Doors Unlocked and Open

by Imnotahero

Summary

They say that when one door closes another one opens. That might be true elsewhere, but not in Beacon Hills. Danger lurks behind every door, and once they’re ajar they stay like that - unlocked and open. Which is not good. Not at all. Stiles find things bad enough with Dread Doctors, Theo and his pack of Resurrected Chimeras, Lydia stuck in Eichen House and the foundation of his friendship with Scott unraveling fast. The surprising return of Derek might just be the counterbalance he needs. Especially if they could just close some of these damned doors...

Notes

A warning for die-hard Scott-fans: Initially Scott might come off as a bit of a douche. Please have patience. Remember that this is from Stiles' perspective and he's feeling hurt and
rejected, which heavily influences how he sees his best friend. It gets better.

Title borrowed from the song "Doors Unlocked and Open" by Death Cab for Cutie

Part 1 of the Doors Unlocked series. Canon compliant up to season 5B. Unbetaed so all errors are mine and mine alone (and now shared with you).
The room was dimly lit. A tension lingered in the air, mixing with the smell of sterilizers. There was barely any movement, just the slightest rise and fall of his chest as Stiles drew shallow breaths. Mostly he held it, waited and prayed to a God he wasn’t sure existed. If he did, all evidence suggested he’d long since abandoned this part of the country. Stiles didn't blame him. Not one bit.

A shrill beep startled him. Penetrated the silence as unexpected and unwelcome as giddy laughter at a funeral. It baffled Stiles how it was possible to simultaneously, and with equal measure and intensity, both hate and love that sound.

For the most part the constant beeping of the machine monitoring his dad's heartbeat was a source of overwhelming comfort. Each time the tone pierced the otherwise quiet room, it flooded Stiles' entire body with relief and for a split second he relaxed.

Then, just as suddenly, the mind-numbing fear kicked in again. The scant second it took for the machine to emit its digital tone again, felt like a lifetime and the relief quickly drained out of him, forcing him through a myriad of emotions ranging from utter hopelessness to paralyzing fear.

When the beep came again the process started all over. It was an emotional roller coaster, a purgatory of contrasting emotions that was slowly breaking him down, one beep at the time.

Of all the things that could kill him Stiles had never seriously considered sound a possible threat. Fangs yes. Claws definitely. Bullets and arrows - certainly a risk. Sound however was way down the list somewhere between paper cuts and the common cold.

The only sound he’d ever feared was Lydia's banshee scream, and only because of what it represented. How it heralded death. This sound was the exact opposite. This sound promised continued life. Which meant that it this case it was the lack of sound that spoke of death. It was an odd paradox that would normally morbidly amuse him. There was however nothing amusing about possibly losing his dad.

His dad was pale. Unnervingly pallid, his skin almost deathlike. It was disturbing how many dead bodies Stiles has seen over the past year to make him instantly recognize the waxy hue of the near dead. And he couldn’t escape the fact that his dad’s skin tone seemed to be getting closer and closer to said hue with each minute, each hour and day that passed. Stiles was not ready for a possible case of condition terminal, and for the moment the doctors of Beacon Hills Memorial Hospital was not exactly instilling him with a sense of hope. In fact, Stiles had started dreading the doctors and their visits. The play on words - dread and doctors - had caused him to break down in a fit of hysterical laughter that had nothing to do with humor and everything to do with fate kicking his ass. Dread and doctors were clearly the bane of his existence.

His outburst had scared the nurses and resulted in Melissa calmly administering him a sedative. It had knocked him right out, which was probably a good thing, because it was the only time he’d slept at all since his dad was brought in. He’d later been informed that the sheriff had undergone another surgery while he was out like a light. Something about a damaged spleen and whatnot. Stiles had been a bit groggy when they told him, still half drugged and slightly disorientated. The important part was that his dad was still alive. If only barely.

The number of tubes and wires connected to him was too many to count. He was breathing on his own, but the breaths were so shallow and slow you had to concentrate to hear them. Stiles spent every minute available by his dad’s bedside, only taking record fast bathroom breaks. And when he
did he couldn’t bring himself to close the door, scared out of his mind that he’d just wither away and die while he was doing something as mundane as taking a piss.

Wither away. Like mom.

Being here had opened up string of old wounds never fully healed. Stiles tried valiantly to push the contrasting memories of his mother out of the way. He had enough dealing with his dad possibly dying on him, and didn’t need more emotional baggage to taunt him. But it was a losing battle. Aside from the beep, there was nothing to distract him, nothing to keep the repressed thoughts from seeping to the foreground. He was trapped in a morbid form of déjà vu with no way of escape.

Just like the beep, Stiles loved and hated his mother with equal intensity. He loved her unconditionally like children do. And yet he hated her for leaving them. Loved the memories of the two of them baking cookies and her telling him mind-numbingly scary Polish bedtime stories, and hated that he’ll never get to make new memories with her. Equally as passionately Stiles hated how reading Valack's stupid book has brought things to the surface that he was still unsure of. Were they real memories, lies or perhaps fragments of truth twisted around by fear or planted in his mind? He was not ruling anything out, because he’d learned the hard way that his mind isn’t always to be trusted.

He clung to the hope that his dad might give him answers. If he survived the trauma Theo inflicted on him that is.

Stiles hasn’t seen the marks across his dad’s chest. Not since he found him slashed open and almost gone. But he knows they're still there, and will leave permanent scars. He's stitched up bandaged up now. Melissa had explicitly told him not to touch them. For once, he's following instructions without question.

"We don't want to risk him getting an infection," she'd said, lips tight and eyes watery. "The doctors are at a loss. I told them it was probably a mountain lion, but that doesn't explain why his body is acting as if it's poisoned and yet nothing shows up on our tox screens. Frankly we have no idea how to treat him. At the moment we can little do but wait and hope."

Stiles had just nodded mutely, clutched his dad’s hand like a lifeline, and willed him to get better. Melissa had hugged him from behind, kissed his tear-streaked cheek and left them alone. Stiles had eventually fished out his phone and tried to get a hold of Lydia, but it had gone straight to voice mail. The same with Deaton, but that had been less surprising. Deaton had left town without telling Scott anything about what he was up to. Or if he had Scott hadn’t bothered filling Stiles in. No matter, Deaton was out of reach and Stiles was out of ideas.

He had tried them both again later, but still nothing. He contemplated calling Malia but could not make his fingers cooperate. He’d hovered over the letter D in his contact list longer than he was comfortable to admit, but eventually scolled on by. Kira was gone and could little do. Liam would probably come if asked but had nothing to offer in terms of advice or knowledge.

Stiles skipped S entirely.

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The third day dawned bright, new, and still Stiles hadn’t slept a wink since he woke from the
drugged out bliss two days prior. His dad looked even paler, or it might just be the morning light playing tricks. Stiles clung to that illusion while the machine continued to play out its torturous and toneless melody.

A nurse appeared at nine with a tray of uninspired breakfast. Stiles dived for the coffee, inhaling it greedily and feeling his body slowly waking up. The nurse eyed him with ill-concealed judgement, but Stiles resolutely ignored her, pushing unwelcome thoughts back into the shadows of his overactive mind. She continued to glare until he picked up a piece of toast. She didn’t leave until he’s taken a bite (it tasted like cardboard). He drenched the rest of the toast in a thick layer of strawberry jam and tried calling Lydia. It went straight to voice mail - again, and the nagging feeling in the pit of his stomach intensified.

Chimera.

Remembering Theo's reveal of his true self and his intentions chilled him to the bone. They should have seen it coming. He had seen it coming. Well, not that Theo was a Frankenstein experiment gone horribly awry, but Stiles had known from the moment he laid eyes on him that something was not right. As usual, no one had listened, and now everything was going to shits.

Theo had wanted Lydia. He'd admitted that. He wanted all of them. The whole pack, save for Scott, because obviously Theo had no room for another alpha in his gang. Stiles actually felt a bit guilty, oddly enough. Not that he could be blamed for Theo's whacked plot, but he too had rejected Scott in a way, and it didn't sit right with him. It had been an impossible situation, of course and between the option of saving Scott or his dad, Stiles had chosen his dad. It had been the right choice. Scott was an alpha with healing powers, fangs and claws. His dad might have a gun and a badge, but Stiles knew firsthand that when faced with supernatural foes that carried little weight and even less protection.

Scott was okay though, that much he knew. If he hadn’t been Melissa would've been in pieces and not working the night shifts. She hadn’t said anything. Hadn't mentioned Scott or suggested Stiles call him, which told him she probably knew things were off between them. She’d never been the meddlesome type anyway, and whenever they fought as kids they’d always made up quickly. This time it was different.

Scott should come to me this time, thought Stiles somewhat childishly. Scott had ignored his warnings about Theo. He had chosen to believe whatever version of the story about Donovan Theo had spun. Three days alone in a hospital room with nothing but beeps to keep him company had left much room for contemplation and in hindsight it was clear that Theo must have fed Scott some cock and bull story about what really went down in the library. Stiles knew Theo was a manipulative little shit, but he had to hand it to him. He was a masterful manipulative shit.

The truly depressing realization was not that Scott would disapprove of the outcome with Donovan. Stiles had known and feared that all along. That part he'd been prepared for. A much harder pill to swallow was that Scott had believed Theo over Stiles so readily and without even bothering to ask his side of the story. After all the truly horrifying things they’ve been through together and how Stiles had stood by Scott the entire time, for better and worse, he’d expected more. As soon as the tables were turned, though... Nothing.

It was the worst way Scott could ever wound him. Honestly, he would much rather prefer a set of claws to the chest. That would probably hurt less and heal faster. So yeah, Scott should come crawling back, admitting that Stiles had been right from the start. But here he was, three days later, and still no sign of him. Not even a text.

Worse yet, no sign of Lydia either. Right now that was worrying Stiles far more. His instincts told him to go out and look for her, but at the same time he was not prepared to leave his dad. It was
another one of those impossible choices, much like Theo asking him to choose between Scott and his dad. Once again, his dad won.

In desperation, Stiles tried Deaton again but still no answer. Swearing creatively he finally gave in and called Liam.

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"What do you mean no one was home?"

Stiles glared from Liam to Mason and back again. Liam looked terrible, like he was about to collapse at any given moment. Mason was more or less propping him up. Stiles made a mental note to get to know Mason better when and if time allowed it. He seemed like a decent person and a good friend.

"We went to her house, just like you asked," answered Liam, his voice toneless and flat. He sounded sad. No, scratch that. Stiles knew that tone. He sounded wrecked. Oh. Oh, crap!

Stiles felt like hitting himself over the head. He had totally forgotten about Hayden. His own worry over his dad and Lydia had pushed everything else to the side. He felt horrible. Stiles knew very well he could be an asshole on the best of days, but this was borderline tactless. He quickly rose and offered the chair to Liam, clasping his shoulder in the process. It was not much, but it was a start.

"The door was locked; we rang the bell probably fifty times. We waited, and then we waited some more, but no one answered. Lydia's car was not in the driveway, nor were her mom's. The lights were out; we even peaked through the windows. Liam climbed a tree and looked in the second story windows. Nothing. No one was home. Totally empty. And according to Mr. I-Can-Hear-Heartbeats there wasn't a living soul inside."

Mason took a breath and waved one hand in a silly half circle. "So, that is what we mean by no one being home."

Stiles suppressed a grin. His facial muscles were unfamiliar with the movement and it felt wrong. Nevertheless, Mason was hilarious even in the face of mountains of crap. He respected that. Hell, he approved of that.

"She wasn't at school either," continued Mason, clearly on a roll. "Also her mom has called in sick to work. I asked the woman in administration for her number, claiming I needed to consult on a history assignment, but when I called it went straight to voice mail."

"This isn't a really promising report, guys."

Stiles somehow felt worse than before, which was a feat in itself. Mason shrugged apologetically. Liam just stared straight ahead, seemingly lost in his own mind.

"Thank you for checking, I appreciate it."

He patted Liam's shoulder again. He flinched, stared at Stiles without really seeing him and then gave a half-hearted shrug. "You're welcome," he muttered, rose heavily and turned towards the door. He disappeared through it without a backwards glance. Mason however lingered.
"Don't take it personally," he said quietly, probably in an effort to elude Liam's werewolf hearing. Stiles had a feeling Liam was not in an eavesdropping frame of mind.

"I didn't think. I'm sorry." Stiles smiled halfheartedly. "I've been here for three days worried out of my mind about my dad, and I just pushed everything else aside. I gather it didn't go too well for Hayden?"

Mason just shook his head, and Stiles felt his insides freeze. Liam was a good kid who had not asked to be dragged into this, and neither had Hayden. Stiles was on first name basis with loss and sorrow, and he did not envy him.

"I'm so terribly sorry, I feel like such a selfish dick asking you to locate Lydia. It's just that I'm terribly worried about her. I don't know what happened with Scott, but I know Theo went after him, he admitted as much. Said he wanted him dead. And I know Theo is a chimera who wants all us of in his pack. Just not Scott. But Scott isn't dead, that much I've gathered."

"Yeah, he's alive. His mom sort of brought him back."

"You were there?"

Mason nodded, looking uncharacteristically solemn.

Stiles sighed resignedly, leaning back into his chair and rubbing his eyes. They were dry and sore, both from tears and lack of sleep.

"Just tell me. I will find out eventually anyway. In addition, I deserve to know. I was the only one suspecting Theo, and I was ignored. I will not be kept in the dark."

Mason slumped down in the other chair. He was silent for a while and for once Stiles was patient.

"I think you need to talk to Liam about this," he started. "I wasn't there for most of it, and it's not really my place to comment on other people's motivations and thoughts. He's not been in a sharing mood these last few days, and I haven't prodded too much. I'm giving him a bit of space and time. What I do know though is that Liam went after Scott. I think he tried to kill him."

Mason looked to be bracing himself, expecting Stiles to jump to Scott's defense. Confusion spread across his face when it did not happen.

"Why?" probed Stiles tonelessly. "Why did he try to kill him? Was it the super moon? I know he's been having some control issues."

Mason took a deep breath, and then shrugged.

"Honestly? I am not entirely sure. Which is why I think you need to talk to Liam. It's his story to tell and he hasn't exactly been an open book ever since Parrish zombie-walked in and took Hayden's body away. What I do know is that Liam begged Scott to give Hayden the bite in an effort to save her. Scott's mom came to help, but it was apparent that Hayden wasn't getting any better. Medical treatment was not going to save her. But I guess Scott wasn't willing to risk it, or he thought there was still hope. I don't know. All I know is that he said no, and Liam kind of lost it. I guess the super moon didn't help."

Stiles scoffed. "I'm betting Theo probably whispered encouraging words into his ear as well in some shape or form."

Mason nodded. "Probably. Theo was very pissed off when Liam didn't kill Scott, I saw that
firsthand. I came to tell Liam that Hayden was about to die, and he just stopped mid punch and left to be with her. Scott was injured but alive. When Theo came back he did his best to finish the job."

Stiles swore. "Have you talked to Scott since? Seen him at all?"

Mason shook his head. "No. Liam flashes his wolfy eyes and growls whenever Scott’s name is mentioned, so I have not dared prod the issue. He hasn't made contact with any of us either. Has he talked to you?"

Stiles laughed mirthlessly, smoothing a hand over the blanket covering his dad and his terrible Theo-inflicted wounds.

"No."

Mason's eyes bugged out making Stiles almost miss Coach Finstock's mad expressions.

"He hasn't been here? Why not?"

"Probably because Theo managed to make Scott believe I killed Donovan in cold blood, which means that we can't be friends anymore. We don’t kill you see. Pack policy."

"Oh."

Mason chewed his lip, staring at his hands for a moment before his eyes met Stiles'.

"Did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Kill Donovan in cold blood?"

Stiles mentally bumped Mason up on his favorite people list. At least he asked, unlike others.

"In cold blood? No. But I did kill him, in self-defense. He tried to eat me. Literally."

"Then I don't see a problem with it. Pack policy should make exceptions for self-defense."

Stiles actually laughed then. A real laugh. It sounded foreign, like it had somehow gotten lost and wandered into the wrong room.

"Then I guess you don't subscribe to the Scott McCall School of Black and White Morality. Welcome to the grey area, we're numerous and always accepting new members."

Mason grinned, shaking his head. "You're a bit odd, you know that right?"

"Pot, meet kettle."

Mason tipped his head in a silent acknowledgement and they just sat in silence for a moment. When Mason’s phone beeped with an incoming text, he quickly rose.

"It's Liam, he's getting impatient."

"Go, take care of him."

Mason headed for the door. Stiles reached him before he could open it, laying a hand on his shoulder and squeezing in what he hoped was a reassuring manner. He was getting good at those.
"You're a good friend. Mason. Liam is lucky to have you."

The second the door closed behind Mason, Stiles broke down in tears.
Six hours later and Stiles had regained control of his emotions. His eyes were bloodshot and dry as fuck. He was also feeling slightly dehydrated. Tears drained you in more ways than one, but somehow he felt lighter for it. As if some of the toxic thoughts festering inside his brain had leaked out with the salty rivulets. That or he was just too exhausted to fully care. Either way his mood was better, even if his nerves were still on edge and his worry for Lydia slowly growing like a colony of out of control bacteria.

Melissa had been by twice. First to refill his dad's saline bags and secondly to implore Stiles to go home and get some rest. He'd just glared at her and asked if she by any chance had seen Lydia, or knew of someone who'd been in contact with her recently. Obviously, he meant Scott, but he was still too pissed to flat out ask about him.

Melissa had bit her lip and shaken her head.

"No, Stiles. I have not seen Lydia. And I don't know of anyone who's spoken with her lately either."

She had avoided looking at him as she said this, and Stiles had gotten weird tingly goosebumps all down his spine. The kinds that usually told him someone was lying. Badly. But Melissa didn't lie, had never lied to him as far as he knew. So perhaps his spidey senses were just off? Dulled from lack of sleep maybe?

"Really?" he had probed, tilting his head into a ridiculous angle to catch her eye.

"Really," she had confirmed, but her cheeks were suspiciously rosy. Or maybe that was due to the less than fun task of changing his dad's catheter. Stiles was all kinds of thankful that his dad was unconscious for that part.

"I honestly haven't seen her, Stiles."

She left soon after, leaving Stiles behind with the beep and his dad's shallow breaths. In desperation, he tried to call Malia, but it went straight to voice mail. Voice mail was slowly become the bane of his existence and he halfheartedly pondered starting a petition to have them banned.

Not getting hold of Malia didn’t worry him that much though. Malia forgot to charge her phone half the time, and more often than not had the sound turned off. In fact, it was a rarer occurrence when she did pick up the phone. He shot her a text asking if she'd seen Lydia and prayed that she'd see it sooner rather than later.

Half an hour later, two attempts at reaching Deaton and seven minutes spent scrolling up and down the contacts listed under D, and Stiles had an epiphany. Or rather, he awoke from a three day brain hiatus.

Parrish!

Why hadn’t he thought of him sooner? Parrish and Lydia were involved in some sort of weird mating ritual, and Stiles knew the deputy tended to keep close tabs on her. Parrish would know. And if not, then Parrish would be more than happy to find out. Miraculously Parrish actually picked up the phone on the second ring.

"Hold on a sec, Stiles" he whispered in a somewhat flustered voice. In the background, Stiles could make out what sounded like a heated discussion. A door opened and closed, and the sound muffled.
Then Parrish was back.

"Sorry about that, how is your dad doing? I've been meaning to come by. In fact I was supposed to be there already, but I got derailed in a major way. Long and terrible story."

"Don't worry about it. The doctors are still at a loss, but he's alive and breathing."

"This town," muttered Parrish darkly. "I still don't get why I came here in the first place."

"Your freaky supernatural self was compelled by a magical magnet that just so happened to be a cut down tree that no one but you seem to be able to find."

Stiles could practically feel Parrish rolling his eyes. "Thank you for the clarification," he commented dryly. "Hang on I'm almost there. Room 215 right?"

"Yeah. You're at the hospital?"

That question was answered when the door opened and revealed a frazzled looking Jordan Parrish.

"I hate this place," declared Parrish with gusto and shoved a huge cup of coffee at Stiles. "Double everything, extra cinnamon and a dash of vanilla. Enjoy."

Stiles stared dumbfounded at the cup for a few seconds while Parrish slumped down into the vacant chair. He trained his eyes on the sheriff's tubed and pallid form, his face etched with worry.

"Did I get it wrong?" he asked not taking his eyes of the patient. "The coffee I mean. It might be lukewarm by now; I was slightly derailed on my way here. Lydia once gave me a long-winded rant about your ridiculous coffee preferences and I guess it stuck. I figured you could need a little boost."

"Thanks, and yeah it's right." Stiles inhaled the rich aroma and felt his brain come to life in anticipation. He took a tentative sip and promptly moaned blissfully. It was like nectar from the Gods. Stiles was sleep-deprived and on the brink of a nervous breakdown – resorting to horribly cliched descriptions was totally okay under the circumstances.

"Good?" Parrish turned his head and gave Stiles one of his small smirks. "You do realize you're moaning, right?"

"I want to marry this coffee," declared Stiles in bliss as he took another mouthful.

"Better hurry the ceremony along then, your bride is disappearing quickly. Want me to look up getting ordained online?"

Stiles chuckled and licked his lips chasing the last of the orgasmic taste.

"Don't bother, my bride is no more."

"Oh well, It was a whirlwind affair, doomed from the start."

Stiles laughed and set down the empty cup. He could definitely see why his dad was so fond of Parrish. He was just the right amount of snarky and deadpan that made Stilinski men whip out their stamp of approval. In addition, Lydia liked him, and Stiles liked Lydia. And Lydia seemed to like Stiles as well, which was awesome and unexpected all rolled into one. Lydia liking him did however involve far less cuddling and romance than originally planned, but Stiles was surprisingly okay with that. Lydia's taste in men was historically not exactly stellar, but it was definitely improving. It was definitely progress.
Apropos Lydia…

"I'm worried about Lydia."

Parrish sighed deeply slumping further into the incredibly uncomfortable chair. Stiles would need weeks of chiropractor appointments to realign his back when this was over.

"Me too," Parrish admitted. That was not a comforting answer and Stiles felt his heartbeat speed up.

"Not a word for days," Stiles continued letting his frustrations and worry bubble to the surface. "I can't take it. But I feel like I can't leave my dad either, so I've just been sitting here worried out of my mind."

"I understand that," said Parrish with a tight smile. "Lydia will understand that as well. Honestly I'm not sure she'll notice that you haven't been to see her. It's not like she's in a state to say anything anyway, right?"

What - the - hell? Not been to see her? Not in a state to - to what?

"What the hell is going on with Lydia?"

Stiles had gotten to his feet and in a blink of an eye he had Parrish pinned to the wall, his fists clenched in his wrinkled t-shirt. It was first now, with his nose inches from his face that he noticed the deputy was not in uniform.

"Stiles, seriously? Let go of me. What are you – oomph, that hurts. Ease up, man."

Stiles answered by tightening his grip. "What the hell is going on with Lydia?" he repeated all but growling. Spots danced before his eyes, his blood was boiling, rushing through his veins, something dark and ugly simmering deep within.

"Stiles, STILES!"

Parrish made a strangled sort of sound. "You're hurting me. How are you hurting me? Holy hell!"

Parrish' eyes suddenly glowed almost orange, and it felt like Stiles’ hands were on fire.

"FUCK!"

He released his grip and looked in shock at his hands. Angry red blisters were forming as if he'd just been given a third degree burn.

"Oh my God, Stiles. I'm sorry!"

Parrish was already by the sink, cold water running. He pulled the towel of the rack and came back with it dripping with icy water. He wrapped Stiles hands and carefully guided him back to the one chair that was still standing upright.

“Shit, shit. I’m really sorry. I have no real control of that yet, I think it’s mostly instinct to be honest. But you lifted me clear off the floor, dude. What are you, 160 pounds at most?”

“What?” Stiles’ hands were stinging and what Parrish said made little sense. The door opening saved him. A stern looking nurse peeked inside.

"What's going on in here? I heard screaming."
Parrish was on his feet and all but threw himself at the woman, his service-minded deputy smile in full bloom.

"Sorry about that, nurse... Hotchkiss is it? Stiles accidentally put his hands under warm water when he was washing them. I do not think he's slept much the last couple of days. I've wrapped his hands in a cold cloth."

Nurse Hotchkiss peered over at Stiles, and her eyes softened.

"Poor kid," she muttered. Stiles scoffed. He was not a kid. Not anymore. He glared murderously as she unwrapped the cloth and inspected his red hands. She made no note of his scowl.

"That will need some tending to. I'll be back with some ointment and bandages in a few minutes."

The door had not yet closed when Stiles was back on topic.

"What the fuck is going on with Lydia? Talk! NOW!"

Parrish held up his hands indicating he was cooperating fully.

"I'm sorry; I just assumed you knew. You always know stuff, and I thought Scott would have informed you by now."

"Scott knows?"

"Of course Scott knows, I called him as soon as I found her."

"What do you mean, as soon as you found her? Found her where?"

Parrish looked sheepish and half scared to answer, which told Stiles everything he needed to know.

"The Nemeton. You found her by the Nemeton, didn't you?"

Parrish nodded. "Yeah, like always I didn't even know I was going there. The last thing I remember is being at home fixing myself something to eat before my shift, and next I was sitting on top of that huge tree trunk, feet in a lotus position. I know I must have been there many times, but I have no real memories of any of my visits as you know. Only fragments of what I thought were dreams. I’ve only consciously been there that time I found it with Lydia so I was a bit confused at first. Then I saw her. Right in front of me. Lydia was just lying, face blank, her eyes staring straight ahead but not really seeing anything."

A hoarse, throaty wheeze filled the air. It took a few seconds before Stiles realized the sound was coming from him. His breath was coming in quick shallow puffs and he instantly recognized the start of a panic attack.

No, no, no! Not now!

He grasped around for something to anchor him. Something to keep him grounded. Anything.

I need you dad, he thought desperately, clasping the sheriff’s hand tightly. It was cold and clammy against his own boiling skin.

Why is everyone leaving me? Don't leave me too, dad! I need you!

"You alright, Stiles? Stiles!"
Stiles vaguely registered hands on his shoulders. They felt like weights, pushing him down. Drowning him. He swatted at them, uncoordinated and desperate.

"Stiles?" Parrish was starting to sound alarmed. "I need you to take deep breaths for me. Can you do that? I'm going to breathe with you, okay."

Stiles shook his head. Nothing was okay. His dad was not improving, Lydia was clearly not okay, Scott didn't believe him, he'd more or less broken up with Malia, Liam was knee-deep in his own grief and Derek was - Hell, he didn't know where the fuck Derek was. And his mom...

"I can't lose anyone else," he wheezed, throat scratchy and sore, eyes still not seeing straight with dots dancing erratically across his retinas.

"Lydia will be fine," said Parrish reassuringly, a hand back on his shoulder, not letting go. Anchoring him. "Your dad will be fine too. I'm not going anywhere. Now please, try to breathe with me. If not I need to call in a nurse."

Stiles shook his head vehemently. "No nurses," he rasped.

"Then you need to breathe."

Stiles willed his eyes open and found Parrish looking at him with kind eyes, no hint of orange or flames this time. Just compassion.

"Come on, Stiles," he said warmly. "You're getting there; your breath is better already. Just concentrate..."

True to his word, ten minutes later, five of which were spent in a fetal position on the cot next to his dad's bed, and Stiles was much better. Not fine. Not by a long shot. But definitely better. His go to answer when people asked him how he felt was always "fine". Truthfully though, Stiles had given up on "fine" eight years ago. He would never really be fine again. Not like before. However, he was always striving for "better". Better was usually good enough. Today Stiles settled for "terrible". At least it was miles better than "orphan".

Eventually Nurse Hotchkiss returned with the promised ointment for his hands, and Parrish took the opportunity to leave the room to get Stiles something to drink. The nurse inspected both hands carefully. Stiles was not too fond of injuries of any kind and had avoided looking at the burns fearing that the sight might make him even queasier. He stared unabashedly at her face as she worked, cataloging her facial expressions. He liked looking for micro expressions, analyzing the arc of eyebrows, the direction of the eye movements, the twitching of lips. Most of his friends had supernatural senses that could spot a lie coming a mile away by listening to people’s heartbeats. Stiles wasn’t blessed with enhanced hearing, and so he was determined to become the Cal Lightman of the group and practiced whenever he could. Nurse Hotchkiss was displaying poorly disguised astonishment.

"Huh, that's strange," she muttered under her breath.

"Are you calling me strange?" asked Stiles teasingly. Aggravating the nurses was one of the few sources of entertainment when confined to a hospital room for long periods.

"I should," she replied tartly and flicked him on the nose. "You are strange, and you know it."

Stiles grinned widely, feeling the remnants of the panic attack fade further into the background. The nurse turned his hands over for the umpteenth time. "This time I was actually referring to your burns. I got a good look at them just a few moments ago, and they were at least second degree and sure to
blisters. But now...

She trailed off and turned Stiles' hands once again, this time palms up. Stiles succumbed to curiosity and glanced down. They were still a little red, but not the deep angry burgundy you'd expect. No blisters. And they didn't sting anymore. With the panic attack, Stiles had frankly forgotten all about them.

"Oh well," said nurse Hotchkiss brightly although Stiles noticed that her left eye twitched slightly and her lips were pursed meaning she was still confounded and suspicious.

"I'm going to put on the ointment regardless, and bandage it as well. I'll have a doctor look in on you later, okay?"

The nurse left soon after and a few minutes later Parrish returned carrying with him two mugs of steaming tea.

"Tell me about Lydia," demanded Stiles as soon as Parrish had slid down on the chair. The deputy had tried to deny him the mug when he saw the bandages, but Stiles had snatched the cup out of his hands, oozing defiance and complaining loudly about not getting another coffee bride. Parrish had glared at him much like Melissa sometimes did, and Stiles had dropped the issue without a fight. He was too drained to muster up much in the way of compelling arguments and witty retorts anyway.

"You're not going to keel over in another panic attack if I do, are you?"

Stiles scowled at Parrish over the rim of his mug channeling his inner Don Corleone. Or Derek. The expression was much the same. Finally the deputy sighed tiredly almost like he had to gather strength to get it all out.

"Like I said before you, you know-" he gestured towards Stiles with a silly hand movement.

"Yeah yeah, before I went into Defcon 1 meltdown mode - get on with it, please."

"Excuse me for caring about your welfare. Anyway, as I said Lydia was just lying there, slumped over in a very awkward angle, which told me things were not okay. At first, I could not for the life of me understand what was wrong. She wasn't unconscious. Her eyes were open, and she blinked every now and then. Her heartbeat was steady. A little slow admittedly, but nothing alarming. Still, I just couldn't get through to her or get a response of any kind. I thought she might be in some sort of shock and knew I had to get her to the hospital."

Parrish stopped for a while, his face pale. It was clear the whole thing had been a traumatizing experience. Stiles wanted to shake him. To shake the words out. His patience was wearing thin.

"I didn't have a cell phone with me," continued Parrish in a rush, almost as if sensing Stiles' frustration. "Also, I was stark naked. I must admit the nudity is a very disconcerting part of this whole supernatural zombie mode I seem to slip into. Why do I sometimes feel the need to fetch chimeras in the buff?"

Parrish looked genuinely perplexed and although Stiles had to agree it was bizarre on multiple layers, this was not the time for that kind of contemplation.

