend could count towards a college’s social science requirement. I noticed you have scored well in this area.” He glanced at the papers again and gave an amused smile, “You did better with the elfish and runes than you did with French.”

There had been a number of questions on mythical creatures, which had caught Stiles off-guard as much as the mountain ash question, but he’d relaxed a little when there were questions about The Odyssey and The Epic of Gilgamesh, since it seemed the questions about magical creatures were
just about their legends. Stiles had figured out that answering a question right on a subject yielded more questions on the subject, so he’d got quite a few myth questions, more than he expected other students would.

“Are you seriously telling me I could take a class in ancient myths,” Stiles said, “and if I do well in it, I’d get college credit?”

“Please don’t set your heart on the credits. As I said, we only have two months left before the end of the semester and your father wasn’t sure if you would be staying on here next year.”

Stiles wasn’t that interested in the credits, however useful they might be. He was interested in having someone teach him about all the magic creatures that were rumoured to exist. If he were here for a while, he could learn as much as he could to help the pack when he went home. He could try and get something good out of this nightmare.

“I’ll do it,” Stiles said.

“Don’t be too hasty. There are other options you might consider. You could take a language. I notice you did reasonably well on the Latin translation, despite not having studied it according to your school transcripts. You could take Latin or another language as an elective subject. Or perhaps computer programming. That’s a highly useful skill these days, and your scores show a strong logical mind that would take well to a subject like this. Or perhaps botany. You got a number of questions on plant properties.”

Stiles had done some personal reading after Deaton had showed him the mountain ash, including finding a book on primitive plant medicine. He’d wanted to learn if there were other magical plants around. He hadn’t found out much related to magic, but it seemed some of the more mundane knowledge had stuck.

“We would need to accelerate some of the standard biology topics,” Hawthorn was saying, “but botany is an option. Perhaps some advanced economics, given your strength there.”

He looked set to continue. It was starting to seem like Stiles could study anything under the sun here. How the hell did they have the staff to make that feasible?

“If college credit isn’t going to happen anyway,” Stiles said, “could I pick a couple and just start with the basics? Maybe do myths and botany.” He doubted a class here would cover anything about magic, but the mountain ash question suggested he might pick up a thing or two that could be useful.

Hawthorn nodded, “Certainly. Are those the subjects you want?”

“Could I do Latin as well?”

“Three elective subjects might prove a little too much work, especially since you still need to cover the core academics. I will include them and we’ll see how you do, but you should be prepared to drop one if the load proves too much.”

“OK.” Stiles wasn’t going to argue. Maybe he’d actually be able to read the Argent bestiary when he got home.

Hawthorn checked his watch.

“Your academic tutor will be Ms Alliscroft, but since we’re nearly at the end of the academic block for today, perhaps introductions and academic orientation can wait until tomorrow. It will give me
some opportunity to meet with her and arrange the work packages for your chosen subjects. In the meantime, you are free to go back to your room and settle in. Remember, dinner will be served promptly at seven. So unless you have any further questions, you’re free to go.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Can you remember the way back to your room?”

“I’m sure I can figure it out.”

Stiles let himself out of the office and tried to find his way back. He’d been thrown by the conversation back there but this could be a great opportunity. He could learn stuff that would be useful for the pack. And if he focused on studying, maybe the school would give his dad a good report and he’d be allowed to come home.

He made it back to his bedroom with only one wrong turn and started unpacking his stuff. He found the safe tucked in the closet and followed the instructions for setting the code before putting his ADHD medication inside. He was hanging up his sweaters when he heard the voices outside. He wasn’t surprised when the voices stopped outside his door. Someone knocked.

Stiles opened the door and saw a group of nine boys about his own age all trying to get a look at him.

“Hey,” said the lead boy, “I’m Steven. Can we come in?”

“Sure.”

It was a tight fit with all of them, but they squashed inside, all looking at Stiles with curiosity. Steven pointed the others out in turn and named them, but Stiles failed to keep track. He would need to study the names written up outside the bedrooms to try and remember.

“So,” said Steven, sitting down on the end of the bed, “what did you do?”

Stiles’ blood froze. “What do you mean?”

“Middle of year transfers are almost always because you did something that got you in big trouble and your parents decided to send you somewhere to straighten you out. So what did you do?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“We’ll share ours,” Steven said. “For me, it was shoplifting. I nicked a bunch of stuff from Walmart and places; I figured they were big companies so it wasn’t like it would make a dent in their profits so I figured it wasn’t doing any harm.” Something in his tone suggested he didn’t think that way anymore. “Of course, my parents found out and they shipped me here to learn my lesson.”

“My mom found my weed stash in my room,” another boy said.

“I got in a fight with a boy at school. He got shipped off to military school, so I guess it could have been worse.” He looked at the boy next to him, “Oscar’s got the best one. He burned his school down.”

“I didn’t burn it down,” the boy, presumably Oscar, said. “It was a small fire and it was an accident.”

The fighting boy ruffled Oscar’s hair in an affectionate way and said, “Yeah, sure. We believe you,
lil' pyro."

Oscar elbowed him in the stomach and both boys smiled.

“I’m gay,” said the next boy round. “My dad flipped out completely when he found out; he’s a real Bible thumper. He wanted to send me to this strict Bible school to teach me the error of my ‘sinful ways’. I don’t know what my mom said to get him to agree, but she got him to send me here instead on the condition that I do an elective in Bible studies every semester.”

“Sucks,” Stiles said. “I’m sorry.”

He shrugged, “To be honest, I’m glad to get away from him. And all the Bible study means I can throw a random Psalms quote into every conversation I have with him. When I went home for Christmas, he was so convinced about my reformation he wanted me to give a talk at the youth group to try and save other sinners.” He laughed, “I’m waiting until after I graduate to tell him that all this time reading the Bible in depth has made me an atheist.”

“I’m like Nick,” said the next boy, gesturing to the weed smoker. “My folks just gave me lectures about the smoking and the drinking but when they found me with pot, they decided I needed to be reformed.”

“I slept with my girlfriend and she ended up pregnant but I swear it wasn’t my fault. I asked her if we needed a condom and she said that she had the pill. Of course, our sex ed was abysmal and she thought she just needed to take the pill after having sex so really I think the school board should have been the ones held accountable for the pregnancy, not me.”

Stiles didn’t know what to say to that, so he just nodded. He looked towards the last two boys, but Steven said, “Oh, they’re different. They’re Potentials.”

“What?”

“You get different types of people here. You get the Troubled,” he said this with a proud smile, “like us criminals. Then you the sort who weren’t ‘living up to their potential’ at their old schools and got sent here to focus on the academics. Milo’s practically got his Bachelor’s already, insufferable genius.” This last part was said with a tone of brotherly teasing, rather than anything that could be considered bullying. A skinny, black kid ducked his head and looked sheepish.

“There’s also the Fits,” said Nick. “There are some kids who were overweight and their parents decided to send them to a school that makes us go for a run before breakfast. Pretty much everyone here is in one group or the other.”

“So what about you?” Steven prompted Stiles. Stiles realised he wasn’t going to get out of this room without giving them something.

“Locked a classmate inside a police transport van,” he said, “but in my defence, the guy really, really deserved it.” He couldn’t explain that the guy in question had been turning into a lizard monster and killing people.

The boy who’d been sent here for fighting nodded and said, “The guy I punched really deserved it too.”

“So,” said Steven, “did old Thorny persuade you to take any electives?”

“Mythology, botany, and Latin.”
There was a silence. Stiles wished he’d kept his mouth shut.

“You’re going to put Milo to shame,” Steven said.

“He told me I’d probably have to drop one.”

“Yeah, but Latin?”

Stiles just shrugged, since he couldn’t tell them it was so he could read a book about how to fight magical monsters.

“Botany’s good though,” said the other boy who’d been described as a Potential. “That means you’ll be out in the greenhouses. Mrs Joyce who runs them is nice. I could show you, if you like. We have time before dinner.”

Stiles leapt at the invitation, mostly so he’d have an excuse to get away from the scrutinising stares of everyone else. No one else seemed to be interested in the greenhouses, so they just filed out of the bedroom. Stiles shut the door firmly, wishing he had a lock for it, and followed his guide down the corridor. He tried to peer discretely at the names by the other doors to remind himself what this guy’s name was. It turned out he wasn’t very discrete.

“It’s Phil,” the guy said. “Don’t worry. Everyone will expect you to get names a bit muddled for a while.”

“Thanks.”

They passed a group of girls who paused their chatting to look at Stiles. Stiles felt like he was on the plate of a microscope being studied by everyone here.

“Times like this I wish I had an invisibility cloak,” Stiles muttered.

Phil grinned a little, and said, “You’re going to like Mrs Joyce.”

Stiles wasn’t sure of the connection until they left the main school building and crossed to a group of greenhouses. On the door of the first one, someone had taped a sign reading ‘Herbology Department’. The paper was browned and old, crinkled in places where the rain had caught it, suggesting it had been here a while.

Stiles hesitated at the door, remembering the lecture about rules and needing permission to go into places. He didn’t want to get in trouble on the first day. He voiced this concern to Phil.

“This isn’t an office, so that doesn’t count,” he said. “Those of us who study with Mrs Joyce come in all the time to water the plants and weed and stuff. It would waste everyone’s time if we had to go and get permission every single time.”

Slightly less concerned now, Stiles followed Phil inside. It was basically as he’d expected, with planters filled with all sorts of different things, most of which he couldn’t identify. One little cluster of plants though, he knew all too well. Purple flowers bloomed in the back corner. Stiles walked closer, staring at the familiar wolfsbane.
This school is basically my imagining of the perfect school... with the exception of morning runs.

“Please be careful with those,” said a woman’s voice. “They’re highly...”


Wolfsbane was poisonous to humans as well as werewolves. The main difference was that its presence didn’t make Stiles sprout into fur and claws. It was bizarre that it would be in the middle of the school greenhouse.

“Why are you growing wolfsbane?” he asked.

The woman, presumably Mrs Joyce, smiled a little, “Interesting choice of name. It’s more usually known as aconitum. One of my students is doing a research project on poisonous plants and how they were used in many cultures for hunting and warfare. So, be careful what you touch in here and for god’s sake, don’t eat anything. Oh, and don’t try to smoke my ferns either, we don’t grow pot in here.”

“You said that like people have tried?”

“Some of our students are not as bright as others. Some people seem to believe that everything green should be put in a joint and smoked. I take it you’re the new student. Stiles, right?”

“Right. Dr Hawthorn suggested I might want to do an elective on botany.”

“Are you a keen gardener, Stiles?”

“No really. I tried keeping a vegetable plot to try and get my dad to eat more green stuff, but there was never time to look after it with school and stuff so pretty much everything died or got eaten by slugs. I’m more... theoretical.”

“Theory is good, but practice is essential. We’re repotting the saplings tomorrow morning. I expect you to be here.”

“I don’t know what my class schedule is going to look like.”

Phil made an amused noise.

“I take it you haven’t met your academic tutor yet?” Mrs Joyce asked. “We approach things differently here from most schools. We don’t have a fixed schedule of classes. You get your work to do, but it’s up to you about how and when you go about learning it.”

“How does that work?”

“Your tutor will explain it all to you. Essentially, you get work packages with study materials and
you can work through it on your own or arrange time with a teacher if you need something explaining. We do group activities, like the repotting, and lectures and the like, which you can attend or not based on your assessment of whether you need to be there.”

“You don’t just have to go to stuff for your course,” Phil added. “Mr Olden runs a lab on combustion which basically involves blowing stuff up. Everyone’s done that lab at least a couple of times, whether they’re studying with him or not.”

Stiles was still trying to wrap his head around the concept of not having real classes. He couldn’t imagine a school that would just give him a load of work and tell him to get on with it. Maybe it could work, since he had no problem reading about subjects if they sparked his interest, but he could also see it being potentially disastrous. On the other hand, if they let him just get on with his work in his own time, it wouldn’t matter if he got distracted. He could flip between subjects at will and no one would criticise him for it. He was allowed to pick subjects to study just because they seemed interesting and no one would find it weird if he went to learn about random stuff just because he could.

It was completely contrary to his expectations of a rigid demand for focus. He’d assumed his dad was sending him to a school that would be all about discipline and order, and that thought had terrified him. The fact that his dad had picked a school like this instead was both comforting and disturbing. It was comforting, because Stiles thought he could work well in this way, but it was disturbing because it meant his dad must have spent a long time looking for the perfect school to fit with his way of working.

The decision to send Stiles here hadn’t been some impulsive choice made in a fit of anger. His dad had thought this through carefully. How long had his dad been considering this? Since the incident with Jackson? Or even longer?

“You OK?” Phil asked.

“I just... I need some air.”

The greenhouse was stuffy and humid. Stiles hurried for the door and outside, breathing slowly and trying to fight down the rising panic attack. He stared up at the clouds and counted his breath in and out.

“What’s wrong?” Phil had emerged from the greenhouse behind him.

“My dad found the perfect school for me.” Stiles felt like crying.

“And that’s a problem?”

Stiles wasn’t sure how to explain this. His dad had put time and thought and planning into the decision to send Stiles away. He could handle his dad being mad about the thing with Jackson and making an angry decision, but somehow this was worse. He’d thought carefully, and he’d still decided that the best option was to send Stiles away.

Stiles hugged his arms around himself. He didn’t want to start crying, not in front of strangers, with all the windows of the school looking down at him.

“Hey, it’s OK,” Phil said, putting a hand on Stiles’ shoulder. “Come on, let me show you something.”

Stiles followed, because his only other option was to stand in front of the greenhouse or to try and make it back to his room without having a complete breakdown.
Phil took him to a small shed near the greenhouse. He opened it up and stepped into the gloom within. There was little light inside, just whatever could force its way through grubby windows, but Stiles could see a lawnmower and plant pots and a whole array of gardening tools. There was a slightly rusty sink below one of the windows. Phil led the way to the back of the shed, to a wall that hung with trowels and spades. Stiles realised that it wasn’t actually a wall, only when Phil slid it forward a bit to reveal the space behind. It was a small, cramped area between the false wall and the real one, with a handful of dirty cushions and a couple of blankets piled up to make a small nest. There was even a box of tissues next to the pile.

“It’s my hiding place,” Phil said. “I’m happy to share. You can use the sink out there if you need to clean up before going back to the school. Just don’t forget to set an alarm. You can’t hear the bells out here and you don’t want to be late for dinner.”

“Thanks,” Stiles said.

“Don’t worry about it. You wouldn’t be the first guy who needed some alone time after getting sent here.”

Phil left, shutting the shed door behind him. Stiles sank down into the cushion nest, pulled out a handful of tissues, and let himself cry.

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Stiles hoped his face wasn’t too red and blotchy as he made his way back into the school and headed for the dining room. The shed didn’t have a mirror and the glass in the windows had been too dirty for him to see a reflection. He hoped that the eyes that turned to stare at him were just ordinary curiosity.

The entire population of the school poured into the dining. Stiles tried to do a quick estimate and guessed that there were about four hundred students in here, mostly high school age but a few younger. That was a fair bit smaller than Beacon Hills High School. Stiles fell into line like everyone else. The girl in front of him turned to give him a smile.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey.”

“I’m PJ.”

“Stiles.”

“So what did you do?”

Stiles guessed everyone in this school was wondering that, so he gave the same story he’d told the guys on his corridor. PJ nodded.

“You?” Stiles asked.

“Oh, I’m a Potential. My parents thought I’d do better in a school like this.” She didn’t quite meet Stiles’ eyes as she said it, making Stiles wonder if that was entirely true. He didn’t say anything though. It wasn’t like he was in a position to judge someone for keeping secrets.

“What’s the food like here?” Stiles asked, desperate for something to change the subject.

“It’s school food,” she shrugged. “Better than my last place but still it’s food that they cook for
several hundred people and stick under a lamp to keep warm.”

There were a number of food options. Stiles chose a lasagne and was given a load of vegetables with it as sides. Desert was a fruit salad. There was no sign of processed sugar available. PJ seemed to read his mind as she grabbed a fruit salad and put it next to her plate of chicken and vegetable hotpot.

“They take the healthy body part of the school approach way too seriously,” she said.

She invited Stiles to sit with her and he accepted, even though Steven waved him over to another table. Stiles pretended not to see Steven, unable to cope with his enthusiastic interest right now. He sat down next to PJ and the table filled in around him. Stiles was given another selection of names he wasn’t sure he’d be able to keep straight. At least no one was interested in him. One of the girls was talking about some stuff she’d been reading about forensic procedures, rambling cheerfully about the subject in a way that remind Stiles of himself. Around the table, the others were either listening or having conversations of their own quietly enough so as not to disturb her flow. No one was calling her a nerd or mocking her for being interested in her studies.

Stiles listened to the other conversations around him. At the table behind him, one guy was trying to explain to another about the difference between countable and uncountable infinities. This really was a strange school.

***

The text came from Scott after dinner. Hows torture school?

Stiles considered the question for a while before answering. He wondered if he ought to mention the mountain ash question or the fact there was wolfsbane in the greenhouse, but he simply texted back, Not too bad, but 6am runs.

Ouch!!!

Yeah

Stiles didn’t know what else to say to Scott. He guessed Scott didn’t know what to say to him either, because the phone sat dark and still in Stiles’ hand. There were no apologies between them. They’d done what they needed to do to try and protect Jackson from himself. Stiles couldn’t blame Scott for this anymore than he could blame his dad. He couldn’t even blame Jackson, much as he’d like to. Even Matt it was hard to blame, now that he was dead. All Stiles could do was lie on the bed and wish he knew how to make things right with his dad.

He gave up staring at his phone after a while. He might as well get an early night. He had a stupidly early run to wake up for.
The run was horrible, but Stiles survived and thankfully the breakfast afterwards was generous. Stiles tucked into his spinach omelette, sitting at a table with the others from his corridor. Everyone was fairly subdued except for the guy who’d been sent here for smoking and having weed. He’d been wheezing and coughing by the end of the run, sounding almost as bad as Scott used to be, and now he complained between mouthfuls about how the early runs should be classed as torture. Stiles was tempted to agree.

After breakfast, Stiles had his meeting with Ms Alliscroft. She was a stern-looking, middle aged woman who took Stiles through to her office. From the books on the shelves, she was a history teacher, but apparently she was his tutor for all his academic process. She explained the school’s approach in more detail than Mrs Joyce had, showing him his first work packages and walking him through the computer systems, including the archive of training videos, the self-testing software, and the process for arranging time with the teachers.

“There’s no limit to how much time you ask for,” she explained. “It can be if you need help understanding a topic, if you want to explore a subject in more depth than the standard work package goes into, or if you just want to discuss anything related to their area of expertise.”

Stiles was expected to hand in worksheets and essays for his subjects on a regular basis. If he fell behind in a subject or didn’t do as well as expected on a piece of work, a teacher would ask him to spend time with them instead of the other way around. Stiles guessed those check-ins were to make sure people weren’t slacking off without a structure of fixed classes.

“Whenever you finish work package in a subject, you’ll get the next one,” Ms Alliscroft continued. “You are responsible for deciding when to work on each one, but there are expectations that you will get through certain topics for each of your core subjects to keep you on track with standard curriculums as taught in other schools.” She showed him the computer system that let him track his progress across all of his subjects, displaying subjects to be covered and giving little progress bars. With the exception of chemistry, each of his core subjects showed between seventy and eighty percent, presumably because of his test results and the stuff he’d covered in Beacon Hills. Chemistry was down at fifty-four percent. His elective subjects sat at zero.

Most of his work could be done on the computers, with work submitted via the school network, but Ms Alliscroft gave him a swipe card for the printers in case he wanted to print anything off and continue working in his bedroom. She accompanied this with a lecture about responsible environmental practices and reducing waste. Apparently the school would track his quantity of printing and he might get called to justify it if he printed too much.

She finished off the meeting by handing him a notebook and pens, and telling him that their first weekly check-in would be on Thursday.

Stiles wondered about going to the library and starting to go through his work packages, but he remembered Mrs Joyce’s instructions and headed out to the greenhouses. She was in the largest of the greenhouses, along with Phil and about half a dozen other students, in the process of moving a number of small trees into bigger pots.

“Ah, Stiles, glad you could join us. Now, let’s see who was paying attention earlier. Who wants to fill Stiles in on the soil we’re using with these trees? Celia?”

A girl gave a summary of soil information, talking about the pH and the nitrogen levels and why
they were doing it this way. Stiles probably should have gone through some of the introductory work before coming here because he wasn’t sure he followed any of that. Mrs Joyce nodded and moved on to assessing one of the trees that was being transferred. She asked for an identity of the tree and one of the boys told her it was a Scots pine.

“Used for?” Mrs Joyce prompted, as she lifted the sapling up and had one of the girls work at easing the pot away from the base of the plant.

“Christmas trees,” said the boy.

“Yes. Anything else?”

“General construction and paper?” asked Phil. Mrs Joyce nodded.

“Also used to create rosin and a textile called vegetable flannel,” she added. She lowered the sapling into one of the larger pots and the girl packed new earth around it.

Soon, Mrs Joyce moved on to the next tree, and had Stiles come forward to help with the repotting, while she quizzed the others about the species and usage of the various trees. They went through four or five trees until they got to the rowan.

“Also known as...” Mrs Joyce prompted.

Stiles couldn’t help answering, “Mountain ash.”

“Very good, Stiles. Do you know what it’s used for?”

There was only one use Stiles knew of and he stood in silence for a few seconds, trying to work out if there was any other answer he could give, before he said, “Keeping away supernatural bad guys?”

There was laughter from some of the other students, but Mrs Joyce looked at him seriously and said, “According to popular superstition, yes. Anyone else know any uses?”

Stiles escaped from the greenhouse as soon as he thought he could. He cleaned up a bit and then went to the library to start working through his various core work packets. He poured himself into math exercises because it was easier than thinking about the way he’d embarrassed himself in the greenhouse, and the way Mrs Joyce had looked at him afterwards. She hadn’t laughed at his answer.

He wondered about going up to her and asking about the mountain ash tree and the wolfsbane she’d been growing in the other greenhouse. Could it just be a coincidence? Would she decide Stiles was crazy if he started asking her about it?