"Dude, so not relevant at the moment," said Stiles edgily, toying with the handle of his already half empty mug of tea. Who knew tea could be this good?

"Right, sorry about that." Parrish twirled his fingers as if he was rewinding to find the moment he’d
spun out of focus. It was very adorable and not something Stiles should be making notes of. He took a too large sip and scalded the roof of his mouth. This really was a day for burns. Meanwhile Parrish had found the right thread again.

"So as I was saying, I couldn't just carry her into town in my birthday suit because that would look all kinds of bad, and furthermore I was scared to move her in case her neck was hurt in some way. In the end, I had to just leave her there and make a run for it. I ran to the sheriff's station, managed to sneak in without anyone noticing and changed into the uniform I keep in my locker. I called in an anonymous tip and ran back. I stayed with her until the ambulance got there."

"So she's here then? At the hospital?"

Parrish nodded. "Yeah, they've poked and prodded her for two days without much result. She's still catatonic and unresponsive. The doctors are at a loss, and I can't just casually suggest it's some sort of magical mojo at work without getting strapped to a bed right next to her."

Parrish heave a sigh. "It's been a crazy few days. With your dad hurt as well, the station is in disarray. Everyone has been called in but no one knows what to make of any of the top priority cases on our desks. To add insult to injury, no one seemed to really buy my story of just accidentally finding her out in the Preserve when she wasn't even reported missing at the time. I've been subjected to third degree interrogations from officials from all over the state. Apparently Lydia's dad is a lawyer with connections everywhere and he's brought the cavalry."

That last piece of information instantly got Stiles' attention. Lydia's dad had been more or less absent from her life since Peter bit her sophomore year. Her parents were already heading for a divorce at the time. Since then Lydia had never mentioned him or said anything about where he lived. Stiles for his part hadn't dared ask. The only time she had mentioned him at all was in relation to her grandmother and her apparent bansheeessness. According to Lydia's mom, her dad had been the one to lock her up in Eichen House all those years ago.

"Seriously? Her dad is here?"

Parrish nodded face looking grim. "He simply marched in a few hours after she was brought in. I was still at the hospital giving initial statements and waiting for Scott to turn up when he arrived. It was like watching a nuclear reaction play out just feet away. He took one look at her, and promptly gave Mrs. Martin a verbal bashing of epic proportions. I did not catch it all, but enough to get the gist. He's a man with loud pipes."

Stiles snorted. "Well, he's directly related to a banshee and has fathered another. Capable lungs run in the family."

"I noticed," retorted Parrish dryly.

Stiles drained the mug and set it down on the tray next to his dad's bed. "Let me take a wild guess - he claimed Lydia was suffering from the same ailment his mother had and that she should be treated at Eichen House?"

Parrish looked astonished. "How did you- ? Nevermind, I don't even want to know. You do seem to know everything don't you? I used to think Lydia was the psychic but now I'm starting to suspect it's you."

"Why would you assume someone is psychic at all? I'd rather have the ability to turn invisible. Or fly. Flying is cool."
Parrish rolled his eyes. "There is always a psychic; it's like a supernatural rule or something."

"This isn't a young adult sci-fi show on TV, dude. And I need to talk to Mr. Martin. Lydia is not going to Eichen House. That place is not good for you; trust me I speak from experience."

He rose to his feet, perhaps a bit too soon because he felt slightly woozy. Damn, he really could use some sleep.

"It should be a TV show. When this is over I'm selling the rights," said Parrish huffily. He rose as well indicating he was tagging along. Stiles appreciated it. Truthfully, Mr. Martin scared him a little.

"They're never going to go for it," said Stiles dismissively. "What on earth would they call it? Teen Wolf? Our lives is nothing like that movie, no one would want to watch it."

"The Nemeton Chronicles, perhaps?" mused Parrish. Stiles just shook his head. Was it possible he'd found someone even weirder than him? This really was a fucked up town.

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As it turned out Stiles didn't need to ask Parrish for neither directions nor room number. The chorus of very angry voices grew in an unpleasant crescendo as they made their way down the corridor and took a left. The hallway was more or less deserted. It was like a shipwreck - everyone had left, no one wanting to be around when it finally either sunk or exploded. Or both.

A few rooms down from what was undoubtedly the epicenter of the Martin vs Martin showdown, a door opened and Melissa McCall backed out into the otherwise deserted hallway. Her hands were full of a towering rack of linens and towels obscuring her view. She hooked a leg around the door in a practiced manner and pulled it shut only barely saving the very lopsided pile from spilling to the floor.

The save was temporary. When she spun around and found herself face to face with a very angry looking Stiles Stilinski, the towel and linen skyscraper succumbed to gravity in a flurry of white and blue cloth. Parrish busied himself with picking it all up while Stiles continued to glower. Melissa just stood there frozen for a few seconds, a tinge of red slowly making its way up her neck.

"In my defense," she began breathlessly, hands up and palms out, as if she hoped it would generate a force field to protect her. "In my defense, Stiles I didn't lie to you. Not technically, a thing that I in hindsight think you might actually admire. I'm usually not too good with clever wordings and turn of phrase, so I'm rather proud of that to be honest. Was it slightly deceptive? Certainly, but with the best of intentions. And for God’s sake, no amount of your icy scowls will change the fact."

She straightened her posture and gradually her usual no nonsense attitude slipped into place. In fact the head tilt and the arched eyebrows made her look about 120 % done. Stiles continued to glare. For some reason the McCalls of this town seem to go out of their way to dismiss him these days.

Melissa rolled her eyes, hands on hips. “I must admit that is a very good Derek impression. A plus on the glare and creative use of angry eyebrows, but you need to lose the scruff.” She ran a finger over his chin poking at the sad excuse for facial hair that three days of minimal grooming had brought on. Stiles swatted her hand away, running a hand over his face. Surely it wasn’t that bad?

Stiles opened his mouth to say – well he didn’t know what he was going to say, which meant it was
probably something hurtful that he’d regret later, when Melissa barreled on.

"You asked if I’d talked to Lydia. I haven’t - technically no one has “talked” to her because Lydia isn’t talking. Period. Lots of people have talked at her though, but I’m not one of them. Also you asked if I’ve seen her, and I actually haven’t. I was working on your dad when she was brought in, and I’m not on her rotation. Furthermore, her dad is not letting in anyone he hasn't approved of, which means it’s only been her mom, a slew of lawyers, an expert from California and that slightly creepy doctor from Eichen House, what’s his name.

"Dr Fenris."

"Pardon?"

Stiles clenched his teeth and repeated the name for which he bore no lost love. The guy had flat out lied to Scott and him when they’d tracked him down looking for a cure to lycanthropy. Not that Stiles thought there was a cure, but he’d also denied the existence of werewolves and sent them on their merry way without so much as a hint or clue to guide them. Judging by his well-stocked sub-level facility of supernatural creatures, he knew far more than he’d let on. On a personal level Stiles just couldn’t bring himself to trust anyone who thought hiring Brunski to take care of mental patients was a good idea.

"Fenris? Really?" Melissa scrunched her nose. "Odd name. But then again he seemed like an odd fellow." Stiles shrugged. “That's his name. Or probably not his real name, but the name he prefers. Fenris is actually a monsterous wolf-thingy from Norse mythology by the way, so subtle he is not."

Melissa arched an eyebrow and brushed a few stray curls out of her eyes. "Huh. I actually did not know that. But yeah, that's the guy. And I'm sorry Stiles. I thought you had enough with your dad, so I decided to spare you the anguish of knowing Lydia was hurt as well. Her condition is not life threatening, so I thought you should concentrate on your dad. If you feel I made the wrong call, then I apologize."

Behind the door of room number 229, the disagreement was quickly escalating in volume. Melissa glared with ill-concealed disgust.

"Honestly, I can't for the life of me see how yelling by their daughter's hospital bed promotes any sort of healing. We sent in hospital security yesterday in an attempt to separate them and set up a visiting schedule."

“Clearly that didn’t work,” muttered Parrish.

“Not even a little,” confirmed Melissa. “Instead the hospital was awarded with a law suit for their efforts. I believe the charges included “failure to cure” and “neglectful care.” If anyone should be accused of those things it’s Mr. Martin."

Parrish handed over a neatly folded stack of linens and Melissa heaved a sigh. “I have to replace these now. Can’t use anything that’s been on the floor, but thanks deputy.” She opened the door to the linen closet and tossed the pile unceremoniously into a huge bin. She returned seconds later with a fresh mountain and a deep scowl as Mr. Martin’s angry baritone reached a new level of loud.

“I pity Natalie,” she whispered. “She probably thought she was done with him. She’s put up a good fight, but she can’t afford legal counsel and I’m afraid she can little do to stop him from putting Lydia away."

Stiles squared his shoulders and marched resolutely towards the war zone.
“You shouldn’t go in there, Stiles,” warned Melissa. “Knowing your temper and mouth you’re just going to end up sued as well.”

He stopped, hand on the door knob and sent Melissa one of his lopsided grins. “When have I ever listened to you?”

Melissa smiled warmly and ushered Parrish to join him. “You always poke your nose in things, but your heart is in the right place. Please have his back, Parrish. You’re entering hostile territory.”

Stiles opened the door and stepped into pandemonium.

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Stiles lasted almost nine seconds inside the hospital room before he was forcefully removed, the threat of legal action following him out the door. Still it was long enough to get a glimpse of Lydia and verify that she was indeed alive, if not exactly okay. It was just like Parrish had described. She looked catatonic, laying stiffly on her back, arms down by her side and eyes starring glassily into the air.

One of Mr. Martin’s associates had insisted on escorting them both from the building, but had to relent when it was made clear that Stiles’ father was hospitalized in the same ward and he had every right to be on the premises.

Stiles returned to his dad’s room, cheeks blotchy and adrenaline running high. He paced around the room for 30 minutes, ranting about pompous assholes and the sad state of the American health care system. Parrish had let him vent without interruptions, but eventually had to leave. His shift was starting soon and with the sheriff out of commission and a mound of missing person cases to look into, there was no getting out of it.

A few hours after “The Confrontation” Stiles ran out of steam, and he was attacked by a fresh tsunami of anxiety and fear for his dad. The treacherous beep snuck under his skin again, tossing him from relief to fear and back again every few seconds. He was exhausted, emotionally drained and severely sleep deprived. In the end he curled up on the cot next to his dad, and did a halfhearted attempt to catch some Zs. For a while he slipped in and out of dreamlike states alternating between images of being chased by Donovan and a dread doctor standing over his dad chanting “failure imminent” and stabbing at him with a pointy cane.

Suffice to say Stiles did not feel well rested when he was roused by the nurse bringing him his daily depressing dinner. The dinner sat untouched while he stared emptily into the air, mind going a mile a minute but every thought was distorted and unconnected. When Natalie Martin poked her head in not much later, he was half convinced she was a hallucination.

For the first few minutes they simply sat on opposite sides of the bed, both holding one of the sheriff’s hands. Mrs. Martin looked exactly how Stiles felt. Scared. The beep played its monotone melody and neither looked at the other. It was Mrs. Martin who finally broke the silence.

“I’m terribly sorry about my ex-husbands behavior.”

Stiles noticed her left pinky finger was stroking the top of his dad’s hand. It was both weird and sweet.
“It was very brave of you to even try to reason with him. I want you to know that I appreciate the effort even if it didn’t do any good. I know most of the nurses and even some of the doctors are scared to enter the room.”

She smiled warmly and Stiles sensed an echo of something he suspected was tied to his mom. He missed her, and the idea of his dad moving on tugged at his heart. It was both too soon and too late and a whole lot of weird.

“You’re a good friend to Lydia,” continued Mrs. Martin unaware of Stiles’ inner turmoil. “She talks about you a lot. I can sense that she respects you and really care about you. Lydia is, well I guess guarded might be the best way to describe her. She usually doesn’t let people too close. I think she was genuinely surprised you managed to sneak your way into her life.”

Stiles didn’t trust his voice. He just muttered a grateful “thanks”. After that another silence descended. Aside from the beep, of course. It lasted roughly two minutes and then Stiles couldn’t take it anymore.

“So, she’s going to Eichen House, then?”

Mrs. Martin’s hand was shaking slightly he noticed. She clutched his dad’s hand more tightly and the tremors eased somewhat.

“I’m powerless to stop him admitting her to that dreadful place,” she whispered hoarsely. “He’s filed for sole guardianship and with the team of lawyers and experts he has at his disposal, there is little I can do to stop it. Lydia might be 18 and of legal age, but in her current condition she can’t consent to anything.”

She whimpered softly and curled down, her head resting on his dad’s motionless leg.

“He’s been looking for signs ever since Lydia was born,” she muttered almost inaudibly. “If Lydia said something peculiar, or she admitted to having a strange dream, he automatically filed it away as evidence she was suffering from the same condition as his mother. I couldn’t live with that in the long run. His paranoia was tearing the family apart, but most of all it affected Lydia. She began constructing walls around her and became obsessed with being perfect. Perfect grades, perfect hair, perfect boyfriend, popular. On the outside Lydia appeared happy and successful. On the inside she was a mess. And still her dad found faults. Never praise.”

She lifted her eyes, meeting Stiles’ head on. “My daughter isn’t crazy.”

Stiles shook his head. “No, she’s the sanest person I know. She’s not crazy, she’s gifted.”

Mrs. Martin nodded, a tight smile grazing her lips.

“You do know that by “gifted” I mean much more than IQ and academic achievement, right?”

Mrs. Martin chuckled softly. “I had noticed, yes. I must admit I haven’t dared asked for details, but my daughter didn’t inherit all her brains from her father. This town is, well peculiar. And my daughter is certainly a part of that. As long as she’s a force for good I am nothing but proud and supportive. Also, I’m convinced whatever has happened to Lydia now it is a result of these “extracurricular” activities. I tried broaching the subject with Larry, but it’s like talking to a marble pillar, only less fun. I think I just provided him with more cannon fodder for his case against me to be honest. And it’s not something I can just casually address to the medical staff either.”

She fished out her phone and tapped away before sliding it across the bedspread.
“I looked her over thoroughly before Larry arrived, and I noticed something peculiar on her neck. It’s mostly covered by her hair, so I don’t think the doctors have noticed or thought anything of it. I checked her chart and it’s not listed as far as I can tell. I was hoping it might make any kind of sense to you?”

Stiles accepted the phone, and stared at the picture with growing dread. The three puncture wounds told him everything he needed to know and once again he cursed everyone for dismissing the misgivings he’d been having since Theo Raeken showed up.

“It’s supernatural alright," he growled teeth gritted. "I swear I'm going to pummel Theo! Again.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Warning. The first real confrontation between Stiles and Scott, and it's not pretty...

Mrs. Martin left soon after, looking somewhat relieved when Stiles had confirmed that yes, the marks on Lydia's neck was indeed of a supernatural nature. If Stiles was right in his suspicions someone had tried to access Lydia’s memories and gone a bit overboard. He had no idea if this state was just temporary and fixable or if the damage was permanent, but for both his own and Mrs. Martin’s sake he chose to focus on the positive.

The problem he now faced was two-fold: Firstly he needed someone who knew anything about wolf claws, what they could do and how to reverse the effects. And secondly he needed to keep Lydia out of Eichen House.

“Where the fuck is Ethan Hunt when you need him,” Stiles muttered to himself as he mentally mapped out what he'd instantly dubbed “Mission Impossible”. Not that he had any indications that Tom Cruise’ character knew anything about lycanthropic memory meddling, but if he could scale the Burj Khalifa and live to tell the tale, Stiles still wanted him on his team. Preferably accompanied by someone with actual hands-on knowledge, and not just bits and pieces from a, for the most part, unhelpful bestiary.

Stiles tried Deaton again just out of old habit more than anything else. The veterinarian had never been Stiles’ biggest fan and if there was even the slightest chance he was back in town, he was more likely to be sticking his head together with Scott cooking up some plan Stiles wouldn’t be privy to until after it was put in motion. Besides, the news of Stiles’ new status as killer of chimeras was probably not endearing him to the vet in any shape or form. Deaton seemed to be wedged firmly in the blue corner, having thrown his chips in with the True Alpha and his very white morality code. If Stiles didn’t know better he would suspect Deaton of orchestrating the whole thing. That would fit nicely with his borderline Dumbledorian attitude to things and his inability to give straight answers. For some reason Deaton always managed to nudge Scott in a direction Stiles seldom agreed with. Also they might disagree on most things, but Stiles had to admire the guy's talent of saying so much with so few words.

Stiles hadn’t been kidding when he'd told Scott he didn’t trust Deaton and the whole Zen vibe he was giving off. Scott had just laughed and thought he was kidding, which was a nice summary of the state of their relationship at this point. Deaton having a hidden agenda was a good theory. It only lacked motive and proof and basically everything his dad had drilled into his head a long time ago. Hunches were good, but evidence was better. And at the moment Stiles had nothing to show for. Deaton wigged him out, always had. Not as much as Theo admittedly, but enough not to trust him blindly.

It didn't much matter now anyway, because Deaton wasn’t picking up. Shocker.

Stiles paced the room for a good hour. He made long and intricate mental lists and half-assed plans that he knew wouldn’t work unless directed by a Hollywood director with a trillion dollar budget for special effects, and even then it would probably tank.
He needed help. It was as simple as that. Regrettably he was coming up woefully short on his Go-To list. Scott was out with a capital O, at least for the time being. Malia hadn’t returned his text and calling just resulted in her voice mail. Liam was in mourning and not of much use and while Mason was eager as hell, he came up lacking in the knowledge and supernatural powers department. Kira was -. Stiles didn’t know where Kira was, and sadly that also included her parents.

“You know you’re screwed when you actually miss Peter Hale,” muttered Stiles darkly. There were other Hales of course, but Cora was a continent away and Derek… Stiles had no clue where Derek was, what he was up to and he probably didn't want anything to do with Stiles or Beacon Hills at this point anyway. So yeah. Not an option.

Pacing eventually gave way to an epic round of candy crush. Stiles possibly spent way too much on new lives, but it kept his brain occupied for a few hours. In the end his eyes stung so badly, he had to put the phone down. The next half hour consisted of him flopping around on the cot, never finding a comfortable position. It was not likely he would managed to sleep anyway, not with his mind in a state of hyper vigilance and brimming with impossible rescue missions scenarios doomed to fail.

When not even counting the tiles on the walls served to put him to sleep, Stiles finally gave up. Besides he was hungry and the leftovers from dinner did not call to him.

After rustling up a few dollars’ worth of coins he set out to locate the nearest vending machine. The hospital was eerily quiet this time of night, at least on this floor. As he padded down the corridor he could hear the faint echoes of machines singing out their toneless tunes. He spotted a nurse at the other end of the corridor, but she disappeared through a door before she noticed him.

Stiles stayed clear of room 229, although he desperately wanted to look in on Lydia again.

He found a vending machine right around the corner from Lydia’s room. He felt pretty silly lurking there, casting furtive glances around the corner, but he half expected one of Mr. Martin’s henchmen to come storming out and make a citizen arrest or something. Nothing happened though and three tense minutes later, he’d concluded he was being a nervous nellie. Besides his stomach was making sounds like tormented kittens and he was possibly drooling just a little at the thought of a mouthful of Reese’s.

“Come to papa,” he crooned as he punched in the combination. The vending machine whirred to life and he watched in anticipation as the little spiral tray was pushed tantalizingly slowly towards the candy drop as his dad liked to call it.

“Just a little bit further now, here we go, that’s a good little candy bar.”

The whirring sound stopped. So did the candy, clinging to the drop like a mountain climber with no safety net and a steel-like will to live. It was such an annoyingly case of déjà vu, Stiles failed to see the humor in it.

“No no no,” he whined tapping the glass with his knuckles. The hospital was so silent he felt like a burglar, robbing them of peace and quiet. But he was so hungry and that was his last bit of cash as well.

“Well,” he muttered sarcastically. “I do have a patented way of dealing with this. I just need to like, not tip it this time.”

He popped his fingers and rolled his neck before taking hold of the top of the machine, ready to give it a good old wiggle.
Except it wouldn’t budge. Not even a bit.

“What the - ?” He tried again. Still nothing.

He tried from the short side, but the result was the same. And now he knew why.

“This is your own damned fault, Stilinski,” Stiles moaned, resting his forehead on the cool surface and staring resignedly at the huge bolts securing the vending machine to the wall.

Making a sound probably not unlike that of a dying alpaca, he slithered back to the front of the machine again, peering through the glass at the colorfully wrapped candy mocking him. He desperately wanted it. Damn he needed it.

“Just a little bit further. Why couldn’t you just move a smidge closer to the edge?” He scrunches his eyes together, fingertips pushed so hard towards the glass they were white. “Just a teeny tiny bit to the - what the hell?”

The candy had simple moved an inch and dropped down and out of sight. Just like that. Stiles looked around shiftily, eyes scanning the nearby walls for cameras. Was someone yanking his chain? Having some fun with candid cameras? If so it was a pathetically lame joke, but at least it gave Stiles sustenance. He was not about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

He quickly snatched it from the tray, peeled the wrapper off with practice ease and moaned perhaps a tad too loudly. Also possibly a little bit filthily. Anyway he didn’t much care. He was in sugar heaven, his mouth an explosion of chocolate and peanut buttery goodness.

The really sad part about candy orgasms was that they hit hard and faded fast. By the time Stiles had wandered down the corridor (he tiptoed passed 229 just in case) he’d polished of the entire thing and was contemplating licking the wrapper. That was when he spotted him.

Scott.

He was walking down the corridor eyes down, and he was carrying a Styrofoam cup of what looked like coffee. Like he was planning on staying up all night, possibly keeping a watch out for Lydia.

Parrish had said he’d called Scott. Scott had obviously been here, possibly lurking about the hospital for the past few days, and still he’d yet to pay Stiles and his dad so much as a passing visit. It was amazing how fast a sugar high could turn into a wave of rage.

It was probably a testament to how deep in thought Scott must have been, because he clearly didn’t see, hear or smell Stiles coming.

Stiles ran at him like a derailed train, grabbed him by the front of his sweater and pushed Scott into the wall making the decorative art rattle. Unceremoniously and with strength he didn’t know he possessed (or maybe he did, but this was not the time to contemplate that) he tossed Scott to the floor. Coffee spilt in every direction. Scott let out a muffled moan as Stiles followed him down.

“What the hell? Stiles?” he gasped sounding as if the wind was knocked out of him. Stiles absentmindedly registered his leg stinging from the scalding coffee, but burns were second nature to him by now. I didn’t burn half as hot as his anger anyway.

“What the hell, Scott!” echoed Stiles and pushed Scott down again when he made a move to get up. “Where the fuck were you?” he growled threateningly. “Where the fuck was the true fucking alpha when my dad was being shredded by Theo? What happened to “saving everyone” and protecting the innocent, huh?”
Scott struggled to get up, but Stiles was relentless. He straddled his torso, holding both Scott’s hands down. Angry tears were streaming down his cheeks, but he didn’t care to even hide it. Months of pent up frustration were bubbling to the surface and whether they liked it or not this needed to be addressed. Screw the fact that the venue was anything but ideal. Like an avalanche this couldn’t be stopped until it reached the bottom of the valley, and Stiles’ mountain of issues had grown steep.

“Why can’t you trust anyone, Stiles? You need to give people the benefit of the doubt, Stiles?”

Stiles parroted back the lines Scott had thrown at him not long ago when Stiles had tried to prove that Theo wasn’t to be trusted. And he’d been right, even though he couldn’t prove it that night. But Scott had just dismissed it outright. He’d been so full of himself that night. So supreme in his belief that he could do no wrong and Stiles could do no right. Perhaps that was a slight exaggeration, but he wasn’t feeling a particular need to dial down his frustrations, quite the opposite in fact.

“This!” he yelled waving his arms angrily in the direction of both Lydia’s and his dad’s hospital rooms. “This is why I don’t trust people unless they give me damned good reason to. And I’m usually right too. More often that you’d like to admit, and I’ve been too wrapped up in catering to your needs and your beliefs that I haven’t had the heart or the guts to tell you “I told you so”. But here it fucking is.”

Scott opened his mouth, but Stiles simply put his hand over it, shaking his head.

“I know what you’re going to say, Scott. You’re going to give me the same nonsense about how I never trusted anyone. How I never trusted Derek. Which is utter bullshit by the way. You were the one who didn’t trust Derek. I trusted him from the moment he saved my ass from crazy alpha Peter. You barely trust him now, and seem to only turn to him when you need something, like his claws or his knowledge.”

He paused, drew a deep breath and continued. "So I do trust people. I trust my dad. I trust Lydia. I even mostly trust the rest of the pack. I also trusted you, Scott. I trusted you so much I’ve been willing to help you out even when I felt you were making the wrong decisions. I’ve stuck by you through everything, man.”

With that the air went out of him, and he slumped sideways freeing Scott from his grip. Scott remained where he was though, on his back, staring vacantly up in the air, and for a little while they just laid side by side, breathing heavily, and not speaking.

The silence was deafening, like something black and toxic was sitting on Stiles’ chest, slowly siphoning his anger, his energy and taking with it chunks of his most important friendship in the process.

“You haven’t been to see me, or checked in on my dad,” mumbled Stiles, mouth dry and hoarse. “You’ve kept Lydia’s condition from me deliberately for reasons I don’t understand. Either you’re taking a page out of your mom’s book and are trying to spare my feelings when dad isn’t really out of the woods yet, or you don’t trust me. At the moment I don’t think I want to know which it is, but regardless you’re making decisions for others and without our say-so, and it’s not really helping form strong pack bonds.”

Scott’s continued silence and the angry jut of his chin told him he’d hit a nerve. Chew on that, why don’t you, thought Stiles somewhat vindictively. He’d never claimed to be anything but an asshole, borderline paranoid and with a barrel of trust issues. But he owned those traits, faulty as they might be. When he didn’t trust someone, he let them know. When he did trust them, he walked through fire and back for them.
“You didn’t take my misgivings about Theo seriously,” said Stiles when Scott continued the silent treatment. “I have no clue what he told you about what happened with Donovan, but I’m convinced it wasn’t the truth, and yet you so readily believed his side of the story. Looking back on our conversation you never once asked me to explain things.”

Stiles couldn’t bring himself to even look at Scott, and when he didn’t respond right away he was sure he wasn’t going to either.

“He said you lost your temper and hit him over and over until he was dead,” Scott finally admitted, voice raw and small in the deserted corridor. “He said you bashed his skull in.”

“And that sounded like something I would do, did it? Just like that?”

“You have before,” whispered Scott, and Stiles’ heart was ripped to shreds. There was a rushing in his ears, the sound of his blood running wild with emotion. Suspecting something was one thing, having it confirmed a whole other experience.

This was the moment, Stiles mentally noted. This was the moment their friendship changed irrevocably.

Stiles kept losing people he loved at the hospital. This wasn’t like losing his mom, nothing would ever come close to that. But this was a darker kind of loss. This was a loss that could’ve been avoided, could’ve been fixed if they’d treated the infection sooner. It too had withered away slowly, until the damage was too great to fully repair. Stiles knew, however mad he was at Scott right now, this was as much his fault. His major flaw had been to silence his misgivings, to not stand up to Scott more forcefully. To fail to make them listen and believe. If they were ever going to rebuild this, he had to stop that. He had to let it all out.

Over their heads the florescent lights flickered erratically, eerily in sync with Stiles’ racing heart.

“That’s not fair,” Stiles whispered, voice shaky. “I was influenced by that evil fly thing and you know it. I will admit I remember it, I will also admit that some of the ideas and the plans originated from me. I will gladly own that, Scott. I sometimes think bad thoughts. In my darkest hour my mind can be a terrible place. But I would never act on them. The fly took away my common sense, the part of me that distinguished right from wrong. You know that. The same thing happened to Isaac, to the twins and also to Derek. Yet you judge me by another standard. What makes me different?”

“I don’t know.”

At least Scott sounded honest. It didn’t change anything though, possibly only made it worse. If Scott didn’t know, couldn’t reasonably justify it, that meant it wasn’t logical. It was instinctual. Or worse yet manipulated, seeds of doubt carefully planted, watered and tended to over a long period of time. Slowly but surely taking root.

“Well,” said Stiles flatly, trying his best to mask the tremor in his voice. “For your information I didn’t kill Donovan for sport. In fact I was attacked outside of school, bitten – and yes I have the scars to prove it – chased into the library where I foolhardily climbed the scaffolding in an attempt to escape. Donovan followed, I pulled out a linchpin and the top collapsed and fell on him. He was impaled by a steel rod and died in front of me.”


Stiles snorted. If he wasn’t so evil Stiles would congratulate Theo on some grade A plotting.

“He attacked me as I was trying to fix the Jeep. I grabbed the wrench and hit him with it to get away.
I lost it when we fought in the library. I even called 911 anonymously but by the time the cops got there, Parrish had whisked the body away."

“Huh,” said Scott. It was a far cry from “I’m sorry” and even if he’d apologized Stiles wasn’t so sure he would accept it. Not right away anyway.

“That’s it?” Stiles couldn’t help but prod. He deserved more than a huh.

“What do you want me to say exactly?” asked Scott defensively. “There wasn’t anything to suggest Theo had ulterior motives.”

Stiles scoffed. “Not - ? Oh my God, that is rich! My gut feelings are nothing? My instincts doesn’t count for anything?”

“You always have crazy gut feelings, Stiles. I can’t just trust them without evidence. If I did half of Beacon Hills would be on our watch list.”

Stiles jumped to his feet, cheeks blotchy and red, eyes flashing.

“Half of Beacon Hills should be on a watch list, Scott! When your life is like a really bad season of Buffy, then caution is the way of the world, buddy. And you never take any of my suspicions seriously. Like Matt – “

“ – we’ve talked about that before. That was never a serious suggestion on your part.” Scott had sat up, and was wiping coffee of his chin, looking annoyed and ruffled.

“I was dead serious!” hissed Stiles. “I also said we should stop Jackson when he was in Kanima mode by any means necessary, and that didn’t turn out so good when he escaped right under your and Allison’s horny noses.”

“That was the right thing to do, Stiles. We saved Jackson!”

“No, Scott.”

Stiles stepped in front of Scott again, bending his knees so they were face to face. He noticed that Scott flinched slightly. Like he was scared of him. A small part of Stiles sort of enjoyed that.

“You didn’t save Jackson, Scott. Lydia saved Jackson. And that would never have happened if it weren’t for Peter and Derek. Without Lydia, Jackson would still be a kanima under someone’s control. You poisoned Gerard so that he didn’t turn into a werewolf, but you did so in a really shitty way, Scott. Did you ever think to simply ask Derek to be a part of the plan instead of just using him?” Scott simply glared defiantly back. Who was he kidding? Anything that involved trusting Derek was not something Scott would have considered. Not back then. Perhaps not even now if that was the case.

"You’re forgetting something important in all of this," said Stiles, voice low; resigned. "After Jackson escaped from the police van he killed a bunch of people. He killed that girl at the rave and all those deputies. Don't get me wrong, I never wanted to kill Jackson. He's a douche, but that doesn't mean I wanted him dead. I just wanted people safe. So what made Jackson’s life more important to save than theirs?”

Scott didn’t have an answer for that. Stiles cocked his head, then slowly rose to his feet again.

“You know what I think? I think you don’t want to kill anyone. You don’t want blood on your hands, and killing Jackson, agreeing to that would give you that. But your hands are still bloody,
Scott. You can dress it up all you want, but we had the chance to stop him and save more lives in the process, but you didn’t take it. Just like you wouldn’t give Hayden the bite.”

“That’s not fair.”

Stiles laughed mirthlessly, spun around arms wide.

“Fair? Fair doesn’t live in Beacon Hills, Scott. You wear this huge white hat and surround yourself with fancy words and impossible promises of saving everyone. We can’t save them all. No one can save everyone. You can’t save them all. Which means you need to realize that this isn’t a zero sum game. You can’t just pick between good and bad – sometimes you have to settle for the outcome that will hurt the least. And you know what? Chances are it’s in some shade of gray.”

He turned around and walked back towards his dad’s room, suddenly bone tired.

“What happens now?” Scott asked just as Stiles was about to open the door. He didn’t realize he’d followed him. Stiles didn’t turn around, just hunched his shoulders and took a deep breath.

“We need to find a way to save Lydia. I think Theo messed with her memories. And we need to stop Theo and the Dread Doctors. How I have no clue. But before that I need to make sure my dad will be okay.”

He opened the door and disappeared inside before Scott could say another word.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Stiles is domestic, depressed and sleep-deprived. Someone leaves. And possibly some good news.

Chapter Notes

Season 5B has now begun airing as of yesterday. I just wanted to point out that most of this story is already written. I'm working on the final few chapters at the moment. Any similarities (if any) to things that happen in 5B is therefore coincidental :) Also I will not be changing things to fit the new canon, unless it's too awesome to ignore (and it fits the story, of course).

Stiles fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. The overdue confrontation with Scott had drained him both emotionally and physically and he shut down like a PC needing a reboot. For once he didn’t dream. Didn’t wake up drenched in cold sweat or with the echo of a cry on his lips. Not even the beep disturbed him. The thing that eventually roused him, was a low and mostly inaudible mumble. Thinking it was one of the annoyingly cheerful nurses with the less than edible breakfast, Stiles turned his back to the door, pulled the duvet over his head and burrowed further into the pillows, willing the person to bugger off and leave him alone.

“Go away,” he demanded drowsily, the request more or less muted by his cocoon of pillows. The murmur continued undeterred.

Gradually Stiles regained consciousness. Peering experimentally out from under his makeshift cover he noticed it was still pretty early. Too early for breakfast at any rate. The room was dimly lit, the few early rays of sunshine that had wrestled their way past the curtains cast a warm and soft glow over the otherwise depressing room.

“Hmm-doc-hmm.”

There it was again.

Something – someone was talking, or trying to talk. It was muffled, like it was coming from far away, possibly the next room over. Stiles couldn’t make out the meaning. Probably someone talking in their sleep.

Sleep. That was the operative word, and something Stiles desperately wanted more of. His head felt lighter, less foggy, after a few hours of uninterrupted rest, but the fatigue hadn’t entirely let go yet. He blearily consulted his phone. 6:10 AM. Yeah it was definitely still sleepy-time. He was halfway back into dreamland when the mumble came again.

“Hmm-docrrrr.”
What the fuck?

His nerve endings were suddenly all systems go, his body attack-ready and his fight or flight mode activated. Stiles' first thought was of Theo. If that fucking bastard had snuck in to finish the job, Stiles wouldn’t hesitate to try and kill him.

He sprang to his feet in a flurry of blankets, and spun around in all directions with nothing but a half chewed straw from one of his countless coffees the day before as a weapon.

There was no one there. The room was as sterile and depressing as the day before, and besides himself and his comatose dad, there was no one to be found. Stiles even checked the adjoining bathroom and the too-small-to-conceal-humans cupboard under the sink that not even Tyrion Lanister could fit inside, even if he was folded in half. Empty.

“You’re probably just dreaming,” Stiles muttered, dragging a hand through his sleep-mussed hair, taking note that time for a shower needed to be scheduled into his busy schedule for the day of worrying himself sick. It was long overdue. He should probably do something about the facial hair as well.

He was contemplating the pros and cons of option a) shower + grooming versus option b) more sleep or c) possibly doing both at once, when he heard it again.

“Hmmm-doctor.”

Could it be?

Stiles spun around slowly, heart racing. His dad looked just like he did yesterday. Still pale, tubes and wires everywhere and an oxygen mask affixed over his mouth. The machine beeped. His dad didn’t move.

“I’m losing it. Nothing to worry about at all. Keep this up, and they’ll strap you down on a bed next door to Lydia.”

Hearing voices that wasn’t there was never a good sign. Unless you were a banshee of course, but somehow he doubted the ability was contagious.

“Doctor”.

“D-dad?”

This time Stiles stood facing his father, and could actually see the lips moving, could see the breath fogging up the oxygen mask as he rasped out a mostly inaudible cry for a physician. He was probably in pain. Stiles was by his side in two strides. He clasped his hands, squeezing them tightly. His eyes were still closed, and aside from the one word there was little to suggest he had regained consciousness.

“Dad, can you hear me? Dad? It’s Stiles. Can you hear me?”

Eyelashes fluttered and then, miraculously the sheriff opened his eyes.

“Doctor,” he croaked again and Stiles laughed hysterically, so relieved, so grateful and so delirious with happiness his chest felt like it would explode.

“I know,” he wheezed out between fits of giggles. “I know, doctor. I’ll get the doctor, don’t worry. Oh god, you’re awake and oh my god, you’re awake.”
Blinking back tears of joy, Stiles pushed the alarm button repeatedly, wanting doctors in here as soon as possible to witness the miracle. A frazzled looking nurse exploded into the room just seconds later, Melissa McCall hot in pursuit.

“He’s awake!” crowed Stiles euphorically. Melissa rushed to the bed, and visibly relaxed when she looked into the sheriff’s bleary, but clearly responsive eyes.

“Thank the heavens,” she breathed, voice shaking slightly. “Can you hear me, John?” she asked, squeezing his hand. He blinked his eyes and made a horrifying choking sound. Melissa looked slightly alarmed, and quickly removed the oxygen mask.

“Are you in pain?” she inquired, prodding his mouth open to look for anything that might be constricting his airways. The sheriff shook his head minuscule, but clearly. He opened his mouth again, but no sound came out except a slight wheezing.

“Pulse and heartbeat within normal range, eyes responsive and alert. Possible damaged vocal chords,” listed Melissa and the other nurse scribbled everything down on the chart.

“Did you alert us as soon as he woke up?” she asked Stiles while she continued to monitor his pulse. Stiles nodded affirmative.

“Good. Patient regained consciousness at approximately 05:40 AM. Let’s get Dr. Halsted in here as soon as possible.”

Stiles slumped to the floor and cried in relief.

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The next few hours had flown by in a blur of tests, doctors, nurses and more tests. His dad was poked and prodded, x-rayed, scanned and a multitude of other things that Stiles didn’t know the name of, only that it was sure to cost them an arm and a leg when this was all over. But he didn’t care, he would gladly forego college if needed as long as his dad would recover.

So far things seem to be going alright if the little eavesdropping he’d been able to do was anything to go by. His vitals were improving and the surgeries to repair the damage Theo had inflicted were seemingly successful. At the moment the only worrisome part was that the sheriff hadn’t said anything. He opened his eyes, he clearly recognized people, and even tried to move his hands a little, but words seem to be an issue.

Stiles watched in frustration as he struggled to form words, but all his efforts were fruitless. All he managed to produces was raspy gurgles that sounded as if they were grating his throat in the process. It clearly exasperated his dad as well, because his heartbeat sped up and the twitching in his hands intensified. In the end one of the doctors had ordered a morphine drip claiming he needed more rest to further the healing. Pushing himself before the body was ready, wouldn’t do him any good.

Melissa had ushered Stiles out of the room after that.

“You need to go home now, Stiles,” she said in her sternest mom-tone. “He’s clearly out of the woods, and for the next 12 hours or so, he’ll be asleep and not much company. And you, young man, is in dire need of a shower.”
She scrunched up her nose and cast an unimpressed look at his out of control hair. He’d caught a glimpse of it earlier, and for all he knew birds could be nesting in it and he would be none the wiser.

“What’s wrong with his voice?”

Stiles hadn’t dared ask the other doctors earlier, mostly because he didn’t trust them to give him a straight answer. Melissa he knew better and she’d have a hard time managing to lie to him. Especially now with the whole “keeping him away from Lydia” thing that she knew firsthand he hadn’t reacted well to. She looked like she had expected the question, smiling softly.

“So far the doctors have focused solely on his internal damage. Theo messed up much of his colon, scratched the liver and a kidney. That was the life threatening areas they had to concentrate on. There were no signs of damage to his throat or vocal chords, but we’re not ruling it out. It could also have happened during the intubation. Sometimes the tube will nick the vocal cords. If that’s the case, it will be healed within a few days.”

“Yeah?”

She nodded encouragingly. “Yeah, I believe so. Now, please leave my hospital. You stink and if you stay any longer we’ll either have to disinfect you or isolate you. I’d like to avoid both if possible.”

Stiles left with a new spring in his step, only accompanied by the tiniest little voice at the back of his head telling him he was missing something important.

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The day started off with a long list of practical things for Stiles to take care of. His first headache was figuring out how to get home from the hospital. It took him a little while to remember that his Jeep had been towed and was for the time being out of commission. Exiting the hospital he’d headed straight for the parking lot out of old habit, actually whistling rather off-key and dangling the car keys on his finger. The parking space was however depressingly free of baby blue jeeps. Normally he’d call Lydia, but yeah. Not an option obviously. That left him with pretty much no viable options for a ride home, which sadly meant public transportation.

Public transportation was not a friend to Stiles, and Stiles no friend to public transportation. They had parted ways as soon as he’d turned 16, his license had been issued and his dad very reluctantly had handed over the keys to mom’s old Jeep that had been sitting in the garage for more than seven years. His dad joked that the local branch of the Public Transformation Board had sent the sheriff’s department a cake as a token of their gratitude. Stiles suspected it might actually be true. Scott had informed him that the bus driver, Mr. Wilson, who was not only a terrible driver but an even worse conversationalist, had broken down in tears of joy when it became apparent that he didn’t need to make a stop at the Stilinski residence anymore. Scott, bless his soul, had stopped taking the bus in protest, and had taken up riding his bike instead. This was of course back in the BB (Before Bite) era, when Scott was willing to jump through as many hoops as Stiles for his best friend. And yes, Stiles did realize he was probably being a tad bit too harsh and a smidge vindictive these days when it came to Scott. But when he was forced to take the bus again – something he’d only done with the lacrosse team and track meets since, he felt entitled to a bit of mental complaints.

So yeah, Stiles and the bus was not a good combination, and this was so not going to be a long term solution. He had to change buses twice just to get home, and there was even a twenty minute wait
between routes which was made worse by his phone dying and he had to entertain himself with – well nothing. Stiles did not do well with nothing.

Finally back at Casa Stilinski it took him and his growling stomach three minutes do deduce that the fridge wasn’t holding anything edible, which meant embarking on another bus ride. Lugging four bags of groceries on public transportation - not easy. Halfway through the endeavor Stiles had developed a new-found respect for old ladies with trolleys. A can rolled out and disappeared at least four seats behind him. With the bus full to bursting with passengers and devoid of human compassion, Stiles quickly abandoned all hope of locating it. A bag of tomatoes hit the asphalt hard on the way up the driveway, and prompted Stiles to settle for tomato soup instead of the planned chicken and rice. Any food was better than what the hospital served up anyway.

The process of getting from the hospital, to the store and feeding himself had taken half a day, and when you lived in Beacon Hills with odd leisure activities that often required swift getaways, this was not ideal. Stiles was more than ready to sell his soul for a working car. All it took was a box, a photo, some graveyard dirt and the bones of black cat, right? The old lady across the street had a cat. It was ginger, but Stiles was a boy with borderline delinquent tendencies and had cans of black spray hidden at multiple locations. And he probably could benefit from a bit more sleep.

But sleep was not in the cards, Stiles cold tell. Instead he sat a new Stilinski Household record for longest shower. The warm water was therapeutic. The same could be said for the much needed Stiles-time. He stepped out of the bathroom feeling born anew, but it didn’t last long. The house was just too silent. Even though his dad normally wasn’t home much, it was as if his presence still lingered. Stiles normally didn’t mind being home alone, because – well, because he never really felt alone. Now though, it was as if his dad been surgically removed and the absence felt like a knife to the gut.

To stop his brain from spinning too many depressing scenarios, he instead embarked on a massive cleaning spree. By the time the sun set, the house smelt strongly of pine needles and Febreze. Exhausted he collapsed on the sofa, back aching and hands sore. The house still felt empty and bare, but at least it was now ready for his dad to return, 100 % germ and bacteria free. Honestly, you could eat straight off the kitchen tiles if you wanted. He didn’t see how anyone would want that, but it was nice to have options. Now, all his dad had to do was recover fully and everything could go back to normal. Or as normal as life in Beacon Hills ever was.

Stiles stared at the clock on the wall, watching the seconds tick away. The house was so still he could hear it ticking, which he'd never noticed before. The sound reminded him eerily of the beep at the hospital, and made him miss his dad so much it physically hurt. But it hadn’t been 12 hours yet, and Melissa had sternly informed him that he would not be welcome back until the next morning. If anything changed she would call him. Stiles had roughly another 10 hours to fill, and no idea how to do that without going slightly insane. The sensible part of his brain knew that sleep would probably be a good thing, but that part had never been all that dominant anyway.

In the end he settled for some food and a Lord of The Rings marathon. Stiles’ life was pretty shit at the moment, but at least he didn’t need to face the wrath of Mordor and destroy dangerous rings at Mount Doom. Seeing others struggle would hopefully lift his spirits a bit, if only by comparison. It was as he came back from the kitchen balancing a tray of sandwiches and a glass of juice, that he noticed a light blinking on the answer machine he honestly didn’t know why his dad still kept around. To be honest, he hadn't even known they still had a land line. He pressed the button half expecting it to explode in his face. The machine didn’t, but the message certainly put a dent in his plans for the next day.

“Sheriff Stilinski, this is Joan Nielsen from the school administration office at Beacon Hills High
School calling. Your son, Mitz- I’m sorry, I don’t know how pronounce his first name. Anyway, your son has not been in school for the last few days, and unless you can produce a valid reason for his absence, and he returns to school no later than tomorrow, we’ll be forced to expel him and that could seriously jeopardize his chances of graduating on time with his peers. Please get back to us as soon as possible.”

Stiles slumped down on the sofa with a groan as Joan Nielsen’s tinny voice cut off. Fuck. He’d forgotten all about school. Almost a full week of homework and tests to make up would be murder, but doable. He could always visit his dad before school. It wasn’t ideal, but he really didn’t see any other option. Now all he had to do was figure out the logistics of it all without a car. Suddenly he wasn’t so sure who had the worse deal, him or Frodo.

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The Lord of the Rings marathon was promptly cancelled and Stiles went on a mission to try to get an overview of just how much schoolwork he had missed. With Dread Doctors, Chimeras and his dad at death’s door, school somehow didn’t seem particularly important. But his dad would disown him and then find a way to castrate him using something dull and painful, like a rusty spoon, if he didn’t graduate. The last thing Stiles wanted was to disappoint him.

The result was quite depressing, but with a few all-nighters he should be able to get reasonably back on track. With Lydia’s notes he should be able to shave off some -. Crap. For a moment he’d forgotten all about Lydia and her predicament. Stiles felt horrible for even worrying about academia when a dear friend was trapped in her own mind, especially when he was powerless to help her.

Snap out of it, Stilinski, he chided himself sternly. Beating himself up over this would only make the situation worse. At the moment the only issue he could do anything about was his continued school career. Stiles needed a win, needed at least one thing in his life to go according to plan. Control might be overrated, but when everything was out of balance, control quickly became pretty desirable, even if it was only over his school curriculum.

Stiles called the hospital and, after being on hold for so long he had suffered through half of Elton John’s discography performed on pan flutes, he finally got one of the doctors to e-mail the school an official statement about the reason for his absence. After that he sorted through the books and papers he’d need for the next day, and promptly collapsed on his bed. He needed to get some sleep. He knew that. Facing school without it would be ill-advised. Stiles tended to get snarky and confrontational even on good days, and tomorrow would probably not be one of them. He was stressed, borderline depressed, sleep-deprived and living in a state of hyper vigilance while trying to manage his ADHD. Even with sufficient sleep he would probably still piss off a teacher before lunch. Without sleep, detention was guaranteed.

He shuffled reluctantly to the bathroom, head spinning with worry for Lydia and how to get her out of Eichen House, how to stop a trio of frequency bending mad doctors with unclear agendas and their artificially created supernatural minions. Needless to say no solution presented itself. Only his own pale reflection. To make up for his uselessness, Stiles spent five minutes flossing. At least he could win the war against plaque.

When he got back to his room he had a visitor.

«Hey.»
«Holy hell!»

Stiles jumped, wind-milled into his desk, books and knickknacks cascading to the floor.

Malia was sitting on his bed staring at him in that matter of fact and no nonsense way that he both loved and resented.

“Why are you flailing?” She looked genuinely perplexed, like the reaction was foreign to her. It probably was.

“Fucking hell, why do shapeshifters seem to think it is okay to just crawl through my window without permission? Also, does it run in the family?”

“I don’t know,” Malia shrugged, looking slightly confused. “I come through your window because I want to see you. Also it’s the fastest way in. Your front door is usually locked and I thought it would be rude to break the lock.”

“Scott has no problem using the door, you know. It’s polite. And there is a door bell. You press it and then someone comes to open the door for you. What if I was doing nude yoga in here?”

“I’ve seen you naked before. And you’d break your neck if you tried yoga. You shouldn’t do that. Not alone anyway. I think I’d be into nude yoga. At least the nude part. And I’m pretty flexible.”

“So not the point,” muttered Stiles half annoyed. He’d called Malia days ago, and first now she turned up. Also, he was under the impression they’d cooled off the whole relationship thing. Which was also why he felt the window route was not really appropriate anymore. As well as the offer of being his nude yoga partner. But then again Malia wasn’t really all that well-versed in etiquette of any kind. Chances were she hadn’t picked up on the important nuances of their little talk a few days ago.

“I’ll use the door next time,” she promised, as if reading his mind.

“Thanks. Or you could call first. If I know you’re coming, then it’s okay to use the window. Okay?”

She nodded, hair bobbing.

“You called me,” she continued. “I heard your message and came right over. How’s your dad doing?”

Stiles slumped down in his desk chair, rubbing his eyes.

“He woke up this morning, thank god. The doctors are hopeful, but he’s having trouble talking. Something about his vocal chords being damaged but they think he’ll be okay.”


“I will,” said Stiles meeting her frank stare. “I’m going to go see him before school tomorrow. Perhaps you’d like to come? He’s very fond of you, you know. I think he’d appreciate a friendly face. Besides I need a ride to school.”

Malia averted her eyes, which was - odd. She never did that. In fact she looked, well, nervous. Or at the very least uncomfortable, and Stiles wasn’t sure he’d ever seen her like this. At least not with him. Malia was inexperienced in most areas, but she was determined and tackled things in a direct manner. He admired that about her. So this shifty behavior… Dear god was she squirming? Well, needless to say it was very foreboding.
She began, then stopped, took a deep breath and seemed to steel herself. Stiles held his breath. Bad news were coming and he was fresh out of emotional and mental capacity to handle it.

“I can’t,” she finally stuttered out. “I want to. Please tell him I want to see him. Promise me, Stiles. But I’m leaving tonight. I don’t know when I’ll be back.”

What the -?


“I’m going with Braeden.”

Stiles’ heart skyrocketed in an impressive 0.1 seconds.

“Braeden’s back?” he asked, voice unsteady.

Malia nodded. “Yeah, she came to my rescue at the hospital the same day everything went wrong. I was fighting another chimera and she helped me out. He escaped by the way, but we injured him, broke this pointy stinger thing he had going. Not sure what he was supposed to be, but it didn’t look good. Anyway, she came back because she has a lead on the desert wolf.”

Stiles was nodding numbly, not knowing why he was nodding, because none of the things she was saying were good. He should be shaking his head.

“Why is your heart racing?”

Stiles froze, heart skipping and certainly not showing any signs of slowing down. There it was again. Malia’s unnerving ability to ask horribly personal questions without realizing how tactless it was. Especially when Stiles possibly knew the answer, but was refusing to examine the implications.

He chose to ignore the question.

“You know Theo hurt my dad, right? Do you also know he tried to kill Scott and wants to build a super villain pack with him as pseudo alpha and the rest of us as betas? Do you know he’s a chimera?”

Malia nodded.

“Yes, I know. I talked to Mason. And Scott. I had to tell him I was leaving. I heard about Lydia too, and I’m terribly sorry. I want to help, and I will as soon as I get back. I just have to do this first, Stiles. It’s like my skin is itching and I can’t concentrate, and I just know this will stop it. I need answers.”

“Well, I need help, and there’s not a whole lot of people left to assist me.”

“I’m sorry.”

It really looked like she meant it, which also meant Stiles couldn’t be mad at her. If he’d been in Malia’s shoes, he’d want to track down his mom too. To get answers. He couldn’t fault her that, and if she was with Braeden, well, then at least she was in capable hands.

“It’s okay.”

He smiled, suddenly feeling sad. They had been drifting apart for some time. He liked Malia, he
respected her and wanted nothing but the best where she was concerned. But they didn’t really understand each other. If they placed the McCall pack on a spectrum ranging from romantic idealist to pragmatic realist, Scott would be on one end and Malia the other. And Stiles, well Stiles honestly didn’t know where he fit on the spectrum. Somewhere in between, certainly. Which meant that the two points he thought were the constants in his life – his best friend and his girlfriend weren’t as connected to him as he’d believed. Perhaps they never were. And perhaps it wouldn’t have been an issue at all if it weren’t for the crap they dealt with. Stiles was a ship lost at sea, without anchor and with no land in sight. He’d recently realized that Malia was just as lost as he was, and not a safe way to shore.

“Please keep in touch,” he whispered fighting the lump in his throat. “I will worry about you, I hope you know that. Please text me or call me every day, so I can worry marginally less.”

Malia grinned widely, looking both radiant and slightly deranged. Next Stiles knew she had lifted him to his feet and was hugging him tightly.

“I will, I promise,” she whispered back. She let go and Stiles felt small, cold and lost.

“Braeden is waiting down the block,” she said picking up a backpack he hadn’t noticed before. Stiles nodded and bit his lip not to say something stupid that might ruin the moment. She stopped by the window, hesitated slightly and then turned around. “Before I go I want you to know something. Theo came to see me.”

Stiles cringed and collapsed back into chair.

“Stiles, you should know he can shift fully, and not into a wolf. A coyote. He told me he was like me, half wolf half coyote. He told me he could help me with the Desert Wolf as well. It sort of made sense, because I always felt an unexplained sort of connection to him. And no, not sexual, so stop cringing. It was never like that. Not really.”

She glared and Stiles shrugged unapologetically. He wouldn’t put anything past Theo.

“The thing is, I’ve been sort of thinking.” She laughed just a pitch too high to be natural. “Or rather, I’ve been panicking and driving myself a bit crazy to be honest. It’s actually the reason why I turned off my phone these past few days. I needed time to sort out a few things in my head. You see, Scott told me that Theo was a chimera. That he owned up to that… And if we’re the same, if we have this sort of bond, then…”

“You’re nothing like Theo,” said Stiles firmly. Just the notion that Malia could even contemplate such a thing made his stomach turn.

“How do you know?” Malia sounded wrecked. “How do you know, Stiles? Theo is half and half. All chimeras are that – a combination of two supernatural entities. So am I. Half wolf, half coyote. Doesn’t that make me a chimera too?”

“No. Not like Theo. You’re a result of two people procreating in the natural sense. Theo is the result of three otherworldly doctors cooking up experiments. There is a huge difference. You’re not like Theo!”

Malia didn’t look convinced. Stiles had never seen her look so small, so vulnerable.

“Your faith in me means the world,” she whispered, not meeting his eyes. “I wish I could be just a sure. Peter had all his memories of me removed, which is peculiar at best.”

“That wasn’t his doing. It wasn’t Peter’s choice. And it doesn’t mean there’s something suspicious
Malia laughed. “You don’t even mean that. You think everything connected to Peter is a conspiracy plot. Also Stiles, there’s another thing I didn’t tell you before, and I’m terribly sorry about that. It’s just that I instructed you to table the search for the desert wolf, and I didn’t want you to know that I couldn’t fully commit to that. Especially when memories from the accident started to come back to me, little by little.”

Stiles was confused. He thought her memories of the accident came back after reading the dread doctor book. And honestly, he wasn’t sure how much of that whole experience had been fact and how much was fiction blended with fear.

“I don’t think you should trust your visions, Malia. Between the Dread Doctors and Dr. Valack, I’m not trusting anything unless I can prove it or have multiple witnesses with impeccable records.”

Malia slowly met Stiles’ gaze. He’d never seen her look more serious.

“It all came back to me before I read the book, Stiles. It started happening as soon as I started taking driving lessons. I think being behind the wheel triggered things. At first it was just short flashes and bits and pieces. Eventually it all came crashing back one night I was driving with Theo.” She took a deep breath, closed her eyes and when they opened again they flashed blue. “I didn’t cause the accident, Stiles. It was the desert wolf. She shot at us. She caused the accident.”

It took a moment for the information to process. “Are you sure?” he asked tentatively. This changed things, especially where the book was concerned. He needed to dwell more on that later. Malia nodded diminutively. “Why would my own mother want to kill me, Stiles?”

He swallowed thickly, thoughts racing. He understood what Malia was thinking. He understood too well, since he usually jumped to the worst kinds of conclusions. In the back of his mind the visions of his mother attacking him on the hospital roof played ominously. She’d been scared of him. And here Malia was telling him how her mother tried to kill her.

“You’re not like Theo,” he repeated thickly.

“Maybe not. But I need to be sure. It frightens me, Stiles, thinking that if my own mother wanted me dead, perhaps it’s because I’m like that too? Created and not quite right.”

“Don’t say things like that, Malia. It’s not true.”

“Most of the time it feels like that, though,” she admitted. “I’ve never felt right since I returned to human form. I thought it was the time spent as a coyote, but maybe there’s more to it. Maybe it’s because I’m put together wrong. They’re still at it, trying to create the perfect chimera. If I’m one too, I’ll either end up dead like the others or something worse. I have to know! And maybe my mom can help somehow. Perhaps she knows something we don't.”

Her phone beeped and Malia glanced at it, and hopped onto the windowsill.

“I’ve got to go. I’ll text you.”

“Come back safely,” begged Stiles. She nodded and then she was gone. Stiles stood rooted to the floor, staring unblinkingly out the window, curtains billowing in the slight wind.

“You are not put together wrong,” he whispered firmly, knowing that Malia would hear him.

His phone beeped immediately, the message simply saying “Thank you.”
A half hour later, as Stiles was nested under the covers and yet light years from asleep, another text ticked in from Malia.

_Derek is not with Braeden anymore. She says he vanished in the night a few days ago, without so much as a word. Thought you might want to know._

The elation this news brought outweighed the mortification of why Malia thought this would interest him. And it certainly did nothing to help him sleep.
Stiles had anticipated spending a significant amount of time in the school administration's office the next day. Historically speaking he had a slight tendency to tick off the secretaries. He didn’t know why. He never tried to. In fact, he tried to be charming and likable, but obviously he was doing something wrong. Their preferred way of punishing him was making him wait. And then wait some more. Stiles was not good with the whole concept of waiting, and it usually lead to even more blabbering, because how else did you pass time in a waiting room with only outdated pamphlets on STDs and the dangers of drugs to tide you over? It was a viscous circle that with few exceptions ended up with not one, but two detentions.

Knowing this, Stiles had factored in ample time for waiting. He was therefore unprepared for the principal’s sternest secretary to burst into tears at the sight of him. “You poor dear,” she’d croaked handing him a fistful of tissue that she clearly needed more than him. Stiles accepted them reluctantly. Much like a caged animal he was unaccustomed to overly emotional reactions like this, and frankly it made him rather uncomfortable and distrustful. Between heaving sobs, the secretary blathered on about what a tragedy it all was, and what a great man the sheriff had been. Stiles stood there awkwardly, feeling like an alien in his own life. One hand clutched a crumpled lump of tissues, while the other, in a fruitless attempt to make her stop, patted the secretary stiltedly on the arm. This went on for quite some time. Each time Stiles tried to tell her that his dad was doing fine, she would start to wail again. The whole thing was very bizarre.

Stiles had visited his dad in the early hours of the morning and was pleased to find that he looked much better. His cheeks had more color, and he’d even worked out a system with Melissa of blinking once for yes and twice for no. It was a terrible method for learning details about what had happened to him, and meant that Stiles was forced to throw out suggestions that the sheriff could either confirm or deny. Stiles knew his dad was on the way to recovery when he began rolling his eyes at some of his more ludicrous proposals.

So his dad was definitely getting better. Yet looking at the school staff you would think Sheriff Stilinski was at death’s door. Initially Stiles had intended to correct them, but that was before he realized the administration had talked to all his teachers and managed to get him out of most of the work he’d missed. He would need to take a few makeup tests and cover the material on his own, but that was peanuts compared to the alternative. Stiles was not about to stare such a gift horse in the mouth, and gladly accepted both more tissues, a piece of surprisingly good apple pie as well as their thoughts and prayers.

He spotted Scott in passing, probably on his way to AP Biology, a subject Stiles had decided to forego. They shared a nod, but didn’t stop to talk. Scott looked about as terrible as Stiles felt. They would need to talk again soon, that much was certain. But Stiles still had issues to work through, and he needed a bit more time. Still, it was a relief to notice that the brunt of his anger at Scott was gone. Instead he was left with something worse – disappointment.

Walking down the corridors, he felt the absence of his friends acutely. He got a few nods and hellos, but none from people he wanted to talk to. Lydia, Kira and Malia were all gone. Scott on timeout. Derek’s whereabouts were unknown, Isaac and Jackson somewhere in Europe, and the rest… well, they were dead. Being dragged into the world of the supernatural had seriously damaged his social life.

The lack of friends didn’t much matter for the first half of the school day anyway. Stiles had material to catch up on and makeup tests to prepare for. Before he knew it, it was lunch and he found himself
standing awkwardly in the middle of the cafeteria without knowing where to sit or with whom.

“Stiles!”

Somewhere in the back of the room a pair of hands waved enthusiastically in his direction. Seconds later they were replaced by Mason’s face, grinning ear to ear as he jumped up and down to get his attention. Stiles returned the wave clumsily, weaved in and out between seas of bodies and arrived, miraculously, without spilling any of his food.

“You’re back!” exclaimed Mason with a grin. Next to him Liam smiled sadly, head bowed down as he picked listlessly at a limp French fry. Stiles just arched an eyebrow in a wordless “duh” and sat down.

“So, does that mean your dad’s all better?”

Stiles confirmed and spent the next few minutes answering all of Mason’s rapid fire questions. Liam didn’t say much, but seemed genuinely relieved to hear the sheriff was on the mend.

At one point Mason pushed his tray aside and whipped out a huge book about mythology and began question Stiles on topics far outside his scope of knowledge. They were in the middle of a discussion on sea creatures when Liam let out an audible gasp followed by a heart-wrenching whimper.

Mason and Stiles shared a concerned look as Liam gripped the table hard causing the Formica top to crack.

“What’s the matter?” inquired Mason with concern. Liam didn’t answer, simply stared at the far end of the cafeteria, face going paler with every passing second.