Stiles tried not to think about it, just got on with the rest of his work. He watched his progress bar move up a place as he completed a computerised test of his understanding of linear equations. He could get through this. He just needed not to seem like a complete nutcase by talking about supernatural bad guys with his botany teacher.

***

There were options for his noon exercise class and Stiles joined a group practicing self-defence. They started with fairly basic stuff but Stiles figured basics couldn’t hurt given that he’d been beaten up by an old man who’d been dying of cancer at the time. He tried to get his flailing limbs to be at least vaguely coordinated and found that he actually quite liked the class by the end of it.
Lunch brought an array of salads and then it was time for academic work again and Stiles dove into his chemistry package, working through the subjects Harris had failed to explain properly. There were headphones on the library computers, so Stiles watched some videos that went over the concepts. Stiles decided he liked the videos, each of which started with a simple explanation of a concept and then explained the same thing in slightly different terms, and then explained it again with analogies, and then started again but slower and with more basic points. Students could watch the videos for as long as it took to grasp the idea. If they got to the end of the half a dozen different explanations, they could click a button to book time with the relevant teacher. Stiles watched the first video all the way through, but once he realised what was going on, he usually only needed the first or second explanation for the concepts to click.

He completed a few online worksheets, which shone with green ticks when he submitted them, and he saw his progress bar for chemistry jump by five points by the end of the afternoon.

“In your face, Harris,” he muttered.

Stiles wasn’t sure he was ready to face the other students, so he lingered in the library while everyone else packed up their work and headed off. In the library, everyone seemed to obey the unwritten rule of not talking to each other. Stiles didn’t want to do real work, but he opened up his myths and legends introduction package and saw a list of suggested reading materials. He explored the stacks of the large library until he found the right section, which was considerably better stocked than the Beacon Hills public library had been when he’d been trying to research werewolves. Stiles found an English translation of La Bete du Gevaudan, as well as an interesting-looking book on fairy legends from around the world. He then picked Ovid’s Metamorphosis as well, mostly so that his choices would look less suspicious and because this one was actually on the list of recommended reading.

He swiped his new card on one of the machines near the entrance to the library and then scanned the books. There was apparently no limit to how many books he could check out, and no late fees, though he suspected he would get stern lectures if he forgot to bring them back.

He headed up to his bedroom and shut himself in with the books.

***

Stiles stared at his phone while it rang, wondering if he could get away without answering, but there had been enough silence between them lately. If he wanted to make things right, he couldn’t just ignore his dad. He answered the phone.

“Hey,” he said. His stomach tied into anxious knots while he waited for something.

“Hi, Stiles.”

“Hey,” Stiles said again. He cringed. God, when had it become so difficult to talk to his dad?

“Are you settling in alright?”

“Yeah. I guess. Whoever invited 6am runs needs to be locked away as a sadist, but otherwise... yeah.”

“And the teaching approach? What do you think of that?”

Stiles felt that wrenching in his gut again as he thought about how much research his dad must have put into finding this school.
“I think it could work for me,” Stiles admitted.

“Good.”

Silence strained between them. Stiles flopped down on his bed and stared at the cracks in the ceiling. He hunted for something to say.

“I’m doing an elective in botany.”

“Botany? Does this mean I’ll be subjected to mutant carrots over the summer again?”

“Hey, those carrots were tasty.”

When Stiles had attempted his vegetable gardens, his carrots grown in strange, branching, twisted shapes. They’d looked weird as hell, but they’d tasted fantastic, once he’d managed to clean the dirt out of awkward crevices.

Silence returned.

“The house is quiet without you,” his dad said. Stiles bit down on the urge to say something about how his dad should just come and fetch him then.

“I’m sorry,” he said instead.

“I know you are, kiddo, but I think this is for the best. That school could be good for you.”

Stiles didn’t know what to say to that.
“So what do you think of Metamorphosis?” asked Mr Gains, Stiles’ teacher for both mythology and Latin. He’d asked for Stiles to come and see him to talk about how he was settling into the school and the learning methodology. Now Stiles sat in front of Mr Gains’ desk with a cup of green tea as they discussed Stiles’ choice of books and how he’d done on the introductory exercises in the first work packages.

“It’s a bit repetitive,” Stiles said, “and some of the stories seem like they don’t really fit.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like there’s that one with the lovers and there’s no transformation in it and it’s like Ovid got to the end and went ‘oops, I need to make this fit, better make the berries change colour’.”

Mr Gains seemed amused, “You may have a point there. What about the other books?”

“The fairies book bothers me.”

“How so?”

“Every culture has their own stories and they’re all completely different. You’ve got fairies who are tall and elegant, fairies who are little people with wings, some that steal children, some that help with housework, but they’re all called fairies.”

“It’s a bit of a catch all term. It’s like so many different things under the sea are called fish, even though most of the species of fish are completely unrelated. A manta ray is nothing like a tuna. Imagine that there’s some other, magical realm and everything that lives there is just called a fairy, whether they’re imps or brownies or something else altogether.”

“That actually helps,” said Stiles, already wondering if there was such a place.

“You shouldn’t sound so surprised. It’s what they pay me for after all.”

They talked about the mythology books a little more and Mr Gains suggested some others for Stiles to try, and then they moved on to Latin. He gave Stiles some passages from the Metamorphosis in Latin to try translating as an exercise.

“I assume it’s obvious that reading the English version of the book while you do this would be cheating,” Mr Gains added.

“Yeah, I figured that.”

Stiles hesitated, thinking of the Argent bestiary, and he tried to figure out how to ask about it. Mr Gains obviously saw that Stiles wanted to talk about something else and prompted him to ask. Stiles knew he wasn’t going to get out of here now, so he asked about the differences between archaic and classical Latin. When Mr Gains was done explaining, he asked, “Why do you ask?”

“I... saw a book in archaic Latin and wanted to try and understand it but all the resources and stuff were for classical Latin.”

“What’s the book?”

“Oh it doesn’t matter, it just seemed interesting at the time.”
“Well, see you get on with the Ovid and maybe we could consider a translation of your book as a project.”

It could be worth considering. Mr Gains knew Stiles was interested in mythology. The man had books on his shelves about everything from golems to Valkyries. He probably wouldn’t look at Stiles like he was insane for wanting to read a book about werewolves and kanimas and whatever else might be in there. If he could get Mr Gains to help with the translation, maybe they wouldn’t have any nasty confusions like the master/friend thing with the kanima. He’d get Scott to email him a copy of the book.

“I’d like that,” Stiles said.

***

When Thursday came, Stiles was feeling optimistic about his first check-in, but still a little anxious. He wasn’t sure how this sort of thing went, but he’d been going through the work packages. The refresher work with chemistry had got him up to the level of his other core subjects and now he was working his way through them all. He was struggling with his Ovid translations and some of the botany stuff kept getting muddled in his head, but otherwise he thought he was doing alright.

He sat down in Ms Alliscroft’s office and watched her frown at her computer screen. His anxiety began overtaking his optimism as she kept just reading whatever reports she had on him. He fidgeted nervously until she turned to him and asked him how he thought he was doing.

“Well,” he said. “I mean, I think so but I guess that’s what you’re going to tell me. That’s why we have this meeting, right?”

“You’ve been going through your work packages at a rapid pace.”

“Good?” It came out sounding more like a question because he’d have thought she’d be more pleased about that.

“Stiles, what are the focuses of this school?”

“Huh?”

Ms Alliscroft folded her hands and leaned towards him across her desk, “Healthy mind, healthy body, and...?”

“Healthy,” Stiles tried to remember, “spirit?”

“Healthy attitude.”

“My attitude’s plenty healthy. I’ve been working hard. I’ve been studying. I’ve been handing in the exercises.”

“Yes. That’s the problem.”

“How is working hard a problem?” Stiles demanded, sounding more angry than he’d intended.

“I don’t know the details, but I know that you were sent here because you had some problems at home and I think you think you’ve got something to prove. I’m concerned that you’re trying too hard to show you can be responsible and you’re going to burn out.”
"I can’t believe I’m being told off for working hard."

“It’s not… don’t think of it as being told off, and it’s about whether you’re working for the right reasons. If you’re studying something because you’re interested in the subject, that’s one thing. If you’re working to make a point to someone else, that can cause problems if you don’t keep things in perspective."

Stiles felt a simmering rage below the surface. He was focusing on his schoolwork, which was what he was supposed to do. He was trying to get this place to give him a good report to his dad so he could get to go home. How could that be a bad thing?

“Do you want me to stop working?” he asked.

“No. Of course not. But tell me, how have you been spending your evenings?”

“Reading.” He was working his way through the mythology books Mr Gains had recommended.

“I think you should try joining one of the sports teams, or spend some time in the games rooms, or socialising with some of the other students. Maybe you should keep the academic work for the academic time slots, at least until you’re feeling more settled. Did you play any sports at your old school?”

“Lacrosse.”

“Excellent. The lacrosse team practices tonight. I think you should go along.”

“Do I have a choice?” Stiles asked.

“Of course you have a choice. I’m just concerned that you’re going to burn yourself out if you keep trying to work at this pace.” The way she said it made it sound like he really didn’t have much choice at all. Well, he could cope with that. He could go to the lacrosse practice. He could show Ms Alliscroft that he had a good attitude.

Stiles felt like he was backed into a corner where he couldn’t win. If he stopped working so hard, he’d probably get called out for being lazy and not living up to his potential. He’d thought studying was what was wanted and now it felt like they were changing the rules on him.

“Anything else I need to fix?” Stiles asked.

“Stiles, I think perhaps I haven’t made myself clear. It’s not about fixing something. It’s about making sure you’re happy. Mental health is as important as physical health.”

Stiles almost started laughing. He wondered what she’d say if he started talking about werewolves. What would she think of his mental health then?

“Can I go?” Stiles asked.

“You can go, just remember to keep things in balance. You don’t have to work all the time.”

Stiles left the office, feeling upset and angry. He was trying his best and apparently trying his best was a problem.

Steven was coming out of one of the other offices and he saw Stiles. Stiles couldn’t really avoid him, especially when Steven gave him a cheerful greeting.

“Hey,” was all Stiles said back.
“First tutor meeting?”

“Yeah.”

“Sounds like it didn’t go well.”

“Apparently I’m out of balance.”

“Well maybe you should ask for gymnastics training as an athletic option,” Steven said. When Stiles gave him an unimpressed look, he said, “Sorry. That was a joke.”

“I got that. I just don’t feel much like laughing.” He just wanted his dad to know he was doing everything he could to make things right. Getting criticised for exactly that was the last thing he wanted right now.

“How about you come blow something up on the Xbox? That always makes me feel better.”

“There’s an Xbox?”

“Down in the games room. You didn’t notice it? It’s a couple of versions old, but it’s still good.”

Stiles hadn’t actually set foot in a games room yet. That might have been part of the unbalanced problem Ms Alliscroft had been talking about. He considered going with Steven, but he wanted to check his email and see if Scott had sent over the bestiary yet.

“No, I’ve got a couple of things I need to do and then apparently I have to join the lacrosse team for practice.”

“OK. Cool. I’ll see you there.”

“What?”

“I’m on the lacrosse team,” Steven said. “I’ll see you on the field.”

“Great.” Stiles tried to sound friendly, but he was finding Steven’s attempts to be nice grating. Stiles didn’t want to make friends because that felt like giving in to the idea of being stuck here. He wanted to focus on getting home, not playing Xbox games or getting to know the other students. He just wanted to prove to his dad he deserved to come home.

He’d play lacrosse if that was what was required. He’d stop working on the other stuff outside of official times, but he could get the bestiary file and start translating it. That wasn’t part of an official work package so Ms Alliscroft didn’t need to know if he was spending his evenings on that. Then, when the school reported on his progress and his dad let him go home, he’d have something good to show the pack. He could be useful to them, even out here.

***

John Stilinski opened up his laptop and fired up Skype. It was the first time he’d had a parent-teacher conference over the internet but he supposed it made sense, given the circumstances. Today was the Friday of Stiles’ first week at the new school and it was apparently standard practice to have a check-in about status under circumstances like these.

John tried to keep a check on his nerves as he waited to hear what kind of trouble Stiles had managed to find for himself in his first week. Given the way Stiles had been behaving lately, the sneaking out, stealing his whiskey, lies, false police reports, fights, and all the chaos leading up to
kidnap and theft of police property, John was braced for the worst.

Dr Hawthorn’s face appeared on the computer screen, along with a woman he introduced as Ms Alliscroft, Stiles’ tutor at the school.

“So,” John asked, “what is his status?”

“On paper,” Dr Hawthorn said, “Stiles looks like a perfect student. He’s self-motivated. He’s been getting on with his work without any prompting and progressing through his subjects efficiently and with strong comprehension of the material. He’s chosen not one but three elective subjects to challenge himself with. He follows the rules, he’s respectful to staff, he’s quiet, he’s...”

“Wait,” John interrupted, “did you just describe my son as quiet and respectful?”

“Yes.”

Ms Alliscroft spoke up, “That’s actually what concerns me most. Stiles isn’t socialising with the other students. He’s been studying extremely hard, even in his spare time. Now, it’s not usual for new students to be a bit shy when they first arrive.”

“Stiles has never been shy,” John said. “Or quiet.”

Ms Alliscroft nodded, “Which just confirms my suspicions. I’ve seen this before.”

“Seen what exactly?”

“Over-compensation. He knows he did something wrong and now he’s trying to do nothing wrong.”

John remembered the conversation after the kidnapping incident, after John had been asked to resign as sheriff. Stiles had promised that he’d do anything to make it up to him. Now he was trying to make good on that promise, even at the expense of his entire personality.

John dragged a hand over his face and felt like the worst father in the world. He’d thought sending Stiles away to school would be the way to make things right. He’d thought Stiles would get a fresh start and a chance to focus on academics. He’d be separated from whatever bad influences had been luring him out of the house night after night. Better still, he’d be separated for jackass classmates who made Stiles want to commit felonies. He’d thought when Stiles had agreed to change schools that things were going to be alright again.

Except now Stiles was pushing himself to be perfect and that couldn’t be good for his mental health.

John remembered the car ride to the school, the way Stiles had tentatively voiced his love, as though he were afraid. He’d been afraid John wouldn’t say it back and that realisation tugged at something painful inside.

“Should I come see him?” John asked.

“It’s up to you, but it’s rare for students to get visits except at school functions. I don’t know how it would make Stiles feel to receive one,” Dr Hawthorn said.

John considered. It might make Stiles feel better to get assurance that he was still loved. Or it might isolate him further from the other students and make him feel like he was being pandered to. He might consider an attempt patronising, or be resentful that John thought he couldn’t cope on his
own. Right now, John felt like he hardly knew his son. He didn’t know how best to help him.

He felt no better when they ended the conference but John had decided not to go visit Stiles. He had to hope Stiles would settle in at the school, but in the meantime he had other ways to help Stiles see that he was still loved. No matter what. John found an empty box and started making up a care package. He took it to the post office just before closing and then set about making dinner. He made a stir fry with chicken, lots of vegetables and the light spray oil. He took a photo of the thing in the pan, making sure the low calorie oil was in the frame, and he texted it to Stiles.

*The things I do for love.* he typed in the text. *I hope this makes you happy :).*

He stared at the phone while he ate, waiting for Stiles to text him back. The screen remained dark.
Merry Christmas. As my present to you all, have some angst. :)

Stiles stared at the picture on his phone. It was blurred a bit by his tears. He wasn’t sure if they were tears of anger or sorrow. His dad was willingly subjecting himself to vegetables out of love for Stiles, despite everything Stiles had done. Stiles should have been glad about that, given all his efforts to make his dad eat healthily, but the passive aggressive nature of the text just riled him up. It was like his dad was trying to prove that he was the better one of the two. The pettiness burned.

Stiles already felt like the worst son in the universe. It wasn’t going to be helped by his dad prodding at him and stirring up guilt. But at the same time, the rising anger just made him feel even more guilty, because he deserved the guilt. He didn’t have a right to feel angry over being made to feel guilty because he’d just destroyed his dad’s life. And yet there was that message of love in the text. Stiles didn’t know how to respond to that. The feelings churned and swirled inside him until he couldn’t tell what was happening inside his own heart.

Stiles rolled onto his side on the bed, curling up in a huddle around his phone. He’d thought it was bad when his dad had sounded so cold and distant, but at least then Stiles had felt like he deserved it somewhat. He didn’t know how to deal with his dad sending him texts talking about love.

A part of him couldn’t help wondering if his dad was only loving him because he was supposed to. What if he was sending text messages with that word because that was what a father ought to do? What if his dad didn’t actually feel it and was just pretending?

The fears swirled inside him as the bell sounded, warning them that dinner would be starting soon. Stiles lay on the bed. He didn’t think he could face going downstairs and seeing all those other people in the dining room, all those eyes staring at him.

Someone knocked on the door.

“Stiles?” Phil’s voice called out. “Are you in there? You don’t want to be late for dinner.”

Stiles remained silent, smothering his tears in his duvet. Maybe Phil would think he’d already gone down.

“Stiles?” Phil called again.

Someone else on the other side of the door called for Phil to come. Phil called Stiles’ name one last time and then there was quiet. Quiet was easier.

Stiles didn’t know what he wanted right now. He didn’t know what he wanted from his dad. Something he thought would make him happy was just tearing his insides out. He didn’t know what to feel. It was easier to close his eyes and try to feel nothing.

But when he closed his eyes, he saw his dad’s words on the phone screen, with all the questions they brought with him. His dad hoped he was happy, but how the hell could Stiles be happy when his dad was out of a job and this school was probably costing him money they didn’t have. Stiles
had ruined everything with his lies. How could Stiles be happy?

He sat up and went to the desk, pulling out the pages of the bestiary that he’d printed out. He’d borrowed a dictionary of archaic Latin and a couple of text books from the library. He turned to an empty page of his notebook and began his translation.

***

Apparently skipping dinner wasn’t a good plan when he had to get up for a run before having breakfast. Stiles came to this conclusion as he opened his eyes and saw about a dozen faces between him and the sky. He wanted to close his eyes and pretend this wasn’t happening.

“Hey, back off. Give him some room.” Mr Jeffries hurried over. He was one of multiple gym staff at the school, and the one in charge of supervising the run today. There was a woman following behind him. Stiles hadn’t met her yet, but from her uniform it was obvious she was a school nurse.

“Crap,” Stiles muttered. The nurse crouched beside him on the grass while Mr Jeffries tried to herd the rest of the students on for their run. Stiles tried to sit up as he saw others approaching. The slower runners were coming up on them and stopping to see what the commotion was about.

“Just lie still for a minute,” the nurse said.

“It’s fine,” said Stiles. “I’m fine.”

“I was told you passed out,” the nurse said. “Are you in any pain?”

“No. Look, I fainted. It’s embarrassing but it’s nothing serious.” He tried to sit up again.

The nurse handed him a bottle of water. She let him sit up a little to drink so he didn’t end up choking, but she still wouldn’t let him sit up fully or, god forbid, stand.

“Look, I’m fine,” Stiles said.

“There are lots of reasons why you might have fainted and I don’t want to just dismiss this without knowing what the cause is.”

“He skipped dinner last night,” a voice interrupted. Stiles turned to glare at Phil, who was looking down at him.

“Ah,” the nurse said. “Were you feeling ill?”

“I just wasn’t feeling hungry. Can I just go? I’m sure I’ll be perfectly fine after breakfast.”

The nurse reluctantly agreed, but insisted that he should go for breakfast right away. She would go with him to ensure that the kitchen served him before the official time. She also told him that she wanted to see him for a check-up once he’d eaten.

Phil apparently wanted an excuse to get out of the rest of the run, because he stuck at Stiles’ side, helping him up even though Stiles really didn’t want the help. They walked slowly back to the school building, away from the running route. By now it was too late though; half the school had seen him faint or the aftermath. Everyone here would know about it before the end of breakfast.

Stiles sat down at one of the tables with Phil, eating slowly his large helping of eggs and toast, with a bowl of fruit salad to accompany it and a large glass of juice. Phil had managed to get his breakfast too, so they sat there in the otherwise empty dining room.
Stiles hadn’t said anything to Phil. He didn’t know what to say. He was angry with the other boy, even though Phil had probably thought he was being helpful. Stiles just didn’t like needing the help. He didn’t like being the weak one. Didn’t like being the one who fainted. He didn’t like being the fragile human.

“I’m sorry,” Phil said.

Stiles looked up sharply because, angry though he was, he had no idea what Phil was apologising for.

“What?”

“I knew you were in your room yesterday. I should have made sure you were OK.”

“It’s not your fucking job to look after me.” Stiles jabbed his fork into his eggs, angry at himself for being angry at Phil. This just painted another layer of guilt over his soul because he was being so pissy at someone who was just trying to be nice.

He just wanted to get through this meal so he could get out of here before everyone else was done with the run and came in for breakfast. He didn’t think he could face them right now after his humiliation.

“You haven’t got anything to be ashamed of,” Phil said.

Stiles glared at him again. Clearly if Stiles hadn’t got a reason to be ashamed, Phil wouldn’t have thought about needing to reassure him that he couldn’t feel ashamed, so that logic fell apart.

“I fainted in front of half the school,” Stiles said.

“It wasn’t half the school.”

“Are you going to try to argue about technicalities? I fainted and enough people saw it that everyone is going to know me as the weird, fainting kid from now on.”

Phil didn’t try to deny it. Stiles was glad about that.

“Feel free to use my hiding place as often as you like,” Phil said.

“Thanks.”

There were noises from outside the dining room, the faster runners must have showered and they were even now gathering for their breakfast. Stiles made his escape. He wanted to shut himself in his bedroom, or better yet, go and squirrel himself away in that hidden nest, but he had to go to the nurse and probably get quizzed to see if he had an eating disorder or something because he’d skipped one meal.