“Hayden,” he mumbled, and Stiles’ heart clenched painfully. Poor guy, he was naturally still in shock. And sadly for all, Stiles was terrible at this sort of thing. Not for the first time he missed Lydia. She’d know what to do. What to say. How to act.

“I know,” he said tenderly, feeling woefully out his element and comfort zone. “I know what it’s like to lose someone you love. It sucks and it’s going to suck for a long, long time. I’m telling it is as is, since I consider you my friend. I refuse to lie to you. Death sucks. Because when one person’s suffering ends, everyone else’s starts. And it never really ends. But we’re here for you, okay?”

“Hayden,” replied Liam again as if he hadn’t heard a word of what Stiles had just said, which was sort of a shame. He thought he’d been at least halfway eloquent and would probably not remember half it if forced to repeat it. Besides, Liam clearly didn’t need platitudes or half-assed advice from tactless shits like him. Melissa would probably know what to do. Maybe he could ask her to talk to -

“Oh MY freaking GOD!”

This time it was Mason. He couldn’t have looked more shell-shocked if dinosaurs had just entered the building. Liam whimpered again. Stiles finally turned around as well, and promptly felt the ground beneath his feet not just shift, but totally rearrange itself.

Theo Raeken, looking incredibly smug by the way, was walking down the aisle with a posse trailing behind him. And not just any kind of posse, but a reanimated chimera posse. A hot reanimated posse Stiles dimly noted. Hot and deadly. And also supposedly dead! Very dead.

“That can’t even be possible,” gasped Mason, eyes big as saucers. “Hayden died. I saw her die! She’s dead.”
“Not anymore,” replied Stiles numbly. He’d just recognized the other three. One was the guy Theo had killed on the roof of the hospital and who Stiles had helped hide. The other two were Tracy and Corey.

“Are we in an episode of The Walking Dead?” asked Mason shrilly. Stiles never got to answer. Not that he honestly knew how to respond either, because holy hell! Dead Chimeras walking! No, scratch that – Dead Chimeras strutting!

Bizarrely none of the other students seem to find the display odd, but then again none of them had helped cover up their murders and disappearances. Stiles watched the parade saunter past him, none of them casting him so as much as a wayward glance. Liam was hyperventilating as Hayden breezed by, hair billowing behind her, eyes oddly glassy but otherwise none worse for wear.

Just before they exited on the other side, Theo peeked over his shoulder, smirked and honest to God winked at Stiles. He felt his blood boil and fist clenched of their own volition. He wanted to sock him on the chin, to break his jaw, to make the fucker bleed. And clearly Theo knew that. In fact he was probably aiming for it. He wanted Stiles to lose control, to tap into those less sympathetic layers buried deep, deep inside him.

Void Stiles he’d called it. In light of the whole possessed-by-an-evil-fly thing, he’d done his best to separate those actions, thoughts and feelings from the person he was. The person he wanted to be, the kind of man he strived to be. Theo Raeken were doing his level best to scratch at his carefully constructed defense-structures, and despite the bravado, Stiles was far from secure the walls would hold. Everyone had weak spots. His dad had taught him that early. Just because something or someone seemed strong, impenetrable even, that didn’t mean you had to attack with rocket launchers or pounds of C4 to get them to break. Sometimes all you had to do was chip away small holes in strategic places and the wall would crumble.

It was classic interrogation strategy, and something that worked on both physical and mental walls respectively. Stiles dimly remembered it being a major plot point in Prison Break, which at the time had impressed him more than his dad’s often long-winded diatribes.

But he was getting off topic. And Theo had already left the room. All that was left was the normal chatter of hundreds of students gossiping while trying to force down a questionable looking meatloaf. Stiles was brought out of his reverie by Mason tugging insistently on his sleeve.

“What?”

“Dude, Liam,” whispered Mason, voice raw with worry. “We need to take him out of here.”

Liam had slid to the floor, back against the wall, hands hanging limply by his side while he heaved for breath.

“He’s having a panic attack.”

“No shit!” screamed Mason. “What the hell, Stiles. What the hell? Oh my god, his claws are coming out!”

Hell.

That was the operative word alright. Stiles shook his head. He’d once joked about spending an eternity in the lowest circle of hell. That was for getting his dad drunk enough to divulge information about the Hale fire. In hindsight that was far from the worse thing he’d done. Sure, he might not have hit bottom yet, but he was definitely on a sub-level and descending fast. With this rate he’d be
roasting in the flames by mid-semester.

“I don’t know about hell,” he muttered as he picked up his backpack and waved for Mason to get his and Liam’s stuff. “But I do know about panic attacks, and we need to move him somewhere quiet. And for god’s sake, Mason. Cover his damned hands!”

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It took close to 30 minutes to get Liam to calm down sufficiently for the claws to retract and his breathing to normalize. They’d sought refuge in coach’s office, because no one had seen hind nor hair of him since school started, which was slightly odd. Then again so was coach. He’d probably be back sooner or later, shouting nonsense at them from the sidelines. Anyway, Stiles wasn’t missing training all that much to be honest. And with Coach AWOL they were likely to be left alone in there, which was a huge plus when your friend had a breakdown with supernatural side-effects of the kind you would have problems explaining to the school nurse.

As soon as Liam was slumped over in a fetal position, still sobbing but noticeably calmer, Stiles took to pacing the office hoping to be hit with inspiration. What the hell were they supposed to do now? As if the situation wasn’t bad enough, Theo had to go ahead and create his own borderline Frankenstein Pack! Failing to get rid of Scott had clearly pushed him over the deep end.

They needed help. And they needed it now!

Well, thought Stiles tiredly as he stumbled gracelessly into the hallway, leaving Mason behind with Liam for the time being. It was time to call off the Stiles vs Scott standoff. This was definitely an all hands on deck situation.

As if on cue, Scott burst around the corner, nose tilted upwards in that way Stiles knew meant he was following a scent. He spotted Stiles and for a moment they just stared at each other, eerily like dueling cowboys at dawn, none of them wanting to draw first. In the end neither had to make the first move. Perhaps it was instinct, or perhaps years and years of reading each other’s body language. No matter, they both exploded into outraged cries at the same time.

“Did you see him?”
“– strutting around like a fucking king. Who does he think – “
“Oh my god, Liam! How’s Liam taking it? Stiles, did he see her? I’m going to wring his little neck, I swear to God!”

They had migrated towards each other as they ranted and stopped dead in the middle of the deserted hallway, chests heaving with pent up rage and frustration, but this time at least not directed at each other. Not all of it, anyway... Stiles stared defiantly at Scott, cocking his head to one side and arching an eyebrow. (He’d been practicing, okay!)

“Wring his neck, huh? Isn’t that a little – what’s the word... oh yeah – murderous of you? I thought we weren’t supposed to kill them, but save them?”

Okay, so yes, Stiles was being a dick. That was a cheap shot and he knew it. Though, in Stiles’ eyes Scott deserved a few shots, whether they were cheap or not. Scott didn’t seem to agree. He looked about 130 % done, eyes travelling on a sort of half-moon trajectory that couldn’t exactly be classified as an eye roll, but conveyed the same message.

“It’s a figure of speech and you know it,” he retorted tartly. “I get that we have things of a more personal matter to discuss, but can we agree to table that until further notice? Theo Raeken just marched into school with a gang of four formerly dead chimeras. I don’t know about you, but I have
concerns.”

Stiles snorted and rolled his eyes the way eyes should be rolled. “Concerns? I’d say we’re at Defcon 1 and rising. What do we do now? I’m so far out of my element here I’m not sure it’s been discovered, and the bestiary isn’t giving me squat to go on. We need help. We need information! Either that or we need to pack up and get the hell out of dodge!”

Scott nodded. “Deaton isn’t getting back to me,” he offered looking somewhat dejected. “I haven’t heard from him in almost a week, and I’m getting slightly concerned.”

Stiles huffed. “I blew past concerned two days ago, dude. I’ve been trying him for days as well, without result. That leaves us with – well, nothing. Lydia is out of circulation for the time being – and we need to work on that issue as well, you know.”

Scott nodded. “I know. Also Kira and the Yukimuras are out of town. I assume Malia told you she was leaving as well? I’m sorry about that.”

Stiles closed his eyes and took a deep breath. A massive headache was amounting an attack, he could feel it. “Yeah, she came by last night. She left with Braeden. I guess we could call Braeden to hear what she might know about chimeras and Dread Doctors. It doesn’t hurt to ask.”

Scott nodded again. “Yeah, it’s worth a try. I’ll give her a call. Perhaps you can try Derek.”

Stiles spluttered, suddenly feeling as if all the air the hallway had been sucked out.

“What! What?”

Why?

Scott looked mildly concerned. It might have something to do with the spastic arm show Stiles was putting on. If he’d been carrying flags they could put him in the Beacon Hills parades.

“Why not? He might know something. Has anyone talked to him after this shit storm started? He could know something, or perhaps know someone who knows something. It’s worth a shot.”

“I get that,” commented Stiles dryly, hoping to avert attention from his erratic pulse. “I was more interested in why you thought I would be the man for the job. Isn’t that like alpha business?”

Now Scott was looking perplexed and annoyed. “Derek’s not even an alpha anymore, why would it be alpha business? Also, since when do you care about pack etiquette? I thought we could take a call each and save some time. Also I don’t think Derek cares much for me to be honest. He likes you, though.”

What – WHAT?

“Since - since when has Derek Hale ever liked me?” Stiles wasn’t computing. Derek threatened Stiles with bodily harm just for being in his proximity. Okay, so technically that wasn’t true. Not anymore. There hadn’t been threats like that in a long time. And yes, technically they were sort of friends now - probably. Which would indicate that Derek at the very least tolerated, and probably did sort of like Stiles. The more worrisome part was how Scott had picked up on this. Stiles was the perceptive one after all. Scott hardly noticed anything unless it danced in front of him wearing a tutu. Stiles froze. Holy hell, was he being obvious? Did Scott know... things... feelings?

“How would I know, he just does.” Scott looked at Stiles oddly. "Will you do it or not?"

Stiles clenched his teeth and nodded stiffly. He’d just realized a crucial factor. Scott said Derek liked Stiles. He didn't say anything about it being reciprocated. Not that it was. Much... Scott seemed
pleased enough with Stiles’ response, though, and continued talking.

“That was not a bad idea. And yes, Scott should definitely be making that call. Chris Argent did not have all that much patience with Stiles. They agreed to split up for the time being and meet up later. As they walked off in opposite directions, Stiles turned around, a small grin on his face.

“You will call him this time, right? Not just send a text?”

Scott gave him the finger.

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The rest of the school day went by excruciatingly slowly. Stiles wanted nothing but to skip out early, but due to his already lengthy absence he couldn’t risk it. Besides, he had makeup tests to schedule and he didn’t have a car anyway. He would either need to wait and catch the bus or find another mode of transportation.

He managed to avoid running into any of the chimeras, thank god. The prospect of conversing with any of them gave him the heebie-jeebies. Somehow that seemed worse than being forced to make polite small talk with your ex. Not that Stiles had any experience with that per say, but all comedies ever produced seem to advocate a strong sense of embarrassment and awkward in situations like that. Besides, did the chimeras even know they were dead? Or resurrected? Or reanimated? Honestly, Stiles didn’t even know the correct term to use.

Sadly, there was however no avoiding Theo since he was in his AP History class. Theo usually sat at the back, so Stiles made a number out of sitting near the front to distance himself from the traitorous scumbag as much as humanly possible. It was a great theory that proved abysmal in real life.

“Hello Stiles. How’s your dad doing?”

Every nerve ending in his body stood on edge as Theo’s teasing whisper reached him. He chanced a glance to his right, and yes there he was, in the seat next to him, Donald Trump levels of smarminess oozing from every cell.

The familiar boiling rush in his blood spread to his entire body, and by the time the final bell rang and the teacher had entered the room, Stiles was ready to pummel Theo – again. It wouldn’t do any good, though. It would just play perfectly into Theo’s trap, as well as land him with either a string of detentions or a very unwelcome expulsion. Which meant he had to exercise restraint. Not a skill Stiles mastered too well. But he said nothing. Simply flipped open the textbook and began reading dutifully from the chapter on the Marshal Plan. Theo chuckled. Stiles continued reading. He would be the very definition of calm.

“Your heartbeat gives you away, Stiles,” teased Theo. “You want to hit me again, don’t you? I get that. But you don’t have to. Your dad will live another day, and my offer still stands. I want you in my pack.”

Stiles clenched his teeth and repressed the urge to hiss. His heart might be going a mile a minute, he
couldn’t really control that. Not when he was this angry. But he could control his actions and his words, and he was choosing them wisely for once.

“Excuse me while I pass on the chance to frolic with a bunch of artificially created and recently reanimated beings.” He made a dismissive hand gesture, never taking his eyes off the book. “Call me crazy, but I don’t really see the appeal. Quite frankly your “betas” have impulse control issues that I just can’t overlook. And as you probably know – I don’t trust you, and I trust them even less, because I have a feeling they might be slightly under your control.”

“There’s not all that many left to frolic with Stiles,” Theo smirked. “Your options are limited.”

“I’d rather go hermit than join up with you. Does that paint a clear enough picture for you? Now go back to your reading.”

For a blessed few minutes nothing else was said between them. The history teacher that was hired to replace Mr. Yukimura had a Professor Binns like ability to drone on and on without realizing that half the class was sleeping, texting, gossiping or simply not there. As a result he didn’t even notice when Theo moved his chair to sit next to Stiles. Stiles continued to stare down into his textbook, intent on tuning out his new-found nemesis and learn all he could about the European Recovery Program that shockingly few people knew was the actual name of the plan.

“You have nothing to lose and everything to gain, you know,” said Theo conversationally, twirling a pencil casually between his fingers. “I know you’re on the outs with Scott. In fact I applaud you for finally giving him a piece of your mind. Kira skipped town, Malia as well.” He laughed softly. “I might have had a hand in that. Terribly sorry, I guess you’ll miss your girlfriend, but finding her crazy mom seemed like a priority to her.”

Stiles turned the page, highlighted a section on the Compulsory Eastern Bloc rejection and read on.

“I’ve noticed Lydia isn’t in class today. Has she left you as well?”

Theo had hardly finished the taunting question before Stiles had gripped his neck tightly and shoved his face down into the textbook. He let out a strangled sort of grunt, but the teacher didn’t as much as blink, and just droned on. If any of the other students noticed anything, they didn’t care either. God Bless the indifference of youth.

“You fucking bastard,” hissed Stiles, voice low and dangerous. “You know perfectly well why Lydia isn’t here, and it’s all your fucking fault.”

“What the hell are you even – oomph. Will you ease off, please? Stiles?”

Stiles tightened his grip and watched through half-lidded eyes how Theo’s face gradually became more and more red.

“Stiles,” croaked Theo again, his hands desperately trying to pry at his grip. Stiles eased up when a claw rasped him making blood trail down onto his textbook. He let Theo go with a low growl.

“What the fuck is up with you?” Theo sounded just a tad shaky, but he recovered fast. Stiles was back to reading. “What happened to Lydia?”

Stiles snorted angrily and turned to face Theo fully, eyes blazing. “Your little memory drain left her catatonic, you dimwit. She’s in Eichen House now, out of reach for all of us, and I have no idea what’s happening to her and if she’ll be okay again.”

“Oh,” said Theo and it was such an honest and raw response it threw Stiles for a loop. Looking at
Theo it was clear that had not been his intention. He hadn’t known. Not that it made a lick of
difference. Sticking your claws into someone and rooting around their brain was intrusive and
dangerous. Definitely not something you did without explicit consent.

“Fuck. That was not what - What can I do?”

Stiles did a double take. “What can you do? What can you do? You can stay the fuck away is what
you can do. You can stop trying to kill my friends, stop trying to recruit us to whatever psycho
agenda you’ve got going with your band of not-so-merry doctors. Ideally you’ll leave Beacon Hills
all together. That is what you can do.”

Theo didn’t say anything for a moment. And when he finally did, it was something odd.

“They’re going to be so pissed,” he muttered to himself and slid the chair back to his own desk.

At first Stiles didn’t get what he was referring to. Was there anyone not pissed at Theo? It seemed
unlikely.

And then it hit him.

“Oh my god, they have no idea what you’ve done, have they?”

The slight cringe to Theo’s shoulders was all the confirmation he needed.

“You fucked up, didn’t you?”

“Fuck off,” retorted Theo grumpily. Stiles laughed and couldn’t help but feel the slightest bit of
relief. It didn’t help him with Lydia or even the Dread Doctors. But if Theo had pissed off his
benefactors and creators, then perhaps they’d get lucky and they would eliminate Theo. A fight with
one less player was perhaps not fairer, but at least marginally less impossible.

“Go back to the Marshall Plan, Theo,” he said good-humoredly, tapping his highlighter against the
book to emphasis his point.

“Seems to me like you should learn a thing or two about bipartisanship since you’ve managed to
alienate both sides in just a few days.

Theo thankfully left him alone after that.

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After school Stiles did something he excelled at. He procrastinated.

He caught a ride home with Mason who drove a beat up Honda Civic that made his Jeep seem
stylish by comparison. If rust was a prime metal for car building Mason would’ve struck gold. Thank
god it wasn’t raining because the roof actually had holes in it.

Liam was even more subdued, and Mason seemed to make up for it with a continuous stream of
word and chatter. He asked Stiles all kinds of questions, and he ended up relating much of what he
knew and had learned from his shared class with Theo. None of them had any idea what to do next,
which meant that Stiles at some point today was forced to go through with his promise to Scott and
actually call Derek.
But before he got to that, he had homework to complete. He spent two hours getting the essential work done and then took the bus to visit his dad. He was doing much better, in fact he was doing surprisingly much better for someone who’d gone through what he had. The doctors all seemed slightly baffled, but still more pleased than anything. Things had looked pretty bad there for a moment, and this was certainly a win in everyone’s book. The sheriff was even making verbal progress and was up to scratchy grunt noises at the back of his throat, which frankly sounded a bit like Darth Vader on crack. But his color was back, his eye rolling in good form and Melissa swore up and down the tests were looking good as well.

Satisfied that his dad was in good hands and his health improving, Stiles decided the next order of business was getting his Jeep back. He’d let it go too long without having a real mechanic take a look at it, and he was paying for it now with lack of freedom. He’d rather pay dollars, debts be damned.

When he called to get the estimate the total was far worse than he feared even in his most pessimistic moments. He sat silently for a moment clutching his phone, mentally debating whether a bank heist would be totally out of the question. He’d sort of done it before.

“Mr. Stilinski? What do you want me to do? Should I start the repairs?” The voice on the other end sounded impatient and annoyed. Stiles shook his head.

“I need an answer soon if you want me to sloth it in this week. We’re almost fully booked. Also I’ll need to send for a few of the parts. This model went out of production a good while ago. I’ll be honest with you, sir. Strictly speaking, I’d recommend you buy a new car.”

Stiles shook his head again. Scrapping the Jeep was not an option. He wasn’t willing to give up on it quite yet. He’d rather work on her himself. See if he couldn’t salvage it somehow.

“Just… Just – Can you have it towed back to my place? Do you have the address?”

“Sure thing,” came the soft reply. “I’ll have someone bring it by tomorrow.”

***

After fixing himself something to eat, watering the few plants that refused to die despite the neglect they continued to show them, and mowing the lawn, because seriously the grass was getting ridiculously long, Stiles had run out of excuses. Scott had already texted him saying he hadn’t gotten hold of Deaton but he’d left a message with Chris.

Stiles needed to come through on his end. He needed to call Derek. He fished out his phone, and scrolled down his contacts to D. Derek’s name and picture taunted him; made his skin tingly and nervous.

Scott had been right to ask Stiles. It was probably true that Derek sort of liked, or at least tolerated Stiles. He hadn’t really discussed it with Scott or anyone else for that matter, but Derek and he had gotten closer over the last year or so. Last summer when Scott was busy with his newly founded “Be a Better Scott McCall” program Stiles had hung out at Derek’s loft and helped search for Boyd and Erica. It had been – well, not fun. It wasn’t fun searching for people in dire straits, but still it had been good. Derek was easy to talk to, easy to banter with. Even Peter was tolerable in small doses as it turned out. Not trustworthy of course, but he had a dry wit and ounces of sarcasm, both qualities
Stiles admired. Though he’d never admit to such a thing outright. God forbid.

After the whole possession thing and Derek almost dying in Mexico, they had continued to stay in touch. Derek left town with Braeden, intent on helping her track down The Desert Wolf. On the day he left, he’d entered Stiles’ bedroom in his patented silent ninja way and frightened Stiles so bad he’d fallen off his chair, spilling soda all over himself all while cursing creatively. Derek had laughed so hard he’d clutched his stomach. Stiles had been mesmerized by the sight.

It had been a short visit, Derek simply informing him of his plans and that he’d probably be back by summer. Stiles had nodded, wished him a good trip and that was that.

Or almost.

When Derek was halfway through the window, Stiles had blurted out “Don’t die” before he had the good sense to stop himself. Derek had stopped, turned around and looked at him in a way that made Stiles burn on the inside.

“Don’t be a stranger,” said Derek eventually, and just like that he was gone.

“I won’t if you’ll stop being a dick,” he’d called out into the night. A moment later his phone had buzzed with a text. It takes one to know one it had simply said, and Stiles had laughed so hard and long his dad eventually stopped by to ask if he was having a fit.

That had been the start of a long string of texts back and forth between them. Derek would send matter-of-fact updates like “Not in Cleveland, false trace” and Stiles would reply back with random facts like did you know your chances of being killed by a vending machine are actually twice as large as your chance of being bitten by a shark.

It had been highly entertaining, and for someone who often seemed quite grumpy Derek turned out to be remarkably funny. At one point Stiles managed to get Derek hooked on Snapchat which gave him an even better sense of what Derek was up to. He got cheesy pictures of sunsets, a giant donut, and endless highways. Sometimes even out of focus selfies. Stiles never knew if it was because Derek was such a crappy photographer, his wolfy eyes messed with the camera or he was just doing it to be annoying. All were viable options.

When school was out for the summer, Cora had joined him on the road, and she took the opportunity to wedge herself into as many shots as possible, pulling faces and making rabbit’s ears on her brother whenever she could. Through texts and photos Stiles learned a whole new side of Derek, and Cora too for that matter.

Braeden mostly stayed out of it, but could sometimes be seen in the background looking as if she was rolling her eyes. Stiles didn’t know her particularly well, and the few times their paths had crossed he’d always gotten the feeling she didn’t like him much. But she was evidently still with Derek, even if he seldom mentioned her. Stiles was happy for him. Derek deserved to be happy, and to be with someone who didn’t want to kill him, use him or seduce him for their own twisted agendas. Still, he couldn’t help the slightly sour feeling that crept over him whenever Braeden was seen or mentioned in their communications. He wrote it up as a slight distrust, but only because he was looking out for a friend. Or almost friend. Or whatever.

Stiles had taken screenshots of some of the best photos and saved them to a folder named “chemistry”. The name was supposed to steer curious people away, but in the back of his mind he couldn’t help but wonder if there was a double meaning to it. The snaps and texts had continued well into the summer months and was perhaps the only bright spot of his days. Not that he shared that piece of information with anyone, not even Scott or Malia. Truthfully he didn’t entirely know why
he hadn’t told anyone he was in a text marathon with Derek Hale. He never lied about it, just never mentioned it or brought it up. It was nice having something that was just his. But besides that Stiles really didn’t have any excuses for the subterfuge. Sometimes, he would casually ask if anyone had heard from him, but Scott would always shrug and say no. Malia usually just looked at him oddly without commenting, and Lydia. Well, Lydia hardly knew Derek to begin with and had little reason to stay in touch with him in the first place. She always smiled, though. Stiles never knew what that was all about.

Stiles opened the chemistry folder and flipped through the archived photos. The latest was a picture of Derek and Cora wedged into the frame wearing ridiculously big sunglasses and sticking their tongues out. They looked stupid and happy. He quickly excited the folder again, and went back to his contact list and Derek’s entry. Perhaps he could get away with sending a text? Just say shit was hitting all the fans and could Derek please get in touch with Scott? Except Stiles always gave Scott such grief for sending Argent texts instead of calling. If word got out he wasn’t much better he’d never hear the end of it. But it was just so damned tempting…

He pressed the text history and stared at the latest message from Derek. It was received August 2nd and marked, for all intents and purposes, the end of their burgeoning friendship. Because Stiles had never replied. And Derek – Derek never messaged again after that. And with that the whole healthy communications thing they’d practiced for almost four months, imploded.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” muttered Stiles as he paced the room. “It was just a simple question. An innocent suggestion, and you went and made it into a big deal and blew a budding friendship. So stupid. There should be a monument erected over my stupidity, and its size should be proportional to my stupidity. The thing would eclipse the Washington Monument by a mile.”

He flopped down on the bed, fist banging against the mattress. After a minute of angry muttering he lifted the phone again, the screen still lit and the message clear as day.

*Hi, so I’ve been thinking. You mentioned Scott was busy working, Malia was in summer school and Kira in New York. Not sure what Lydia is up to but you haven’t mentioned her much so I’m thinking she’s busy as well. If you want you can come meet up with Cora and me. Just say the word and I’ll book you a flight. D.*

It had thrown him for a loop. Like someone had strapped him upside down in a gravity-defying rollercoaster. It had shocked him monumentally that Derek Hale, former alpha and aspiring GQ model (he sometimes toyed with the idea of sending in his picture) had invited him along on the Hale siblings’ summer road trip. And offered to pay for it to boot. A year ago Derek was ready to pummel Stiles on sight. Now he’d wanted to vacation with him.

It had been incredible, flattering, exciting and terrifying all rolled up in one. The thought of going somewhere that required a plane ticket to hang out with Derek scared him so freaking much, because that meant he had to own up to a few things, at least to himself. And he just wasn’t ready to do that. Besides his dad would throw a fit, Scott would never understand and Malia – well, how could he expect Malia to understand? Basically, there’d been about a million reasonable arguments for Stiles to say no. And one giant reason to say yes. But that reason scared him more than any supernatural being ever had. So Stiles had fallen back on his old patented method of dealing with things that scared him – he’d ignored the problem, hoping it would eventually go away.

It didn’t. Go away that is. But the more time that passed without sending a reply, the harder it got. And the silence on Derek’s end was deafening. Besides, saying yes would feel like being unfaithful, even though that was so not on the table, like literary not a chance in hell. But where did the line go with stuff like that – with action or thought?
Frankly, he didn’t want to know. Not then, and he still didn’t. So instead of facing up to it, he’d chosen to ignore it. Derek had never pressed for an answer and left the ball in Stiles corner. Stiles had never been all that good with balls anyway, and it’d been left alone in the corner, the air slowly fizzing out. But now he had to call. The ball needed to get back on the field, and Stiles needed to kick it. Hard.

He pressed dial before he could change his mind, felt his heart try to escape through his throat, nearly suffocating him. Was it possible for werewolves to hear his heartbeat through the phone? Stiles stopped breathing altogether when the call connected.

*The subscriber you are trying to reach has switched of their phone or is temporarily out of reach. Please try again later.*

Stiles was so relieved he flailed and flopped straight off the bed and down on the floor, landing awkwardly on his hip. He’d called, he would live to see another day, and he could honestly inform Scott that Derek wasn’t picking up. He was probably hiking through uncharted forests, climbing impossible mountains using only his claws or something badass like that anyway. Living in unison with nature where no man or wolf had ever boldly gone before. Derek would totally rock the hermit lumberjack look.

It wasn’t until he’d fired off a text to Scott about his lack of success, and was nested under the blankets, that another thought hit him. Had Derek changed his number? Perhaps he was so mad at Stiles for never answering that he’d severed ties altogether. Had Derek blocked him? Erased him from his call history?

“Stiles Stilinski, ladies and gentlemen,” he muttered darkly, burying his head under the blanket. “Destroyer of friendships.”

Derek had taken Stiles’ advice and stopped being a dick. Unfortunately Stiles had picked up all his bad habits and for good measure taken dickishness to a whole new level.

Stiles suffered through another night with minimal sleep. But for once it wasn’t fear or nightmares that kept him awake, but regret.
The doorbell rang the next morning just as Stiles was eating cereal straight out of the box. He was running late, and his dad wasn’t around to catch him in the act, which made it allowed. Hell, it was expected. Teenage rebellion, it was a thing. Still, he felt as if he’d just been caught red-handed breaking the sacred "always use a bowl" rule his mom had imposed after growing tired of the massive cleanups necessary whenever he’d attempted to get both cereal and milk into his mouth at the same time without the aid of utensils or some sort of container. Stiles had always been a very experimental child. Still was, some might argue. Anyway, Stiles half expected the person on the other side of the door to brandish the swear-jar in his face and demand a dollar contribution, like his dad did nowadays whenever he misbehaved. Suffice to say the jar was never empty.

When he opened the door it was however not a jar, but a clipboard that was pushed in his face by a grumpy looking mechanic. Or tow truck operator. Was that even a thing? The mechanics probably didn't do the towing, right? Just like the tow truck guys probably didn’t do any repairs? Why was he even thinking about this stuff in the first place?

“A good morning to you too, sir,” he said sarcastically as Mr. Mustache (it was quite impressive, unlike his own lackluster attempt at facial hair) glowered at him while gripping the keys to his beloved jeep so tightly you’d think he’d want to elope with them. Or crumple them. Either way Stiles wanted them back.

“Please sign,” the mustache muttered in a gruff bark. Stiles wagged his fingers dangerously close to his face, the universal sign for “do you have a pen.” Evidently Mr Mustache didn’t speak the language or something got horribly lost in translation, because all it achieved was an even more sullen glower. Stiles ended up having to trot back inside to locate a working pen. He could feel the man's somewhat beady eyes trying to burn a hole in his back while he did so, and idly wondered if he’d unintentionally insulted him in sign language or something to that effect.

“This would have run much smoother if you had a pen attached to the clipboard,” he offered conversationally as he scribbled his initials in his most sloppy scrawl. It was about as illegible as a doctor's signature. Was sloppy penmanship a requirement to get into medical school? Did they take special classes for that? Stiles really was a fountain of important questions this morning.

Mr. Mustache didn’t care for his advice. In fact he only cared for his clipboard. It was snatched out of his hands as soon as he’d dotted the last i.

“I’m going to fix her myself,” Stiles informed him with a nod he hoped portrayed confidence. That prompted the first genuine smile from Mr. Mustache. He was missing two teeth and could benefit from a round of flossing.

“You’d have better luck restoring the Titanic,” he guffawed and waddled down the driveway, tossing the keys over his shoulder as he went. Stiles didn’t care. His baby was back, beaten up, broken and slightly damaged. Kind of like him.

“I’m going to fix you,” he promised solemnly, the sentiment going out to more than just the car. When he walked by the jeep on his way to catch the bus, he could’ve sworn the headlights blinked to life for a split second. He brushed it off as a trick of the light. He did the same when he thought he saw Donovan staring forlornly at him from the front of the bus ten minutes later. He was gone by the next stop.
“What did you do?”

Stiles spluttered making parts of his French fries dangle limply out the corner of his mouth. He glared at Scott who had just dumped down in the seat across from him looking anything but sunny. Stiles swallowed the rest, and took the time to wipe his mouth with a napkin. Daintily. What kind of greeting was that anyway?

"Well?" asked Scott impatiently. "What did you do?"