***

The lacrosse team practiced again on Saturday afternoons. Stiles turned up for practice and had to deal with everyone looking at him. The coach, Mr Andrews, made a point of asking Stiles if he was well enough to join in. Even when Stiles assured him he was fine, the coach didn’t push him hard. It probably didn’t matter. It wasn’t like Stiles was going to get to play given that the season was already mostly over and everyone else had been practicing together since the start of the semester.
After the main part of the practice was over, Mr Andrews brought them all together to talk tactics for an upcoming game. It was a friendly away game against another school. Stiles didn’t really pay much attention at first, since he’d probably spend the whole thing sat on the bench, until he heard the mention of the school’s name.

“What?” he said, the word slipping out. Eyes turned to him and he winced away from the attention.

“Stiles?” Mr Andrews asked.

“We’re playing Beacon Hills?”

“That’s right. You know that team?”

“I... um... that’s my old school.” Stiles said.

All the eyes were on him. Questions suddenly piled on him as the other students asked him about the team, about their strategies, about their weaknesses? Stiles felt like he was under bright lights in an interrogation chair. He couldn’t tell them the weaknesses of the Beacon Hills team, the team his best friend was still co-captain of, the team that still felt like his team, that he hoped to be back with next semester.

“Scott McCall, the co-captain, is an amazing player,” Stiles said, since he was clearly expected to give them something, and at least that comment didn’t feel like a betrayal.

“Co-captain?” asked Steven.

“Yeah. The other co-captain is Jackson Whittemore. He’s a good player too,” probably better than ever now that he was a werewolf, “but he’s a jerk. Feel free to hit him in the face with the ball as often as possible.”

There were some snorts of laughter at that, but Mr Andrews cut him, “I don’t think that should be part of our tactics, boys. Please remember the school’s policy on violence.”

He continued on with planning the match strategy. No one said anything to Stiles again until after practice. Stiles and Steven were both heading up towards their corridor to get cleaned up before dinner.

“The lacrosse jerk,” Steven said, “the one you mentioned, is he the guy you locked up?”

“Yeah.”

“And he really deserved it?”

“Yeah. He thinks the world revolves around him. Entitled prick.”

“I promise I’ll try to get at least one good shot at his face,” Steven said.

Despite everything, Stiles couldn’t help smiling at that promise. “I’d appreciate that.”
“Find a partner to work with,” Ms Hanson, the chemistry teacher, announced to the small group, “and come up to the front to collect your samples.”

She had just finished explaining the process of the experiment they were to perform, which involved identifying a number of samples based on what happened when they were burned. It seemed a minimum number of practical tests were required in science subjects to prove their knowledge of the material and earn their grades, so Stiles was here along with ten others who were at about the same level. Stiles turned to Oscar, one of the boys from his corridor, who was standing beside him. Stiles opened his mouth to ask the other boy to partner up.

“Since we have an odd number,” Ms Hanson continued, “Oscar, perhaps you should work up front with me.”

Oscar flashed Stiles an apologetic smile and made his way to the front desk. The space beside Stiles was quickly filled by a girl who Stiles remembered as having met on his first day.

“Partners?” she said.

“Sure.” Stiles then frowned, trying to remember her name. He gave up and asked with an apology.

“PJ,” she said. “Don’t worry. It’s not easy learning everyone’s name.”

She went to grab their samples while Stiles set up their Bunsen burner. She arrived back at their station just as he’d got it lit.

“Close call there,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Stiles looked down at the flame. That hadn’t been close to anything.

“Oscar,” she said. “You don’t want to be paired with him for anything involving burning stuff.”

Stiles looked back towards the front desk. Oscar had his own burner going and was inspecting the samples. Stiles remembered the stories from his first day, why everyone had ended up here. Oscar was the guy who’d started a fire in his old school. Stiles wondered if PJ’s comment now was referring to that, or something else.

He shrugged the thought off and they started with the experiment, making note of the colours that their samples burned and checking against the text book to identify the compounds. They’d worked out the first three when there was a blaze of brilliant, green light from the front of the classroom. Stiles looked up to see half of the front desk burning with a green fire.

Ms Hanson already had a fire extinguisher in hand as Oscar quickly backed away from the blaze. The fire alarm started blaring as Ms Hanson smothered the flames in white foam.

“Everybody, turn off your burners and evacuate the building,” she said, voice loud enough to be heard over the alarm, but still perfectly calm.

“I’m sorry,” Oscar said, over and over. “I’m sorry.”
“Just evacuate, Oscar.”

The students all trooped out of the lab, heading for the back lawn. PJ grinned at Stiles as they headed outside, muttering, “I told you so.”

The students were supposed to group up by corridor to make it easier for them to be checked off as safe, so Stiles headed with Oscar towards the rest of his group. They all stared at Oscar as he walked up. Oscar was studying the ground, avoiding their eyes.

“Has someone been letting you near fire again?” Nick asked.

“It was an accident,” Oscar said.

“Maybe you should just accept you’re never going to pass chemistry and stop trying to fry us all.”

“Leave him alone,” Phil said.

Stiles wasn’t in any hurry to join in the conversation. He was still trying to figure out what had happened back there. How had the fire grown so quickly? The only explanation Stiles could think of was that Oscar had split something flammable on the desk, but all they had were the samples and those had been tiny portions, nothing that could explain the quantity of green flame that had been burning.

“Hey,” Steven said, cutting Stiles out of his thoughts. “You’ve got mail.”

“What?”

“A package. I went up to my room after lunch and someone had left it by your door.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

When the all clear was sounded and they were allowed back into the building, it was nearly the end of the day’s academic block. Since there was no point going back to the chemistry lab now, Stiles headed upstairs and went to investigate the package. As Steven had said, it was lying by his door. Stiles took it into his room and sat down on his bed, looking at the Beacon Hills postmark. He wondered if Scott had sent him something, but when he tore open the paper, he saw a little note written for him in his dad’s familiar handwriting.

*Missing you lots. Thought you might want these. Love Dad.*

There was a sweater that had been in the laundry on the day Stiles had come here. There were a couple of books from his bedroom. There was a box of pens in a rainbow of colours and some spare notebooks. Most surprisingly of all, there was a Tupperware box of sugar cookies. The cookies were obviously homemade, and probably made by his dad, judging from their misshapen forms and variety of sizes. He couldn’t remember the last time his dad had tried baking anything.

He wondered if his dad had been really bored not having a job to go to, but he couldn’t deny the note, or the fact that his dad had packaged these things up to send to him. Stiles tried not to think about what this might mean about the situation with his dad, and what it meant for his odds of being allowed home at the end of the semester.

“You might want to share those,” said a voice from the doorway. Stiles looked up and saw Phil standing there, looking at the cookies.

“Oh,” said Stiles. “Right. Of course.” He held out the box.
“No.” Phil jerked his head sideways and then looked significantly at Stiles. The room next to Stiles in that direction belonged to Oscar.

Stiles left his room and Phil hung back, letting Stiles knock on that door.

“Come in,” Oscar said. When Stiles opened the door, Oscar was sitting on the bed, looking thoroughly miserable. He looked worse when he saw Stiles, saying, “Sorry I wrecked your experiment.”

“It’s OK. It’s not like you did it on purpose, right?”

“Right.”

Stiles held out the box of cookies. Oscar looked at them, surprised.

“Really?” Oscar asked.

“Yeah.”

“Thanks.”


Oscar smiled at him as he reached out and took a cookie. Across the hall, Stiles heard a bedroom door closing as Phil left them to the cookies.

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“What about if someone gets bitten by a werewolf but doesn’t turn into a werewolf?” Stiles asked.

Mr Gains considered the question, “Well, it depends on which legends we’re looking at. Some of the stories show different ways that a person can be turned. There are stories about people wearing the skins of wolves, or being cursed, or drinking water from a puddle inside a werewolf’s footprint. If you’re talking about a werewolf who was made by a means other than a bite, then their bite might not have an effect on the victim.”

The two of them were sitting in Mr Gains’ study for another lesson. Stiles had returned La Bete to the library and Mr Gains had wanted to know his thoughts on it. Stiles was trying to be cautious in his questioning, hoping to learn as much as possible without sounding like he believed werewolves were real. It made for a rather tense conversation from his perspective, though Mr Gains was smiling and relaxed over his cup of green tea.

“There are also tales of hierarchies of werewolves,” Mr Gains went on. “The leader of a pack has more power than the members of a pack, or werewolves who don’t have a pack. The leader, the alpha, if you will, has the ability to bite humans and turn them into a werewolf in their pack, but the others wouldn’t have that power.”

“But what if we were talking about one of these leader werewolves?” Stiles asked, thinking of Lydia on the field at the school dance. They still didn’t know why the bite hadn’t changed her. “What if there was a werewolf who could and did bite people and make them werewolves, but then he bit someone else and that person didn’t turn into a werewolf? Have you heard of any stories like that?”

Mr Gains gave Stiles a long, serious look before answering. “There would be a number of possible reasons. Perhaps the werewolf in question lost his power; there are stories of that happening. Or
perhaps the victim might not be human.”

“Not human?”

“There are stories of all kinds of creatures, some of whom can look human: selkies, vampires, banshees, fae. A werewolf could bite someone like that and the bite would have no effect.”

The thought was a disturbing one. He was pretty sure Lydia wasn’t a vampire but there were too many questions that needed answers. However human she seemed, he had to remember that Scott could seem human to those who didn’t know the secret.

“Would it be possible for someone to be one of those things,” Stiles asked, “and not know about it?”

“Definitely,” Mr Gains said. He took a sip of his tea, as though that was the only answer necessary.

“Well?” Stiles prompted.

“There are many stories of a child being born to a human and... something else. In those stories, it’s not uncommon for the person to not realise their heritage until later. Some stories have born werewolves who don’t come into their power until puberty. Other stories have those with supernatural gifts whose gifts don’t manifest until some trauma or triggering event. Banshees, for instance, are often said not to show a sign of their power until they have been close to death themselves. It would be perfectly possible for someone not human to appear human until an event such as a werewolf bite caused a different reaction in them from what would be expected.” Mr Gains took another sip of tea. “Of course, we’re talking hypothetically here. They’re just stories.”

“Of course,” Stiles agreed, quickly. Mr Gains gave him another of those serious looks that made Stiles wonder if he’d been too intent with his questioning. He was left wondering if he’d given something away, let slip that this was more than stories to him.

“I think,” Mr Gains said, “that we could try a different sort of lesson. Tonight.”

“Tonight?” Stiles asked. Tonight was the full moon. He’d started keeping track since Scott had become a werewolf so he didn’t even have to think about it. Mr Gains wanted to give him a lesson on the night of a full moon.

He remembered the wolfsbane in the greenhouse. What if werewolves were more than stories to Mr Gains as well? Even if that were the case, Stiles didn’t know how much he could really say. He didn’t know what side this man was on. Even if Mr Gains knew all about the supernatural, he could be like the hunters, assuming every werewolf was evil. Stiles couldn’t admit his best friend was a werewolf. He couldn’t ask without giving away too much if it turned out Mr Gains was like Kate.

“The lesson wouldn’t take much time,” Mr Gains said. “Come to my office when you’ve had your dinner. If will be something a little different from reading old books.”

He gave a smile that was probably meant to be reassuring. Stiles nodded, agreeing. He had to do this lesson because it was the only way he’d learn what Mr Gains really knew and what he really thought. Stiles couldn’t do much of anything until he had more information and the best way to get information was to accept whatever lessons his teacher was willing to give him.

He left Mr Gains’ office and went to get on with the rest of his studies, including an experiment for biology. He had to accelerate his progress in that subject for the sake of the botany lessons. He also had an essay to hand in for grading for English. He took a large dose of Adderall and poured
himself into his work to avoid thinking about what this evening’s lesson might be. When dinner came, he could barely eat, but he forced himself to swallow down his food because he didn’t want another fainting incident in the morning.

“Hey, you OK?” Phil asked, sitting across the table from Stiles. Stiles nodded. He wished he’d sat at PJ’s table instead, because Phil was way too observant.

“Just thinking about some work I’ve got to do,” Stiles said.

“Nothing to serious, I hope?”

“No, just some stuff for Mr Gains.”

“Of course,” Phil said. That just made Stiles frown more because why ‘of course’? It seemed a strange response, as though it was obvious that Mr Gains was the one who Stiles needed to think about.

Or maybe Stiles was overthinking it. He forced himself to eat quicker so he could get away and then he headed straight for Mr Gains’ office. Mr Gains, instead of inviting Stiles in, closed the door behind him and led Stiles down a corridor past all the other offices.

“So what’s the subject of this special lesson?” Stiles asked. Mr Gains reached a door that Stiles had previously dismissed as a store cupboard, and unlocked it. Beyond, a stairway led down below the school. Confusion was rapidly becoming nervousness, but Stiles tried to hide it. If there was something suspicious going on, he didn’t want Mr Gains to know that he knew, in case it gave away what else he knew. He remembered Allison’s story about how Kate had introduced her to werewolves and he felt a chill of terror about what might be down those stairs.

Mr Gains led the way and Stiles followed. His only other choice was running back to his room for his phone and calling for help, but who the hell could he call? His dad wouldn’t believe something was wrong and he didn’t exactly have evidence. All he could claim was that a teacher was being creepy. If he called Scott or Derek, they’d come, but they wouldn’t be able to get here in time to do much and it wasn’t like they could take him out of the school. If Stiles tried to run from here, he’d just end up getting sent back and his dad would be even more angry with him. Stiles ran the calculations quickly and decided that the best thing to do was to go along with this, at least until he knew exactly what this was.

But he left the door open at the top of the stairs so he had an escape route.

The hallway below the school was lined with doors. A couple stood open and it seemed this really was a storage area, judging by the linens in one and the shelves of stationery in another. Mr Gains walked down to the end of the hallway, and opened one of the doors. Stiles hoped they were just here to get supplies for the lesson. When Mr Gains waved Stiles inside, Stiles hesitated a moment and then stepped into the small, dim room beyond.

The light flicked on and Stiles blinked for a moment, taking in the mostly empty space and the air mattress in the middle of the concrete floor. There was a sleeping bag on the mattress, a bottle of water and a couple of books beside it. The room seemed otherwise empty until Stiles spotted the line of black dust that ran around the base of the walls in a continuous line.

Stiles spun back to the door just in time to see Mr Gains finish pouring the handful of mountain ash in a line across the doorway, closing the barrier.
I believe the appropriate phrase is "Mwa ha ha ha!" :)

Chapter End Notes
“What’s going on?” Stiles asked.

“I’m sorry, Stiles.” Mr Gains straightened up from the boundary line, looking at Stiles through the doorway.

“You’re sorry?” Stiles looked at the mountain ash line. He should still be able to cross it, based on everything Deaton had told him, but then what? Mr Gains was standing between him and way out.

“We have to take precautions. There are hundreds of innocent people in this building and the full moon will be rising in a few minutes. We can’t take chances. If you can demonstrate you can stay in control, then we can revisit whether this is necessary next month.”

Stiles thought about the full moon with Scott when he’d still be getting used to being a werewolf. He’d handcuffed Scott to a radiator to try and keep him from hurting anyone. He almost started laughing.

“You think I’m a werewolf?” Stiles said.

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of in that,” Mr Gains said. “We just have a responsibility to the humans in this school as well. I know this can’t be pleasant for you, but the school has a policy for the safety of all the students.”

“The school has a policy on werewolves?”

“This wouldn’t be the first time the bite resulted in someone being sent here. Dramatic changes in attitudes, acts of violence, secretive behaviour – none of these things are unusual when a person is getting used to a new state of being. The school policy is to isolate a werewolf for their first full moon, to ensure no one gets hurt, until we can see whether or not such measures are necessary.”

Stiles looked down at the air mattress, at this attempt to make the room a bit more comfortable. He even had books, a couple of volumes on mythology from Mr Gains’ private collection. This wasn’t like Kate chaining Derek up for torture. If Stiles had known about mountain ash that first full moon with Scott, he might have tried something similar. It was just a shame that they’d got everything completely muddled.

“I’m not a werewolf,” Stiles said.

“You don’t need to deny it, Stiles. All those questions you asked me? And Mrs Joyce told me that you felt ill in the presence of wolfsbane.”

Stiles remembered his need to leave the greenhouse quickly shortly after finding those plants. Of course, that had been nothing to do with the wolfsbane and everything to do with his emotional state.

“I also fainted in the middle of the morning run,” Stiles said. “When’s the last time you heard of a werewolf fainting?”

Mr Gains stared at him for a moment. He opened his mouth, closed it again, and then said, “That’s
“And I wasn’t reacting to the wolfsbane or I’d have run out of there a lot sooner.” Stiles moved to the doorway and crouched down next to it. He held his hands over the line and swiped them apart, the dust beneath moving aside at the gesture, breaking the barrier. “Really not a werewolf,” he said.

Mr Gains took a step back, staring, as Stiles straightened up.

“You’re not a werewolf,” Mr Gains said. Stiles just shrugged.

“All your questions,” Mr Gains said, “about getting the bite but not changing? You were talking about yourself?”

“Nope. I’m nothing but human here.”

Mr Gains looked like that was utterly astonishing. He looked down at the broken line of mountain ash.

“But you know about these things?” he asked.

“I know some stuff. I don’t have to be a werewolf to know about them.” They stared at each other for a little longer, then Stiles said, “Does this mean I can leave this room now?”

There was only a moment of hesitation and then Mr Gains stepped aside. In the hallways below the school, Stiles breathed a little easier. He could see the stairs and the way up. He didn’t leave yet though.

“So,” he said, “how does a school end up with a werewolf policy? Does this mean there are other werewolves here?”

“Not right now,” Mr Gains answered. “Not werewolves anyway.”

“But people other than werewolves?”

That hesitation again, then Mr Gains said, “I suppose you should probably come with me.”

“You’re not going to try and lock me in a room again?”

“No. I’m going to introduce you to some of the more unusual students we have in this school.”

***

Stiles crossed the lawn under the moonlight with Mr Gains. He glanced towards the greenhouses, dark and silent. There were still lights on in the building behind them; lights out wasn’t for another hour. Still, it seemed strangely dangerous to be walking away from the school building as the night fell around him. They reached the edge of the lawn and moved under the trees through which they ran each morning. It didn’t take long for the school building to be hidden behind the tree trunks and undergrowth.

A minute later, Stiles picked up voices under the trees. Someone was laughing but Stiles was still too far away to make out words clearly. He wondered exactly what he was walking in on. Not werewolves, but his conversations with Mr Gains had shown that there were plenty of supernaturals who might be lurking out in the woods. Stiles gave a nervous look at Mr Gains, who didn’t seem to notice at all.
“No, you can keep your distance,” a girl’s voice was saying. A familiar voice.

“I’m not going to touch anything,” a boy protested.

“You never need to touch anything.”

“I’m with PJ,” another voice put in. “You can sit over there.”

“Come on, it’s not his fault.” Stiles knew that voice. That was Phil.

“It never is his fault,” said PJ’s voice, “but I’d still prefer not getting my face burned off.”

A light shone through the trees, flickering and bright. Stiles approached the campfire and the group clustered around it. Six students sat around the fire in the small clearing, with Oscar sitting a little further off. Everyone turned to look at Stiles as he stepped into the circle of firelight.

“I knew it!” Phil said, grinning.

“Stiles,” Mr Gains said, “I’d like you to meet our special class.”

Stiles looked around at the faces. He knew Phil, PJ, and Oscar, but he didn’t know the other four. He gave a nervous wave.

“Pull up a log,” PJ said, gesturing to the collection of chopped logs that they were using as seats.

“All students in this group,” Mr Gains said, “take turns to demonstrate something different to the class each month. This month, I believe it’s Lucy’s turn. Lucy, do you mind explaining why there is a fire hazard without staff supervision?”

A girl a little younger than Stiles looked up and said, “Mrs Joyce is getting some ingredients for me. I’m going to do a hawkeye potion.”

“Hawkeye potion?” Stiles asked. “You’re making a potion to turn people into arrow-shooting superheroes?”

“It’s a potion to improve eyesight,” Lucy said, “to let people see long distances.”

Stiles felt like his world had turned upside down in the past hour. He stared around at the group, who were all perfectly accepting of Lucy’s announcement. He looked at Mr Gains, who just nodded along to the explanation.

“This is a class on making magic potions?” Stiles asked. “How come no one told me this was an elective option?”

“It’s not an elective we offer to most of our students,” Mr Gains said, “and potions are just a part of it. All students are encouraged to demonstrate their personal gifts.”

Stiles had come across a few times since arriving at this school the idea of students learning by teaching others. They were encouraged to try and explain concepts to each other both to help students that hadn’t got it yet but also to make sure that they had understood correctly. Stiles hadn’t thought the same principle would apply to magic lessons. He hadn’t thought anything would apply to magic lessons.

“What are your gifts?” Phil asked.

“Yeah, Phil and I have a bet on,” PJ said. Mr Gains looked disapprovingly at her as she said that.
Stiles guessed the school had a policy about gambling as well.

“Don’t have any gifts,” Stiles said.

“Come on. You have to have something to be here,” said one of the boys.

“I made a mountain ash barrier once,” Stiles said. It was the only thing he could think of to say. He didn’t have any special talents. The best he had was a lot of skill with Google. When the pack needed research doing, he was the guy who did it, but that probably wasn’t what these guys meant.

Mr Gains was the one who asked, “What was the barrier around?”

“I made it around a whole nightclub,” Stiles said, “to try and trap a kanima inside.”

“What the hell’s a kanima?” PJ asked.

“A werewolf with an identity crisis,” Stiles answered. “Sometimes, a person gets bitten and something goes wrong and instead of turning into a werewolf, they turn into a lizard monster with paralysing venom in their claws. They go around killing people under the command of someone else.”

Everyone was staring at him. He wasn’t sure whether anyone believed him. He also wasn’t sure if he belonged with this group, with people who were making magic potions as a lesson, with people who talked about gifts.

They were distracted by the approach of Mrs Joyce, carrying a plastic box containing a number of different herbs, and a large bag slung over one arm. She looked a little surprised to see Stiles sitting around the fire, but she looked towards Mr Gains and received a nod, after which she proceeded as though nothing had happened, handing over her supplies to Lucy. Lucy slipped from her log and started pulling things out of the bag, starting with a chopping board and a knife.