“I have no clue what you’re referring to,” answered Stiles indignantly. “I have done nothing except visit my dad – he’s managing raspy growling noises now by the way, in case you care. Which I know sounds terrible – its’ like he’s invented a whole new language that’s a mix between Dutch and Swahili, but nevertheless, it’s progress. I’ve also suffered through three classes of varying quality and now I’m being accused of – what exactly?”

Scott dived into his sandwich like a man starved, and produced some weak flailing while he chewed and swallowed.

“You texted me that you couldn’t reach Derek and that he’s changed his number. So, at the risk of sounding repetitive, I ask again - What did you do?”

Stiles was confused. “What I..? I dialed the number, waited for it to connect, it didn’t and I got a prerecorded error message confirming this. This prompted me to hang the fuck up. Do you need further details?”

Scott rolled his eyes. “You’re such a drama queen sometimes, I swear to god. I mean, what did you do to piss off Derek? You were the only one of us still in contact with him and now all of a sudden he’s unreachable… So my question remains – what did you do?”

Was it hot in here? Surely the air conditioner must be broken. How could students be advised to congregate to learn under such horrible conditions? And why, oh why was he wearing so many layers of clothing?

“How –“, he paused to take a sip of his juice. His throat was drier than the Gobi desert. “How did you know I was in touch with Derek?”

Scott smirked. Sometimes he was more conniving than people gave him credit for. It was something about the floppy fringe that made people underestimate him. Perhaps Stiles also needed to grow some floppy prince hair and he’d be taken more seriously as well?

“No thanks to you, Mr Secretive, that’s for sure. I talked to Braeden last night,” said Scott with an air of ill-concealed amusement. “She mentioned something about endless text conversations and Snapchat duels. Personally I’m having trouble with the whole concept of Derek and social media, but Braeden muttered something about huge donuts and driving forty miles to see a big ball of yarn or something. She lost me there, and to be honest I wasn’t sure I wanted the details anyway.”

Stiles blushed and busied himself with propping his mouth full of dry chicken that felt like rubber. It went well with his dry mouth. Also, it prevented him from commenting on the yarn thing. If Scott knew that Stiles had a screenshot in the secret chemistry folder of Derek Hale, half wolfed out and dangling by his claws from a huge ball of twine he would probably attribute it to the wonders of Photoshop. But it was as real as it was incredible. If it was socially acceptable Stiles would've gotten
it enlarged and framed.

“So, what happened?”

“Huh?” Stiles struggled to swallow the last of the chicken and chased it with the remnants of his drink. Scott looked half annoyed.

“Why did the snapchatting stop and how is it connected to Derek changing his number?”

Scott’s tone irked him. As if Stiles wasn’t beating himself up enough over how poorly he’d handled that situation. Standing trial by “Judge McCall” was not high on his list right now. Not again, and not for this.

“Honestly, it’s none of your business,” he replied firmly, doing a decent job of controlling his heartbeat. Scott scoffed. “I mean it,” Stiles continued with a glare. “I don’t feel like talking about it, and even if I did it wouldn’t change the status quo anyway. Let it rest, please.”

Scott threw his hands up, and leaned back looking perturbed. “Alright, fine. Let’s continue the trend of not talking about stuff. Because that has worked so well for us in the past.”

Stiles fumed. “Oh, that’s rich,” he threw back tartly. “Don’t you dare allude to the thing with Donovan, okay? At the time I didn’t tell you for a reason, namely the fact that you’d made it perfectly clear that anyone who didn’t live up to your prefect standards could just fuck off. Did I screw up by concealing it? Absolutely. But you need to tone the holier than thou attitude down a notch, especially when you’ve kept plenty of things from me and others as well.”

“That’s not true – “

“Oh it is, and you know it. But this isn’t the time or the place for this. We have bigger fish to fry. And as for this story, well you’ve just done the exact same thing again – you assumed I did something wrong. That it was my fault somehow. What did you do? That was your exact words. You talked to Braeden and assumed what she said was true. You don’t care about my side - you just want me to confirm it. If something goes wrong and Stiles is involved, it has to be his fault. Right?”

“You’re overreacting, Stiles. That isn’t the case at all.”

Stiles shrugged. “There’s your side, there’s my side and then there’s the truth. Everything is subject to assumptions and interpretations. The problem is you’ve never been much interested in my view, my theories or my hunches. Besides, we have Dread Doctors to worry about and precious little to go on. That kind of takes precedence I think.”

Scott looked affronted, but nodded stiffly. Their personal issues needed to take a step back. No one said anything for a while. Scott finished his sandwich and began wolfing down a bag of chips. Stiles had given up on the chicken.

“So, I had an enlightening conversation with Theo yesterday,” said Stiles when he couldn’t take the silence anymore. “I’m pretty sure resurrecting chimeras wasn’t part of the deal he had with his creators. Theo is breaking formation so to speak and I have a feeling he’s using some of the doctors’ tricks to do it. Chances are he’s falling out of grace with them.”

“So?” Scott looked confused. “How does that benefit us?”

Stiles smiled lopsidedly. “He just went from an allied to a threat. He’s staged a mutiny which means the doctors will probably try to eliminate him or derail him somehow. Theo will have enough to deal with staying out of their way. I doubt he’ll be bothering us much.”
Scott didn’t look convinced. “Excuse me, but the guy plotted to kill me and steal my pack. I don’t feel comfortable ignoring him.”

“I’m not saying you should feel relaxed. Theo is a snake and will strike if opportunity presents itself. But I’m pretty confident he’ll spend most of his time trying to stay ahead of the doctors, possibly also trying to weaken them. And he’s got at an advantage. He knows more about them than we do. We need to start gathering information.”

Scott sighed, looking tired and worn. Stiles could relate.

“Somehow I doubt Theo will offer this information if we ask him nicely.” Stiles shook his head. "Doubtful. He's still trying to recruit to his pack. He offered me another olive branch, but I declined disrespectfully.”

Scott looked torn between relief and rage, which he could sort of understand. Theo had did his best to kill Scott after all. Hopefully it would take more than just the allure of information to make him turn to him again. "Well," said Scott with a sigh. "Chris didn’t know anything about Dread Doctors but promised to check with the various resources the Calaveras have at their disposal. Braeden would do the same. She mentioned something about conferring with Deucalion. I’m not a huge fan of the man, but if he has info I’ll listen. Other than that we have squat.”

Stiles pursed his lips while poking at the last piece of meat formerly known as chicken.

“Liam,” he said eventually. “Liam was taken by the Doctors. I don’t know how much he told you about it, but I haven’t talked with him yet. Perhaps he remembers something that can help us?”

Scott squirmed, face scrunched up in the same grimace Stiles knew he was hoping to get out of something.

“I don’t think he’s all that eager to talk to me right now. You will have to do it.”

Yeah, thought Stiles dejectedly as he gathered his stuff ready to head to the next class. I’ll put it on my seven mile long to do list.

For a split second as he put his tray away Stiles thought he saw Donovan staring at him from the food line. He blinked and then he was gone, like a mirage.

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“I don’t really remember all that much.”

Stiles had never been to Liam’s house before. It was a nice house. Liam had a nice room. Spacious. PS3 and lots and lots of games that called to Stiles on a molecular level. Kicking back with a mindless game would be so good right now.

Liam on the other hand didn’t look so good. He was on his bed, back against the headboard, a pillow in his lap. He kept picking at a thread that was threatening to unravel. Kind of like Liam himself.

“I was unconscious for most of it, but I recall being in this damp basement of sorts. Lots of weird instruments and containers. The equipment looked sort of old and outdated.”
“Was there any posters or signs on the walls? Anything to give a hint of where it might be?”

Liam shook his head. “Not that I noticed. But I was more concerned about what they were doing to Hayden. And me for that matter.”

Stiles tensed. “They did stuff to you as well?” Liam nodded.

“Yeah, I woke up on the floor with this weird contraption on my arm. It had tubes and stuff coming out of it with some sort of liquid. Not sure whether they were pumping stuff into me or taking stuff out. I don’t feel any different, but I’m not sure that even matters. I did try to kill my alpha during the supermoon. I’m honestly not sure if that was due to the moon, my own anger or whatever the doctors did to me. Possibly all of the above. I’m afraid of the answer.”

Stiles understood that better than he cared to admit.

“So they definitely injected Hayden, then?”

Liam nodded again, head bowed. “Did you see her today?” he asked, voice small and hollow. Stiles shook his head, giving him what he hoped was a sympathetic smile.

“No, but I did see Tracy. She passed me in the hallway walking with Corey. She didn’t seem to notice or care. Almost as if she didn’t even know me. The same with Corey. Either they’re ignoring us or they don’t remember. I’m sort of leaning towards the latter. A lifetime of resurrection and zombie movies has taught me that messing with the dead seldom works out without kinks or unfortunate consequences. In most cases deadly.”

“Hayden remembers me,” whispered Liam, voice wrecked. “She smiled at me during home room.”

Stiles shrugged. “That doesn’t necessarily mean anything. Maybe she smiled because you stared at her?”

“She passed me a note.”

“Oh.”

Liam crumpled, clearly fighting to keep control over his emotions. “Yeah, she wants us to meet,” he managed hoarsely. “I should probably stay away from her, right?”

“Probably, yeah.”

Liam bit his lip, hands shaking. The thread in the pillow had come completely undone. “I’m probably not going to do that.”

“Probably not, no. I figured as much.”

Liam looked surprised. He stared at Stiles incredulously, looking for signs of anger, sarcasm – something.

“You’re very different from Scott,” he remarked and Stiles laughed softly.

“I know. Not necessarily a good thing though, depends on the situation, I think. Anyway, I know firsthand that what we should do and what we want to do not necessarily overlap at the best of times. You care about this girl. She’s not to blame for what happened. She’s not evil or bad. Or at least she didn’t used to be. She’s just unfortunate and the victim of an agenda we know too little about. If that was my girlfriend, I’d want to try and save her, no matter what. That doesn’t make it smart. But it
doesn’t make it wrong either. It makes it human.”

Liam nodded looking less gloomy. “I’m going to see her later. It’s a risk, I get that, but I have to know.”

“Text or call me before you go, and check in every 30 minutes okay?” Liam nodded. “Okay.”

“Okay. Oh, and ask her if she remembers anything more about the place and the doctors. Even the smallest detail could be important.”

“I will.”

For a moment they just sat there in silence. Stiles wanted to question Liam more, but sensed that he was too distracted by the upcoming rendezvous with Hayden to be of much help. He gestured to the door signaling that he was going to go, when Liam sat up, leveling Stiles with a frank stare.

“I have no idea if this is important or not, but they did mention something about frequencies when they came for us at the school. Didn’t Valack mention that as well? I think I overheard Lydia talk about it once.”

Stiles perked up at that. “Yes, he did. He said the doctors weren’t entirely human and that they used to be scientists infatuated with the supernatural. Then he quoted Tesla – something about energy, frequency and vibration. I’ll look it up later. According to Valack they use electromagnetic forces to prolong their lives, give them power and make people forget they saw them. What did they tell you?”

Liam was silent for a moment, eyebrows knitted together in concentration.

“I think it was something along the lines of them being on a frequency we couldn’t even imagine. The frequency scrambler Parrish built didn’t work, like at all.”

“Interesting.”

Liam perked up. “So you know what it means?”

Stiles shrugged. “Nope, I have no clue.”

“Oh.”

“But it’s something, and I’ll Google-Fu it later. Good luck later, and text me. Every 30 minutes, remember?”

He was halfway out the door when Liam spoke again.

“Do you think I’m like them? Like the chimeras? They did something to me. Why would they do that if I’m not like them?”

Stiles didn’t turn around. He wanted to reassure Liam, but he also didn’t want to lie. And the truth was he honestly didn’t know. They’d clearly done something, but did that mean what Liam feared it might mean? He did not have an answer for that.

“Am I a chimera, Stiles?”

Liam’s voice was full of terror. “I’ve been having control issues. Perhaps that is why? Am I not in control of myself? What do they want with me?”

Stiles ached for the boy. Those were the same kinds of questions he struggled with everyday himself,
especially in the aftermath of the whole fly-thing. Was he really in control? Was anyone ever really in control? Probably not. But Stiles did understand the fear on an intimate level.

He turned slowly, trying to look as open and honest as possible. The only thing he did know was that secrets kept regarding things like this seldom worked out well.

“I think we need to be open to the possibility. Ignoring it won’t make it go away, trust me on that. Are they trying to make you into a chimera? Perhaps. I truly don’t know. Maybe you were simply a convenient ingredient? A source for supernatural DNA. They need to get the supernatural juice or genes from somewhere. I don’t think you can just cook that shit up in a lab. Deaton said they’re breaking the laws, but is it even possible to break the laws of thermodynamics? I’m not so sure, but then again, I’ve been wrong before.”

“Oh god, do you think my DNA helped change Hayden?” Liam looked physically sick. Stiles sighed. “I don’t think anything. I just think we need more information before we draw conclusions and jump to assumptions. Here.”

He rooted around in his backpack and handed Liam a crumpled stack of papers. “I’m not sure if this even really works as advertised. The only one who’s seen the doctors after reading this thing is Kira. But it can’t hurt to try. Perhaps it will jog your memory if nothing else.”

“This is a fucked up book club,” muttered Liam, staring down at the cover with disgust.

“Tell me about it,” concurred Stiles. “Also, I think we need to expand the reading circle a bit.”

“What do you mean?”

Stiles swung the backpack on one shoulder and grimaced. “I think it's time to interrogate the author again.”

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“What exactly do you mean I can’t see him? You granted us access just a few weeks back.”

Stiles glared, arms crossed at Dr. Fenris. He’d cornered him outside Eichen House at the staff parking lot. He’d waited a whooping three hours and change before he turned up. The guy at the gate had not been forthcoming when it became clear that Stiles didn’t have an appointment. With Deaton missing in action he had no idea how to get inside without voluntarily admitting himself. And he was so not doing that again, thank you very much.

Dr. Fenris looked like he wanted to flee the premises, but Stiles had done his homework and had him trapped between the wall and his car, safely out of sight from the security cameras. Not that he had anything to threaten the guy with except his dazzling wit, but for unknown reasons it seemed to do the trick.

“You’re joking, right?” The doctor actually did look astonished at the request.

“I don’t joke about mental patients, doctors. I need to speak with Dr. Valack again. Just a short visit. I can be in and out in ten minutes tops. You can time me. I work great under pressure.”
A bold-faced lie, but Fenris didn’t need to know that.

The doctor stared at Stiles like he had three heads. Or was playing bagpipes – badly. Or both. The point was he looked as if he was seriously thinking of having Stiles readmitted. Not really a promising sign.

“Okay, Mr. Stilinski. Let’s recap what happened the last time you visited this facility, shall we?” Dr. Fenris arched an eyebrow and Stiles mentally groaned. Recaps never boded well. “Firstly you brought a kitsune who disrupted the very fundamental and essential safeguard that allows us not just to keep certain individuals safely locked up, but also keep others, and in most cases, significantly more dangerous from creatures entering.”

“In our defense we were not made aware of that before going in. And besides, you didn’t care to ask what kinds of supernatural creatures were in our party anyway. That seems like a glaring error in your safety routines, and hardly something we can be held accountable for.”

Dr. Fenris looked someone was force-feeding him huge slices of lemon.

“I guess I can admit our procedures could need a bit of work. In our defense though we usually don’t allow anyone outside of staff down in that sub level. And there are reasons for that. Good reasons, all of which are directly tied to the fact that each and every one of the incarcerated beings are extremely dangerous. Deaton more or less twisted my arm last time, and without his insistence I wouldn’t even entertain the thought.”

He leaned casually against the wall, a small smirk cruising his lips. “So, in conclusion. No Deaton, no access. Are we done here?”

Crap! This was not acceptable. All their sources of information were drying out fast. Valack was the only viable lead they had.

“Oh, come on,” Stiles grabbed onto his coat stopping him on his way to unlocking the car. “Remember the first time we met? We came to you with a real concern and you flat out lied to us. Can’t you just sort of bend the rules a bit? Let me talk to him on the phone at least?”

Dr. Fenris looked torn. Eventually he heaved a deep sigh and raised his hands in what Stiles hoped was an “alright” kind of gesture.

“I could get in serious trouble for this,” he began in an urgent whisper, casting furtive glances over his shoulder. “We don’t really want this to get out for – well for obvious reasons. So I need to know that you won’t go blabbing about this to god knows who. Keep it to yourself and that freaky posse of yours. Promise me!”

Stiles immediately stood up straight, all but saluting. His head nodded so viciously he probably resembled one of those bobble head figures.

“Okay. I can’t believe I’m about to do this.” The doctor shook his head and muttered something about oaths and whatnot. Stiles didn’t care, only gestured for him to get on with it. Dr. Fenris allowed a final look over his shoulder before he continued. “Letting you into Eichen House wouldn’t have done much good anyway. Dr. Valack is no longer in our care.”

Stiles did a double-take. “You let the crazy man with the self-inflicted lobotomy walk out - a free man?”

Dr. Fenris honest to god rolled his eyes. “No, of course not. What I mean to say is that after the electromagnetic field was disrupted, that not only let the doctors in – it also weakened the structure
and the cells in general. Also I believe the doctor made a trade with you? Information for the scream of a banshee?"

Stiles nodded. What did that have to do with anything?

“Did you know that the scream of a banshee can shatter unbreakable glass?”

No. NO? No way. Stiles felt a cold wave of dread travel down his spine. This was not good. Not good at all. “Are you implying that Dr. Valack used Lydia’s scream to what – escape?” His voice had gone up several octaves and next Stiles knew he was pressed uncomfortably against the wall, Dr. Fenris’ hand clasped over his mouth.

“Not so loud you fool!” Stiles contemplated licking his palm to get him off him, but the notion was less than appealing. “Also,” continued Fenris in a shrill whisper. “I’m not implying anything. I’m confirming. Valack is gone, in the wind, on the lamb. Call it what you want. And not just that – he took several other inmates with him.”

Still muffled by the hand, Stiles had to rely on his eyes, eyebrows and erratic arms to convey his shock. Fenris seemed to share the sentiment and soon let him go. He looked dejected and tired.

“Who? Or should I say what? I mean who did he bring along?”

There were Dread Doctors and an unstable band of chimeras on the loose already. He really wasn’t looking to add to his worries.

“A swamp creature. I wouldn’t worry about that too much. It’s probably long gone by now. Beacon Hills doesn’t really offer the ideal environment. The Sluagh from the cell next to him is also missing. The same is Peter Hale.”

And there it was. The only threat the pack had successfully managed to contain and he was out on unsanctioned parole after just over 6 months.


“Call it what you want, Mr. Stilinski. Now you know, so I’d appreciate it if you could refrain from accosting me in parking lots in the future.”

Stiles took a few steps back and smiled halfheartedly.

“I’ll do my best.”

Dr. Fenris sped away without another word leaving Stiles cocooned in a cloud of dust.
Chapter 7

The next few days passed without anything really alarming happening. Liam had indeed met up with Hayden and did dutifully text Stiles every half hour as promised. The texts had gotten progressively more incoherent and short as time went on, ending up with just a lonely "k" plus a random emoji. Liam had called when he got home (very late Stiles might add), but hadn't been particularly talkative. Judging by the goofy look on his face the next day it was quite obvious the reunion had been a success. He'd refused to offer up any details, which was gentlemanly and a bit frustrating. But his spirits had lifted considerably and he was pretty much back to his old self.

Stiles hadn’t mentioned any of this to Scott. Probably not the smartest decision since secret-keeping and omissions of truths was what had landed them in this wretched situation in the first place, but things were still awkward and tense between the two. Telling Scott Liam was fraternizing with the enemy would probably be like throwing fuel on a fire. They should straighten out their issues first, then address the implications of Theo's resurrection scheme. Stiles wasn't stupid. He knew Hayden could be another way for Theo to rope Liam into his pack, which was why he felt it particularly prudent to not alienate or berate him. Telling him to stay away from Hayden was the obvious solution, sure. But also the best way to drive him further away. Without Liam and Scott clearing the air first, he was far from assured he could get Scott to agree to this reasoning.

The whole thing was a fucking mess and something Stiles felt very passionately about not getting in the middle of. Anyway, chances were as soon as shit went down (and it would at some point, it always did) they would mend fences and move on. A common enemy and threat was always a powerful motivator for rebuilding a team. To reunite the band. But not a good long term solution. They really needed to talk. But then again, so did he and Scott. It was a fucked up situation all around, but getting stubborn teenage boys to sit down and talk about their feelings - voluntarily - was about as easy as pulling an elephant through a needle. And without someone like Lydia there to force the issue, Stiles predicted the ice front could last a good while.

He did keep a close eye on the Chimera pack just in case, though. So far all of them seemed perfectly normal. Or as normal as dead teenagers walking around school could be. There was not so much as a flash of an eye or a wayward claw in sight, and the somewhat subtle enquirers he'd made had turned up nothing, except that people found him and his questions weird. The usual in other words. Still, Stiles kept expecting the other shoe to drop at any moment. It was just too damned calm for his liking.

As for his dad, he'd been encouraged to let his voice rest for a few more days. He was up and walking for short periods of time and had developed an unhealthy addiction to jelly – he had the whole floor convinced it helped soothe his throat and they brought him the stuff by the buckets. Stiles was powerless to stop it. The nurses were all enamored with him and literally fought to be the one to bring him the stuff. It was both disturbing and amusing.

At night Stiles fought his own demons. The house was too quiet. His homework too boring to hold his attention for long periods of time and Google was failing him. The murder board was overflowing with notes about frequencies, electromagnetic fields and the laws of thermodynamics that for some reason spoke to him. He didn’t know how it fit in, if at all, but at this point he wasn’t about to dismiss anything, and certainly not weird hunches.

Worst of all were the little voiced in the back of his mind, whispering and planting doubts, ideas and fears. During the day he managed to drown them out, but the quiet hours in the early AM were somehow scaring Stiles more than any Dread Doctor, chimera or kanima ever did.
And then there was Donovan. He kept seeing him everywhere he went. Just a flash here and there, gone in the blink of an eye or lost in a crowd. *I know he’s not real,* he whispered into the darkness of his room, wanting to sound assuring but the slight quiver to his voice gave him away. He knew people often saw the dead after they were gone. It was a sign of the brain still working through it, not totally accepting the fact.

*I’m just guilty,* he thought firmly, curled into a ball, face against the wall. *I didn’t want him to die, I feel responsible and I haven’t owned up to it. I haven’t come clean, admitted it. It will get better once I’ve talked with my dad.*

But first the sheriff had to get better. He couldn’t just spring something like that on him while he was still recuperating from a string of injuries that nearly killed him. *Dad will be so disappointed. He’d understand, but he’ll be hurt that I concealed it. I can’t be selfish now. Dad will have to get his strength back first. I’ll manage until then.*

The thing with Donovan had shaken Stiles so thoroughly to the core it had shook loose another layer of his subconscious that were slowly inching its way to the surface. Strings of little incidents, of odd occurrences that for the longest time Stiles had either labeled coincidences, convinced himself were not related to him or dismissed them as entirely unimportant.

But being the son of a cop also meant that he was rather proficient at spotting patterns. And at this point they were way past incidents. They had flown straight by coincidences at warp speed and was now bathing in enough circumstantial evidence to at least qualify for a warrant.

Every time this trickled to the forefront, Stiles had pushed it down and out of his mind. He was good at that, focusing his energy on other people and other problems. This was getting harder and harder, and he was fast approaching the day where he had to consciously and purposefully test his hypothesis.

But he was scared. Scared to be right. Scared of what it might mean. Scared that it meant Theo was right. That there was something more inside him. Something dark. Something that could take over completely. Something that had already taken over for a brief time, and would love to do it again, perhaps even without the help of evil demon flies.

Eventually sleep overtook him, but he woke the next morning curled into a tight ball, muscles cramping and feeling more exhausted than before he went to bed. He was reaching a breaking point, he could feel it.

*Who will be there to catch me when I fall?*

He didn’t know the answer to that question. Falling wasn’t the worst part. Everyone fell eventually, but without a safety net to rely on, would he even be able to get up at all?

“When the fall is all there is left, it matters.”

*Stiles stared at his own reflection contemplating the idea of a dual self. A mirror image – the same - but opposite. Everyone had that – lighter and darker aspects. But was there something more to his darkness?*

In frustration he banged his fist into the mirror, watching it shatter, break and twist his image into multiple distorted versions. He turned off the light, and left the bathroom. He could feel the hand bleeding and knew a trail of blood followed him down the stairs and out the door. It was an apt metaphor.
The less said about the school day the better. Stiles was in a foul mood, which meant that he couldn’t resist commenting rather snidely on some of the inane things both fellow students and teachers managed to say. Unsurprisingly, by third period he was saddled down with two days with detention.

He avoided having lunch with Scott knowing it would only lead to another argument, and Liam looked too love struck and Mason too enthusiastic, and in his current condition that just wouldn’t do. He’d only end up fucking up their day as well, and he might be a dick at times, but there were limits.

He ended up camping out in the furthest corner of the library digging deeper into frequencies of all kinds. After fifth period he cornered Mrs. Martin for news about Lydia, only to learn she’d been denied visiting privileges while she was being sued by her ex-husband for child neglect. Needless to say his mood did not improve after that.

Detention was spent equally between his history homework and sulking. When he was done the only students left at school were the ones who had band practice. He glances in as he walked past, thinking momentarily of Paige. He remembered Peter saying she’d played the cello, but had she been in band? Or just rehearsing on her own? And why did he care at all? He stopped and peered through the little window in the door for a moment, but he couldn’t spot anyone he knew. It was odd, wasn’t it? Not knowing a single person there? It seemed like he should know someone there, right? It irked him, like an itch he couldn’t scratch.

Not wanting to go back to the empty house and the long line of unwanted suspicions he knew would be waiting for him, Stiles decided to pay Parrish a visit. He hadn’t talked to him since the hospital, and with his dad laid up in a sickbed he felt hopelessly out of the loop, everything.

Stiles had completely given up on the bus. After prodding and poking and using up a whole roll of duct tape to no avail, he’d also given up on the Jeep – for now. He didn’t have the tools or the knowledge to fix whatever was broken, and covering everything under the hood with tape didn’t seem to be doing the trick.

In the far back of the garage, behind a rusty wheelbarrow and three huge bags of fertilizer, he finally located his old bike. After hosing it down and treating the chain to an entire bottle of grease, it was good to go. It was significantly faster than the bus at any rate, but ten times as exhausting. Stiles had yet to reach a firm conclusion on which of the two was the lesser evil, although he was leaning towards the bike.

At the station things were in a state of organized disarray. For a visitor it probably appeared calm and in control, but for someone who’d hung out at the sheriff’s station as much as he had, Stiles immediately detected the undertone of stress in the air.

“The worst part has been trying to get a handle on the chain of command with the sheriff temporarily gone,” explained Parrish in a low voice, glancing furtively around the bullpen.

“I thought Walters was second in command,” said Stiles. Parrish nodded. “Yeah, he would’ve been, but his wife went into labor early and it ended in an emergency C-section and a string of complications, so she’s hospitalized for a few weeks at least, which means he’s stuck taking care of twin boys and a dog. I guess we never thought a situation would arise when both he and your dad were out of the equation at the same time. Basically we've had a bit of a Hunger Games situation on
our hands with most of the deputies trying to woe the liaison sent down from the County to straighten things out.”

“You’re not in the mix?”

That surprised Stiles. Parrish was more than capable and he knew his dad had nothing but good things to say about him, despite his unknown supernatural origin.

The deputy snorted and stamped a report with perhaps a tad too much force. The desk groaned and creaked. Not only did Parrish not know what he was, he clearly didn't know his own strength either.

“I thought it best not to draw too much attention to myself. With so many supernatural elements lurking in the shadows and me being one of said elements, I didn’t want to risk it.”

Stiles nodded, looking pointedly at the now cracked desk. “Probably not a bad idea. I just hope you’re not stuck with Schmidt. He’s useless.”

Parrish didn’t comment, and instead got up and gestured for Stiles to follow. They descended the stairs and walked past the interrogation rooms and towards the holding cells. Parrish waved Stiles into the cell at the very back and followed him inside. He sat down on the uncomfortable bench, and Stiles followed suit.

Unsurprisingly Parrish wanted news on Lydia.

“I haven’t managed to see her,” admitted Stiles. “I tried with Dr. Fenris but he’s not willing to let me in. Also, I learned that Dr. Valack has escaped along with a few other undesirables. Peter Hale among them.”

“Lovely,” muttered Parrish, his head leaned back against the wall, eyes closed. “Just what we need, another supernatural maniac on the loose.”

“I also talked to Lydia’s mom today. Her dad has brought out the big guns and are suing for negligence and full custody. I’m not really on his list of accepted visitors after my little stunt at the hospital, and I don’t think he’ll have a change of mind. You might have more luck, being an officer of the law and all.”

Parrish looked doubtful, but before he had a chance to reply, his radio suddenly sparked to life. Cursing under his breath he snatched the radio off his shoulder.

“Yeah, this is Deputy Parrish.”

“This is Deputy Clark. Could you come assist me, please? I have a 415N from a Mrs. Newman who claims she’s reported this to you on other occasions and want you to follow up.”

Parrish rolled his eyes. “10-4. I’ll be right there.”

He rose heavily pinning the radio back in place. “I’ll hopefully be right back if you care to wait. I’d really appreciate and update on things. I have a double shift, but I have lunch coming up soon. Perhaps you could bring me up to speed, and then we can go grab a quick bite?”

Stiles nodded. Anything to postpone going home. Parrish looked relieved.

“Damned woman, she’s in here every week with the same complaint. 415N is –“

“Disturbance from a neighbor, I know.”
Parrish smiled crookedly. “Of course you do. The sheriff said you were a nosy little shit.”

“You say nosy, I say vigilante. And I know who you’re referring to. She’s been complaining about her neighbors since the beginning of dawn. She lives next to a kindergarten, what else can she expect? I think dad passed her on to you first chance he got.”

“Lucky him,” he muttered, but smiled as he went. “She bakes the best cookies though. Almost worth the hassle of all the paperwork and her long-winded diatribes.”

“Bring me back one!” shouted Stiles after him. He heard Parrish cackle softly while he trotted back down the hallway and ascended the stairs.

Stiles fished out his phone and quickly checked for new messages but there was no cell service. Now that he thought about it his dad had mentioned that they’d installed cell signal blockers in the basement to eliminate the chance of incarcerated people making illegal calls. Confiscating their phones didn’t always help. Apparently burner phones could be hidden in the most creative ways. Stiles had opted out on the details.

He spent a minute staring at the folder named “chemistry”. With great restraint Stiles resisted clicking it and instead settled for a few rounds of some inane game.

He was engrossed in something involving bubbles and diamonds when a loud clang echoed in the cell. He startled and lost a few of the bubbles, but wasn’t too concerned. It was probably someone just locking one of the other cells. No big deal.

“Good afternoon, Stiles.”

Correction. He was wrong. It was a big deal. A big deal wearing a smarmy smirk and a plunging v-neck.

“Peter,” he hissed in disbelief. How the fuck had he gotten inside the sheriff’s station without being detected? And furthermore, what did he want?

“It’s nice to see you again,” said Peter courteously, head tilted slightly to the side. He had his arms tucked behind his back, and Stiles got a slight Hannibal vibe. A chill ran down his spine. It didn’t help that the clang he’d heard clearly was from the cell he was sitting in. He liked the idea of Peter’s face behind bars. However, he didn’t much enjoy this turn of events.