She pulled a number of herbs out of the box, naming them in turn and starting to chop them up finely. The other students moved around to look. Even Oscar edged closer, though he was still keeping his distance from the fire. Lucy took out a pot from the bag and filled it with water. The plastic bottle the water had come in did slightly diminish the grandiose magical feeling of the occasion. She set the pot to boil and scraped the herbs in.

“That needs to simmer for a while,” Lucy said. She pulled a small nut out of the herb box. “This needs to be ground in the light of the moon. It doesn’t have to be the full moon, but the stronger the moonlight, the stronger the potion.” She moved her work over to an area of the clearing where the moon was shining clearly through the trees and set to work.

“How do you learn recipes like this?” Stiles asked.

Mrs Joyce gave a smile, “We have some books which are not in the school library. I can allow you to borrow one.”

Stiles couldn’t help grinning. A part of him wondered if he’d stumbled into a dream because he couldn’t quite believe he was going to be lent actual books of magic potions. This whole evening seemed somewhat surreal.

While Lucy worked, Mr Gains looked at Stiles and asked, “So what happened to the kanima?”

“There was this whole thing where his ex-girlfriend showed him a key and told him she still loved him, and then he died and came back as a normal werewolf. If there is such a thing as a normal
“I may have to get you to expand on this story,” Mr Gains said. “My knowledge on kanimas is shockingly low. Perhaps you could fill in some gaps as your contribution to this group.”

“Um… sure,” Stiles said. He could give a lecture on a kanima, although most of the advice would be about not getting sliced in the neck by one. At least this way it felt like he might have something to add to the conversation.

“That’s the base done,” Lucy said, “it’s the same standard mix as a lot of potions aimed at giving the drinker the attributes of something else, so now I just need to add the thing that the potion gets the attributes from.”

She dug into the bag and pulled out a small, glass vial. Stiles peered closer to see what was in it, and then immediately wished he hadn’t. He turned away, bringing a hand up to his mouth in case of vomit.

“Are those eyes? Yep, those are actually eyeballs. Oh god.”

“Ethically sourced,” Mrs Joyce said. “The birds died of natural causes.”

“But they’re eyeballs!”

One of the boys laughed, “You fought a kanima but you’re grossed out by this?”

“The kanima just oozed paralytic slime everywhere. There was no plucking out of eyeballs. This is way grosser.”

“You can’t be squeamish if you want to learn magic,” Lucy said. She opened the vial up and tipped the eyes into her potion. Stiles looked away.

He hated the thought that he might not be cut out for magic class. He couldn’t get given the opportunity to learn about magic potions and whatever else this group got taught and then back away from it because of eyeballs. He forced himself to watch as Lucy stirred the potion and then pulled out a bottle from the bag.

“All that’s left now is to imbue it with power,” Lucy said.

“What does that mean?” Stiles asked.

“Seriously?” asked the boy who’d laughed about the eyeballs.

“I found out the supernatural existed about two months ago,” Stiles said, “and I’ve spent most of that time trying not to get killed by psychopathic alpha werewolves or murderous lizard monsters. Give me a break if all I know about potions comes out of Harry Potter.”

“Trevor,” said Mr Gains, “we don’t mock people for not having had the opportunity to learn something before.”

“Sorry,” muttered the laughing boy. He didn’t sound particularly sorry.

“Is there another bottle?” Mr Gains asked. “Perhaps Stiles would like to try the imbuing ritual himself.”

“Um, sure,” said Stiles. “As long as it doesn’t involve eyeballs.”
“It’s what gives the potion its power,” Lucy said. “Otherwise it’s just a load of herbs. You have to put a spark of magic inside it.”

She filled two glass bottles with the murky green liquid and put the tops on them. She handed one to Stiles and they moved away from the fire to a clearer patch of ground. Stiles was aware of everyone else moving to watch them and he felt like he was up on stage for a performance and no one had given him a script.

“You can get magic from all sorts of places,” Lucy explained, “but the simplest is to draw it up from the earth. There are currents that flow through the world and you can tap into them and draw out a little power to use in your spells. This school’s built over a couple of these currents and we have our meetings here because this is the point where the two currents cross, so it’s a focal point for energy. You just have to reach down and find it.”

“Oh,” said Stiles. “How?”

Lucy blinked at him. She turned to Mr Gains, desperation on her face. “I don’t know how to explain it. I can do it, but I can’t put it in words.”

“Anyone else?”

“You picture it,” said PJ. “You just sort of imagine it working and it works.” She faltered, sounding less certain than when she’d started, then she too turned to Mr Gains for help.

“First,” said Mr Gains, “draw a circle around the bottle. That will contain the power.” Stiles saw that Lucy had already scratched a circle in the dirt around her bottle, so he copied. “Then, you have to visualise in your mind what’s happening. With magic, will is important. It matters more that you can imagine something working than that you know how it works.”

Stiles remembered Deaton saying something similar. He remembered needing to make the mountain ash line when he had only a handful left and how he’d just pictured that line, even though he knew it was impossible. He nodded.

“Try picturing a well,” Mr Gains said. “Imagine there’s a deep well of magic below our feet and you’re drawing up a bucket full of it to pour into the potion. Just close your eyes all hold the image in your mind.”

So Stiles did just that, sitting down on the earth next to his potion bottle. He didn’t picture a well, but glowing streams beneath his feet, the currents the Lucy had talked about. He imagined them as flowing light. He imagined reaching down and scooping up some of that light, lifting it to the surface. He held on to the image desperately, needing this to work, needing to not look like a completely hopeless case in front of the others.

He remembered that night at the club, at the need he’d felt then. He’d had to make the barrier because there was no other option. He needed to make this spell work now. He tried to make the feeling the same, the certainty that the spell had to work. He pulled up that glowing light and imagined it pouring into the potion bottle.

“Holy crap,” Trevor said.

Stiles opened his eyes. A couple of feet away, Lucy’s potion bottle was gleaming in a way that could be dismissed as the light from the fire catching in the glass. No one could make such a claim about Stiles’ bottle. It was glowing. It outshone the fire with a silvery light.

“I thought you said you didn’t have any gifts,” PJ said.
I have no idea where the idea of ethically sourced eyeballs came from, but I couldn't resist it. :)

Chapter 9

Stiles stared at the bottle, as surprised as everyone else, as the light slowly faded. He stared, breath catching in his throat in his astonishment. All this time, he’d been the weak one, the human one, but that bottle had been glowing with power.

“Did I... that was me?”

“That was you,” Mr Gains said.

The students crowded a little closer to him to look at the bottle. The light was dimming now, and the bottle just looked like a glass bottle containing murky green liquid. Stiles could almost believe that he’d imagined what had happened moments before, except for the surprise and awe on the faces around him.

“It seems that you have gifts after all,” Mr Gains said. “I think we should arrange an extra session to discuss what this means for your education.”

Stiles nodded, too dazed to do much else.

Then the fire exploded.

It was like someone had just thrown a firework into it. Sparks and flames shot out in all directions. Students yelped and scrambled to get out of the way. Stiles tried to move backwards, but he’d been on the floor and he ended up scrambling in a strange, backward crawl because standing up would have taken time and left him too close to the burning madness.

Mr Gains muttered something, inaudible over the shrieks of fear and the crackle of flame, and then water appeared mid-air, splashing down over the campfire. Stiles coughed through the sudden smoke, seeing the other students hurrying to stamp out the last bits of fire that still burned, scattered around the clearing by the explosion. Mr Gains muttered again and a few bits of burning leaf and branch sizzled out in the trees around them.

In seconds, they were left in darkness, with only the moonlight through the trees illuminating the scene.

“Is anyone hurt?” Mrs Joyce asked. There were a few answers of no.

“Damn it, Oscar!” PJ snapped.

“I was just trying to get a closer look,” Oscar protested.

“I think we’ve had enough for one night,” Mr Gains said. “You should go back to the school and go to bed; you’ve still got your run in the morning. Stiles, come and see me in the morning and we can discuss things further.”

Stiles got to his feet. He picked up the potion bottle he’d been working on. Lucy had already started walking back in the direction of the school building, so Stiles offered it to Mrs Joyce.

“Keep it,” she said.

So Stiles clutched the bottle and walked back towards the school, falling in with Phil, PJ, and Oscar.
“What the hell happened with the fire?” Stiles asked.

“Oscar happened,” PJ answered.

“Fire just goes crazy around me,” Oscar said. “I don’t mean it to happen.”

Phil put an arm around Oscar’s shoulder and squeezed, “It’s not your fault. We know it’s not your fault.”

Oscar looked so thoroughly miserable that Stiles decided to change the subject, saying, “Right now I feel like I don’t know much of anything.”

“We can fix that,” said Phil. “Ask away.”

“So, you guys were all sent here to learn magic?”

“My family has a history of witchcraft,” PJ said. “My great grandma, my aunt, one of my cousins. When my aunt realised I had the gift, she convinced my parents to send me here to get real training. About half the group have similar stories.”

“I have a psychic talent,” Phil said. “Sort of. It’s mostly empathic. I pick up on people’s feelings. Occasionally I’ll get a flash of knowledge about someone or I’ll get an image of something that I usually can’t interpret at all. Like, the first time I saw you, I had this image of half a dead wolf buried and there was a spiral around it.”

“Laura.”

“You actually know what I’m talking about?”

“Yeah. Laura was a werewolf. The spiral was a revenge symbol. It was her brother’s way of saying that he was going to stop the person who’d murdered her.”

“See, this is what I’m talking about. Even when my gift works, it’s useless. I didn’t tell you anything you didn’t already know. I can’t do spells like PJ or the others. I just get pictures that don’t help anyone.”

“At least your gift doesn’t set everything around you on fire,” Oscar said. “I wasn’t sent here to learn to use magic. I was sent here to learn to stop using it.”

“How’s that going for you?” Stiles asked. Oscar glared at him.

They’d reached the door back into the main school building. Inside, the corridors were eerily quiet. They only had a few minutes left before lights out and most of the students were already in their rooms. The others who’d been out under the moonlight had already hurried ahead. They followed, up the stairs towards the bedrooms.

“You shouldn’t talk about this with the others,” Phil said.

“Yeah, I figured that,” Stiles said.

PJ nodded goodnight and headed off towards her bedroom, and the three boys hurried on to their corridor. They’d barely made it through the door when the hall lights went out. Stiles clutched his bottle of potion to his chest and wondered what would happen if he drank this. What would he see?

He slid into his room and quickly undressed, setting the potion bottle down inside his safe. He found his phone to set the alarm for the morning, only then seeing the list of texts and missed calls.
Scott had been trying to get hold of him all evening.

Fear clenching inside him, Stiles rang him back.

“Oh thank god,” Scott answered the phone. “Where the hell have you been?”

“What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong is you weren’t answering. I wanted to talk to you about Jackson’s first full moon but you didn’t answer. I thought something had happened to you. I was thinking about running over to that school to make sure you were OK.”

Stiles started laughing. After everything that had happened tonight, it was hard to take Scott’s worrying seriously. Stiles still felt like he might be dreaming, like the spell and potion and everything else were just a delusion to shore up his self-esteem. But he’d done it. He’d done magic. And he had teachers here willing to teach him more.

“Don’t laugh!” Scott snapped. “I was worried.”

“I left my phone in my room. They have rules here about when you’re allowed to have phones so I just didn’t have it on me.”

“So nothing happened?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Stiles said. “I was nearly set on fire by a guy with out of control magic.”

“What?!”

“Don’t worry though, the teacher did a spell and put the fire out before anyone could get hurt. Oh, and I made a magic potion to give me super-sight.”

“Are you serious right now?” Scott asked.

“Yep. There’s a special class for people who know about the supernatural. I think I may be at the greatest school since Hogwarts.” He grinned out the window. He could see the lawn and the greenhouses and the trees beyond them. He couldn’t tell now where they’d been, but he’d be able to find it again. And he had the meeting with Mr Gains in the morning.

Crap, the morning.

“Forget what I just said about this being a great school,” Stiles said. “I’ve still got a 6am run to wake up for. I need to get to bed. I’ll see you soon.”

“Stiles, be careful.”

***

Stiles turned up to his lesson with Mr Gains with the Argent bestiary on a USB drive. He had it tucked into his pocket, waiting for the right moment to show it. He wanted information before he gave away his secrets. So he sat down in front of the desk and accepted a cup of green tea from the teacher and started asking questions.

“Do all the teachers here know about the special class?” he asked.

“Most. Not all know all the details, but there are provisions that need to be made for some of the students, like always having a fire extinguisher to hand if Oscar is doing science experiments, or
that a werewolf might not be in their room on the night of the full moon. Generally speaking, it’s easier if the staff know, so when someone knew joins us, we ease them into the concept after a couple of months."

“And how do you identify students who are in the know?”

“Usually, the parents know and that’s the reason they send the student here, so they tell Dr Hawthorn directly. If we are left to figure it out from behavioural clues, we’ve been known to make mistakes.” Mr Gains gave a sheepish smile. Stiles smiled back.

“What happened last night, the potion glowing like that, that wasn’t normal, was it?”

Mr Gains shook his head, “No. Every human has some ability to do magic and they can build on it with practice and training, but some people have a genuine gift, a spark of talent that they can channel. You definitely have a spark. If that was your first time doing magic, I would say you have the potential to become powerful, with the right training.”

“Technically,” Stiles said, “it was my second time.”

Stiles explained the full details of the mountain ash line, how he’d run out of powder and had to make the line anyway. Mr Gains looked impressed.

“Creating a barrier of mountain ash,” he said, “is something just about any human can do, but what you did, creating more powder when you were nearly out, that’s... to conjure something from nothing without a ritual, without a focus of power, that’s...” He shook his head. “Stiles, I don’t know exactly what you did to get sent here, but I think you need to be here. To have a talent like that going untrained would be a tragic waste.”

“So dedicated magic lessons?” Stiles asked. He was excited but he couldn’t ignore the twist of anxiety inside him. Mr Gains expected him to be amazing at this but what if the potion had been a fluke? What if he never managed magic again? What if he wasn’t as good as Mr Gains thought he was?

But he wasn’t going to let a few fears stop him trying because, holy god, he had a chance to learn real magic.

Mr Gains started with principles of energy flows, bringing out a book on ley lines and telluric currents for Stiles to read later. All magic, it seemed, involved drawing in magic and shaping it via a force of will to get the desired outcome. Words could be used to focus the mind and rituals could help with the shaping, magical objects or symbols could make a spell endure when the caster was gone, but what really mattered was will. A powerful enough practitioner could perform intricate spells with nothing but their own thoughts.

“In training, rituals are useful because they provide a framework,” Mr Gains said, “but unfortunately some practitioners think the rituals are what makes the magic work and they end up hobbling themselves, unable to do anything without a dozen candles, silver circles, and an armful of props. This is the most important lesson I could give you: remember, with the right thought behind it, anything can be a tool for magic.”

They talked a little more about principles and then Mr Gains decided it was time for the practical. He pulled out a bowl and put it on the floor in front of his desk.

“It’s common to start with lighting a candle,” he said, “summoning the element of fire from nothing, but given your apparent power and the experiences of last night, I think we should start
He made a point of checking the power cables and anything that might get water damaged were well away from the bowl. Stiles slid off his chair and sat down in front of the bowl.

“So I’m just supposed to magic up water into the bowl?” Stiles asked.

“Exactly.”

Stiles stared at the bowl and drew in a deep breath. He closed his eyes so he could picture the bowl in his mind as he wanted it to be.

Mr Gains cleared his throat.

Stiles opened his eyes again and looked up at him, anxious. He hadn’t even started and he’d already gone wrong, it seemed.

“What did you start with last night?” Mr Gains asked.

“The circle,” Stiles remembered. “To contain the spell.” He looked down at the bowl on the carpeted floor. “How am I supposed to draw a circle without wrecking the carpet?”

Mr Gains opened a drawer in his desk, pulled out a length of string, and tossed it at Stiles. The ends of the string were knotted together, making a short loop. Stiles placed it down on the carpet, shaping it around the bowl. He’d drawn the circle in a line of dirt yesterday, so he shouldn’t be too surprised that a bit of string could work.

“I can use anything to make a circle?” Stiles asked.

“Whatever’s convenient,” Mr Gains answered. “There are circumstances when specific materials will enhance the spell: a silver circle if you’re doing a spell on a werewolf, mountain ash if you’re making a barrier spells, and so on. Most of the time though, for a basic spell, anything will do. When you have a bit more experience, you will have the control to do a spell without a circle, but right now you risk the magic spilling over.”

Stiles tried again, with the bowl now surrounded by its string circle. He closed his eyes and pictured the bowl. He pictured water bubbling up at the bottom like a fountain. He pictured the bowl filling up from the bottom with cool, clear water. He tried to reach for that well below him, for that magical light. He pictured it as he had the night before, with those rivers of flowing light, but he felt the difference too. He sat between the two rivers as they came together, instead of over the joining. He was close enough though to reach out and touch those lights, to draw up the power like water rising from a well. He dragged it into the bowl with the image of the water.

“Stiles,” Mr Gains’ voice was soft. Stiles opened his eyes. He saw the little puddle of water in the bottom of the bowl, bubbling like there was a tiny fountain beneath it. He saw the water gleaming with light.

The spell shattered with his surprise at having made it work, but surprise was quickly replaced with delight. He punched the air, grinning like a loon and dancing a little in place as he sat, his excitement needing to escape through movement.

“Well done,” Mr Gains said.

“I did that. I actually did that! I made water.”
“Yes you did.” Mr Gains returned Stiles’ grin.

Stiles leapt to his feet to continue his excited dance, but the sudden movement caused a rush of light-headedness and he ended up back on his ass on the floor a moment later as the world swum back into focus.

“I should have warned you about that,” Mr Gains said.

“Ya think?”

“Magic can take a toll as much as physical activity. More even. Right now, your body is used to working but your magic isn’t. You have to be careful while you build up strength or it’s like asking someone who’s been bedridden for life to suddenly run a marathon. Take it easy after you’ve done a spell.”

“No sudden movements. Got it.”

Mr Gains helped Stiles back into the seat and gave him a banana to try and make him feel better while they returned to the more theoretical side of the lesson. Stiles offered the USB drive with the bestiary and Mr Gains eagerly opened up the file on his computer. He stared at it in astonishment.

“This is an Argent bestiary,” he said. “How did you get this?”

“Stole it from an Argent.” When Mr Gains looked at him sharply, Stiles amended, “By which I mean I acquired it by perfectly legal means.”

“Stiles, just about everyone involved in this world has heard of the Argents. They have a code they follow but they are dangerous.”

Stiles gave a little snort at that warning.

“Stiles, I’m serious.”

“Oh, trust me, I know how dangerous the Argents are. Kate Argent burned down a house full of werewolves, including children. Gerard Argent beat me to a pulp to deliver a message, murdered a bunch of people, and threatened his own granddaughter unless he got what he wanted. I’m the last person you have to warn about how dangerous the Argents are.” He thought of Derek. “Second last.”

Mr Gains was staring again.

“I think you may have only given me part of the story earlier,” he said. “Do you want to fill me in on the rest?”
“Stiles!”

Stiles had made it two steps away from the bus when arms wrapped around him in an enthusiastic hug. Stiles hugged Scott back. They’d talked on the phone but it wasn’t the same and the weight of missing Scott filled the hug.

“Jeez, get a room you two,” Steven said, climbing down from the bus. He elbowed Stiles aside so that there was room for everyone else still getting out. Stiles grinned, too happy to be embarrassed.

“Steven, this is Scott, my best friend.”

“So he’s not the one we should hit in the face?”

“No. If you hit Scott in the face, I will shut Oscar in your room with a candle.” Stiles wouldn’t actually do that, mostly because Oscar didn’t deserve to be used as a weapon, but the grinned threat got his point across.

“Got it,” said Steven.

“Huh?” said Scott.

“Inside joke. I’ll explain later. So how is everyone? Has Coach done his big speech yet? Is Harris still being a jerk? Did things go OK with Jackson you-know-when? Tell me everything that’s happened.”

“You’ve been away two weeks,” said Allison, coming up to join the group standing around the visiting school buses. “You’re acting like you’ve been away years.”

She put her arms around him in a hug that was considerably more restrained than the one Scott had given.

“It feels like I’ve been away years. Tell me what’s new.”

“Nothing really,” said Scott. “Same old Beacon Hills.”

“You’re useless,” Stiles told him. He turned to Allison, “Well?”

“Erica and Boyd are dating,” she said.

“I asked what was new.”

“Yeah, but now it’s official.”

Stiles rolled his eyes.

“Come on, boys, we’ve got a game to get ready for,” Mr Andrews called out. Stiles was herded with the rest of the lacrosse team over towards the locker room. The other students who’d crowded into the buses went off towards the field to take their places in the stands and watch the game. Scott put his hand on Stiles’ shoulder and gave a squeeze before they parted to go get ready.

Mr Andrews’ idea of a pre-game pep talk was a lot more subdued than Coach’s. He talked about the need for a good, clean game, reminding them to focus, and giving gentle encouragement. Stiles
missed wildly inappropriate Independence Day quotes.

It felt wrong to head over to the away team bench, to sit so close to where he’d sat for so long, but to be apart from it. He was just trying to calm the feeling of disorientation when a figure emerged from the stands right behind him.

“Hey, Stiles,” his dad said. Stiles turned in his seat to look at him.

“Hey.” His greeted was somewhat subdued. He still wasn’t sure how to act around his dad. His dad clearly didn’t either. He patted Stiles’ shoulder in an awkward gesture.

“So, who should I be cheering for tonight?”

“Well you’ve got to live here afterwards, so you should probably cheer for Beacon Hills. Unless by some miracle they let me on the field.”

“You got it.” There was a grin that was obviously at attempt at friendliness, but it was clearly forced. For about a minute, they just stayed like that, Stiles sitting on the bench, his dad right behind him. They stared at each other in uncomfortable silence.

“Well, good luck,” his dad said at last, and then disappeared into the stands. Stiles was almost relieved that he walked away.

Stiles had barely turned back to the field, where the first line players were taking their positions, when another figure popped up from the stands. Phil, who’d come in the buses as a spectator, appeared at Stiles’ side.