“I can’t really say I return the sentiment,” replied Stiles as calmly as possible. “I had banked on never seeing your smug face again. This is a bit of a letdown to be honest.”

Peter tutted. “That isn’t a very nice thing to say. Particularly to family.” Stiles stared at him incredulously.

“We’re not related. If you’re alluding to my relationship with your daughter, that is over as well. Or perhaps Dr. Valack messed with your head or something? I hear he’s fond of drilling into them, who knows what he might have knocked loose in there. I also heard rumors of your jailbreak with the good doctor. Care to explain what you’re up to?”

Peter laughed softly. “You’re missing the point entirely, but that is hardly important at the moment. And as for Dr. Valack we’ve had a parting of ways so to speak. I have no idea where he jetted off to, and frankly I don’t much care either. I only care about one thing, Stiles.”

Peter took a deep breath but looked more amused than annoyed. “I do like you, Stiles. I’ve told you that before haven’t I?”

Stiles shrugged. Whether or not lunatic werewolves liked him wasn’t high on his list of priorities at the moment. It wouldn’t help him with college applications or his CV, so yeah. Worthless. Peter seemed intent on buttering Stiles up for whatever reason, though. It was all highly suspect.

“You’re perceptive and not as naïve as most people your age. Also, you have certain – abilities that I think will come in handy.”

Peter actually seemed sincere, which was – well, a foreign look for him. Stiles wasn’t sure he could trust it. Who was he kidding? Of course he couldn’t.

“How did you get in here? Parrish should be back soon anyway, you better scram if you want to avoid being locked up again.”

Peter picked at some invisible lint on his jacket looking positively bored. That did not bode well.

“What did you do?” snarled Stiles, striding towards the bars. Peter took a step back just out of reach of Stiles’ lashing fingers. Not that he could do any lasting damage to Peter, but sometimes it wasn’t the effect but the intent that made all the difference.

“Temper, temper,” chided Peter tauntingly. “I haven’t hurt anyone if that’s what you’re worried about. I merely called in a – what’s the code again? A 996?”

“You fucking bastard!” Stiles was seething. “You called in a bomb threat? That is – borderline evil.”

Peter shrugged unapologetically. “I can see how you would feel that way given the events of just a few months ago. Didn’t you have a hand in that? They’ve done a good job of rebuilding the place.”

Stiles made desperate attempts at grabbing Peter, but he was just out of reach. He screamed in frustration.

“Don’t worry, Stiles. There is no bomb. But given this departments history with bomb threats they’re inclined to take the tip seriously, which works in my favor. There is just a desk clerk left and he’s not the most perceptive of the lot. I’m surprised you didn’t hear them clear out?”

Stiles growled in frustration, taking several steps back and collapsing on the bench, his breath heaving.

“What do you want?”


“You always want something, Peter. For once I’d wish you’d just spit it out instead of hiding it behind intricate plots and misdirection.”

The smirk disappeared from the werewolf’s face, and he deflated slightly. He met Stiles’ eyes and sighed deeply.

“A valid point. Subterfuge hasn’t really worked all that well for me in the past. And even though I doubt you’ll believe me, I don’t actually have sinister intentions this time. Nor did I in Mexico, but
I’m not sure this is the time or place for that conversation.”

What the - ? Was he for real? It was a pity everything in the cell was pinned down, otherwise he’d throw something at him by now.

“I can see from your reaction that I’m right. We’ll revisit that some other time. In the meantime I need your help.”

Stiles didn’t know whether to laugh or curse. Helping Peter Hale had never turned out favorably for anyone – ever.

“You’ve got some nerve,” he replied coldly. “Last time I saw you, you tried to kill Scott.”

Peter shook his head and waved a finger in his direction. “Technically, that is not true. I tried to get Scott to kill me – there’s a vast difference.”

“Not in my eyes. Killing you would kill Scott, and I think you know that. And you went behind everyone’s back working with Kate Argent. Kate! Who burned your family and almost killed you as well. I think my point stands. Why would I want to help you?”

Peter bowed his head, took a few deep breaths and when he lifted his head and met Stiles’ he was taken aback. He looked raw, scared – lost.

“When I say I need you to help me, what I really mean is I need you to help Derek. I think he’s in trouble.”

For a moment Stiles’ heart stopped. A cold chill ran down his spine, leaving him momentarily paralyzed. Then his body sprang into panic.

“I thought that might get your attention.” Peter didn’t even look smug. Just relieved. Stiles clenched and unclenched his fists.

“How do you know?” he asked almost inaudibly, not really trusting his own voice. Peter heard him anyway.

“Do you remember the talk we had a while back? After Boyd died and Derek went missing for a few days?”

Stiles nodded. Peter smiled softly. “Good. We tried to tell you about what it feels like to lose a member of your pack. Do you remember what Cora said?”

Stiles quickly skimmed through his mental archive. “She said it was like losing a limb.”

“That’s right,” Peter acknowledged. “A strong pack develops a bond. I know it sounds clichéd but it’s true. When one is hurt or worse yet, killed, we can sense it. It’s even worse when it’s family.”

The unspoken point hung in the air. Stiles felt sick. Nauseated. He thought about the phone call and the error message. Was it possible Derek hadn’t changed his number, but instead was in trouble? He doubled over, stomach turning. He felt like throwing up, but nothing came up.

“I take it you believe me.”

Peter had taken a step closer and crouched down, so they were eye to eye. “You may think what you want about me, Stiles. But know this – pack, family – means everything to me. I don’t want Derek harmed. Something is wrong, I can feel it. But I have no clue where he is or what he’s doing. I
would skip town to go look for him myself, but I have other orders of business that is of the utmost
importance as well.”

Stiles coughed violently, stomach still cramping. “What could be more important than this?”

“You’d be surprised,” said Peter tonelessly. “I’d love to stay and chat about that as well, but I have
places to be. I suspect we’ll get to address that in the near future. Will you help find Derek?”

Gathering his strength Stiles scrambled to his feet. Peter looked earnest and forlorn. He looked –
human. Stiles wasn’t prepared for this. This didn’t fit with his established worldview. In all
likelihood Peter was hiding stuff and misdirecting him, but oddly enough he knew he was telling the
truth about Derek.

“I have no clue how,” he admitted. “But I will do my best.”

Peter smiled sadly. “Then I will bid you adieu for now and leave you to it. Thank you.”

He turned with a flourish and stalked down the hallway at a brisk pace.

“Pompous jerk,” Stiles muttered in annoyance and yanked at the cell door. It was still locked.
Fucking Peter!

“Hey, Hale! How am I supposed to help Derek if I’m locked in a cell?” he yelled after him. “Unlock
the door, Peter!”

Peter stopped, turned and studied Stiles in a way that made him feel oddly naked.

“No,” he said plainly.

“No? Why not?” Stiles banged on the bars in frustration. “A bomb threat will have the deputies
occupied for hours and there is no way the desk officer will hear me down here even if I had the lung
capacity of a banshee.”

A smirk curled Peter’s lips, and for a moment he looked borderline deranged.

“I know,” he said smugly. “But you don’t need a key to get out, do you?”

Stiles’ heart skipped a beat. Peter grinned.

“That’s right, Stiles. I know what you can do. In fact I’ve always known that you had the potential. I
just never knew you’d access it without a push. I bit Lydia and that sparked her ability you see. I
offered you the bite once, but you turned it down. I accepted that. I didn’t need it at the time. But
now I do. Only you’ve accessed it on your own, haven’t you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” protested Stiles weakly. Peter tutted.

“Liar, liar pants on fire. You can get out if you want to. And I think you do. See you later, Stiles.”
And with that he was gone.

***
Stiles may or may not be hyperventilating.

Okay, so he was definitely hyperventilating. His breath came out in short raspy gasps. It wasn’t so much the fact that he was locked in. He wasn’t scared of confined spaces or anything like that and Parrish would be back eventually. Technically he could wait. He’d be hungry and bored, but none worse for wear.

Instead it was the idea of Derek in trouble, the notion that he’d probably been in trouble for some time already, that had him spinning steadfast into a panic attack.

“Get a grip,” he wheezed out. “Losing your shit won’t help.”

Incredibly it worked. A few minutes later and his breath was under control again. Fucking Peter. Stiles paced the cell back and forth going over what Peter had suggested with mounting dread. Suspecting something was one thing. Suspicions could be ignored. Having someone else point it out though – that made it real.

“Shit, shit, shit.”

He banged his hand on the wall, opening up the wound from earlier when he’d broken the mirror. He stared at the blood smeared on the concrete without really seeing it.

Was it really that bad, though? Would the world end if it was true? Would everything change?

Would he?

Because that was really the crux of the matter. Not the ability in itself. Stiles was well-versed with supernatural shit by now. Most of his friends had glowing eyes, fangs or mystical abilities. If this was true for him as well, then he would actually have more in common with them than ever before. He wouldn’t be an outsider – the weak link. The human. The liability.

But that all hinged on one thing.

Control.

Control over the ability. And most importantly – control over what purpose he would use it for. He curled down on the bench, nausea rolling over him again. Would it be the same? Would it be like when he was possessed?

Was I ever really possessed?

Stiles actually did throw up this time. Heaved repeatedly until there was nothing left to get up. The room stank, but Stiles paid it no mind.

He knew that he’d been infected with a fly. He’d seen the thing spring out of his creepy replica and watched Isaac trap it. Derek had even told him about what had happened when a fly had been inside him, Isaac and the twins. And yet Stiles couldn’t fully believe it.

I’m not strong enough. I’m not good enough.

He whimpered softly, cursing his estrangement from Scott and his dad who was hurt and out of reach. The worst part was that he felt so alone. So vulnerable. So lost.

But so is Derek, a small voice at the back of his mind reminded him. Derek was also lost. Alone. And he needed his help. And he couldn’t help him locked in here and feeling sorry for himself.
“We make our own destiny,” he muttered. “God, I sound like a Marvel character.”

Nevertheless, it was the final push he needed. Make it or break it, he would try. He would face it. He would probably fail anyway. Right?

Wrong.

Stiles took a deep breath, closed his eyes and did as Deaton has once taught him. Probably the only real and useful thing the vet had ever told him if he were honest.

Stiles believed.

A soft click echoed through the room and then the bars slid open.

“Fuck me!”

He walked slowly towards the open door, looking around for any other possible explanation. He thought back to the time the door had mysteriously locked and unlocked at the hospital with Malia. And the time he’d burst into the library without a keycard, something that wasn’t supposed to be possible.

“Huh,” he said, cocking his head thoughtfully to the side. “I wonder…”

He closed his eyes again, scrunching up his nose feeling oddly like Hiro Nakamura from Heroes for a moment. A swish and a soft click again, and when he opened his eyes he was once again locked in the cell.

“You’re a wizard, Stiles,” he muttered sarcastically when he unlocked the door a second time. He wasted no time getting the hell out of there. If he thought he spotted Donovan sitting in a desk chair in the bullpen, he certainly would never admit it.
Stiles didn’t remember anything from the bike ride home, which was troublesome yet understandable. His mind was buzzing, his entire body tingling and - well, he didn’t quite know what else. Just that what he’d been pushing down for so long, subconsciously or not, was now bubbling to the surface, boiling over, and he was scared senseless it might be uncontrollable and dangerous. At any rate, the state of justifiable deniability that he’d swathed himself in for months was now officially obliterated, thank you Peter Hale. And worse yet, Derek was in trouble and he didn’t have the first clue where to even start on that one.

Probably by calling Braeden.

His half-formed plan was tossed over the fence as soon as he arrived home. Leaning casually against the Jeep, smirk in place, was one Theo Raeken.

“Fuck my life,” muttered Stiles dejectedly. Why did trouble always travel in numbers?

“What? No warm welcome?” asked Theo mock-offended when Stiles skidded past him and dumped the bike by the garage.

“Sorry, fresh out of cupcakes and lollies,” sniped Stiles, every word coated in layers of sarcasm.

“Now get off my property.”

Theo smiled crookedly. Stiles’ fists itched to punch him again. His fist was destined to pummel him. Repeatedly. It was the only thing that had felt right since Theo had arrived in town, all smirk and zero credibility. Stiles still marveled how anyone could’ve put their trust in him. He was practically oozing villain.

“I won’t stay long – by the way what happened to your Jeep? I thought you had it fixed after that whole thing at Deaton’s?”

Stiles actually growled. Honest to god, hanging around werewolves for prolonged periods of time seemed to make him pick up some of their more annoying habits.

“Don’t you worry about my car, dimwit. Didn’t I make it perfectly clear that I had no intention of being affiliated with your pack? I even unfriended you on Facebook. Or I would have if we’d been friends in the first place. Take a hint, buddy.”

Theo nodded, running a finger over Roscoe’s hood. Stiles wanted to break the finger with his bat. He’d totally do it too if the action wouldn’t also dent his Jeep.

“You were quite clear on that point,” Theo conceded. “However it has come to my attention that young Liam doesn’t seem to mind hanging out with one of my betas. In fact I believe they’re very intimate. Something like that might be taken as a sign of young Dunbar changing his allegiance, or affiliation if you will. So, I just wanted to issue a new invitation. Extend an olive branch if you will.”

“I will not accept anything of what you’re offering, even if it was pure gold and adorned by diamonds. By the way, thank you for leaving.”

Stiles fished out his keys intending to get the door between Theo and himself as soon as possible.

Wait… The fucker!
“What the fuck did you do to the lock?” He spun around pointing the key at Theo who blinked innocently.

“I had a feeling you might not be inclined to hear me out, so I wanted to buy myself some time. There is no way you’ll outrun me on that bike – I guess you heard, but I can fully shift and I’m fast. So I thought I’d stay and chat for a bit while we wait for a locksmith. I think you need one.”

Stiles cursed and didn’t bother being quiet about it. He kicked the bike, threw the key at Theo who sidestepped it easily.

“Do you want some Skittles?” he asked conversationally. Stiles answered by knocking the bag out of his hands making them scatter in every direction. Theo tutted.

“Rude. You could’ve just said no thanks, you know.”

“Could I?” Stiles paced angrily next to the Jeep, arms flailing. “It seems to me like you don’t take no for an answer, this visit being a case in point.”

“I could just make you join me, you know,” responded Theo, something dangerous creeping into his voice. “Obviously I don’t want that. But I want you on my team more, and if forcing you is the only way to get that, don’t think for a second I won’t do it.”

Stiles was seething. Logically he should be scared right now. Theo was a chimera and even if he wasn’t a real supernatural, his claws and teeth were real enough. His dad could testify to that. Still, the share audacity of him and his “request” had him boiling from the inside and out. And he was right. He couldn’t outrun him.

But perhaps I can outsmart him?

He’d just unlocked a prison cell with the power of his mind. Surely he could do the same with his own front door?

He closed his eyes and did as before, concentrating as hard as he could on unlocking the door.

Nothing happened.

“Are you getting a migraine or something?” Theo sounded almost concerned. Stiles slumped against the car, disappointment rolling off him in waves. He might have faced the fact that he was slightly magical for lack of better word, but he still needed to go to Hogwarts before he could master this thing. Or maybe it was impossible to unlock a broken lock? His Alohomora wasn’t working, that much was certain.

“Yeah, you make me sick,” he deadpanned and Theo laughed. But not in an amused sort of way. Stiles was clearly coming up on the allotted quota of smart remarks tolerated by his newfound nemesis. Lovely. This day just kept on giving.

If only I had managed to fix the Jeep, he thought desperately. Not that it mattered much. If so Theo would probably have broken the ignition or something anyway. Or ripped out the carburetor like Erica did way back when. But a getaway car would be nice. Now he basically had the choice between surrender or, well perhaps not death, but certainly a good pounding. He wasn’t sure his dad’s medical insurance could take the whole family laid up in hospital.

He forced his will to try and unlock the door again, but with the same disappointing result. He was evidently still mostly Muggle. Just an hour ago that notion would have been welcome, now not so much.
Nevertheless, his Harry Potter comparisons were coming to an end and this clearly wasn’t a magical flying Anglia even if the color was right. Although he sure did wish it was.

Stiles jumped in god honest surprise as the Jeep roared to life, headlights blinking erratically for a split second. Theo cursed loudly.

“What the fuck? I thought it was broken?”

Stiles didn’t waste a second, just threw himself into the driver’s seat and wrenched it into gear. “Go go go!” he screamed hysterically, halfway between manic laughter and mind-numbing shock. The jeep sped down the driveway leaving a gaping Theo behind. Stiles whooped loudly and patted the old car lovingly on the steering wheel.

“Do you fly as well?” he yelled half in jest, fastening his seatbelt just in case.

It didn’t.

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“Stiles. Stiles, son will you quit pacing?”

Sheriff Stilinski was propped up with at least nine pillows, each one more colorful than the other. The nurses’ bid for his attention had evidently found new arenas to compete in. Stiles had spotted no less than three quilts and an afghan that had not been there yesterday. The hospital room was beginning to bear the resemblance of a temple. Or a shrine.

“Stiles!”

His dad’s voice was still raspy making him sound like a seasoned blues singer. Stiles had a vague notion it only made him more desirable in the nurses’ eyes.

“Sorry, dad. What did you say?”

He was still hyped up on adrenaline after his magical getaway. Going back to the house was not an option right now, so he’d decided hanging around here would at least keep him out of Theo’s crosshairs for tonight. He’d get Scott up to speed on things tomorrow. Maybe.

The sheriff rolled his eyes while he sipped daintily from cup of – Stiles didn’t know what it was but he suspected it was sugary and unhealthy.

“Would you sit down before I call for a strait jacket? You’re giving me whiplash and I have enough injuries as it is.”

“Sorry,” muttered Stiles and plopped down in the chair, knee bobbing and fingers tapping out an intricate melody on the armrest.

“Oh for God’s sake, Stiles. Did you forget to take your medication today? You’re all over the place.”

His dad did look mildly concerned now, and no no no, Stiles did not need a third degree. Not now. Not yet.

“I might have (he had),” he admitted sheepishly. “Sorry, I’ll set an alarm to make sure I do it tomorrow.” He whipped out his phone and did just that. He also quickly checked for messages. But
one from Malia informing him they were in San Diego. Stiles fired back a text telling her he would be calling to talk to Braeden in a bit. When he looked up his dad was looking at him through narrow eyes.

“Something’s up.”

It wasn’t even phrased as a question. Stiles was doomed. He squirmed in his seat, wondering if he should make a break for it. His dad’s nurses would probably lasso him in before he’d reach the elevator though. Damned his dad’s charms!

“Come on, Stiles. Spill it. You promised to keep me informed, remember. I have now literally bleed for the supernatural crap that goes on in this town, and I think you know I’m not wild about all the secrecy. But I’m even less wild about people being hurt and in danger. So if there’s something – anything – I need to know about, you’d best inform me.”

Stiles nodded. The days of keeping his dad out of his business was gone. He’d known Theo was bad news, had told his dad so, but hadn’t divulged everything. Not the stuff about Donovan. And if he’d done that, perhaps things would’ve turned out differently. There was always a lot of what-ifs playing around in his head, and it was exhausting. He’d tried the secret-keeping for too long with terrible results. Surely full disclosure couldn’t be much worse, right?

“Is this about what happened to Donovan?”

Stiles froze. When he finally met his dad’s eyes he couldn’t hold back a whimper. He knew.

“How did you? When did you..? Oh my god, dad…”

The dam broke and Stiles crumpled into heaving sobs. Once it started he couldn’t stop.

“Son. Son, oh Stiles.” The sheriff sounded wrecked, but Stiles didn’t dare look at him. He was too scared of what he might find written on his face.

“Damn these tubes.” There was a sound of sheets ruffling, muffled cursing and then a warm hand was on his back.

“Stiles.” He felt his dad’s hot breath near his ear, his fingers squeezing reassuringly. “Stiles, it’s okay. It’s okay, I’m not mad. It’s okay. Please come with me to the bed though, my feet are tingly and I’m about to rip out several of these wires that will surely have half the medical staff in here, and I don’t think we want that right now.”

Stiles shook his head, wiped tears and snot, and followed his dad dutifully back to the hospital bed. The sheriff climbed back in, not without difficulty and left room for Stiles next to him. Not since he was 12 and sprained his ankle had Stiles actually laid next to his dad like this. He’d missed it.

The tears continued. His dad tucked his head into the nook of his arm, and stroked Stiles’ hair softly.

“I’ve had a lot of time for contemplations these past few days,” he whispered softly. “Not being able to talk – well, let’s just pray you never get to experience that. You might implode. But I had all the time in the world to reflect back on well, everything. You growing more quiet, the 911 call from the library right after your and Theo’s access cards were swiped, the mercury on the floor. I pieced it together. That Donovan had died there. And I confronted Theo.”

Stiles stiffened. Fuck! Not his dad too!

The sheriff must have sensed his panic, because he was quick to reassure him. “Don’t worry, Stiles.
Theo told me it was an accident. He told me it was him. That he was the one to set off the scaffolding. But it was you wasn’t it?”

Stiles nodded. His dad sighed deeply.

“I’m so sorry, son. That never would’ve happened if it wasn’t for me.”

Stiles was half delirious with relief, shame, fear, guilt and every other emotion that had been bottled up for far too long. But what his dad was saying didn’t make a lick of sense.

“What are you talking about,” he rasped out, voice wobbly. “None of this was your fault. I messed up, I killed him dad, and I hid it.”

“You didn’t mess up, Stiles. You defended yourself. You acted in self-defense, and if you hadn’t I would’ve lost the most important thing in my life. I’m proud of you. I’m relieved. And I’m so sorry you had to live through that. Donovan was never really after you – I was his target. I could’ve handled him better, I know that. What happened to his dad – well it was difficult for me. I didn’t deal with it very well, and poor Donovan was left without a support system, without someone to help him through it. I know what happens when thoughts fester. I’ve seen it in too many of the people who has come through the station. I didn’t recognize the signs in him and you suffered the consequences.”

“But I pulled the pin, dad. It was my hands, my fingers, and my decision. I did that and it killed someone. Just like before. I’m not better dad. I’m just the same as before. The same as him.” He almost choked on his own words, but he had to let it out.

“Was I even possessed? Or was it me all along?”

The sheriff let out a wounded gasp, like a man dying. Then his arms snaked around him, gripped him tight.

“You fool boy,” he whispered faintly, and even though he couldn’t see, Stiles knew his dad was crying too. “Is that what you’ve been thinking? Of course it is, I should’ve known. A lot of people only see the sarcasm and the flailing, but I see all of you, Stiles. I might not always understand you, this being a perfect example, but I know you. You can be a little shit, we all can, but I’ve only ever met one person with as big a heart as you, and that was your mother. You’re so much alike it almost kills me at times. She would always take on the trouble of the world as well, always thinking she had to fix it. Never thinking about herself.”

“I miss her,” mumbled Stiles through his tears. His dad squeezed tighter.

“I know,” came the answer. “But I’ll spend every day of the rest of my life trying to convince you...”
otherwise. Now, why don’t you tell me more about this Theo character and what he’s been up to lately? I must admit I don’t like him much.”

Stiles couldn’t have loved his dad more if he tried.

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Stiles spent the next hour updating his dad on everything about Theo, the crazy pack of resurrected chimeras, what Theo had done to Lydia, how her dad had locked her in Eichen House, Deaton being missing, Malia taking off with Braeden and his fight with Scott.

His dad growled, cheered, cursed and laughed at all the right places. Despite the somber subject matter it was the best time Stiles had had with his dad for a long time. They felt like them again. Team Stilinski. The walls of secrets and lies were coming down brick by brick.

Stiles was slowly working himself up to the worst of it – admitting that the crazy stuff possessed Stiles had done, wasn’t just because of the demon inside him. That parts of it, possibly all of it was stuff Stiles could, if he wanted to, do now as well.

He was just about to launch into the whole episode with Peter and the prison cell when his phone chimed to life with a shrill ring. Stiles almost fell off the bed in surprise, and the machine monitoring his dad’s heart rate spiked as well, so he wasn’t the only one alarmed.

“God, we’re pathetic,” joked the sheriff as Stiles fished the phone out of his pocket. “Don’t ever let it slip that the sheriff of this town nearly has heart attacks when the phone rings. I’m elected to this job, those kinds of rumors would not promote confidence in the public eye.”

Stiles wobbled off the bed, staring dumbfounded at the phone. Kira’s smiling face was plastered all of the screen.

“What the fuck?” he muttered disbelievingly. Why would Kira be calling him? Unless it was Scott? Please no. He couldn’t take any more bad news.

“Stiles?” asked the sheriff, but Stiles didn’t hear him. He accepted the call with shaky hands.

“Kira?” he asked tentatively.

“Stiles? Stiles is that you?” Kira sounded – well, the word panicked came to mind.

“Yeah, yeah it’s me. Where are you? I thought you left town... Has something happened?”

“Stiles, you need to come. You need to get here right away! Please.”

“Is it Scott?” Dear god, don’t let it be Scott, he couldn’t bare something happening to him with them still not really back on a good footing. Kira didn’t answer right away.

“Kira! Oh, God you’re scaring me now. Is it Scott? Where are you?”

He vaguely registered his dad sitting up in bed, looking distressed.

“I’m at home,” she finally answered in a rush and Stiles could hear a commotion of sorts in the background.
“Please get here as soon as possible, Stiles. I don’t know who else to call. You’re the only one I think might be able to help.”

“Is it Scott?” Stiles yelled again, already battling his feet into the sneakers he’d kicked off a while back. He tripped and banged his knee into the chair, cursing.


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Stiles hit the brakes so hard outside Kira’s house the seatbelt tugged uncomfortable across his chest, but it didn’t hurt. His heart was beating so hard, everything else was dulled down and faded into the background. He reached out to kill the motor and remove the keys, but came back empty handed. For a moment he just stared unblinkingly at the ignition. He shook his head, closed his eyes and opened them again, but still there was no key to remove. When he yanked open the door, the engine died instantly, as if on cue.

Kira’s red Toyota was parked in the driveway, dirty and covered in mud. He ran past it, didn’t even bother with the doorbell or door handles for that matter. A wave of his hand and the front door burst open with a bang, picture frames rattling on the walls. Stiles burst through and the door closed behind him, thankfully with a soft thud this time. He was met with a trio of incredulous Yukimuras.

“Stiles,” gasped Kira. “What on earth - ?” She gestured towards the door, eyes surprisingly wide. It took a few moments for Stiles to notice they all looked tired and disheveled. Mr. Yukimura was even wearing a sling and had several scratches on his arms.

“What happened to you?” asked Stiles completely ignoring their bewilderment over his entrance. “And more importantly, what do you know about Derek?”

Mrs. Yukimura took a tentative step forwards, ushering Kira and Mr. Yukimura to stand behind her. As if they needed protection. What on earth was going on?

“Stiles,” she said calmly, a shaky smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Perhaps we should sit down? I could make you a nice cup of tea, if you want? You like tea if I recall correctly, and I think we could all use something to calm our nerves.”

She gestured to the living room. Mr. Yukimura was already retreating towards the kitchen. Stiles fumed.

“I don’t want any tea!” he barked, arms flailing. “Kira calls me all distraught and begs me to come, saying it concerns Derek and you want me to sip tea? I think not. Just tell me!”

“I will,” reassured Mrs. Yukimura, voice firm. “But not until you’ve calmed down. Your anxiety and stress will not help the situation, trust me on that.”

“I DON’T TRUST YOU! I DON’T TRUST ANYONE!”

Words and energy burst out of him in a tsunami of frustration, fear and anger. The lights in the hallway flickered erratically.

“That wasn’t me,” gasped Kira shrilly.
“I know,” said Noshiko staring hard at Stiles who was standing hunched over, panting and suddenly overcome with fatigue. She approached him, hand outstretched.

“Come,” she urged, tone motherly and warm. “How about that tea?”

With considerable effort Stiles accepted her hand and let her lead him back to the living room.

***

“We’ve been to Mexico,” explained Kira excitedly once they were all situated in the comfortable sofa, sipping from huge cups of warm tea. It took effort on Stiles’ part to not keel over and fall asleep. He felt drained dry. The tea helped a little.

“Mom thought it would be beneficial for me to get away from Beacon Hills and the Dread Doctors so I could get control back of my fox spirit. It was a bit of a shock to realize they’d done something to me. That I’d done things, terrible things I didn’t even remember…”

She looked small and forlorn as she admitted this. Stiles had all the sympathy in the world. Kira probably sensed it, because she met his eyes frankly and smiled sadly. They’d never really been all that close. He liked Kira fine. She was fun and quirky and beautiful. But unlike Allison he hadn’t spent all that much time with her. All they had in common was Scott. That had changed now, in more ways than one.

“Did it help?” he asked weakly. Mr.Yukimura shoved a tray of cookies in his face with an encouraging grin. Stiles accepted one automatically. It was always cookie time.

Kira shrugged. “I don’t really know. The real test I guess is coming back here. But mom put me through the paces. It was trippy.”

Stiles raised a lazy eyebrow and Kira stuttered. “Not magic mushrooms trippy,” she added hastily. Her dad coughed nervously.

“Actually it partly was,” said her mom calmly, a small smile tugging at her lips. “I slipped some mushrooms in your food.”

“Mom!” Kira looked scandalized. Noshiko merely shrugged. “It’s the best way to face kitsune demons, really. You know about Bardo, Kira. You did all that research for Scott. It’s a form of spirit walk if you will, and if you’re successful you’ll come out stronger for it.”

“My parents are crazy,” mumbled Kira with an eye roll worthy of Hales.

“Your mom is 900 years old,” commented Stiles drily. “In comparison a case of magic mushrooms doesn’t even register in my book.”


“As fascinating as the tales of illicit drugging of a minor is, I’m still waiting for info on Derek. I have it from – and I can’t believe I’m about to say this – reliable sources that Derek’s in trouble. Well, reliable when it comes to Derek at any rate. Anything else out of said person’s mouth is to be met with the utmost skepticism. Bottom line is I know he’s in trouble. I just don’t know where to start, so
any info you have is most welcome.

The Yukimuras shared significant looks between them. It involved much twitching of noses and eye squinting. It was clearly a form of silent communication but Stiles was only well-versed in Hale Eyebrow and fairly fluent in Hale Eye rolls. This was another language entirely.

“Hello?” he ventured, waving his hand in the air to get their attention. “Impatient teen over here.”

Kira drew a deep breath and then turned towards him.

“We went back to the town with the church of La Inglesia. It was the place where I earned my first tail, where I learned how to heal. So mom thought it would be a good place to start. To go back and reclaim the control I had then.”

“That makes sense I guess,” said Stiles still not following how this pertained to Derek. “What does that –“

“I’m getting to it,” interrupted Kira with a knowing smile. “The Berserkers were gone, but I still wanted to show my mom everything. Where Kate locked me up, where I was stabbed, where Scott and Peter fought. Where Derek almost died.”

He was not prepared for the wash of memories that brought back. God, he’d been so scared. Scared for Scott, scared for Liam and his shaky control, worried about Lydia back home. The only person he hadn’t been worried about was Derek. As it turned out it was the one person he should’ve worried about. But Derek had always been there for him. Derek had always come back for him. Derek was – well Derek was safety. Not until he saw him bleeding out, human and weak had it hit him just how much he cared about him.

It had turned out alright though. Derek had regained his werewolf powers and emerged stronger for it. Stiles always got strangely misty-eyed and something swelled in his chest when he thought about his regal wolf form. There were pictures of that as well in his chemistry folder. He’d snuck a few candids.

“Okay…?” Stiles didn’t know what else to say. Kira looked encouraged. “We also saw the hole in the wall where Kate had Derek trapped and Scott and Braeden found him, when he was you know… de-aged.”

“I’m still not grasping how that was even possible,” remarked Stiles accepting Mr. Yukimura’s offer of a refill with a grateful smile. “How do you just turn the clock back on one person while the rest of the world moves forward? It – I guess I’m having a hard time wrapping my head around it. Time travel and alternate universes I can almost believe, you know. This just seems – odd.”

“I never understood it either,” admitted Kira. “But it wore off whatever it was, so I guess it was some kind of magical mojo of sorts. I’m still trying to get used to being a kitsune, you know.”

Stiles giggled somewhat hysterically. He kind of did know, whatever the fuck he was supposed to be. He should start a club with Parrish. Supernaturals Unknown. It had an almost badass ring to it.

Noshiko sighed deeply. “As Kira was saying, we did see the place where young Derek was found. It had traces of wolfsbane, lots of it in fact, all dried up now. As for the seal on the wall, it was broken so it’s impossible to know exactly what was depicted. We only saw bits and pieces of it, but just enough to know it was Aztec and old. Kitsune have no knowledge or influence there. I don’t know if this is important or not, but I thought you should know. I’m afraid we can’t be of more assistance here, Stiles.”
He nodded mutely. The who’s and whys of what Kate had done was something he’d spent many a sleepless night thinking about and maybe a few hours too many researching. It irked him, tugged at his subconscious and itched like an infected scab. With Derek away from Beacon Hills and no real signs of side effects it had seemed silly to be obsessing about it. And so he hadn’t mentioned it to anyone – I mean, why would he?

He shook it off, desperate to get back on topic. “What does this have to do with Derek?” he asked impatiently. Mr. Yukimura continued to ply him with baked goods. Stiles had to hand it to him, his chocolate chip cookies were divine.

“Well,” began Kira nervously. “When we explored the tunnels below the church we came across something curious.”

She bit her lip, unclenched it and then bit it again. Finally she just opened her mouth and let whatever she was struggling with tumble out. “We found another wall with similar markings.”

Stiles choked on his cookie, scattering crumbs in all directions. Mrs. Yukimura brushed a few daintily off her top. Mr. Yukimura scurried off and returned moments later with a broom set and began cleaning up. In the meantime Stiles was preoccupied with coughing out fraught cries of “What? Another? What?”

“Another wall with Aztec carvings on them. This one we do have pictures off, but we have no way of knowing if it’s the same as the other one.” Kira flipped up her phone and quickly tapped into a folder marked “Mexico”. She handed the phone wordlessly to Stiles who flipped through a series of pictures of intricate carvings that meant absolutely nothing to him.

“Did you – “

He hesitated. He had a vague notion where this was going, but it was just too far-fetched to even entertain. He couldn’t possibly be … Could he?

“Yes, we did,” confirmed Noshiko. “We tore down the wall. Knowing what was found there last time, and if there was a possibility someone being trapped behind there…” She trailed off. Stiles was holding his breath, feeling lightheaded and delirious.

“It was Derek, wasn’t it?”

Kira nodded. “Yes, we found him behind the wall, all covered in wolfsbane flowers as well, arms crossed. Almost like a tomb. But he was breathing. He was alive. He IS alive,” she corrected immediately when Stiles started making a high pitched screechy sound like that of a mourning walrus.

“Where is he?” He stared at Kira, eyes pleading and desperate.

“He’s downstairs,” she answered calmly. Stiles was already halfway out of the sofa, but Mr. Yukimura stopped him with his broom. “Please, just wait a minute,” he requested in his teacher’s voice that was more order than anything. Stiles complied.

“When we found him he was unconscious,” explained Kira. “We moved him out and took him to our campsite. We tried waking him, but without success. But he was breathing and appeared healthy, so we decided to just wait and see. He’d been covered in wolfsbane and we know how that affects wolves. We removed it all, and thought the effect would wear off and he’d wake as well.”

“Did he?”
Kira nodded.

“He did. Almost 18 hours later, he stirred. He was disoriented and upset. He appeared almost delirious and he didn’t even recognize me. His powers were weak at first, but with time it came back. First his eyes would flash blue, then his fangs would elongate, claws appear and retreat. He didn’t seem to have control, not over his powers and not over his mind. We were heading back home but he got increasingly more agitated and confused, and we couldn’t keep him still or calm enough to travel with him in our car. In the end we had to sedate him.”

“Is he the one who did that?” Stiles gestured at Mr. Yukimura’s sling. That also explained the scratches. He nodded. Stiles cursed mentally. Derek was going to beat himself up over that when he got back to his old self. Derek Hale was one heck of a flagellating bastard. Stiles guessed it took one to know one.

“And he really hasn’t said anything? And he doesn’t remember anything? Not his name, not where’s from, not even Cora?”

Stiles remembered young Derek and how confused he’d been when they had brought him back. He’d lost memories too – but that memory loss seemed to correspond with the age of his body. Like someone had turned the dial back on both body and mind. Now however...

“Does he look the same?”

Kira looked confused. “What do you mean the same? He looks like Derek. Grown-up Derek.”

Stiles deflated. For a moment he thought perhaps he’d been rewound to the Derek prior to Laura’s death. He’d been a bit less bearded and with a penchant for leather jackets. Now he was all about the soft Henley’s and the Soccer mom car.

“Come,” said Kira finally breaking Stiles out of his troubled musings. “I’ll take you to him if you want. He’s still sleeping off the drugs.”

He followed her numbly out into the hall and through a doorway down to the basement. Kira flicked on a light at the top of the stairs. A single light bulb swung from the ceiling casting eerie shadows over the walls and their faces. With each step Stiles felt his heart beat faster and harder.

At the bottom Kira turned left and lead them to a steel door with a heavy lock. She fished out a key from one of the pockets on her Marvel hoodie and fumbled slightly when trying to get it in. Stiles noticed her hands were shaking.

“You know,” she mumbled softly, head turned away from Stiles so he couldn’t see her face. “It’s true that he doesn’t seem to remember anything, that his mind is jumbled and confused. But –”

She paused for a moment and Stiles heard the lock open with a soft click. Kira turned her face to him, hand on the door knob. “But –” she repeated, sounding as if she wasn’t entirely sure she should be saying whatever was on her mind at all. Stiles waited with baited breath.

“There was one word we all recognized. One name he kept repeating over and over again.”

She turned the knob and the door swung open soundlessly. There, on a cot was Derek, half turned on his side, features softened, and his stubble just a little too long and unkempt. He wore a green t-shirt and Stiles noticed the front was matted with dried and old blood.

He took a tentative step into the room, feeling almost as if he was entering a church, something sacred. Someplace important.
“What did he say?” he asked shakily, already knowing the answer but not what it meant.

“Stiles,” whispered Kira. “He kept saying Stiles.”
Chapter 9

Stiles stayed in the room with Derek for – well, he didn’t know how for how long exactly. Derek showed no signs of waking up, and after a while he reluctantly ventured out of the room, locked it behind him (without a key, would you look at that) and padded up the stairs. He found Kira in the kitchen making a sandwich. There was no sign of her parents.

“Hey,” she said softly with a smile. She gestured towards the bread and multitude of toppings laid out on the counter. “Are you hungry? I can fix you one as well if you want.”

Stiles was surprised to find his stomach was grumbling. It was later than he thought. “Yeah, alright. Thanks.”

“Turkey and cheese okay?” He nodded and sat down by the kitchen table. A few minutes later Kira sat down a plate that had his mouth watering. She followed up with a glass of juice.

“Is he awake?”

Stiles shook his head, mouth full of food. Kira sighed and sipped her own juice.

“I didn’t think he would be. Dad injected him again this morning with a pretty high dose. I’d be surprised if he wakes this side of midnight.”

They didn’t say much after that. Just ate in companionable silence. It wasn’t until they’d both cleared their plates and Kira had brewed a pot of tea that any words were exchanged.

“How’s Scott?” Kira’s voice wavered a bit, but her face was solemn. Stiles wasn’t sure how to answer that question. Instead he countered with one of his own.

“You haven’t talked to him?”

Kira shook her head. “No. Not since I left town. He’s texted me and I’ve responded to most of them. Well, at least until we came to Mexico. There is no cell service in the Mexican desert as you know.”

Stiles suddenly felt cold. He knew that. Of course he did. They’d tried to call Scott and Braeden to check on their progress while they worked on the Jeep and berserkers had been lurking in the shadows. None of the calls had connected. They’d all tried with the same miserable result. Yet a memory of Stiles getting a call from his dad, deep under the ruins of the La Inglesia church popped into his mind. An impossible call really. Something that had surprised him then, but he’d forgotten – or perhaps repressed was a more fitting word.

“Yeah,” he muttered without elaborating and instead waiting for Kira to continue.

“When we got back a bunch of texts started ticking in, but I haven’t responded to any of them. I feel kind of terrible about it to be honest.” She was wringing her hands nervously and staring morosely into the dark tea. “I love him and I care about him, but on my trip I had time to think about stuff, and I think I might be a little angry with him.” She dropped her head down on the table with a groan. “I’m such a terrible person,” she moaned. “I should at least say I’m back right? But I know that if I see him I have to talk to him, and not just about the nice and fun stuff, and I suck so hard at that.”

Stiles had been out of the loop on the dramas of Scott and Kira for a while. He hadn’t been forced to play messenger like he did with Allison, and Scott was more experienced with girls by now and didn’t need Stiles’ admittedly terrible dating advice anyway.
“I’m not sure what to say here,” he admitted. “I have no clue what has been going on between the two of you. I have my own issues with Scott at the moment.” He barked out a mirthless laugh when Kira looked at him like he’d grown two heads. “Let’s just say Scott and I haven’t always seen eye to eye on stuff, which is fine. I’ve always backed him up though, even when I thought he was wrong. But with time I’ve felt more and more, I guess overlooked. He dismisses my ideas and yet expects me to always have his back.” He shrugged, tired of the whole thing, wanting nothing but to move past it.

“I know Scott has this very simplistic and wholesome view of how things should be. He wants to save everyone, which is admirable. And I agree, we should try that—but it’s not a very realistic goal. Have you by chance ever tried to talk to him about self-defense?” Kira shook her head. Stiles smiled tiredly. “I guess it’s not as important a topic for someone with healing abilities and also happens to be a katana-wielding ninja.” Kira blushed. “But when you’re entirely human with just an aluminum baseball bat at your disposal and you run in supernatural circles in a town with a villain magnet in the Preserve, well let’s just say it becomes a topic of interest. How far are we going to go to try and save someone who’s not in control and can do devastating harm? His answer – to always save them, never kill them. He just didn’t offer any handy guide books on how to do that and live through it unscathed.”

Kira nodded. “He’s very hung up on that. I think it’s connected to what happened with Allison. He doesn’t want that again.”

“And I get that, I truly do. The thing responsible for her death was wearing my face at the time. Trust me I absolutely get that. I just wished he’d try to see things from my perspective.”

Kira grabbed his hand and squeezed. “What happened, Stiles?”

So he told her. Told her everything. About Donovan. About Theo. About the chimera on the roof of the hospital that Theo killed and blackmailed Stiles to help hide. He told her about lying to his dad, and how he was so scared if he ever told him Scott would not want him as a friend anymore. He also told her about how Theo twisted the truth and how Scott bought it, hook, line and sinker.

Kira had tears in her eyes when he was done.

“Oh, Stiles,” she whispered, voice wobbly. “I’m so sorry that happened to you, and I agree with your dad. It was self-defense. No one can blame you for that. And I’m sure Scott will understand eventually – he has to!”

Stiles smiled at her gratefully. “I hope so,” he admitted softly. “I really do.”

Kira wiped a tear and sat back, eyes closed. “I’m actually a bit mad at him too,” she admitted. “He saw signs, you know. I’m sure of it. That something was wrong with me I mean. I almost chopped the head of that chimera at the club. I don’t remember it at all, but Liam said I yelled something in Japanese. Apparently I’ve been muttering it in my sleep as well. In Mexico my mom stopped by a friend of hers who is also a shapeshifter of some kind. She had her look at me, you know with her shifter eyes, and she told us my fox was much bigger than usual. It was also acting not as a shadow, following my movements, but instead it was moving separately, like I was two people in one. I had Scott look at me like that, because I felt off. I asked him to tell me what he saw, and looking back I think he lied to me.”

Kira bit her lip, seemingly deep in thought. Stiles had no clue what to do or say.

“I sometimes get the feeling that he’s – I don’t know – not really trusting me, I guess. Like he thinks I can’t handle stuff. I can handle the truth however much it hurts at the time, because being lied to
hurts worse and for much longer.”

“I think you need to tell him that,” said Stiles. “He loves you, that much I know. Everyone can change, but if you don’t let them know that they need to, they never will.”

“I know. And I will.” She sighed deeply. “It’s just – hard.”

“Most things worth fighting for are,” said Stiles. “I will fight for my friendship with Scott. But I won’t bend over backwards to save it. I want him to meet me half way. To say he’s sorry. I will gladly say I’m sorry too, because I can be a shit and I know it. I just don’t want to feel like I’m less, you know.”

Kira drained the last of her tea, and picked up both their mugs and placed them in the sink. It was getting dark outside. He checked his phone. 9 missed calls from his dad. He was in deep shit. After all Stiles had just stormed out of the room without so much as a goodbye and certainly no explanation. He was probably worried sick and if he didn’t check in soon he’d probably send half the department out looking for him.

He sent him a quick text saying he was fine and would call him soon. The response ticked in just a few seconds later.

*Stop scaring your dad to death.*

It was sound advice. A second beep and…

*Also there might be an APB out on you.*

Stiles snorted. His dad was nothing if not predictable. At least he wasn’t –  Another text ticked in.

*And you’re grounded until the next Millennium*

He’d spoken too soon.

“Do you want me to forward the pictures of the wall?” asked Kira. Stiles nodded still grinning and got to his feet. He idled by the table, torn between wanting to get back home and reluctance over leaving Derek.

“I want to take him home with me.”

He hadn’t even known he’d considered it before it was out. Kira didn’t even look surprised. She nodded, a small teasing smile tugging at her lips. Stiles pretended not to notice.

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For a moment Stiles had been worried about the practicalities of moving Derek. He was a man of considerable muscle mass and Stiles had never really impressed anyone in the weight room. In fact he’d been the source of more mocking guffaws than impressed awes. Kira on her part looked like a brisk wind could knock her over. But between the two of them they managed to carry him out of the house and into the Jeep with little to no hassle.

Kira got into her car to follow him home, and Stiles climbed into the driver’s seat where he spent a panicked minute looking for his keys before he remembered that he didn’t have them with him.
Halfheartedly he tried to wave his hands in the direction of the ignition, attempting every swish and flick he remembered from the Harry Potter movies. It wasn’t until he leaned back dejectedly in his seat, mind focused on everything he knew about hot-wiring a car that it suddenly roared to life.

Stiles laughed giddily for two blocks and the grin stayed in place all the way back to his house. Kira was already waiting when he leapt out of the car in a mass of uncoordinated limbs.

Theo was thankfully nowhere in sight but sadly the lock on the front door was still very much broken.

“What happened here?” asked Kira in concern.

“Theo,” answered Stiles and gestured for her to follow him around the house to the back entrance. Blocking Kira’s view he pretended to fumble around with the lock for a moment when in fact he just scrunched his nose and visualized the little cogs inside the lock moving. Seconds later the door was open.

Once inside, Derek hanging limply between them, Stiles hesitated for a moment. Where to put him? Somehow it felt a bit too personal putting him in his bedroom, and his dad’s master bedroom was out of the question. The guest room hadn’t seen clean sheets since 2007 and was piled high with every piece of clothing Stiles had outgrown or discarded since junior high. It would take forever to make it habitable.

“Let’s put him on the couch,” he decided. Soon Derek Hale was laid out on Stiles Stilinski’s old and somewhat threadbare, yet surprisingly comfortable, sofa. He looked both perfectly at home and totally out of place. Like a modern piece of furniture that clashed with the rest of the room, yet somehow felt right.

“I need to get back home,” said Kira and pulled out a little pouch from her bag. “Sedatives,” she commented upon Stiles’ confused look. “I case he wakes up and is disoriented and you know, violent. Are you sure you want to be alone with him? Maybe you should call Malia?”

“Malia is away with Braeden looking for her mom.”

Perhaps Kira could sense something in his voice as he said this because her face fell, but she didn’t comment further. “Don’t worry though,” he said reassuringly. “I think I’ll be okay. In fact I’m sure I will be.”

He actually meant it, and believed it with every fiber of his being.

***

After Kira left Stiles called his dad. There was no use in hiding stuff, that time was over, so he gamely told him about running into Peter (but omitted the stuff about his magical mojo, that was not over the phone material) and the Yukimuras finding Derek in Mexico. Needless to say his dad was both shocked, angry and endearingly concerned.

“But he’s – you know – old? Right?”

Stiles remembered how shaken his dad had been when a young Derek Hale had turned up that the sheriff’s station. He’d been muttering about Delorians and time travel for weeks after.
“Dad, he’s not old. He’s like, I don’t know 23 or 24. I never asked. So he’s exactly as old as he should be. No more, no less.”

“Thank god!” The relief was palpable even over the phone. “But did you say he was found behind a wall in Mexico? Again? Why? Is he hurt?”

“Dad, I have no clue. I haven’t talked to him yet, he’s still sedated. And he’s not hurt. Not physically at least.”

That was the wrong thing to say.

“SEDATED! SEDATED? STILES!”

“Dad, chill…”

He could hear a commotion on the other end. It sounded like someone was upending a tray – Holy crap!

“Stiles, don’t you dare tell me to chill! I’m coming home. Lock yourself in my study. In the safe, and I know you know the combination you nosy little weasel, is a gun. You can find wolfsbane bullets in the case in the bottom drawer. Chris Argent kindly supplied me.”


There was more muffled sounds and then a shrill beep. His dad had evidently pulled out a tube and set off an alarm. Nurses would swarm the room within the minute if their level of commitment to his care so far was anything to go by.

“Dad, I’m not alone,” lied Stiles with a cringe. It was alright to lie a little when it concerned his dad’s health. Right? “Kira is here, okay.”

There was an oomph, the sound of raised voices and his dad mouthing off. Stiles raised an eyebrow. Who knew the sheriff could swear like a sailor?

“Dad?”

“Did you say Kira?” His dad sounded breathless. “Did she bring her sword?” Stiles rolled his eyes.

“It’s a katana, dad and yes she did.”

“Smarty pants,” muttered his dad. “Oh go away, I’m alright. I’m not talking to you, Stiles,” he added with a huff. “This night nurse is a menace. No, I don’t need another pillow. Honestly.”

“Goodnight, dad,” said Stiles suppressing a laugh as the nurse in question started berating the sheriff on the dangers of chilly feet. He didn’t feel like listening to his dad being tucked in like a baby, and promptly hung up.

***

Stiles never went to bed. It didn’t feel right somehow to leave Derek alone downstairs. So far he hadn’t so much as twitched his nose, but he hated the idea of him waking up alone and confused in a strange place. To his recollection Derek had never stepped foot in this area of his house. So yeah,
they were having a depressing sort of slumber party.

He scoured the house for blankets and fetched his favorite pillow from his room and then proceeded to build an impressive nest in his dad’s arm chair. He put on the TV and turned the volume almost all the way down. Somewhere in the middle of a Masterchef marathon (they were making something with kale) he fell asleep.

He woke later by a low whining. Disoriented, stiff-necked and bleary-eyed it took Stiles longer than he’d care to admit to remember where he was and why. The whimpers continued and with a jolt he realized Derek was the source. In his haste to extract himself from the blanket fort he managed to get further ensnared and promptly fell to the floor, buried deep in a mountain of wool and fleece. When he resurfaced he was met with an intense cobalt blue stare and a low growl.

“Derek? Hey, Derek. It’s me. Stiles.”

He lifted his arms slowly, doing his best to appear non-threatening. It should be easy – he was draped in quilts of maroon and magenta. No villain or evil-doer with respect for their trade would be caught dead in it. Derek was obviously not in a frame of mind to deduce such warped logic, because his wolfy eyes were now accompanied by his very pointy fangs.

“Easy there, sourwolf.”

Stiles mentally cringed at the nickname. It hadn’t been well-received last time, and was probably not the best of opening lines. But he hoped the familiarity would help trigger something in Derek. They’d never been particularly polite in their verbal sparring anyway. Acting all anxious and gentle wouldn’t feel like them somehow. But then again he was probably overthinking stuff as per usual. Pet names, however ridiculous might not be the best route to take with potentially feral werewolves.

Derek’s growling intensified. And yep, there went his eyebrows. Stiles was perhaps not doing so well in this whole Bring Back Derek project. Whoever put him in charge did not know what they were doing. Hidden from view by the fortress of blankets he patted his pockets for his phone. Only to discover he was wearing pajamas pants and they were oh so very pocketless. His phone was all the way over by the dining table and he wasn’t exactly up to summoning charms yet. Which meant he had to talk his way out this one. Which basically meant he was screwed. Or about to get his throat ripped out. By Derek’s teeth. It wasn’t as if such a demise would be surprising exactly. He’d had ample warning and on multiple occasions.

“Derek,” he tried again, voice soft and devoid of his usual sarcasm. “Derek, it’s Stiles. Do you remember me? Slightly irritating friend of Scott McCall, son of the sheriff, prone to babbling and saver of lives. Yours even on occasion.”

Derek sniffed the air almost doglike. Or wolflike was perhaps a more accurate description. He took several long lungfuls. Held it for a while and then exhaled. He then turned slightly to one side and did it again. And again. With each breath the growls subsided. By the eighth drag of Eau de Stilinski Derek had returned to human form. By the eleventh the growling stopped and his eyes shifted back to the color Stiles had never been able to pin down. It was constantly shifting, sort of like Derek. And his mood.

“Stiles?” he finally croaked out, voice raspy. He blinked several times, almost as if waking himself from a three-day bender. Stiles hadn’t noticed he was holding his breath until he relaxed and slumped bonelessly down on top of the sea of coverings.

“Yeah, it’s Stiles. You’re back in Beacon Hills. You’re at my house.”
Derek didn’t appear to be listening. He was busy scanning the room before he suddenly froze and gripped his stomach. He patted it hesitantly and then yanked the matted t-shirt up so Stiles got a prime, premium box seat ticket view to his Abs of Perfection; capitalization totally warranted. The view should be classified as a national treasure.

“Dude, what are you doing?” he croaked, voice slightly off pitch. Derek’s hands were roaming his stomach looking for – honestly Stiles didn’t know what he was looking for, but he’d be more than interested in joining the search party. And he officially had the worst inner monologue ever and should be reprimanded and sent to bed early without his supper. Honestly.

“This isn’t real. It’s just like last time,” muttered Derek, panic creeping into his voice.

“I sort of agree. Your stomach and abs are unreal,” joked Stiles going for a glib tone to hide that he was perhaps salivating slightly. Damn Caitlin and her too-close-to-the-truth questions that had haunted his mind ever since. Stiles had issues, alright. A long list of them and could probably benefit from a good shrink. All of said issues were usually well-guarded and hidden behind a wall of sarcasm and smartass remarks. Yeah, he was pathetic, but at least he was predictable.

Derek cast him one of those one-eyebrow-raised looks that Stiles by now knew meant he was being unseasonably silly. It was so familiar and so “them” Stiles’ heart did a complicated 4.1 grade of difficulty jump. Derek didn’t seem to notice or care about Stiles heart acrobatics. He was back to looking troubled, complete with grumpy mutterings.

“This is just a dream. It’s not real. I’ll wake up any time now.”

Now it was Stiles’ turn to raise an eyebrow. “You dream about me often, then? Dare I ask the nature of said dreams?”

Derek stared at him uncomprehendingly for a full minute. At the 23 second mark Stiles began to squirm. He wasn’t used to being looked at like that, okay. It was unnerving.

“Show me your hands.”

“Come again?” Stiles blinked at him stupidly. What on earth was going on?

Derek closed his eyes for a moment and then leaned forward, resting his forearms on his legs. Stiles had seldom seen him like this. Unsure, borderline scared and looking at Stiles like he was either his savior or the thing that would end up killing him.

“You have more fingers in your dreams,” said Derek. “It’s a way to find out if you’re awake or dreaming. You count fingers.”

Stiles was gaping. Derek was parroting back things he’d just months before told Scott in a school bathroom while he was in the middle of a nervous breakdown. He couldn’t remember ever talking to Derek about it.

“How did you know that?”

Derek smiled a strange half-smile Stiles had never seen before.

“You told me.”

Stiles shook his head. “No I didn’t. I’ve never told you that.”

Derek’s smile grew wider, and it was both fond and anxious for some reason. “Yes you did. In the
boys’ locker room at school. I was telling you about a dream I had about Mexican hunters breaking
into my loft, asking about La Loba. Only I wasn’t sure it was a dream because I didn’t remember
waking up. So I asked you how I’d know if I was awake or dreaming, and you told me about the
fingers.”

“I don’t remember that.” Stiles was officially confused. Was this something from his possession
period that he’d somehow forgotten?

“You wouldn’t. That was the dream. I counted your fingers. You had six. And then I woke up in my
loft faced with Kate Argent shifted into some sort of catlike creature, and with a shotgun sized bullet
hole in my stomach. Next I know I’m here.”

“Wait. WHAT?”

Stiles’ mind was reeling. First of all – Derek Hale dreamed about him? That was – huge. That was
monumental. And it was also not the time nor the place to freak out about that. The more pressing
matter was how Derek seemed to be missing some memories. A lot of memories in fact.

“So, are you saying that Kate kidnapped you – again? And brought you to Mexico, gift-wrapped
you in wolfsbane and buried you behind another Aztec carved wall – again? Or are you just not, like
remembering – you know stuff. From the last six months or so?”

“What do you mean again?” Derek looked confused. Stiles’ face probably mirrored his.

Stiles flailed his arms around, not sure where to even start. “We realized you were missing almost a
year ago. Scott found shotgun shells at your loft, and with the help of Lydia’s banshee mojo we
tracked them to a gang of hunters called the Calaveras in Mexico. They contacted Braeden who took
us to La Inglesia, the ruins of an Aztec church in the middle of nowhere. We found you buried
behind a wall there. And you, you know were - “ Stiles shrugged helplessly.

“What?”

“You honestly don’t remember any of this, do you?” Derek shook his head. Stiles groaned. Great,
amnesia. Just what he needed.

“What was it about me?”

Oh crap, yeah. How to explain that predicament to an amnesiac? Stiles went with the unfiltered truth.

“We found you looking like your 16 year old self. You didn’t remember any of us. And your eyes
were yellow.”

Derek’s expression went from rapt attention to annoyed in record speed.

“Ha-ha, very funny, Stiles.”

Stiles threw his arms up, eyes wide and honest. “I’m honest to god not joking. I swear it on – fuck, I
swear it on my mom’s grave.”

He didn’t know how to interpret the look Derek was giving him. It was a new one. Uncharted waters
and undiscovered. He then nodded his head and Stiles knew it meant “go on”.

“It was a ploy of sorts,” he started. “Kate used you to enter your family’s vault. I have no clue what
she wanted, I think it was some talisman to help her work on her control or something. She was
basically played and someone robbed the safe and got away with all of Peter’s bearer bonds. They
used it to fund a deadpool for supernatural creatures. You, Scott, Liam, Kira, Malia, Lydia everyone were on it. We managed to stop it, but whatever Kate had done to you, made you gradually lose your werewolfitude. You were more or less human, and then a berserker stabbed you in Mexico when we went to rescue Kira and Scott, who were also kidnapped by Kate by the way, it's like her MO or something. We thought you died but instead you turned into a wolf. Then you left Beacon Hills and somehow ended up back behind a wall in Mexico.”

Stiles was out of breath after that longwinded diatribe. Derek looked shell-shocked. Stiles decided to let him have a minute to take it all. He was in the middle of braiding some of the decorative threads on a blanket when Derek spoke again.

“Who’s Liam?”

Stiles balked, arms doing a complicated sequence of moves that would’ve made Madonna weep Vogue tears.

“Liam? Liam is Liam. Scott’s beta.”

Now Derek looked half appalled half scared.

“Scott has a beta? Since when?”

“Since a wendigo tried to kill Liam and Scott saved him from falling off the roof by biting his arm.”

“That is the most stupid bite story I’ve ever heard.” Derek looked on the verge of being truly offended.

“Tell me about,” agreed Stiles.

“That is even worse than my cousin three times removed who accidentally bit an old lady on the bus. He yawned at the same time as she swatted a fly and her elbow touched his mouth. He clamped down on instinct. It was quite the scandal. Turns out she was an ultra-conservative republican and they’re hard enough to control while human. We never invited them to parties.”

Stiles stared at Derek wondering who this pod person was. “What?” asked Derek as if he hadn’t just divulged weird family information.

“Nothing,” murmured Stiles with a shrug. “Just wondering what exactly happened to you in that hole. You just told me a long-winded and totally random story without anyone forcing you. That’s very – un-Derek like. You usually don’t talk or confide in me, just threaten or argue. Sometimes both at once.”

Derek crossed his arms and glared. “So? You just told me a long-winded story as well. One littered with nonsense like berserkers and a teenage me. I guess we’re even.”

“You mean to tell me the tale of the elbow-bitten republican isn’t true?”

Derek huffed. “Of course it is true. I don’t lie. Unlike some.”

Stiles angrily climbed out from the blankets and half crawled half humped over so he was staring Derek straight in the eyes.

“Listen here, amnesiac-wolf. I want you to listen to my heartbeat and tell me again that I’m lying.”

He regurgitated the whole thing, even adding a few tidbits about mouthless assassins and Peter for good measure. When he was done Derek looked stunned.
“But – it can’t be true. I don’t remember any of that. It doesn’t even seem vaguely familiar. And the bit about me as a teenager, that’s just trippy.”

“Hang on, I’ll prove it to you.”

Stiles navigated to the folder marked chemistry and there it was. A selfie of Stiles looking even goofier than usual and slightly blurry since it was angled so that he’d intentionally caught young Derek in the background. He was sitting on Scott’s bed eyeing the PS3 with thinly veiled interest.

He shoved the phone in Derek’s face. For a moment it was perfectly quiet. Stiles slumped against the couch intent on letting Derek have a moment to absorb the crazy. He closed his eyes and rested his head against the worn fabric. He was acutely aware of Derek’s legs next to him. He could understand how some of these things were hard to get his head around. So he was trying to be patient. But it was hard. When a couple of minutes had passed and Derek made no move to say anything, he’d reached his limit.

“Are you done staring at your young face yet? Can we move this thing along – HEY!”

He snatched the phone out of Derek’s hands and clutched it possessively to his chest. Derek looked – well he didn’t know what that look meant because Stiles had never seen that particular facial expression on him before. He had some color back in his face though, which was probably a good sign, right? But he’d also totally been flipping through Stiles’ photos without permission which was bad.

He glanced down on the screen and saw the photo of Derek and the big ball of twine. Yep, bad. Very bad.

“You’re still a creeper-wolf, aren’t you?” Stiles glared at him murderously. “I showed you one picture. That was not an invitation to snoop through the rest. Rude much.”

Derek didn’t seem to be listening. “Now I know this is a dream,” was his only answer to this blatant violation of Stiles’ privacy.

“What on earth are you on about? I just spent half an hour explaining everything and you’ve listened to my heartbeat. I’m not lying!”