“You should tell him the truth,” Phil said.

“What?” Their voices were quiet whispers to avoid anyone overhearing, but the noise of cheering from the stands would probably prevent that anyway.

“He’s afraid he’s failed as a father and he doesn’t know what he did wrong and he just wants to understand.”

“Stop psychically reading my dad. It’s creepy.”

“Sorry. I can’t control what I pick up.”


“Look, you’re in pain and he’s in pain and you both feel guilty about the way things are and I think you just need to talk.”

Stiles felt frustration and guilt burning inside him. It was made worse by the fact that Phil was probably right. He’d tried to keep his dad out of the whole supernatural mess to keep him safe but all that meant was that the secrets and lies built up. His dad thought he was some sort of delinquent and the only way to end that was to tell him the truth. But that didn’t just mean telling him about Scott and werewolves and stuff. That meant telling his dad that he could do magic. He wasn’t sure how his dad would look at him if he did that. Would his dad look at him like he was some sort of freak?

“You need to talk to him,” Phil said.

Phil headed back to his place in the stand and Stiles turned to focus on what was happening in the
game. From the cheer the rose up from the Beacon Hill’s supporters, and the strutting figure on the pitch, he’d just missed Jackson making a spectacular goal.

The game was horrendously one-sided. There were three werewolves on the Beacon Hills team now. With Scott, Isaac and Jackson all playing on top form, there wasn’t a chance to beat them. Stiles probably should have felt disappointed by his own team’s performance, but he was proud of his bro and somewhere inside he still felt like Beacon Hills was his real team.

Stiles didn’t get off the bench all night, which was neither unexpected nor unwelcome. Stiles probably would have been too distracted, running everything Phil had said over in his mind. His dad felt guilty and hurt. That added another layer to Stiles’ guilt. He needed to fix this. He just wasn’t sure how because he couldn’t exactly go over to him in the middle of a lacrosse game and start spilling secrets, and the buses would be heading back to school once the game was over. Stiles would have maybe a five minute window and that wasn’t enough for a conversation like this. And there were too many people around to go into the things he wanted to say.

He should have had this conversation ages ago.

As soon as the last whistle sounded, Stiles hurried from the bench and went to find his dad in the stands. It wasn’t like he needed to shower, so he could use this time to talk.

“Is everything OK?” his dad asked, once Stiles had scrambled over seats in his hurry to reach him.

“I just... I’ve got to get on the bus soon and I just wanted to say I’m sorry.”

“Stiles, I know, you’ve said –”

“I know I’ve said I’m sorry but I am and I want to tell you everything. I want to explain why I did everything I did, but there isn’t time so just trust me that I will tell you absolutely all of it. Just not right now because I’ve got to go back to the school. OK?”

“Is this your way of trying to convince me to transfer you back?” his dad asked.

“No!” Stiles thought of his magic lessons with Mr Gains, barely begun. “No, definitely not. The school’s amazing. I mean, I hate the morning runs with a fiery passion, but the rest of it? You found the perfect school for me, Dad. I just... I want you to know that you haven’t done anything to feel guilty about. I love you.”

Stiles put his arms around his dad in a tight hug. After a moment, his dad hugged him back and said quietly, “Love you too.”

As Stiles descended from the stands and moved to rejoin the rest of his team, he saw Scott standing over at the edge of the field, looking in his direction. Stiles would be willing to bet that Scott had just been listening in.

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John had barely been back from the game for ten minutes when the doorbell rang. He went to answer it, unsure who would be visiting him like this. He certainly wasn’t expecting to see Scott standing nervously on his doorstep. It reminded John of a million times when Scott had turned up at the house wanted to play with Stiles, or hang out with Stiles, or talk to Stiles. The familiarity had a bitter sting to it as he knew that wasn’t the case this time, but John stepped aside to let him in.

“What can I do for you?” John asked.
“It’s about Stiles,” Scott said. “I know he talked to you at the game and said he was going to tell you everything but this isn’t the sort of conversation he can have with you over the phone and I don’t think it should wait until the end of the semester, not with Stiles away like this and you punishing him about it all.”

“Scott, you know what he’s planning on telling me, don’t you?” He’d known that Scott would be in on it. Scott had been involved in Jackson’s kidnap, in all the nights away from the house, in all the lies.

“I wasn’t going to say anything and he’ll probably be mad at me for doing this instead of him. It’s Stiles’ choice but he’s made his choice that you should know and neither of you should have to wait and it’ll be easier if I tell you. Easier for you to believe.”

“You think I’d believe you more than my own son?”

“No,” said Scott quickly. “I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just I can show you things he can’t.”

“Show me things?”

“Stiles shouldn’t be punished for anything that’s happened. He’s just been trying to keep everyone safe.”

“Safe from what?” John asked.

Scott stood in front of him, clearly bracing himself. John wanted to push, but it was obvious that Scott was building up to a confession. John wondered for about the thousandth time what his son had gotten himself caught up in. If they’d lived anywhere but Beacon Hills, John would have thought gangs. Given all the violence around here recently, maybe he shouldn’t rule that out. John waited, anxious, as Scott shifted uncomfortably in his gaze.

“I’m going to show you, OK?” Scott said. “If I tell you, you probably won’t believe me so I’m going to show you. Please don’t freak out.”

“Show me what?” John asked. Then Scott changed. He lowered his head and when he raised it again, his features had shifted. His eyes shone a brilliant yellow. His mouth opened to reveal sharp fangs. Hair had spread down the sides of his face. He looked at John with a face that was more animal than human.

“Stiles has been trying to protect you from werewolves,” Scott said.

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It took a long time for Scott to explain it all, starting with the night he’d been bitten, explaining the truth about the kanima and why they’d felt they needed to lock Jackson up. John shouldn’t have felt relieved to know that his son had taken it upon himself to fight a killer lizard, but it was comforting to know that Stiles wasn’t the sort of person to kidnap and traumatised a classmate on a prank. Stiles had been trying to help. He’d thrown himself into danger, fighting werewolves and lizards and god knew what else, because he’d been trying to help people.

And John was left feeling like he’d failed as a father because his son had been in mortal danger and he’d never even guessed. He’d been angry and punished Stiles when Stiles had needed protection.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked. Scott sat across the kitchen table from him, looking as uncomfortable now as he had been at the start of his explanation.
“At first, it was just big and strange and sudden. We were trying to wrap our heads around it ourselves. Then Peter... he came after my mom. He tried to use her to get to me. Stiles and I, we figured it was safer if you didn’t know. You’d... if you’d known about Peter, you would have gone after him and he was dangerous. Stiles didn’t want to lose you.”

“I’m his father! I’m the one who should protect him!” He’d not seen any of this. He’d always thought he was a good detective but he hadn’t put the pieces together. And Stiles had been there, trying to be a hero, and taking chances no boy his age should have to take. John felt like he needed to break down and cry, or smash his fist through the table at his own obliviousness.

“Stiles never wanted to hurt you,” Scott said.

“But he didn’t feel he could trust me.” The sting of that was less than the sting of how much he’d failed to keep his son out of harm’s way, but it was still a sting.

“We were going to tell you after Jackson got out of the police transport. But then he came to the station and with the restraining order, it just didn’t feel like the right time to say something.”

John slammed his fist down on the table. He regretted the gesture when he saw Scott flinch but he was still angry.

“That would have been the perfect time to say something! I thought my son had done something so stupid, so cruel, to play a prank.” Stiles’ only explanation had been that it had been meant as a joke. John hadn’t wanted to believe that his son had so lacked in compassion that something like that would seem funny to him, but that was the only evidence Stiles had provided. That had been the first moment John had really felt like he was failing as a father, and he wished desperately that Stiles had been willing to tell him the truth then. If he’d only explained, John could have understood.

John felt a guilty shame now for the shame he’d felt then in Stiles.

“I’m sorry,” Scott said. The same words Stiles had said, over and over.

John tried to get his feelings under control.

“Scott, thank you for telling me. I think I need some time to process this.”

“Please don’t punish Stiles anymore. We might not always have made the best choices, but he was only ever trying to do the right thing.”

John nodded. That was the son he knew. Reckless, impulsive, always rushing into things without thinking them through, but ultimately a good kid. He’d thought he’d lost that good kid.

Maybe Stiles wasn’t the only one who should have trusted more.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was thoroughly evil that they had to do runs first thing even on Saturday mornings. Stiles wanted a lie in, just once. Instead, he dragged himself out of bed and around the path under the trees, through the school grounds. The run was getting easier now. He didn’t like it any better than when he’d first got here, but there was a familiarity to it now. He could see the shapes of the trees around him and know when he was getting near to the end of it. Maybe he was running faster than when he’d first arrived, because the run didn’t seem as tortuously long as it had the first few times.

He didn’t have to hurry as much on Saturdays, so he ate a slow breakfast before heading up to his corridor and indulging himself in a long, slow shower. It wasn’t as good as a lie in, but it still felt luxurious. His plan was to go down to the library and continuing working through the books Mr Gains had recommended, but he’d only just left his bedroom when a younger boy came hurrying up.

“Are you Stiles?”

“Yeah.”

“Dr Hawthorn wants to see you in his office.”

“What about?” Stiles asked, instantly worried. He didn’t think he’d done anything he wasn’t allowed to do. The boy just shrugged and hurried off. Stiles supposed he had no choice but to see what Hawthorn wanted. Was he in trouble? He hadn’t broken any rules. Had Hawthorn decided Stiles shouldn’t be included in the magic class? Or had all that been a trick and now they wanted to grill him for more information about Scott or Derek or the others?

He tried to keep control of his fears, his mind racing through possibilities as he hurried down to the principal’s office. None of his imaginings prepared him for what he saw when he stepped inside Dr Hawthorn’s office.

His dad was standing in the middle of the room.

His dad pulled Stiles into a fierce hug the second he saw him, hands gripping the back of Stiles’ shirt and pulling him close. His earlier fears vanished under a new wave of terror.

“Dad, what’s wrong?” Stiles asked. Had something happened to Scott? Was his dad here to give him some terrible news about things back home? “Dad?”

“I’ll leave you two alone,” Dr Hawthorn said, slipping out of his own office.

Stiles’ dad held Stiles pressed against him for several seconds more. When he pulled back, he kept a hand on Stiles’ shoulder, as though afraid to let go. He looked like he’d been crying.

“Dad?” Stiles asked again. Waves of panic threatened to overwhelm him.

“I’m sorry,” his dad said.

“Dad, please, just tell me what’s going on.”
“Scott told me everything.”

Stiles froze. He didn’t know if he should be relieved or terrified or furious. Scott had told his dad. Or had he? Maybe Scott had made up some story to try and get them to make up. And if Scott had told him, then would his dad be mad that Stiles hadn’t been the one to tell him?

“He told you?”

“And showed me. Werewolves? Not what I would have guessed in a million years.”

Stiles didn’t know what to think, what to feel. He’d known he was going to tell his dad, but he’d thought he’d have more time to prepare for this moment, to work out what to say. Right now, he felt blindsided.

“I wish you’d told me,” his dad said. “I always thought that if you got in trouble that you’d come to me.”

“I didn’t know how. I’m sorry.”

The fingers on Stiles’ shoulder squeezed a little tighter.

“I know you must have been brave, facing everything you’ve faced, but you don’t have to go through it alone. I want you to know that you can come to me for help. Always. If I ever led you to think you couldn’t trust me, then I’m sorry and I will do whatever I can to make it up to you. From here on in, I want to be there to protect you from whatever danger, supernatural or otherwise, you come up against. I love you, son.”

His dad pulled him into another hug.

“How long have you been planning that little speech?” Stiles asked, trying to keep his tone joking because otherwise he risked breaking down in tears. He didn’t doubt his dad meant every word.

“Most of the drive over here,” his dad admitted.

“I do trust you, Dad. It’s just werewolves and kanimas and everything. I was scared. I didn’t want you to get hurt.”

“I’m the father here. I’m the one who’s supposed to protect you.”

“We’re supposed to protect each other.”

“Then let me,” his dad said. He looked Stiles directly in the eye. “Promise me you won’t keep me in the dark again. Not about something this big.”

“I promise,” said Stiles, because really there was nothing else he could say. He’d been thinking a lot lately about how much pain they could all have been spared if he’d just come clean to his dad right at the start.

His dad nodded now.

“Good,” he said. “I think we’ve got a lot to talk about. We can start on the drive home.”

“What?” Stiles asked.

“I’m taking you home.”
“You can’t.” Stiles thought of the library with the wealth of books on the supernatural, including Mr Gains’ private collection. He thought of the greenhouses; he’d only had one session with Mrs Joyce about the magical properties of plants. He thought about his magic lessons, and about the others, people who he could learn so much from who’d been born to a life of magic.

“Stiles, I brought you here because I thought you needed a drastic change to deal with your issues, but I think you’ve had enough drastic changes recently.”

It was hard to believe that only a couple of weeks ago, Stiles had wanted this so desperately. He’d been so set on going home, on getting a good report so his dad would accept him back with open arms. Now he had everything he could wish for, but he couldn’t take it.

“I can’t leave yet,” Stiles said.

His dad looked at him like he was crazy. He also looked more than a little hurt.

“You don’t want to come home?” he asked.

“It’s not that. I miss you and I miss Scott and everyone, but this school is amazing. Not the morning runs, they’re still horrible, but everything else. And not just the teaching style and the subjects available, but I’m learning magic. Honest to goodness magic!”

“What?”

“There are some kids here who are involved in the supernatural, from families of witches and things like that, and there’s a special class for them. I can learn to do spells and stuff if I stay here.”

“No. Absolutely not. This world is dangerous and you’re already way too involved in it already.”

“I’m already involved. My best friend’s a werewolf, Dad, and that’s not going to change. Plus I can learn magic. Now that I know I can do it, do you honestly think there’s a chance in hell I won’t keep learning? At least if I’m here, I’ll be learning under supervision.”

His dad reached out and put his hand against Stiles’ cheek. It was an unfamiliarly tender gesture.

“When I brought you here, you looked like I was dragging you into hell but you’re really set on this, aren’t you?”

“I can learn a lot here, Dad, and not just the supernatural stuff. My chemistry scores have shot up now that I don’t have to put up with Harris as a teacher.”

His dad shook his head a little. “I wish Deaton had never mentioned this place existed.”

“What?” Everything else they’d been discussing was pushed aside. “Deaton told you about this place?”

“Mentioned it. This was after you kidnapped Jackson. I took one of the dogs in to get some vaccinations and we started talking about you and Scott. I said that I couldn’t even consider threatening to send you to military school because that sort of environment would be torture given your ADHD. He said he’d heard of a school that was strict but flexible, gave me enough that I managed to find this place online.”

“That manipulative bastard,” Stiles said.

“What?”
“Deaton! He must have known about this school so he tricked you into sending me here.”

His dad still looked confused. “Why would he trick me into sending you to this school?”

“Because he’s physically incapable of just telling anyone what’s going on,” Stiles said. He saw the bewilderment written on his dad’s face. “Scott didn’t tell you about Deaton, did he?”

“Deaton’s involved in all this... magic stuff? What is he? A werewolf? A kanima?”

“A druid or wizard or... I don’t know what. That whole ‘not giving a straight answer’ problem. He’s known about werewolves forever but he couldn’t have just said that. Derek attacked him because he thought Deaton was the alpha who’d been killing people, but it never occurred to Deaton to go, ‘actually, I’m not a werewolf but I was a friend of your mom and here’s all this info on magic stuff that might be helpful for you’.”

His dad still looked confused, “Deaton?”

“Yeah. I swear he knows more about everything than anyone but he keeps it all to himself.”

“Did he know about you kidnapping Jackson?”

“Oh yeah,” said Stiles.

“And he knew that you were involved in all this,” his dad continued. He looked furious. “I talked to him about how worried I was and he knew the truth the whole time.”

Stiles knew that feeling of anger all too well, so he smiled and said, “Welcome to the club.”

His dad looked at him for a moment and then laughed. It wasn’t much of a laugh but it was the first genuine smile his dad had given him in a long while. This time it was Stiles who stepped in for the hug.

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John parked the car outside the veterinary clinic. He probably should go home but he’d spent the entire drive back from the school running the situation over in his head and he’d spent half that time having imaginary arguments, picturing what he would say, what Deaton might say back, how he’d react to that. Now the rage was overwhelming and he knew the only way he could possible feel calm was if he actually got some of this anger out of his system, and heard the reality of what Deaton had to say in his defence.

He walked into the clinic, grateful that it was late enough to be quiet. He didn’t want to have this argument in front of a bunch of kids with puppies.

Deaton came out of the back room at the sound of John’s entrance and John had to restrain himself from punching the man in the face.

“Sheriff,” Deaton said, smiling, “how can I help you?”

“You can tell me the truth, if you’re capable of it. Did you know about that school when you mentioned it to me?”

“Did I know what about it?” Deaton’s expression was perfectly calm, as though he had no idea what John was talking about, no concern about the anger facing him. That was enough for what little control John still had to snap.
“Don’t play ignorant! Stiles told me you knew all along. Werewolves? Lizard creatures? Magic? Every time I came into this clinic asking for your advice because of strange animal behaviour, you knew exactly what was going on, and you pretended otherwise. Isn’t that right?”

Deaton didn’t answer right away. There was movement from behind him and Scott was there in the doorway to the back room. He looked nervous.

“Um... sheriff,” Scott started.

“Stay out of this, Scott. I want to get a straight answer from this man.”

“It seems you’ve already made up your mind about me,” Deaton said, “so what good would an answer be?”

God, Stiles had been right. This man just couldn’t answer a simple question.

“Just tell me,” John said, “yes or no, did you know the sort of things that school teaches when you mentioned it to me?”

“Yes.” Deaton still looked calm. There wasn’t a hint of remorse on his face.

“You manipulated me into sending Stiles there!”

“Stiles has a talent worth developing.”

“And it didn’t occur to you to tell me that? It didn’t occur to you to tell me any of this! When people were dying, when I came here asking you for your advice, you knew everything that was going on and you didn’t say a word. When you were sending my son into danger, you didn’t say a word! Scott and Stiles should have told me but they’re kids. What’s your excuse?”

All the words that had been building up in him on the drive back exploded out of him, but he didn’t feel any relief for having said them. The burning rage was as bad as ever. He glowered at Alan Deaton, at the man he’d considered a friend, and waited for something to excuse the secrecy that had put Stiles in danger. Deaton stood there as calmly as ever, face unreadable.

“The supernatural world is full of dangers most people should never have to face,” Deaton said. “It’s not my habit to introduce people to it.”

“It was my job to protect the people of this town. When supernatural monsters were going around killing people, I had a right to know.” Most of his anger was focused on the danger Stiles had been in, but he had enough anger to spend some on his lost job. He’d been the sheriff of this town, trying to stop killers without knowing what he was facing. If he’d had this information, maybe he could have done something sooner, stopped the trails of death before so many lives had been lost. Maybe he’d still have his position as sheriff.

It hurt too much to be angry with Stiles anymore, but Deaton was there, his face so impassive that it was easy to be furious with him. He wasn’t even trying to find an excuse for his actions. What response he did give was weak as hell.

“It’s my job to protect people too,” Deaton said. “This knowledge is dangerous.”

“Well so’s lack of knowledge!” John snapped. “And you didn’t think this world was too dangerous for Stiles.”

“Stiles already knew about this world. I didn’t put him in any more danger than he had already
“You sanctimonious bastard!” John said. “You think it makes it OK that Stiles found out about werewolves on his own? You think that makes it OK to hide things from me, to lie to my face, while you left him in harm’s way?” John didn’t consider himself a violent man but right then he wanted to punch Deaton in his smug face.

“The first lesson I was ever taught was secrecy,” Deaton said. “It’s a lesson that stayed with me. I don’t share knowledge lightly.”

The furious tension between them was broken just a little but Scott’s mutter of, “That’s an understatement,” just loud enough to be audible.

John took a step away from Deaton, trying to regain some calm before he did something he’d regret. Hitting someone who could do magic was utter stupidity as well as being assault.

“Stiles is my son,” John said. “If he’s in danger, I have a right to know. And the sheriff of this town deserves to know what’s going on if he’s to protect civilian lives. Whether that’s me or not, you need to tell the sheriff the instant a supernatural threat shows up. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” Deaton said, that infuriating calm still on his face.

A flicker of doubt worked its way through the anger. “Does that mean you’ll do it?” he asked.

“We’ll have to see,” said Deaton. The last shred of John’s self-control snapped. He swung a punch at Deaton’s face.

Chapter End Notes

I've had some people asking in the comments about Deaton. I didn't want to reply because I knew this was coming. :)

As of now, I've basically given up on watching the show. I'll be sticking to fanfics and AU from this point onwards.
“A lot of herblore is essentially medicine,” Mrs Joyce said. “Plants have many properties and in ancient times witches, druids, medicine men, shamans, all manner of people learned those and used the perfectly natural properties to produce seemingly magical cures. These days, pharmaceutical companies isolate the active component and synthesise or extract it to produce drugs that perform the same function but with more controlled dosage and, often, reduced side-effects.”

“Not where I’d expected this lesson to begin,” Stiles said. He’d expected a long lecture on the beauty and power of nature.

“I may be a witch,” Mrs Joyce said, “but I’m also a scientist, and a lot of what we call magic is just knowledge we don’t fully understand yet.”

“Yeah, but there’s science, and then there’s making the elements out of nothing and people that turn into wolves and making a barrier to stop lizard monsters who secrete paralysing venom from their fingertips.”

Mrs Joyce studied him carefully over the trays of seedlings. Stiles felt like he was being weighed, being judged to see if he was worthy of a proper answer.

“Do you like science fiction?” she asked. Again, not at all what Stiles had expected.

“Yeah.”

“Star Trek: people disappear in one place and appear in another. Star Wars: forces that let you move objects at great distance. Stargate: stones that let you switch bodies with another person galaxies away.”

“Technically, that one’s Stargate Universe,” Stiles said. Mrs Joyce laughed. Stiles was actually a little impressed at her knowledge.

“All of those things and more are portrayed as consistent with science, just delivered through technology beyond our current means.” Stiles might have argued about the Force, but he got her point.

“So you’re saying we just label anything we don’t understand as magic,” he said.

“Exactly,” she said. “Isaac Newton studied alchemy as well as physics. Both were about trying to understand the rules of the universe. There are plenty of people who treat magic as a science to try and make sense of the forces that power it.”

“You don’t get peer-reviewed journals on magic studies,” Stiles said.

“Of course you do. You just have to know where to look.”

“Are you kidding me right now?” Stiles could barely conceal his excitement.

Mrs Joyce looked at him with affected seriousness and stated, “I never kid about peer-reviewed journals.”

“Can I read them?” It probably said terrible things about Stiles that he was ridiculously excited at the prospect, but the idea of proper research papers being treated seriously, discussing magic in
terms of science and attempts at understanding, it was all mind-blowing. Mrs Joyce clearly didn’t think so though because she fixed him with a hard look.

“Aren’t you already busy,” she asked, “with three electives, magic classes with Mr Gains, and a personal translation project?”

“I can multi-task,” Stiles said.

“I understand from talking to Ms Alliscroft that your progress in your core subjects is slipping somewhat.”

“That’s not true! OK, maybe I’ve been spending a bit more time on the other stuff, but I can study English anywhere, where else am I going to learn about magic and stuff?” Stiles tried not to think about it, but he wasn’t sure he’d be coming back next year. His dad clearly hadn’t been happy about leaving him here after the big reveal about the supernatural. He’d agreed to leave Stiles here for now but there was no guarantee his dad would let him finish out high school here. He had to take every opportunity to learn as much as possible in the time he had.

Mrs Joyce gave him a long look, “Maybe, if you show good progress with the basics, I could give you the details to subscribe to the journals at home so you’d have something to read in the holidays.”

Stiles grinned and agreed quickly, before Mrs Joyce continued with the actual lesson.

“As I was saying,” she continued, “most of what people refer to as herb magic is simply science by another name.”

“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic,” Stiles said, trying to sound serious and wise, but the effect was ruined by the fact that Mrs Joyce got the quote.

She grinned and nodded, saying, “Clarke.” She proceeded, “But there are some things that even today we would consider magic and that all has to do with energy properties. Mr Gains has talked to you about energy flows?” Stiles nodded. “And you’ve done waves in physics?” Stiles nodded again. “Well, think of magic energy like waves. They have peaks and troughs. If you get two waves of the same energy, they can overlap and enhance each other, making the peaks bigger.”

“Not necessarily,” Stiles said. “If you align the waves, you can get the peaks to line up with the troughs so they cancel each other out.”

Mrs Joyce hesitated then said, “This is why I’m not a physicist. Maybe calling them waves was a bad analogy, but my point is that you have certain energy types. If you align two types of energy that are a match, you can enhance the effect. Mountain ash, for example, has a certain energy which is extremely effective for protection spells. If you want to do a spell around protection, you can do it by yourself, but if you use mountain ash as part of your ritual, then the same amount of effort from you would result in a more powerful spell because the energy of the ash enhances the energy of the magic.”

“I take it that it only works when the energy types are aligned?”

“Precisely. A lot of the time, the energies are just incompatible and you’ll just get no effect. Sometimes, the energy of the plant is directly contradictory to the energy of the spell, say, if you tried to use mountain ash for a spell of destruction, and then you have to put in more energy to overcome the...”

“The drag effect?” Stiles suggested.
Mrs Joyce smiled and nodded. “It’s always best to start practicing with just your own skill, because that way you learn the limits of your own powers and because the interactions of different powers can be somewhat unpredictable, but once you have mastered the basics, you can start using plant magic as a form of amplifier.”

Stiles nodded to show he was understanding and then they got into the details. That was a lot less interesting, because Mrs Joyce started listing for him various plants and their properties. It seemed that at some point Stiles would have to sit down and learn this stuff by rote. For now, he settled for making notes. As Mrs Joyce explained, he wrote down the name of the plant, a brief description of what it looked like, and what she said it was good for.

“An awful lot of these plants are supposedly good for protection,” Stiles said, as he was working on his second page of notes. “Is that in general, or did you just choose to grow the nice plants here?”

“A little of both. It may also be that the protective properties were most studied and developed because they were the ones most people cared about.”

“But surely once they’d found the first hundred herbs that helped with protection, someone would go ‘I think we’ve got enough now’,” said Stiles.

“The protections aren’t all identical. Some protect from spiritual attacks, some from physical harm, some from bad luck.”

“Wait, if there are herbs that protect from bad luck, are there herbs that promote good luck? Like, could you mix up a potion that would help you pick out the winning lottery numbers or something?”

“Given the number of times that exact scenario has been put to the test, I think it’s safe to assume the answer is no,” said Mrs Joyce.

“Oh,” Stiles was disappointed. “I figured I’d get a lecture on not abusing magic for personal gain.”

“Oh please, every practitioner uses magic for personal gain now and again. The thing you’ll get a lecture about is not using magic to hurt other people. You shouldn’t use an itching spell on the boy who fills your locker with shaving cream, for example.”

“That was a very specific example.”

Mrs Joyce smiled at him, “I could probably show you the recipe for that potion. Just to make sure you don’t accidentally use it on someone.”

“Is that how you got into all this magic stuff? So you could get revenge on the people who were mean to you?”

“It probably used to be the most common reason to start learning magic, aside from being born in a family with a history of magic.”

“Used to be?”

“Now, I think the most common reason people get into the supernatural is that they’ve read Harry Potter and want to see if they can do real magic. Now, we were talking plant properties. I’ve mentioned potions so this is probably a good time to talk about how to combine different plants to create a bigger effect.”
When Stiles returned to his room, he thought his brain might be about to dribble out of his ears from the new information, but he still had a paper to write for history. If he wanted those peer reviewed journals, he needed to show he was keeping up with the rest of his work. He paused though to check his phone and saw a text from Scott asking him to call. At least this time Scott wasn’t freaking out about the fact Stiles didn’t respond at once.

“What’s up?” Stiles asked, when Scott picked up.

“I wanted to apologise for telling your dad for you,” Scott said. He sounded nervous, like he expected Stiles to go into a rage at him.

But Stiles couldn’t be angry. He couldn’t be angry because of the way his dad had held him and looked at him like he understood, and the way he’d listened to what Stiles wanted and accepted it because he trusted Stiles to make the right choice. He couldn’t be angry because although things were weird between him and his dad, for the first time in weeks he felt like things would be OK.

So the worst he could say to Scott was, “You could have warned me. He showed up here to take me home and I didn’t know what to say to him.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s OK. We should have told him ages ago.”

“That’s pretty much what he said.”

Stiles sat down on the bed, phone pressed against his ear.

“Do you think he’s still upset I didn’t tell him?” Stiles asked.

“I think he’s more upset with Deaton. He showed up at the animal clinic and yelled at him about how he was an adult and should have known better. He even tried to punch Deaton.”

“My dad punched someone?” Stiles didn’t know whether to be shocked or delighted. Then he added, “What do you mean tried?”

“Deaton must have done some protective mojo because it was like he didn’t even feel the punch.”

Stiles got distracted by wondering if Mrs Joyce could show him how to do that. With all the magic herbs in the greenhouses, there was bound to be a protection potion that would prevent him from getting hurt. He remembered his humiliating encounter with Gerard and wondered what would have happened if he’d had some magic then.

He dragged his attention back to the more important issue and asked, “Was my dad OK?”

“Yeah. I think he was just angry because it didn’t have any effect.”

“I bet.”

“So,” asked Scott, “how is magic school?”

“It’s awesome!” Stiles rambled about the stuff Mrs Joyce had been showing him, about the herbs and the peer reviewed journals and the energy signatures. He wasn’t sure he was able to get across half of what he’d spent this lesson learning, but he babbled down the phone anyway.
When Stiles finally ran out of words, Scott said, “Sounds a lot more fun than chemistry with Harris.”

“Oh, that reminds me, I’ve got the recipe for an itching potion we need to try out on him sometime.”

“Careful,” Scott joked, “we don’t want your dad thinking you’re mixing with bad influences at your school for troublemakers.”

“Oh please, the worst influence here is my teacher.”

Stiles made up his mind he was going to investigate how Deaton could have made himself impervious to punches. He was sure Mrs Joyce would help him out with that, but it meant he had yet another thing on his list of things to do.

“I should go,” Stiles said. “I’ve got a paper to write.”

Why did he still have to do subjects like history when he could be learning how to become invulnerable? But he needed to show he was a good student if he wanted them to continue teaching him the good stuff, so Stiles grabbed his notes and headed down to the library.
Chapter 13

Stiles headed down to the library one evening after dinner to exchange some books. He was used to seeing other students in here, even at this time, but usually they were using the computers for personal stuff or finishing off last bits of work. He wasn’t used to there being anyone in the shelves of magic books. He jumped a little when he rounded the shelves and saw Oscar there, sitting on the floor. Oscar looked as startled as Stiles, and quickly shoved a book under the shelves and out of sight. There was such a look of guilt on his face that Stiles couldn’t resist reaching down and extracting the book, just to see what it was Oscar had been reading.

“Advanced fire magic?” Stiles asked, looking at the cover. “Shouldn’t you stick to the basics of, you know, not setting fire to stuff?”

Oscar looked glum, “I’m just trying to figure out what I am.”

“Can’t Mr Gains help with that?”

“He’s tried. When I first got here, everyone thought I just had a natural talent for magic that was flaring up, but I can’t even do the most basic of spells. Not even summoning fire or lighting a candle. I’m not doing magic when I’m near a fire. They tested it out while I was asleep. Someone brought a candle up to me and it would have set half the room on fire if Mr Gains hadn’t been there, and I slept through the whole thing. Whatever happens around me, it’s not something I’m in control of.”

Stiles sat down on the floor beside Oscar, leaning against the bookshelf.

“How long have you been looking?” he asked.

“I’ve been here two years. Mr Gains and Mrs Joyce and Dr Hawthorne and everyone are all great, but they don’t know what I am and they’ve all got other stuff to do so they can’t spend their whole lives looking.”

Stiles suspected that Oscar was more than willing to spend his life looking.

“What have you figured out so far?” Stiles asked.

“Not much. Mostly stuff I’m definitely not. I’m pretty sure whatever I am has something to do with my grandmother because she had burns all over her body, but she died when I was little so I can’t ask her. I had theories that maybe she had the same talent and I inherited it, or maybe my grandfather was something weird. Once we’d dismissed the idea of me being a witch, we tried figuring out of maybe my grandfather had been a fire elemental or something.”

“Fire elementals are real?”

“Yeah. Mr Gains helped me summon one. Turns out it didn’t know what I was either and it says that it’s physically impossible for an elemental to have a kid with a human, so that theory’s out.”

“Are there other supernatural creatures linked with fire?” Stiles asked.

“Some of the fae, and they do have a habit of messing around with humans. There are loads of legends about faeries stealing kids or replacing them or something, but Mr Gains tested me and I’m not a changling or a demi-fae.”
Stiles didn’t know enough of this to suggest anything else. Anything he could think of based on his minimal experience with the supernatural would probably be something Mr Gains had already considered and dismissed. The only thing he had going for him was the Argent bestiary and he couldn’t even read that. His translation project was slow going.

Stiles looked sideways at Oscar, “How good are you with archaic Latin?”

“What?”

“You any good at reading archaic Latin?”

“I wouldn’t even know where to start. Why?”

Stiles had only shown the bestiary to Mr Gains. It wasn’t something he wanted to flash around, even to a group of kids learning magic, but Oscar’s need was clearly greater than his own.

“Come with me,” Stiles said. Oscar replaced the book he’d been reading and they headed back up to the bedrooms. The bestiary and Stiles’ translation notes were on the desk. He figured that if anyone came in, he’d be able to explain them as being for his lessons on mythology and Latin. No one needed to know that they were real supernatural resources. He’d printed out pages from the bestiary and now those sheets of paper were scribbled with notes. Beside them, he had his translations. He’d printed copies of any drawings and diagrams, and stuck those to pages alongside his translated texts, all bundled together into a folder.

He opened the folder up now and showed Oscar his work. Oscar flicked through the pages on werewolves with an awed expression.

“This is amazing,” he said.

“I’ve only translated the first few pages,” Stiles said, “and it’s a hunter bestiary, so most of this stuff is about how to hunt and kill anyone who is even vaguely supernatural.”

“Even so.” Oscar picked up the printouts that Stiles hadn’t started translating yet, flipping through the pages to study the woodcuts and drawings that were dotted through the text. “Have you seen anything that might relate to me?”

“No, but I’ve just started at the beginning. I can give you a copy of the file and you can search, if you like, but it’s still all archaic Latin. You’ll have to look up the archaic Latin for crazy-ass fire magic.”

They headed back to the library with his USB stick and he copied the original file over for Oscar. Oscar sat there at the computer, pouring over the scanned pages with something like hunger in his eyes. Stiles hoped the book had some answers because he had a feeling that Oscar had spent far too long running into dead ends.

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Stiles continued his magic practice in and out of his official lessons. He was getting pretty good at summoning the elements, though he avoided summoning fire in his private sessions in his bedroom because he was aware how close Oscar’s room was. He didn’t want to set himself on fire due to proximity of whatever the hell it was behind Oscar’s weirdness.

He wanted to try something different. Partly it was for his own training but partly it was because of the next full moon class. He had a couple of weeks to prepare something. He knew Mr Gains had said he could talk about kanimas and werewolves, giving the other students an introduction to
supernatural creatures, but Stiles wanted to do something impressive. He remembered the way they’d looked when the potion bottle had glowed. He wanted that look again. He wanted to surprise them with something cool.

He flipped through the pages of one of Mr Gains’ books. Mr Gains had let him borrow it to see if there was anything else he wanted to try out in one of their magic lessons. He’d made Stiles promise not to anything out without supervision, so right now Stiles was just considering options. He didn’t actually plan on trying any of these by himself.

His wandering thoughts had drifted back to Oscar again, thinking about all the books he must have gone through looking for some clue to who he was. It was easier for Stiles, all he had to do was look for something interesting. Oscar had to look for something specific and he didn’t even know what it was.

That was what Stiles was thinking about as he turned to the page about the viewing spell. It was a simple piece of magic to show a person or object, no matter how far away. It seemed easy enough. Stiles read through the instructions three times before heading to Oscar’s bedroom and knocking on his door.

“I have a plan that I’m sure won’t work,” Stiles said as soon as Oscar answered.

“OK?” Oscar answered. He let Stiles into the small bedroom.

“So one of your theories,” Stiles said, “is that your grandfather was some fire-related supernatural something, right?”

“Yeah,” Oscar said, “it’s a possibility I’ve looked into.”

“So, assuming that this theory is right and assuming that your grandfather hasn’t been killed by a hunter or died of old age or something, then he’ll be around somewhere.”

“Yeah? What are you getting at?”

Stiles laid the book down on Oscar’s desk, pointing to the spell, “This would let us get a look at whoever we search for. The book says we need something that’s tied to the thing we’re searching for.”

“You think we could use this spell to look for him?” Oscar bent over the page.

“Maybe. I dunno. I’m making a load of assumptions, but it can’t hurt to try, right?”

“But this book says we need something that’s tied to the thing we’re searching for,” Oscar said.

“Duh. We’ve got you. You’re a direct descendent. A drop of your blood should be more than enough.”

Oscar grinned like Stiles had just handed him a winning lottery ticket.

“Let’s get started,” he said.

“Hold on. Slow down. We don’t know if this will work and I don’t want to try a spell for the first time on my own,” Stiles said. He was willing to play around with the spells Mr Gains had already shown him, but there were limits to what he was willing to try alone. Besides, he’d promised not to do any spells from this book unsupervised. The last thing he wanted was to get kicked out of this school for breaking the rules.
They took the book down to Mr Gains’ office. Mr Gains took one look at Oscar’s eager face and agreed to help them with the spell. It was impossible to refuse such hopeful pleading.

It took a while to gather all the ingredients. Oscar had to go out to the greenhouses for a few of Mrs Joyce’s herbs, while Mr Gains laid out the equipment. Stiles read through the spell another few times, to make sure he’d be able to do it right. It would be like drawing up energy from the currents, only across a greater distance. He would have to reach out with his spirit to find a distant point and draw that back with him to become visible. He wasn’t sure he could do this, but Oscar had looked so pitiful that day in the library that Stiles knew he had to try.

He sat on the floor of Mr Gains’ office. In front of him lay the circular mirror and the various other bits that had been gathered. He made the circle on the floor with the piece of string as he had for his other magic experiments, then he focused in on the water. He took a pinch of the herbs one at a time, feeling the energy of the plants, the vibrations of power. One at a time, he added each herb to the water until he could feel the energy rippling through the contents of the bowl. He reached with his mind into the bowl, trying to be in sync with those vibrations.

He held the bowl in both hands, thumbs dipping over the edge and into the infused water. Stiles looked at Oscar.

“The blood,” he said. Oscar pricked his finger with a small needle and held it over the bowl. A single drop of red fell, hitting the surface of the water and spreading out like new veins through the clear liquid. Stiles felt the shift in energy, the way the magic reacted to this final ingredient. He was ready.

He closed his eyes and stretched out with his power. With each breath in, he gathered new power from the world around him. With each breath out, he stretched out across the world, flowing like liquid over stone. He reached across existence, letting his magic float further and further out from himself. He could sense other powers, points of light twinkling like stars in the imagination of his mind. But those weren’t the powers he was looking for. He was looking for something that vibrated with the same energy as that within his hands.

So he searched further, his mind becoming unfocused. It was harder to remember what he was doing, harder to remember how long he’d been here, harder to remember who he was. Time ceased to have meaning. There was only himself and the dark void and the pinpricks of magic that dotted the universe.

Then he felt it, drawing his attention back from the everything to a single point that burned red. Vivid crimson shone across the void and Stiles reached out towards that energy. He felt the way it pulsed until the water around his thumbs seemed like a weak echo.

Stiles tilted the bowl, letting the water splash over the mirror, drawing that power back to himself.

He opened his eyes as the mirror blazed with burning, red light. Flames reflected across the surface and, in the midst of the flickering light, two eyes of dark smoke glared up at him.

“How dare you?” a voice roared. Then the flames leapt out of the mirror.
“Holy crap!” Stiles scrambled backwards as the flames lashed out like burning tentacles. Flames caught the carpet, despite the water Stiles had poured out earlier. The string of his circle caught fire. Across the room, Mr Gains muttered sharp words and water splashed down. But the flames kept coming. Even as some were extinguished, more rose up out of the mirror.

“I didn’t do that!” said Oscar. “I swear I didn’t do that!”

“Get out of here,” Mr Gains snapped.

Oscar ran. It was the only sensible thing for him to do, given his gifts. Stiles stayed, climbing to his feet and staring at the mirror. He tried to get his brain in gear to figure this out.

“This shouldn’t be happening,” he said. “It was only supposed to be a viewing spell.”

An arc of fire rose out of the mirror and the end of it landed on the carpeted floor of the office, tiny tendrils of flame spreading out like fingers. Mr Gains called up more water. The flames sizzled and smoked, filling the air with billowing, black clouds, but the fire didn’t die. Another arc shot out and Stiles realised the flames didn’t just look like fingers, they were fingers. The arcs of fire were arms, and the thing they belonged to was clawing its way out of the mirror.

“What the hell is that?” Stiles asked.

“Get the mountain ash!” Mr Gains yelled over the noise of sizzling and burning. “Mrs Joyce has some.”

The little circle of string had burned up now. Mr Gains was doing his best with summoned water, putting out the fires as they started, but the source of the fire, that burning thing, couldn’t be so easily extinguished.

Stiles ran. He raced down the hallway, ignoring the yelling of another teacher about the rules against running inside. He burst out into open air but he could still smell the smoke clinging to his clothes. He started across the lawn but saw Oscar had beaten him here. Mrs Joyce ran from the greenhouses, Oscar falling back behind her. She held a large jar in one hand, but surely that wouldn’t be enough to hold that burning monster.

Stiles slowed until Mrs Joyce reached him and then fell into step beside her.

“What did you do?” Mrs Joyce demanded.

“It was a viewing spell. It shouldn’t have done this.” He was too breathless to say much else.

As they reached the corridor with the offices, the fire alarm went off. The reason was obvious. Smoke poured out from Mr Gains’ door. The air was hazy with it making his eyes sting and water, and Stiles pulled his t-shirt up to cover his mouth to try and make it easier to breathe.

The burning monster burst through the office door. It was shaped like a man, but about seven foot tall and entirely made of flames, except for those eyes, which were dark as coals inside the brightness. Where it stepped, the carpet caught light, and Stiles could feel the heat of this creature from the other end of the corridor. The ceiling was blackened and scorching above its head. Smoke billowed around it like shrouds. Stiles tried to remember his spell for summoning water and wondered if it would even make a dent in this blazing terror.
Mrs Joyce yanked the lid off her jar and hurled the contents towards the creature with a shout. A line of ash powder shot from the jar, curving like a snake around the burning monster, to land on the carpet in a perfect circle around the creature’s burning feet.

Mr Gains stumbled, coughing from the office, choking out words to summon water and extinguish those fires outside the circle of ash. Stiles hadn’t realised how worried he’d been about his teacher until he saw him alive and well. The only sign of trouble was some slight singeing of his clothes.

The flaming creature looked down at the circle of ash, and then around at the three humans. The carpet inside the circle was still smouldering and flaming. Stiles wondered how long until the floorboards burned. The heat was still wafting out, even if the creature was trapped, and there was still a chance the fire would spread.

The creature laughed, a sound like the crackling of logs in a bonfire.

“‘You think a little ash can stop me?’ it asked. ‘You think you can trap me?’”

“I’m just hoping we can stop things escalating before you burn this place to the ground,” Stiles said.

It was hard to read expressions on a face made entirely of flicking flames, but Stiles thought there might have been a smirk. Those black eyes fixed on him.

“You should have considered that before your challenged me,” the creature said.

“What challenge?” Stiles asked. “There was no challenge. I just did a viewing spell. None of this was supposed to happen.” He gestured towards the blackened paint on the walls and ceiling, the smouldering ruin of the carpet within the circle of ash.

“So you would spy and plot and scheme? You think it makes the situation better that you hoped to view me without drawing my attention? Deceitful human!” The creature spat. A little ball of glowing fire shot from its face towards Stiles. The fire-spit hit the ash barrier and fell to the ground, but still Stiles flinched away from the attack, making the creature laugh.

“We weren’t scheming,” Stiles said. “I was doing a spell to try and locate my friend’s grandfather and the spell latched on to you.”

The creature paused. Just for a second, the ever-shifting fire that made up its body became perfectly still. It looked at Stiles.

“What did you say?” the creature asked.

It was Mr Gains who answered, “We have a boy here in our care who has problems around fire. We’ve looked for the explanation to his powers and have considered that they might have been inherited. This boy wanted to try the theory and practice his magic at the same time. The spell should have shown the boy’s grandfather. It showed us you.”

There was a long moment during which nothing happened, then the flames grew dimmer. The flickering light shrank in on itself, revealing a dark shape within. It was still roughly human in shape, but uneven, like someone had sculpted a man out of lava. Cracks in the darkness showed a red glow beneath and Stiles could still feel the heat coming from the creature, but everything was more controlled now. Those coal-black eyes met Stiles’.

“Show me this boy,” the creature said.
Mrs Joyce looked nervously towards Mr Gains. They eyed the ring of mountain ash.

“If we let you out,” Mr Gains said, “do you promise not to start trying to burn us all to death again?”

Stiles didn’t think they had much choice. This creature, whatever it was, could probably still set fire to the house from inside the barrier.

“If you are lying to me,” the creature said, “then I make no promise, but if your words are true, then I will harm no person here unless you try to harm me first.”

That was probably as good as it was going to get.

“Go and fetch Oscar,” Mr Gains told Stiles. He was surprisingly calm. He walked towards the circle of mountain ash.

Stiles didn’t hesitate. He hurried out of the hallway. With the fire alarm still blazing, everyone should have gathered outside. He reached the door and step outside into the clean air. He breathed in gratefully, the coolness replacing the choking heat he’d been breathing inside. His eyes were still streaming as he hurried over to the gathering point.

The rest of the students were standing in their groups, all eyes turning to him as he ran. He could hear the whispers flowing through the groups but he didn’t care about it now. He needed to find his group.

Ms Alliscroft was with them, and she started to talk to him as he approached, reprimanding him for not evacuating with the others in almost the same breath as she asked if he was hurt. Stiles ignored her and found Oscar, standing with the rest of their group.

“You need to come with me,” Stiles said.

“No one is going anywhere,” said Ms Alliscroft. “There has been a fire and no one is allowed to leave here until the fire department give the all clear.”

Stiles continued to ignore her. He grabbed Oscar by the wrist and started hurrying back towards the school.

“This is unacceptable behaviour!” Ms Alliscroft snapped. “This will not be allowed to slide.”

Other teachers came over to see the commotion, Dr Hawthorne among them.

“Stiles,” he said, “you cannot be allowed back inside. It’s not safe.”

“There’s a burning, demon thing in there that might be Oscar’s grandfather. It wants to see him.”

“These fanciful excuses are not…” Ms Alliscroft started.

“Ms Alliscroft,” said Dr Hawthorne, “keep an eye on the rest of the students please.”

He put one hand on Stiles’ shoulder, the other on Oscar’s, and guided them both towards the school, ignoring Ms Alliscroft’s indignant comments about health and safety and fire regulations from behind them.

“She doesn’t know about the special classes?” Stiles asked.

“I think she’ll have to after today,” Dr Hawthorne said. “So, you summon a demon?”
“Not intentionally.”

“At least tell me you didn’t sacrifice a goat. Last time, the blood got everywhere.”

“Last time?” said Stiles. “People have summoned demons here before?”

“This is a school that deals with both troubled students and the magically gifted,” said Dr Hawthorne calmly. “It would be more surprising if such things didn’t happen.”

The school hallways were still filled with smoke. Stiles almost wished he’d stayed outside as he found his eyes stinging and his lungs burning the moment he stepped inside. He kept wanted to cough, but he was sure that wouldn’t help. There was no clean air to replace the smoke-laden stuff.

Oscar seemed terrified, but he didn’t slow or falter as they rounded the corner and saw the creature, the man-shaped mass of lava. As the creature turned its head towards Oscar, cracks appeared in the skin at its neck, the bright red showing through and little flames escaping to lick the air. The creature made no move towards Oscar, waiting instead for the boy to approach. It seemed calm and still after the raging fires of earlier.

Oscar took a few nervous steps forward. Stiles wondered if he was scared of the creature, scared to learn about his heritage, or scared of what his powers might do to the flames that still touched the creature’s skin.

“Come closer boy,” the creature said, holding out a hand towards Oscar.

Oscar eyed the scorched carpet, the smoke-blackened paintwork.

“Fire and me don’t mix,” he said. He still approached, but each step seemed slower and more reluctant than the last.

“This is my fire,” the creature said, “not yours. You do not command it.”

Oscar moved closer still, until finally the creature took a single step and placed its smouldering hand in the centre of Oscar’s forehead. Stiles expected Oscar to cry out in pain from the heat of it, but Oscar didn’t seem to react. He just stood there, the burning hand touching his skin. The creature’s dark eyes closed.

“Yes,” the creature said after a long pause. “Yes, you are mine.”

“Um,” said Oscar, “if you don’t mind me asking, what exactly are you?”

“The name for my kind does not exist in your language. The closest term you have for what I am is ‘demon’.”

Oscar took a step back, breaking the contact between them.

“You’re a demon?” he asked, voice filled with horror. Stiles had used that word outside and Oscar hadn’t flinched at it. Maybe he’d hoped there was another explanation, or that Stiles had been using that term in a light-hearted way. The fact that the creature used it to describe itself was clearly more shocking.

“And you are part demon,” the creature said. It didn’t seem at all offended by Oscar’s reaction.

“I don’t want to be a demon,” Oscar said. He turned and ran.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the really long gap between chapters. Work, writing commitments, family things, and various other real life stuff got in the way for a while. I'm not sure when the next chapter will be coming, but I wanted to let you know that this fic hasn't been forgotten.

The demon stood in the hallway watching Oscar run. It was hard for Stiles to guess at its emotions, but it seemed surprisingly calm about the fact his grandson was horrified of him.

“You might want to pick your words more carefully,” Stiles said. “‘Demon’ has a lot of negative connotations.”

Dr Hawthorne gave Stiles a look that was shocked and disapproving. His face was considerably easier to read than the demon’s and he presumably didn’t like the idea of Stiles criticising the creature capable of incinerating the school.

“Sir,” Dr Hawthorne said to the demon, “while we all would appreciate your help in teaching Oscar his heritage and how to control his powers, I suspect this would not be the best time. He will need to adjust to this new knowledge. I’m concerned for the safety of my students if you remain.”

He spoke with authority but Stiles thought he detected a hint of fear behind the politeness. The demon didn’t move or say anything for some time. Stiles didn’t know if there were spells for dismissing a demon once summoned. He wasn’t sure he wanted to try in case he put this creature into an inferno mood again.

After what felt like an age, the creature looked towards Stiles.

“Come here, human,” the demon said. Stiles looked to Dr Hawthorne for a nod of permission before he walked cautiously forward. He could feel the heat radiating off the creature and Stiles blamed that for his sweat, not the fear that was pounding through his body with every beat of his racing heart. There were no threatening moves from the creature, no raging fire, and Stiles let his steps speed up until he stood right in front of the lava man.

“Hold out your hand,” the demon said. Stiles obeyed. The creature started to move his own hand out over Stiles’ and Stiles’ mind filled with panicked imaginings of what might happen if they touched.

“Humans burn easily,” Stiles said. The creature never touched him. He held his hand palm down a few inches above Stiles’ outstretched one. Something small and black fell into Stiles’ palm. The thing was hot, but not painfully so. Stiles withdrew his hand so he could look better at the thing. It looked like a pumice stone, perhaps an inch across at the widest point of the uneven lump. Stiles looked at the lava-like creature in front of him and wondered if the demon had given him a piece of himself.

“Human,” the demon said, “when that boy is ready to face his heritage, use that to summon me.” The creature leaned closer to Stiles and each word came with a breath that was hot and dry, “Do
not use it for malicious magic or my vengeance will be extreme.”

Given that the demon had tried to burn down a school full of people just for a viewing spell, Stiles had no doubt that it would burn him in horribly painful places and then fry him to death if Stiles went against him.


The demon nodded. Then he faded into smoke. The process took seconds, with the lava and flame shifting to black smoke that a moment later Stiles could see through. A second after that, all there was left was the dispersing smoke.

The teachers obviously relaxed a little. Stiles clutched the demon’s stone tightly in a fist. He breathed in a sigh of relief, and then started coughing. He’d been standing way too close to the demon’s smoke.

Dr Hawthorne put a hand on Stiles’ shoulder and guided him away. He gestured to the teachers to follow.

“We should get outside. I expect the fire department will be here any minute to investigate the fire alarm.”

“What are you going to tell them?” Stiles asked, as they stepped into the open air and he could breathe clearly again.

“The usual. That some of the students were messing around and it got out of hand, but that we don’t intend to press arson charges.”

Stiles was still finding it hard to believe how calm Dr Hawthorne was being about all this. He supposed awkward conversations with the fire department probably happened a great deal with Oscar at the school, but angry demons would be rarer, yet the man took it all in stride. Something about this guy reminded Stiles of Dr Deaton. Of course, Deaton knew about this school. The two were probably buddies.

Dr Hawthorne walked Stiles towards the assembled students, every one of whom were staring at Stiles in curiosity.

“I suppose,” Dr Hawthorne said, “there ought to be some sort of punishment. I know what happened was an accident, but we can’t allow demon summoning to take place without any consequences. I think a week of detentions would be sufficient.”

“Great,” Stiles muttered, but he didn’t argue because he had, after all, summoned a demon and nearly killed everyone here. The fact that he hadn’t meant any of it didn’t change that.

Dr Hawthorne left Stiles under the glaring eye of Ms Alliscroft and then went to deal with the sirens that Stiles could hear approaching.

Steven was instantly beside Stiles, asking for all the details, but Stiles cast his eyes over the gathered boys and was more concerned with other things.

“Where’s Oscar?” he asked.

“What do you mean?” Steven asked. “He went with you.”

Stiles didn’t answer. He turned, looking across the other groups of kids standing around, looking
bored and annoyed at having to wait outside for the fire department to do whatever it was they needed to do. He couldn’t spot Oscar. It was possible he was in the middle of a group somewhere, just one of the sea of faces, but Stiles doubted it. He turned to Phil.

“Do you know where he’d go if he’s upset?” Stiles asked.

Phil considered, “He usually just goes to his room.”

Stiles looked up at the windows of the school. “Can you tell if he’s up there?”

Phil shook his head, “Not from here.”

“I need to talk to him.” Stiles wasn’t entirely sure what he could say to Oscar that could possibly make him feel better, but he knew that Oscar shouldn’t be alone right now.

Stiles grabbed Phil’s arm and started back towards the school building.

“No!” Ms Alliscroft snapped. “Absolutely not! You can’t go gallivanting into a burning building whenever you like! You are in enough trouble already.”

She looked like she wanted to throw Stiles into a burning building. She probably hadn’t taken it well that she’d been overruled when she’d tried to stop him last time. But on the other hand, there would be fire department people all over the school now, and Stiles didn’t want to get in trouble with them when he was in enough trouble already. There were other places they could look without going back into the school. They could look in the shed hiding space Phil had showed up early on, or out in the woods. Stiles mentally catalogued a list of places, but he hadn’t counted on Ms Alliscroft sticking close by his side and refusing to let him go anywhere.

Stiles was forced to stand with his group for what felt like the next hour before Dr Hawthorne announced that they were allowed to go inside. Stiles glared at Ms Alliscroft and set off at a run for the doors. It still took a while to get inside because everyone in the school wanted to get inside. Stiles hurried upstairs with Phil, only to find that Oscar’s bedroom was completely deserted. So they turned around fought against the flow of students coming in.

Stiles followed Phil’s advice, checking the library and some of the quieter rooms where Oscar might have gone for privacy. Then they headed outside again and checked the grounds. Phil’s hiding place was empty. The clearing where they’d had their magic lesson was empty. Everywhere either of them could think of was empty. It was hard to check the woods thoroughly because it was possible Oscar was hiding behind a bush or up a tree, but after walking along all of the paths, there was still no sign of him.

“We need a teacher,” Phil said.

They found Mr Gains trying to salvage items from his office. The room was a mess of charred remains and water damage. Everything was dark with smoke and the ruined carpet squelched underfoot. Mr Gains was going through his books when they walked in, putting the ones worth keeping into a plastic box. He looked utterly miserable.

He didn’t look any better when Stiles explained why they were there.

“Get me something that belongs to Oscar,” Mr Gains said, “and I can scry for him.”

“That would mean going into his room,” Phil pointed out.

Mr Gains hesitated. It was a serious rule that students were entitled to privacy, but with Oscar
missing and all that had happened today, Stiles doubted anyone would put that rule high up on a priorities list. After a minute, Mr Gains said he’d come with them. He would take the responsibility of going into the bedroom.

While Mr Gains did that, Stiles went into his room to put the bit of lava rock into the safe. He set it down next to the magic potion and his Adderall supplies. He started back out to the corridor when his phone started ringing from where it lay on his desk.

“It’s my dad,” Stiles said to Phil, who was waiting in the doorway.

“Answer it,” Phil said. “I’ll go with Mr Gains to find Oscar. You should talk to your dad.”

Stiles didn’t want to just forget about Oscar, but it wasn’t like he would be much use in helping to find him, and he suspected Phil would be better at comforting him. Everything Stiles had tried to do to help had just made things a million times worse. Maybe it would be better if he just let someone else handle this. He nodded to Phil and answered his phone, trying for a cheerful tone of voice.

“Hey, Dad.”

***

John stared at the email. When he’d enrolled Stiles in the school, he’d chosen the option to stay appraised of any behavioural issues. That meant he got an automatic email if Stiles got into trouble. Since learning the truth of the supernatural and having some honest conversations with Stiles, he’d assumed his tracking was unnecessary, but he’d never bothered to contact the school and change this decision.

He was therefore both angry and concerned when he saw a report of a week’s worth of detentions. The detentions alone he wasn’t that upset about, since Stiles had frequently had them for being disrespectful to teachers or distracted in class, even before all this supernatural mess had started. He’d been perfectly calm and nearly deleted the email without reading it. But he had opened it up and now he stared in concern at the reason given for the detentions: accidental endangerment of self and other students.

He wasn’t going to panic. He wasn’t going to get angry. The past couple of weeks had taught him not to make assumptions or come to any conclusions without full information. Besides, the word accidental was in there. It was entirely possible that Stiles had tripped on the stairs and knocked another student down, or something else that could be dismissed as purely accidental. But Stiles was playing around with magic now, and that made him worried.

He took out his phone and called Stiles’ number. John knew the school had rules about phones, so he told himself not to be too upset if no one answered. The phone rang for a long time and he was about to give up and assume that Stiles was away from the phone, but Stiles’ cheerful voice came through the speaker.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Hey, Stiles.”

“What’s up?”

Here John hesitated, trying to work out how best to ask about the email without it sounding like an accusation. Things were still delicate between them. “So, anything exciting happen at school lately?”
“Exciting? Like what?” Stiles’ voice had that overly innocent tone he used when he’d been caught doing something he shouldn’t be doing. John decided to cut straight to it.

“Anything that would result in me getting an email about a week of detentions?”

There was a pause. Stiles sounded much less cheerful as he asked, “They emailed you about it?”

“The school likes to keep parents apprised of progress and any behavioural issues.”

“It wasn’t exactly an issue,” Stiles said. “It was an accident. Dr Hawthorne isn’t angry about it or anything but he said that there had to be a punishment because he didn’t want anyone else getting ideas about it being OK to summon demons.”

“You summoned a demon?” John yelled. It was a good job he was at home with all the windows shut. No one else would have heard that outburst.

“I thought you said they’d emailed you,” Stiles said.

“They emailed me to tell me about the detentions. No one said anything about demons.” John was tempted to get his keys and head down there right now to pull Stiles out of the school.

“It was an accident, I swear.”

“How the hell does someone accidentally summon a demon?”

So Stiles told him the whole story, starting with the boy with fire power and ending with Dr Hawthorne’s decision on punishment. He tried to make light of it, but even over the phone John could hear anxiety in Stiles’ tone as he explained. John listened, resting an elbow on his desk and rubbing his hand over his face as the words sunk him. He couldn’t believe that this was Stiles’ life now. He couldn’t believe that Stiles had almost been burned to death by a supernatural creature and John hadn’t known.

“Are you hurt?” John asked.

“No, I’m fine. Everyone’s fine. There’s some fire damage to a hallway and a couple of the offices, but no one got hurt. We’re all fine.” If Stiles had repeated that part a couple less times, John would be more inclined to believe it, but the email would have said if Stiles had been hurt.

John didn’t know what to say to that. He just breathed and told himself that Stiles was safe. Except he wasn’t safe, was he? He might never be safe again.

“I wish I’d never sent you to that school,” John said.

“Dad, I swear I’m fine.”

“No. It’s not safe. Demon summoning?”

“I was being supervised by a teacher.”

“That would be more comfort if the teacher hadn’t let you summon a demon!”

Stiles started into a ramble about how it hadn’t been his teacher’s fault, and the difference between viewing spells and summoning spells, and how the teachers had worked to contain the demon and minimise the damage.
“I want you home,” John said. The words were barely more than a whisper, uttered before he’d realised he was saying them out loud, but they were enough to stem the flow of Stiles’ words.

“Dad,” Stiles said after a minute, “please, I need to be here. I need to learn this stuff.”

“It’s not safe.”

“It wasn’t safe in Beacon Hills with alpha werewolves and kanimas and hunters around every corner.”

John hated that that was right. He snapped, “At least I would be here to protect you!”

“The teachers protected me and I’m learning to protect myself. The spell Mr Gains used to put out the fires was a version of the water summoning spell I’m already getting pretty good at. Before long I’m going to be able to properly defend myself against the supernatural.”

He started to sound excited again. John stared at his hand, feeling helplessness wash over him like waves. He wanted more than anything in the world to pull Stiles out of the world he’d stumbled into. He wanted Stiles safe and normal and home but that wasn’t going to happen now. Stiles had walked into a world that was violent and dangerous but there was no way he was going to leave it by choice.

John listened to Stiles talk about the magic he was learning, chattering on like this was the most amazing thing in the world. All John could think about were the number of times that Stiles had been hurt or nearly killed, all without him knowing anything about it, all without him being able to protect his son. John listened and made attentive noises and wondered if he would spend the rest of his life afraid that Stiles was going to get himself killed by some supernatural creature.

When even Stiles’ excitement at magic had run out of words, John ended the call and he sat there, staring into nothing, wondering what he was supposed to do now. He had no job, it felt like his son was in a different universe, and he didn’t know what to do. He wished he could go back to the way things had been. He wished he could make Stiles forget the past months and just be ordinary again, safe.

His thoughts were still on those lines when there came a knock at the door. He went to answer it.

Deaton stood outside. John’s hands clenched into fists automatically, even though he remembered how futile his last attempt at a punch had been.

“May I come in?” Deaton asked.

The only reason John stepped aside was because he was pretty certain he didn’t want to have this fight in front of the neighbours. So he let Deaton inside and then closed the door firmly. He folded his arms and glared.

“What the hell do you want?” John asked.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said. I may have something to offer by way of apology.”
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

This wasn't supposed to be a Sterek fic but still a little hint of Sterek crept in anyway. I just can't help myself.

Stiles found Oscar at breakfast the next day. He had to search, because Oscar had taken a corner table and was sitting low in his seat, bent over his food, as though trying to make himself invisible. When Stiles approached, Oscar seemed to shrink into himself further. He didn’t look up as Stiles sat down across from him.

“Hey,” Stiles said.

“You don’t have to pretend to be nice to me,” Oscar said.

“What?” Stiles had expected Oscar to be upset about what had happened yesterday but he hadn’t anticipated a reaction like that. Oscar shrugged, poking at his food and not looking up at Stiles.

“You know what I am now. You don’t have to pretend to like me.”

“What makes you think I’m pretending?”

Oscar did look up, meeting Stiles’ gaze with eyes that were bloodshot. He glared, but the anger was almost invisible beneath the obvious signs that he’d been crying all night.

“I’m a demon,” Oscar said in a whisper, quiet enough so that no one at the nearby tables would be able to hear.

“A quarter demon,” Stiles shrugged.

“Like that makes a difference.”

Stiles glanced around, wondering how much of this conversation they should really have in a busy dining room, but he didn’t want Oscar to disappear on him again so at least some of this needed to be out in the open between them now.

“My best friend was bitten by an alpha werewolf,” Stiles said quietly, “and so of course the first thing he did was start worrying about how he was now a monster and how he might hurt the people he cared about. He was freaking out about it to the point where he was willing to kill the guy who bit him based on an unverified rumour that killing him would make him human again, because he really didn’t want to be a monster. He thought that killing a guy would make him less of a monster than just existing with his new biology.” Stiles didn’t add that Peter had been killed by someone else and that he had deserved it because he’d been on a murderous rampage. Most of the truth would be more helpful right now than the entire truth.

“That’s different,” Oscar said.

“Not really. You... you have a genetic condition which you didn’t previously know about, but knowing about it doesn’t make you any different from the person you were this time yesterday.”
“Genetic condition? That’s what you’re going to call it?”

Stiles shrugged again, “It’s a condition you’ve inherited from your granddad. What else should I call it?”

“I’m a demon!” Oscar hissed.

“That doesn’t mean you’re a bad person.”

“Seriously?”

“You ever watch Angel?”

Oscar shook his head. Stiles would complain about his taste in television shows later. For now, he had a point to make.

Stiles explained, “One of the main characters in the first season is a half-demon. He spends his time having visions of people in trouble and trying to help them. Then there’s another guy who’s this green, horned demon who helps people figure out their path by singing karaoke.”

Oscar still looked sceptical, “You’re talking about a TV show.”

“Yeah, but the point still stands. Whether you’re good or evil, monster or decent person, has nothing to do with your biology. It’s what you do, how you act, the choices you make. That’s what makes someone good or bad.”

The faintest hint of amusement broke through Oscar’s misery and his lips quirked into a hint of a smile, “And now you’re trying to encourage me by paraphrasing Harry Potter?”

“No,” said Stiles. Then he thought back on those recent words about choices, and amended, “Not intentionally. My point is that you’re a nice guy. You care about being good, you get upset when you cause problems for other people, even by accident. You’re a good person, Oscar.”

Stiles went silent for a minute and ate his breakfast while he let his words sink in. He could keep battering the point home, but he’d said what he needed to say and he thought Oscar had listened.

When the silence across the table continue to drag, Stiles decided he would make one final point.

“When Phil and Mr Gains found you yesterday,” Stiles said, “did they say the same?”

“They couldn’t linger much longer. Breakfast was nearly over and already the room was getting quieter as people set off for their classes and study. Stiles stood and offered to clear Oscar’s tray for him. As he left the hall, Stiles spotted Phil waiting for him. He wondered how much of the conversation Phil had been watching and how much he’d picked up on, either with ordinary hearing or his other sense.

“Dr Hawthorn is right about you,” Phil said.

“What?” Stiles asked.

“Dr Hawthorn has plans for you.”
“Could you make that sound any more ominous?”

“Probably. I could add a supervillain laugh.” Phil was smiling. Stiles gave him a glare, but a friendly one. “Dr Hawthorn has plans for your future. I think he’s right.”

“What plans?” Stiles asked.

Phil just smiled some more, “You’ll find out.”

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Stiles didn’t have to wait long to find out. He had his first detention that evening and went to the little room he’d been instructed to go to, surprised to find Dr Hawthorn sitting at the teacher’s desk at the front. He’d thought he’d be able to spend this time doing work, since Dr Hawthorn had told him this wasn’t really a punishment but just a show because summoning demons couldn’t be seen to go unpunished, but now he thought Hawthorn must have something else in mind.

“Hey,” said Stiles. “Do you usually supervise the detentions?”

“Not usually, but sometimes I feel it necessary to take a personal interest in a particular student’s situation.”

“You’re the principal. Shouldn’t you be interested in every student?”

Hawthorn gave a little smile and a nod, like he was acknowledging that Stiles had won a point in some game. Stiles dropped the books he’d brought with him onto one of the nine desks to stood facing the teacher. He sprawled into the seat and waited for whatever might be coming.

“I wanted to talk to you about your future,” Hawthorn said.

“When you say it like that, it sounds like you’re about to make veiled threats to murder me.”

“I don’t murder my students, no matter how much some of them tempt me.” That whole statement was given with a straight face but there was a trace of amusement in his eyes.

“So, my future?”

“Have you spoken to your father about whether or not you will be returning here next year?”

“I don’t know,” Stiles said. He’d got his dad to agree to him staying here until the end of the semester, but what would happen after the summer, he wasn’t sure about. He would love to continue coming to this school, but he missed Beacon Hills. He also knew that his dad wished the whole supernatural thing could just vanish and he wasn’t happy about Stiles learning even more about that world.

“So we may not have a great deal of time. I understand from Mr Gains that you are connected to a werewolf pack?” Hawthorn said.

“Yeah. We’re friends. Kind of. Well, I’m friends with one of the werewolves but he’s not really in the pack. The alpha tried to get him to join the pack but there were some fights and it all got complicated.” Scott had loudly declared that Derek wasn’t his alpha after using Derek’s body as part of his plan to stop Gerard. Stiles knew that Gerard had needed stopping, and that Derek probably would have acknowledged that if asked, and given that Gerard had been putting cameras around and spying on Scott then keeping the plan secret had probably helped with ensuring it had worked. Stiles knew all that, but still he’d seen the way Derek had looked afterwards, the horror on
his face as he’d been paralysed and used to deliver the bite against his will. Stiles loved Scott, but even he could see that had been a dick move.

Maybe if Scott had apologised for using him or explained his actions, Derek would have forgiven him right away. But the words, ‘I’m sorry,’ had never left Scott’s lips. Instead, he’d just stared Derek down like he was completely in the right for stripping him of his autonomy, and declared that he didn’t work for Derek, like that made it OK. After all that, Stiles wasn’t sure how things would stand between Scott and the rest of the pack.

There was some kind of truce now. Derek had been helping with Jackson’s transformation, Stiles knew, but he wasn’t around to see how anything else was working between them.

“Complicated,” Hawthorn repeated. “The supernatural world often is.”

“So what’s my being connected to a pack got to do with anything?” Stiles asked.

“Traditionally, a lot of the older, established packs have a human associated with them. That human plays a number of important roles. They can act as an emissary, taking messages to other packs, crossing other werewolves’ territories without causing incidents, interacting with hunters who might prefer to kill a werewolf to talking to them, and generally going into places that werewolves can’t. They can also act as advisors to the alpha, provide guidance to the betas, and act as a peacemaker when there is conflict. On top of this, many of them are trained in magic.”

“That’s a lot of work for one person.”

Hawthorn nodded, “It takes a special kind of person.”

Stiles had a suspicion where this conversation was going. He could only see one direction this could lead, given the comments Hawthorn had made so far.

“I’m not sure I’m that sort of person,” Stiles said.

“Don’t sell yourself short, Stiles. You have a lot of talent and I’m not just talking about magic, and you want to help people. All yesterday’s trouble came about because you chose to put effort into helping a friend. An emissary would play a similar role in helping out pack members.”

Stiles wasn’t sure what to say to this. He hadn’t expected Hawthorn’s plans for his future to involve a career as a messenger slash guidance councillor for a pack of werewolves.

“I’m not even part of a pack,” Stiles said. “The alpha basically hates me. One of the betas ripped out a part of my car engine, knocked me unconscious with it and literally dumped me in a dumpster. And she was the one who claimed to have a crush on me, so god knows what the others might do.”

Stiles tried not to think about Derek, who threatened him and shoved him against walls and who’d once bashed his head against the steering wheel of the same jeep that Erica had later sabotaged. Stiles tended to be equal parts angry and afraid whenever he was around Derek, possibly with more than a touch of arousal thrown in, but he preferred not to think about that because he didn’t want to imagine what Derek might do if he figured that out. Sure, there had been times when they’d helped each other out, moments when they’d almost trusted each other, but they’d been on opposite sides more often than not over the mess with the kanima. Derek was probably glad that Stiles was far away from his pack right now.

“You don’t have to align yourself to a pack right away,” Hawthorn said. “We can help you develop the skills necessary so that the option will be there for you in the future.”
He could jump at the option of learning more skills, of exploring new aspects of the supernatural world, but all Stiles could imagine was Derek telling him to get lost. Maybe if Scott had a pack of his own, it would be different. Then again, maybe he would in the future. It was possible Stiles could learn stuff that might help Scott at some point down the road.

“I thought you said I already had too many subjects,” Stiles said.

“You seem to be keeping up with them,” Hawthorn said, “although you’re possibly slightly behind in geography.”

“And you’re OK with adding to my studies?”

“Most of what you would need to know overlaps with what you’re already learning: mythology, magic. If you come back next year, I might suggest an introductory course in psychology. There is another option though.”

“Which is?”

“An old fashioned apprenticeship. I don’t know what you have planned for the summer, but there is someone near Beacon Hills who used to be an emissary. He also used to be a student here. I may be able to convince him to give you some one-to-one coaching over the break.”

Stiles thought about this and considered the possibilities. There were thousands of people living in Beacon Hills but one name came instantly to mind as someone who knew about werewolves and this school, someone who offered guidance to a werewolf pack around supernatural dangers.

“If you say the name Deaton,” Stiles said, “I may have to slap you.”

Hawthorn looked surprised and probably not just because Stiles had threatened his principal with violence.

“You know Deaton?” he asked.

“He’s the one who manipulated my dad into sending me here.”

Hawthorn seemed less surprised by that.

“If you know him,” he said, “it might be easier to convince him to teach you.”

“What sort of stuff would I learn?” Stiles asked.

“More about werewolves: biology, pack history, rituals. There are certain magics that go along with the job, but the more you can learn from Mr Gains and Mrs Joyce, the better. Psychology, counselling, and conflict resolution would probably be a good foundation too. At least a rudimentary grasp of as many languages as you can manage will be a help when it comes to negotiations. Generally speaking, I would recommend learning at least a little on as many subjects as you can, you never know what might come in useful.”

“So, basically, I should learn every subject under the sun?”

Hawthorn gave him an amused look, “You say it like you’d have a problem with that.”

Stiles considered. He’d never had a problem with trying to learn new things. He’d been given a set of encyclopaedias for his tenth birthday and he’d read them cover to cover. He’d spent nights online reading about anything that happened to grab his interest at the time. Learning something
about every subject under the sun didn’t sound too terrible.

He wasn’t committing to anything. If he agreed to learn about being an emissary or whatever the hell Hawthorn had called it, he could always change his mind later. He could always use whatever he learned about werewolves to help Scott out without getting some special role in a pack. There were no downsides to agreeing, except that he would have to spend a bit more time studying.

“So where do we start?” Stiles asked.

“How about with a few lesser known facts about werewolves that you might not have covered in your lessons with Mr Gains. For example, did you know that werewolves aren’t the only were-creatures out there?”

“Wererabbits?” Stiles asked, mostly joking.

Hawthorn answered with complete sincerity, “I’ve never come across a wererabbit, but a werecoyote, I’ve met. Most records are of transformations in the canine family, but once in a while there’s an exception, usually caused by a psychological block.”

Stiles thought about Jackson, who’d transformed into a kanima because of his inability to reconcile his sense of self with the fact of his adoption. He brought this up, leaving off Jackson’s name, and asked if that was what Hawthorn meant.

“That’s one example. The occasion I’ve personally come across, it was a hunter who’d been bitten. He was... passionate in his hatred of werewolves, so when he was bitten, something went wrong in the transformation. He became a coyote instead of a wolf. The mind is very powerful. This hunter couldn’t will away the change to his biology, but he willed away a part of it. This is very rare though, and would seem to stem from a deep seated aversion to the change.”

“It would seem?” Stiles asked, picking up on the less than definitive turn of phrase.

“It’s hard to be certain,” Hawthorn said. “We can’t exactly do statistically significant, controlled trials of werewolf bites to see who changes into what, and no one is keeping detailed records. Sometimes the best we can manage is conjecture.”

He continued talking, explaining what he knew of transformations and the various ways they could go wrong, from bite rejection to uncontrollable violence. Stiles pulled out his notebook and started taking notes.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The uniform slid on like it was another skin, a part of himself slipping into place. The familiarity of the fabric made him feel whole again, like a piece that had been missing was restored. John took a deep breath and checked his reflection in the mirror. The sight that looked back was so familiar that he’d almost stopped seeing it but he saw it afresh now: the uniform, the sheriff’s badge, the job he’d worked so hard at for so many years. Deaton’s apology. John felt just a little bit grimy for agreeing to this, but he hadn’t said no.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” he told his reflection then he headed down to his car. He drove to the station. He had another moment out in the parking lot, wondering if this was the right thing to do, if this was honest. The distance between his parking space and the front door had never seemed so long.

He walked into the station. The applause began the moment he stepped through the door, and then Deputy Graeme was there, presenting him with a cake with the words ‘Welcome Back’ written on the icing. She clapped him on the shoulder.

“No one will tell Stiles if you have two helpings,” she told him with a grin.

Around the station, others grinned and gave him words of welcome. None of them seemed to doubt that this was right. None of them seemed remotely suspicious that John had been reinstated. They all seemed to believe this was the way things should be. That made his choice sit just a little easier. He enjoyed the situation for a few minutes, accepting the smiles and welcomes, soaking it in, letting their happiness diminish the guilt.

“Well,” he said, “I’m sure we’ve got crimes to solve. Clarke, you want to get me up to speed?”

“Sure thing, boss.”

John went through to his office, Deputy Clarke following behind. They spent some time going over everything that had happened during his suspension and the status of all open cases, because apparently it had been a suspension and not a firing. There had been a hearing to decide what to do next and it had been agreed that while his son’s actions reflected badly on him, they weren’t enough to justify stripping him of his badge. Likewise, the murders that had been committed on his patch didn’t reflect well on his competence, but the fact that he’d got the evidence on Matt eventually counted in his favour. The final decision was to let him have his job back and let the voters decide at the next election whether they thought he was still the right man for the position.

Part of the problem was that John didn’t know how much had been Deaton’s doing. And he didn’t know how much of that doing was magic.

It could be that Deaton had used his position as a respected member of the community to suggest that there should be a hearing instead of a simple firing decision. It could be that he’d spoken to a few influential citizens who happened to have pets, and that those voices had swayed the final decision. John could live with himself if that was all that had happened. But there was also the possibility that Deaton had used magic to brainwash people into deciding in John’s favour. The fact that it had all happened so quickly after the conversation with Deaton made John worry about how much magical influence Deaton had been forced to employ.
He’d asked that question when Deaton had first proposed getting John his job back as an apology, but Deaton had been vague. The fact that he hadn’t given a clear answer made John wary, but it wasn’t absolutely proof of dark magic. After all, Stiles claimed that Deaton never gave a straight answer about anything.

John could have gone back to Deaton and pushed the issue. He could have demanded to know exactly what Deaton’s part in this had been, but he was afraid to do so. He was afraid to learn that his reinstatement was all a sham and then he knew he’d have to leave. As it was, he could hold onto the hope that everything was above board and he could get on with doing the job he knew he was good at. Now, he had extra knowledge to help him deal with the stranger cases.

“Are you OK, Sheriff?” Clarke asked. John had been zoning out. If he kept this up, he might turn into Stiles.

“Yeah. I’m fine. I just need to get my head back in work mode.” He hesitated, then asked, “Did you think I would be coming back?”

“Of course,” Clarke said. “You hadn’t broken any rules. The crime stats last year weren’t great but most of the deaths were animal attacks and you went by the book and called in the right authorities to help. They were bound to reinstate you when they looked at the evidence.”

John breathed a little easier, but only for a moment. There was that little whisper of doubt in the back of his mind that asked whether it was possible for Deaton to brainwash an entire sheriff’s station. He pushed the thought aside.

“Where were we?” he asked, and focused on his job.

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Stiles wondered if any of the kids who’d been sent here for their physics potential could figure out a way to add an extra hour or two to each day. He would make his life so much easier. Right now, he was trying to juggle his core subjects, his electives, his magic lessons, and now his detention emissary lessons with Hawthorn. At this rate, he would run out of time to sleep. He’d actually asked Hawthorn if he could skip some of the physical education requirements so he could have more time for the academics, and Hawthorn had responded by suggesting Stiles drop Latin. There was no way that was happening because his translation of the bestiary was finally starting to speed up now that he only had to look up every other word in the dictionary.

A couple of extra hours were exactly what he needed. Or maybe a time turner. He should definitely ask Mr Gains if time turners were real because then he could use one to get all his studies done and he wouldn’t exhaust himself like Hermione had. Seriously, if she was that smart, why didn’t it occur to her that she could use the time turner to travel back a few hours and then take a nap in a quiet corner somewhere?

He headed up towards the bedrooms. He needed to finish a biology worksheet but then he would probably still have half an hour to work on his translations before lights out. He’d save researching time travel until tomorrow.

He reached his corridor and slowed down as he heard a voice coming out through an open door. He knew eavesdropping was rude, but he couldn’t help it when the voice said, “Please don’t make this like the werewolf thing.”

Stiles froze in his tracks. That was Steven’s voice. Steven wasn’t part of the little circle that knew about magic. So what the hell was he doing talking about werewolves? He was presumably on the
phone because there was a pause before Steven spoke again.

“I just said it because it’s funny,” he said. Another pause. “Yes, I do find it funny because it’s just a silly rumour, an example of how stories spread. No one actually believes a student summoned a demon.”

Stiles didn’t know who Steven was talking to but he was already worried. Stories about how the fire had started had flown round the school. Everyone knew Stiles was involved somehow because Hawthorn had given him detention for it, which meant Stiles was fending off questions, often from people he didn’t even know, about what had really happened. No one had outright asked him about the demon-summoning rumour, but he knew that the story was still out there. And presumably Steven wouldn’t be the only one telling someone outside the school.


Stiles was still standing in frozen shock when Steven stepped out of his bedroom. From the nervous look on Steven’s face, he probably guessed that Stiles had been eavesdropping.

“My dad,” Steven said. “He’s a little odd.”

“Is everything OK?”

“Yeah. I just...” Steven looked more annoyed than anything else. “I now have to convince the kitchen staff to give me a load of salt without sounding like I’m crazy.”

“Salt?”

“I made the mistake of telling my dad that stupid story about you summoning a demon. Now he wants me to block my bedroom door with a line of salt.”

“So demons can’t cross it,” Stiles said.

“Right. You’re taking a mythology class, aren’t you?”

“And I’ve watched Supernatural.” Stiles thought about the work that still needed doing, but he thought it was more important to stick with Steven and figure out what this was all about. “Want me to come with you?”

“Yeah. I guess I might sound less crazy if I’m not alone.”

“You could always say you need the salt for a science experiment,” Stiles suggested.

Steven actually smiled a little at that, “Good plan.”

“And if we’re both doing the experiment, it explains why we need a large amount.”

They walked together down the hall, falling quiet as they past another group who were heading up to their rooms for the evening. When they reached a quieter hall, Steven said, “You’re not making fun of me for having to do this.”

“You’re keeping your dad happy. Nothing funny about that.” Stiles didn’t want to say that he also knew that demons were completely real. Trying to explain would just make him sound crazy, though he would have a word with Mr Gains. Steven would probably feel better about this whole
situation with his dad if someone sat him down and talked him through the existence of the supernatural. It might be easier to believe coming from a teacher.

“I overheard,” Stiles continued, “sorry about that, by the way, but I overheard you saying something about the werewolf thing?”

Steven gave a frustrated sigh, “My dad gets these strange ideas sometimes. You know that purple flowers in the greenhouse with the toxic warning sign? My dad has a whole load of those planted around the house because he’s convinced it will keep the werewolves away.”

“He shouldn’t worry so much, most werewolves are actually pretty nice.” When Steven shot him a look, Stiles continued, “Didn’t you read Harry Potter?”

“This isn’t a joke.”

“Sorry.”

“When he sent me to school here,” Steven said, “I hoped he’d take the opportunity of not having to look after me to go and get treatment.”

He definitely needed someone to sit down with him and explain the existence of the supernatural. Right now, he was convinced that his father was deluded. Stiles knew from his own experience that father/son relationships were better when everyone was on the same page. If he were back in Beacon Hills, Stiles would call Scott and get him to show Steven the face. He could set up a Skype meeting or something, but then Steven might believe it was all special effects and that Stiles was mocking him. Stiles definitely needed to talk to Mr Gains.

They reached the kitchens. The place was quiet and empty, except for a woman sitting in the corner with a book. She looked up, obviously annoyed at having her reading interrupted.

“No, I won’t make you cupcakes for a midnight feast,” she said.

“Actually,” said Steven, “we were hoping to get some salt for a science experiment.”

“Salt?”

“Yes.”

“Just salt?”

“Uh-huh.”

Stiles continued, “It’s for an experiment on the effects of saline water on plant growth. We need enough salt to create multiple solutions of different concentration and we’ve got to have enough to run the experiment over enough time to see the impact and enough plants to get statistically significant results.” When she looked blank, Stiles summarised, “We need a lot of salt.”

“And you want to start your experiment now?” she asked. She still looked dubious. It probably didn’t help that Steven looked nervous as hell to be making the request.

“We’re starting the experiment first thing tomorrow,” Stiles said, “but you’ll all be busy with cleaning up breakfast and getting started on lunch. We figured we’d be less of an interruption if we came now.”

The woman glared at them for a few seconds more and then put the book down. She went over to a
draw and pulled out a piece of paper and a pen. When Stiles took these from her, the paper turned out to be a request form. Stiles filled out the information about what they were requesting, using his experiment description as the reason for it. He hesitated when he got to the sponsoring teacher box, before writing Mrs Joyce’s name in it. He could talk to her in the morning and explain that the salt was actually a demon barrier. She would probably be OK with it and might help out with convincing Steven his dad wasn’t crazy, but she might make Stiles do the experiment anyway.

The woman took the form and checked it over.

“I will be talking to Mrs Joyce about this,” she said. Stiles tried to look unconcerned and wondered if he could catch Mrs Joyce in the greenhouses before tomorrow’s run if he set his alarm a few minutes earlier.

The grumpy kitchen lady went into a large pantry and found a huge bag of salt. It was practically a sack. Stiles was astonished. Given how healthy all the food here was, he wouldn’t have believed there was that much salt in the kitchen. The woman found a ziplock plastic back and started weighing out salt. She gave them a couple of hundred grams, which was probably plenty for a salt water experiment, but Steven would have to be very careful if he wanted to have enough to block his doorway. Still, they couldn’t argue. They thanked the woman and got out of there quickly.

“What about Mrs Joyce?” Steven asked as soon as they were heading away.

“I’ll talk to her,” Stiles said. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Thanks for this. She never would have said yes if I’d just gone in and asked.”

It was possible she might have done. With the number of people around here who knew about magic, he wouldn’t be surprised about any member of staff who turned out to be in on the secret.

By the time they got back to their rooms, Stiles still had enough time to finish his biology, but there was no time left to work on the translation. He threw himself into bed just as it was lights out and he lay there for a while, thinking about Steven. What was the best way to break a secret like this to people? It was a shame they didn’t have another lacrosse game because then he could have got Scott to give a demonstration.

His mind still racing, it took Stiles a while to drift off, but he’d finally slipped into a half-asleep doze when he was snapped out of it by the sound of breaking glass.

Chapter End Notes

As an aside, one of my books is available for free on kindle for the next three days. I’m not sure why my publisher thought April Fools Day was the best day to start this special offer, but there’s more information over on my Tumblr if anyone's interested.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!