Derek didn’t look convinced. “I know that. But the story is just too weird. Even for Beacon Hills this is a whole new level of whacky.”

“Not really,” muttered Stiles. “You just don’t remember the recent shit.”

“And you have a whole folder in your phone with pictures of me. Why?”

It was a valid question. Most were snaps and he technically wasn’t supposed to save. Somehow he didn’t think that was why Derek was asking.

“You sent them to me,” he muttered, not looking at him. He had a feeling this Derek would look confused or worse yet, appalled. He didn’t need to see that. “After you left Beacon Hills, we texted a bit, sometimes sending silly pictures.”

“Huh.”

Stiles peeked at Derek from the corner of his eye. He hadn’t expected that answer. It didn’t sound appalled at any rate. “It looks like we’re sort of, well – friends?”
Stiles sucked in a breath. Were they? He’d like them to be, but the jury was still out on that one. With
the amnesia though, they were evidently back to square one.

“Maybe,” he muttered. “Why?”

Derek shrugged. “You always seemed so frustrated with me. Always giving me shit, being in my
face. It seems like a bit of a leap.”

“I could say the same about you.”

Derek laughed softly, a crooked smile tugging at his lips. “You could,” he admitted. “But I still need
to see your hand, Stiles. I need to know if I’m dreaming or not.”

When Stiles waggled a perfectly normal five-fingered hand in Derek’s face all the air seem to go out
of him. He slumped back on the couch rubbing at his eyes.

“So… What now?” he asked in a resigned tone. "Will I get the third degree from Deaton? A sit
down with Argent? What the fuck happened to Kate anyway? Was she the one to do it this time as
well?"

Stiles was absentmindedly scrolling through his photos, wondering just how much Derek had
managed to go through before he’d caught him snooping, the little shit.

“Deaton’s whereabouts is unknown presumably out looking for info on Dread Doctors. I’ll fill you
in on that bit later,” he added when he caught Derek’s confused expression. “Argent is hunting Kate.
She was last seen in Mexico shot full of yellow wolfsbane, so I somehow doubt it was her this time.
HOLY CRAP!”

Stiles jumped to his feet and began pacing the room leaving a trail of blankets in his wake. Derek
stared at him much like people who’d accidentally come upon a pair of crocodiles in the least likely
of places.

“What is it?”

Stiles laughed hysterically, tearing at tufts of his hair. “Oh crap, oh crap. Well,” he began, voice
several octaves higher than usual, making him sound borderline crazy. Some days he actually
wondered if that line wasn’t already crossed.

“I can say with absolute certainty that it wasn’t Kate. Or if it was, I at least knows who sent her on
the mission.”

Derek was on his feet as well now, standing indecisively in the middle of the living room watching
Stiles unravel.

“What is it?”

Stiles finally stopped and brandished his phone in Derek’s face. He squinted at the screen
incomprehensibly and then looked back at Stiles.

“I have no idea what I’m looking at,” he admitted. “It looks like the entrance to the Chamber of
Secrets.”

“Oh god, a Harry Potter reference! You have no idea how fitting that is given the experiences I’ve
had the last couple of days, but no – it’s not the entrance to The Chamber of Secrets, although it’s
just as bad. Possibly worse. That –“ he tapped his finger at one of the photos Kira had sent him. It
showed the stone carvings of a snake eating its own tail – “that is an Ouroboros. It’s the mark of the Dread Doctors. The fucking doctors took you, Derek! Holy crap! And you were behind a wall – just like that creepy chimera that Parrish found and that attacked Scott at school. Fuck me!”

It was a rare sight to see Derek looking that lost. Stiles was seething. And scared out of his mind. Was Derek a chimera too now? Had the doctors pumped him full of shit as well, just like with Liam? And what the fuck were they trying to do? Did they need to lock him up as well?

“I have no idea what doctors you’re talking about, but judging by your reaction I’m thinking I should be freaking out.”

Stiles rubbed at his face, feeling the stirrings of a panic attack building. He did not have time for that shit now.

“I’m calling Scott,” he announced flatly. “You thought the tale I just told you as weird – wait until you hear the rest.”

***

Despite the lateness of the hour it only took 26 minutes for the rest of them to gather at the Stilinski house. It was hard to say who was more surprised – the others at seeing Derek and hearing his crazy story, or Scott discovering that Kira was back and that for once he was the one entirely out of the loop. Stiles watched him go through every emotion from elation, stunned shock, jealousy, fear and finally something that possibly might be guilt. It was a start.

It took several hours to cover everything. Derek was reintroduced to Liam and Mason, and then they all helped fill him in on the events he’d forgotten and the development since he’d left with Braeden. He remembered Braeden from when she rescued him and Peter from the Calaveras, but it was very awkward to explain the nature of their current relationship. Not that any of them really knew the details. Most were just guesswork and assumption. But you just didn’t up and leaving town with someone unless you at least trusted them, and hopefully cared for and liked them.

It was a very memorable moment when Derek relearned that Peter had a daughter. The notion seemed to both scare and offend him. Scott took great pleasure in telling him that Stiles was now more or less part of the family since he was dating Malia. Derek’s face was schooled in a neutral expression upon hearing this news. Stiles however wanted to kick Scott. He suspected it was some sort of retribution since they weren’t exactly back on the best of terms yet. He vaguely recalled a memory of him serving Scott water out of a dog bowl and decided he’d take it in stride. What he didn’t like was the fact that Scott obviously thought this would hurt Stiles somehow. Like Derek mattered to him, but Scott shouldn’t know that. No one should know that.

Stiles left it to Scott, Liam and Kira to fill him in on the dread doctors, Theo and the chimeras. He hoped they all had the good sense to keep Donovan out of it. If anyone should tell that story it was Stiles.

He gestured for Mason to follow him into the kitchen and together they whipped up an extremely early breakfast consisting of scrambled eggs, toast and pancakes. Stiles prided him on his pancake-making abilities. It was the one thing his mom had taught him to make.

“How are things with Liam and Hayden?” asked Stiles. He managed to flip the pancake without
dropping it.

“Good, I think. Liam’s happy at least.”

Stiles nodded. Liam was more or less back to his old somewhat annoying self. He’d even agreed to come here despite Scott’s presence which was progress. Mason had let it slip that they still hadn’t talked things out. Given Scott’s stubborn streak and the depths of Liam’s anger, he suspected that might be a long and rocky road. Still, it was good to see that common enemies could make them work side by side.

“And Hayden? How is she?”

Mason shrugged. “She seems fine. I didn’t really know her all that well before she – you know, died. My source for comparison is sparse. Liam insists that nothing’s changed though. I want to believe that for his sake.”

Stiles deposited the pancake on the tray and poured in some more batter. 27 pancakes so far. He had a feeling they needed lots more.

“I do too. Although I’ve never seen a movie with resurrections where everything turned out peachy. There’s probably a catch. Mind control or some unforeseen reaction at the next full moon.”

“Or maybe we’ll get lucky and it’s nothing?” Mason looked hopeful. Stiles longed for the days when he was as naïve and innocent.

“Or not,” muttered Mason when he saw his somber face. “I’m starting to get the feeling that I should start looking at colleges on the East Coast.”

“That is actually sound advice.” He sighed deeply, flipping another pancake, this time with less success. “You don’t have to be involved in this. You know that right?”

Mason pursed his lips. Stiles recognized the look of selfless loyalty.

“That’s not really an option. I think you can understand that.”

Stiles could.

“Let me know if you pick up anything weird regarding Hayden or any of the chimeras for that matter. I don’t think they or Theo are our greatest threats, but experience have taught me that even when things seem fine it has a tendency to do a 180 and knock you in the back of the head with a blunt object. So if you notice any tremors, see birds flee or deer run amok, let me know. I’d rather be forewarned than just swallowed by the earthquake.”

“I will.”

***

Stiles’ prediction about the pancakes was right. They’d ended up with 57 which was an insane amount, but they disappeared like dew before the sun, and ended with both Scott and Liam sticking their forks in the last one and neither refusing to relinquish their hold. Stiles made mental notes to invest in a pancake baker or alternatively never invite the two of them over for meals ever
again. When they resorted to growls and flashing eyes, he’d had enough. He simply wrenched both forks away and gave the somewhat mangled pancake to Derek. For a few minutes Scott and Liam mentally united in resentment towards Stiles. It was however soon forgotten in an epic battle of the rest of the scrambled eggs.

“You’re on cleanup duty,” he announced with annoyance when eggs literally flew over the table and some of it stuck to the wall beside the fridge. Mason had already excused himself, and Kira was doing the same.

Stiles gestured for her to follow him into the living room. He closed the door behind them, effectively muffling the low growls and excessive snarfing.

“They really do behave like wolves,” complained Kira. He noticed her tone wasn’t light and teasing as usual. Her issues with Scott was still unresolved apparently.

“Yes,” confirmed Stiles popping the p and dumping down on the couch in a long-limbed tangle. He’d long since given up on keeping Scott’s grabby paws off his lunch tray. Wolf metabolism was off the chart. Stiles always packed granola bars to keep him with sustenance throughout the day. Not that Stiles particularly liked granola bars. But they did the job of starving off his hunger pains and as a bonus Scott hated them with a passion only likened to that of several burning suns.

Kira found a spot in the armchair still partially draped in blankets.

“You’re worried,” she said matter-of-factly. Kira leveled him with a no-nonsense stare that would look more at home on Lydia. She wasn’t wrong though.

“I am. We should be. We have weird, frequency bending doctors in masks, never a good sign historically speaking, and they’re going around doing experiments on not just people, but also other supernatural beings. And as if that isn’t bad enough, we have no clue why. So yes, I’m very worried. Chew my nails down, jump at shadows, planning sub-level survivalist vaults worried.”

“Yeah, me too.” Kira was turning something over in her hands, and it took a few seconds for Stiles to recognize her obsidian glass tail. A symbol of her abilities, her control and her advancement. Things she was now doubting.

“I still worry that if I let my guard down, or if I fall asleep I’ll end up snapping into another trance and ram my katana through someone. I don’t remember any of it. Not even a vague shadow of resemblance.” She sighed and bit her lip nervously before continuing. “Remember Tracy? Lydia talked with her and she said she had night terrors. Only it wasn’t that at all, it was real. But who knows how long she was affected before it started creeping into her subconscious? Just because I don’t remember anything, that doesn’t mean I didn’t do stuff. I might still do stuff for all I know. The doctors did something to me, Stiles. That I do remember.”

Stiles nodded, rubbed his eyes and sighed. It was a fucked up situation of monumental proportions.

“I gave the book to Liam,” he admitted trying to block out what sounded like cutlery being used as sabers coming from the kitchen. “The Dread Doctor book. The doctors took him along with Hayden, and he told me they did something to him as well. I thought he should get the chance to find out if that was a onetime thing or a repeated pattern.”

Kira nodded looking thoughtful. “Mason should probably read it too, then,” she added.

Stiles snorted. “I’m betting fifty bucks that he’s already made a copy and is ahead of Liam reading it. I’m betting he’s taking notes.”
Kira laughed softly. “He’s very – enthusiastic,” she settled on.

“An understatement if I ever heard one,” countered Stiles. They shared a grin and for a split second Stiles felt almost normal. Sharing a joke with a friend. Yeah, Kira was definitely becoming a true friend. It was nice.

“If I ever cross paths with Valack again I’m going to give him a less than raving review of his book. According to that hack it was supposed to unlock memories of the doctors if we’ve ever seen them. I thought it would be either or. You know, either just a subpar reading experience, because let’s face it, the book is terrible, or you got the visions. But we all got visions, but none of us about the doctors. Except for you. Personally I have no idea if what I saw were even real or just something my crazy mind cocked up. But you didn’t get weird not-doctor visions, right?”

Kira shook her head. “I’m not sure if this even matters, Stiles. Aren’t you just worrying about technicalities? Maybe looking for patterns and causes when it’s most likely just a coincidence?”

Stiles pursed his lips. He as prone to overthinking stuff; that was true. But it bugged him, itched and scratched at his mind, and experience had taught him not to ignore it outright.

“It’s not a coincident though, is it? My dad always says that once is an incident, two is a coincidence and threes a pattern. This didn’t happen to just one or two of us. It happened to Lydia, to Scott, Malia and me. That’s four people who read the book, and seemingly none of us have seen the doctors and had our memories altered. Yet we all have strange visions. Lydia of her grandma in Eichen House, I saw my mom accusing me of wanting to kill her when I was 8 and Scott saw himself with an asthma attack as a kid. Random stuff. Too random even. It just bugs me.”

Kira yawned. “Well, I for one am going home to get some sleep. We have school in the morning.”

Stiles grimaced. “Don’t remind me.”

Kira rose and wandered around the room gathering her bag and jacket. She stopped mid zip and leveled Stiles with a pensive look.

“I don’t know if this means anything or not, but I didn’t get any visions the first time I read it. I actually didn’t entirely finish it either, because I had trouble getting through it. The words jumbled and bleed into each other. It was as if my fox was messing with my reading ability. My mom suggested I try to outfox it, and read the book backwards. The dread doctor memory came to me after I took her advice.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh my god, that could be it!” Stiles did a little fist pump and then raced up the stairs without further explanation. He came crashing back minutes later sounding like stampede of panicked bison. It drew the attention of the pancake warriors in the kitchen who rushed in forks brandished.

“What’s going on?” Scott’s eyes were flashing red. He had bits of scrambled egg in his hair. Liam’s t-shirt were covered in jam. Only Derek looked relatively clean. Aside from the blood crusted t-shirt he was still wearing.

“I can’t find the book,” he panted. “Do any of you have the book?”

“The book! The book – the book with capital B book. The dread doctor book, Liam! I just gave it to you a few days ago, don’t you have it on you?”

“No! Why would I? It’s boring as fuck. I try to read a bit before bed, but I usually fall asleep within the first paragraph. Best sleeping aid I ever had.”

Stiles whined and threw a pillow across the room. It hit a lamp and sent it crashing to the floor.

“I think we could all use some sleep,” suggested Scott, eyeing Stiles wearily. “I have my copy in the locker at school. You can have it tomorrow if you can’t find your copy. Alright? What’s so important about it though?”

“We need to read it again.”

Scott balked. “No way. That was a terrible read and I have better things to spend my time on, thank you very much.”

“Kira read it backwards!” shouted Stiles, complete with lots of flailing. Scott looked unimpressed. And uncomprehending. God, did he need to spell out everything?

“She’s the only one who got back memories of the dread doctors. And she read the book backwards. Perhaps that’s the reason? We need to read it again, backwards – to be sure.”

Scott looked skeptical. “That sounds like a long shot, Stiles. Shouldn’t we prioritize getting hold of Argent and Deaton and helping Derek get his memories back?”

“There you go again.”

Stiles sighed deeply, suddenly bone tired, dejected and just plain fed up.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Stiles met Scott’s borderline definite stare.

“It means that history keeps repeating. I come to you with a theory, you shoot it down. Seems familiar. But you know what Scott? You’re not the boss of me, and I intend on reading it backwards no matter what you say.”

Scott’s eyes hardened. Behind him Liam shared a significant look with Mason. Derek looked confused.

“Yeah, sure. You do that, Stiles,” he said finally. Then he picked up his jacket and left. Kira shrugged and followed him out a moment later.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Stiles met Scott’s borderline definite stare.

“It means that history keeps repeating. I come to you with a theory, you shoot it down. Seems familiar. But you know what Scott? You’re not the boss of me, and I intend on reading it backwards no matter what you say.”

Scott’s eyes hardened. Behind him Liam shared a significant look with Mason. Derek looked confused.

“Yeah, sure. You do that, Stiles,” he said finally. Then he picked up his jacket and left. Kira shrugged and followed him out a moment later.

“I haven’t actually read all that much yet,” said Liam. “I don’t mind starting over. Perhaps reading it from the back will improve the experience.”

“Thanks,” muttered Stiles with a grateful smile. Mason patted him on the back as they left. Stiles checked the time and was appalled to see it was just after five AM. School was going to be murder.

“I guess we should get some Zs,” he suggested halfheartedly, fishing up some of the many blankets and putting them on the sofa. “You can sleep down here, okay. And I don’t know what you did in the kitchen but I’m putting you in charge of cleaning it up.”

Derek didn’t answer. After doing some damage control on the lamp (nothing broken, but it needed a new bulb) Stiles turned around to find the werewolf looking at him strangely.

“What?” he ventured, nervously flattening his hair. Did he have something in his teeth? Or was his
fly open? God he hoped his fly wasn’t open!

“What happened with you and Scott?” Derek looked genuinely perplexed.

“We’re having a slight disagreement.”

“On what?”

“Everything.”

Derek raised an eyebrow, but didn’t ask any questions. Which was good. Stiles was too tired to answer any of them and he’d passed his limit on emotionally draining moments for the day.

“Long story, huh?” he simply said. Stiles snorted.

“Aren’t they all? Will you be okay down here?”

“I’ll be fine. Go to bed, Stiles.”

Stiles did just that and dreamed of chasing a ball of twine that was rapidly un-spooling until it was all gone.
The next day at school was, as predicted, murder. Stiles walked totally unprepared into a pop quiz in Economics, but it was on coach’s favorite topic of risk and rewards which they’d covered extensively last year, so he felt pretty confident it hadn’t gone too badly.

He was so incredibly tired that he fell asleep both in physics class and during lunch. The only good thing about the day was that he found the tattered copy of the Dread Doctor book in his locker. He spent the last two classes reading it from the back, and got about halfway through before the school day was over. It didn’t improve the story, but it didn’t make it worse either. Which was a feat in itself, he thought.

He popped by the hospital after school and had to endure an hour of heavy interrogation regarding the Derek situation. As it turned out, the sheriff wasn’t easily satisfied and wouldn’t relent until he’d gotten Derek on the phone. The two of them had a lengthy conversation that Stiles didn’t really understand all that much of, but when he got off his dad looked more sad than worried.

“Pity about his memories,” he commented. “He was very helpful with the deadpool stuff you know. To the point where I was seriously considering approaching him about applying as a deputy. It wouldn’t hurt to have someone with his senses on the squad.”

Stiles made sounds like a tortured hyena. His dad clearly interpreted it to mean he was opposed to the idea, and berated him for it at length. Stiles nodded along, trying to look chastised and contrite. A slight scolding was miles better than his dad realizing the idea of Derek in a uniform was doing weird things to his libido.

“They’re talking about releasing me in a few days,” informed his dad when he was done scolding Stiles. “I’m recovering faster than anticipated. Apparently there’s still some juice left in your old man.”

“Please never tell me about your juices, dad,” pleaded Stiles. He was itching to get back to the book and find out if there was anything to Kira’s method. On the one hand he kind of wanted to prove the theory, on the other hand proving the theory would mean that he’d encountered the doctors before, and that was less than desirable. It was an odd case where being right was bad and being wrong was good. Or what he privately called Beacon Hills logic. Meaning there was none to be found.

“I most certainly will regale you with tales of all my juices, and in great detail too, son. Unless you fetch me some jelly. I’m in the mood for some raspberry I think.”

“I’m not indulging your continued effort to give yourself a heart attack. You’d think being partly shredded by a chimera would make you treasure your health more.”

“I do,” said his dad smugly. “It made me realize life is fragile and it can be taken at any moment, and in this town I’m more likely to die of rogue claws than trans-fat and sugar. The laws of probability are in my favor, son. Now go fetch. I’ll time you.”

“You have a perfectly good button at your disposal. Get one of your girlfriends to do it.”

That actually turned out to be the powerful threat Stiles needed to keep his dad in check.
“No, please. Keep them away from me.”

Stiles leered. “I thought you loved the attention?” His dad honest to god shuddered. It was a sight to see.

“It was fine, flattering and entertaining until they started creeping in while I was sleeping. I woke one morning and the room was filled with balloons.”

“Ah that’s so nice,” cooed Stiles. He was all too aware of his dad’s aversion to all things even vaguely balloony.

The sheriff glared. “I’m half tempted to suspect you tipped them off. It seems like something you’d do.” He narrowed his eyes at Stiles, who for his part was the poster child for innocence. And rightfully so, for once.

“You should cast your suspicions elsewhere, daddy dearest. I would start with Melissa if I were you. She seemed quite annoyed with the tittering and gossiping outside your room the other day. I heard her mutter about “unprofessional conduct” more than once.”

“Melissa,” wheezed his dad out in a threatening voice eerily like the character of Newman in Seinfeld, complete with hand-wringing. Stiles took that as his cue to leave.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” said Stiles with a slight head-shake. And people thought he was odd. He did however spot someone looking awfully lot like Donovan in the reception area. He never turned around for a second look.

***

Having Derek Hale as a house guest was strange. Firstly because he actually cocked, a discovery that had Stiles gaping like a blowfish for several seconds. Derek had made lasagna and was wearing an apron. An apron! Also, the lasagna was crazy good. Stiles might have licked the casserole clean afterwards. Derek possibly tutted. It was all very domestic – and strange. Very strange.

Secondly Derek actually talked. Surprisingly much at that. Stiles wasn’t used to Derek communicating verbally to any great lengths, so this threw him for a loop. He was also very candid and direct. Too direct perhaps.

“You look like shit,” he commented casually while putting the plates into the dishwasher.

“Thank you for pointing that out. I can’t imagine why. I absolutely got the recommended amount of sleep last night. Also, I lead a very stress-free life. I mostly run through meadows frolicking with butterflies. It’s a way of life. You should try it.”

Derek just started at him unimpressed, then shrugged. “I’ll consider it. The day you give up sarcasm.”

“Ha-ha, comedian-wolf in da house,” joked Stiles and smacked him on the back of the head with his dish towel. Derek shredded it with a claw right down the middle looking entirely too smug for his own good when Stiles cursed creatively, staring angrily at the scraps of cloth in his hand. It was time to change the subject.
“Did you remember anything else?”

According to most daytime soaps and life time movies, amnesiacs usually got their memories back after a while. Often at a crucial moment. This moment didn’t feel crucial though, and Derek shook his head, proving that it was in fact not. Stiles felt cheated.

“Pity,” he muttered thinking about the folder on his phone with odd photos and text history. If Derek never remembered, then it would be as if it never happened. Like a dream that you recalled in vivid detail as soon as you woke up but withered away into blurry memories with time, before erasing entirely.

“Doesn’t sound like I’ve missed too many good times,” said Derek with a light shrug. “Would it be such a loss really?”

Stiles didn’t answer. For Derek it probably wouldn’t.

“I’m going to go sit quietly in my room and read this awful book back to front. You can do whatever you want, as long as it doesn’t involve any more destruction of property.” Stiles shook his tattered photocopy in the air like a flag on 4th of July. Derek rolled his eyes.

“No, you’re not. Not up in your room,” Derek hurriedly corrected when Stiles gave him a put-upon glare complete with a hip tilt and a jaunty hand on it, the likes Lydia was prone to. “If this things gives you visions or memories or whatever, isn’t it better to not do it alone? Stay down here. I’ll read something too, okay? Keep you company.”

“Okay. Book club. Totally cool. Should we get wine?” rambled Stiles as he backed out of the kitchen. ”Book clubs usually involve wine according to every film and TV show ever.”

Derek didn’t answer, just went to the fridge and came back with a can of Fanta.

“Is the can okay, or should I fetch you a wine glass?” asked Derek sassily. Stiles stuck his tongue out but grabbed the Fanta greedily. He usually avoided keeping sugary drinks in the fridge mainly to save his dad from an early grave. This was a welcome treat in the middle of the week.

Actually, Stiles was kind of touched. And not just for the offer of a sugary beverage, but for the proposal of keeping him company. He immediately sprawled out on the couch all lose-limbed and star-fished. Derek settled in his dad’s chair with a John Grisham novel he’d pulled randomly from the bookshelf by the TV.

For the longest time the only sound in the room was that of pages being turned and the clock ticking softly in the background. It was – nice. Unlike the book that was – well, horrifically terrible seemed to sum it up nicely. Reading it from the back added a sort of trippy quality to it, but nothing in terms of logic. Several times Stiles eyed Derek and the Grisham novel with envy. He’d read it before – or at least he thought he had, and it wasn’t even all that good if memory served him right, but that was all relative to what you compared it to. Dr. Valack was no contender for the Nobel Prize in literature that much was certain.

Stiles was seconds away from calling the backward-reading hypothesis an epic failure when the edge of his vision took on a sort of hazy quality. Like one of those vintage filters on Instagram, making the room blurry and in tones of lilac and soft yellow. He tried to open his mouth to tell Derek – well, he didn’t know what he was going to tell him. It didn't much matter, because he couldn’t get a word out edgewise. It was as if someone had hit mute.

Derek was still in the room, but the room had changed. It was Stiles’ room. Only it looked – wrong.
He couldn’t quite put his finger on it, but something was clearly off. Derek was standing by the bookshelf wearing the leather jacket he always donned back when they first got to know him. This whole thing was very odd and – HOLY CRAP!

The door swung open and a buzz-cut and frazzled looking Stiles barged in, dropped his backpack by the desk and plopped down in the swivel chair, attacking his laptop with intense concentration. God, he remembered this. This had actually happened! Derek was on the run from the law and any moment now –

“Hey Stiles!”

-his dad would appear. He watched himself – god, this was acid levels of trippy – turn around, spot Derek and flail aimlessly.

“Yo, D – Derek, I, um-“

“What did you say?”

His other self – former self, god, he had no idea what to call it. It was like watching something from a Pensive. He really was all about the Harry Potter references these days. No matter, his past self sprinted out the door and closed it. He could hear the muffled conversation outside. Inside Derek rolled his eyes skyward and fiddled with the CD player behind him.


“Listen, I’ve got something I’ve got to take care of, but I’m gonna be there tonight. I mean, your first game.”

“My first game. Guh, it’s great. Awesome. Uh – Good.”

Lord, he’d been so awkward and terrible at the subterfuge back then. Derek evidently agreed. He kept on inspecting Stiles’ stuff while buzzcut-Stiles continued an extremely awkward conversation out in the hall. How his dad hadn’t tested him for drugs back then was beyond him.

Stiles tuned out the conversation in the hallway for a moment and tracked Derek’s movements. Staring. Something still rubbed him the wrong way about the room, though. It was oddly tidy. Too tidy. Stiles applied to the Chaos Theory in all aspects of his life. This was anything but chaotic. It was pedantic. And where was the chair he used to have by the bed? And that CD player? That had broken beyond repair before he even started high school. It had been during a sleepover with Scott and pillows were both involved and to blame. It shouldn’t be there. Something weird was clearly going on. Or, you know something weirder than the weird that this was. Whatever!

“See you there.”

“Take it easy.”

The door flew open and a flustered Stiles burst through. He was immediately grabbed by the t-shirt and pushed up against the door. Stiles felt the echo of the half chubby that particular situation had caused, stir in his pants. God, he was predictable.

“I’m sor – oh!”

“If you say one word – “snarled Derek, mouth inches from Stiles face. Looking at it from this angle it looked very – suggestive. It didn’t help his downstairs situation. At all.
“Oh, what, you mean like, “Hey dad, Derek Hale’s in my room – Bring your gun”? Yeah, that’s right. If I’m harboring your fugitive ass, it’s my house, my rules, buddy.”

Derek just stared at Stiles after that. Just two inches closer and their faces would be mushed together. He wondered if he could like, walk over and push, just a little?

He didn’t get the chance to find out. It was like time stilled. Past-Stiles and Past-Derek remained in that painfully awkward, borderline sexual position as out of nothing shapes flickered into being.

“No, no, no,” he pleaded stupidly, but he was unable to move. Stiles was frozen in place in a memory stored and locked away that was now trickling into his consciousness. Seconds later the three Dread Doctors were standing in his room looking both ridiculous and frightening. Stiles gawked. This was the first look he’d gotten of them live. Before this all he had to go on was the illustration on the cover of Valack’s book. The book was crap, but at least he’d gotten that relatively right.

One of the doctors glided, or flickered towards the pair by the door. There really was no good word for how they moved. It was eerie. Otherworldly.

“What are you doing?” he asked uselessly. He wasn’t there. They couldn’t hear him. The doctor grabbed hold of Derek’s neck and jammed something – Stiles couldn’t see properly. But it was long, and shiny. Some sort of needle perhaps? Derek whimpered and struggled uselessly. Another doctor was holding him in place. While this happened the third one approached Stiles.

“Who the fuck are you?” snarled his younger self. "Hey, what are you doing – umph!” The doctor took no notice of Stiles’ attempts at mouthing off and simply stretched out his hands, fingers wide. The tips glowed blue emitting small sparks. When it touched Stiles’ chest he immediately froze. His eyes were still open and moving, though. He looked petrified. Nothing was injected, though.

The guy – or thing – who knew what was behind the masks – slipped its colored monocle in front of one eye and peered into Stiles’ eyes. Green, red, yellow – several colors flashed across his face as the filtered glass changed. Then as suddenly as they appeared all three retreated back, and stood in line like soldiers. Just watching. Stiles and Derek were still frozen in place.

“Prognosis promising,” chanted one of them.

“Prognosis promising,” replied the others in perfect unison. A second later and they had flickered out of existence. By the door the two antagonists burst into movement again, like nothing had happened.

Derek adjusted Stiles’ jacket, and Stiles returned the favor, a smug smirk tugging at his lips.

“Oh my god!” he squawked as Derek made a sudden move. Then the memory faded out, but not before Stiles had noticed something odd. Now that the doctors were gone, his room was back to its usual messy state, the CD player updated to his current one and the chair was back by the bed.

He didn’t have time to ponder this further because the scene was shifting. *God, there’s more*, he thought dejectedly. Soon the background took shape, details coming into focus.

Beacon Hills Memorial Hospital. He was walking down a deserted hallway. He was on the phone.

“Yeah, I said I can’t find her.”

He remembered this. Derek was outside in the car. Stiles was looking for Peter. He watched himself walk down the abandoned corridor at the hospital, rolling his eyes slightly at whatever Derek was saying on the other end. He turned left and peered inside the hospital room that was supposed to harbor a catatonic Peter. The bed was empty, pink bedspread perfectly made up, the tray next to it
“Yeah, well he’s not here either. He’s not here. He’s gone, Derek.”

Then in the blink of an eye the room changed. The bed was now messy and unmade, the bedspread blue instead of soft pink. The tray had a glass on it. He watched himself slowly drop the phone and back out of the room. In the distance he could barely make out Derek’s muffled shouts over the phone informing him that Peter was the alpha. He remembered the all-consuming fear. He also remembered –

“You must be Stiles.”

Yes, there he was. Peter. Still with the burns on his face, looking oddly serene. Thinking back this was the single scariest encounter he’d ever had with him. Which was saying quite a lot actually. But there was just something uncontrollable and almost psychopathic about him that night.

And there was that scary nurse as well. Stiles watched in fascination as everything played out the way he remembered it. Derek showing up to save his hind. Derek knocking out the nurse. So weird that she’d been called Jennifer too, by the way. Derek and Peter fighting. Peter winning…

Something caught his attention. A flicker. At first he thought it was the lights. His former self was covering by a desk, watching in stunned disbelief and fear as the two werewolves battled for dominance. But then he too noticed it. On and off, on and off.

Even though Stiles knew what would happen next it was still a shock to see it play out. The three dread doctors marched in eerie unison down the corridor. Passed the knocked out nurse and further towards Stiles’ hiding place. One of them glanced down at him, his cane narrowly missing Stiles’ foot. He didn’t dare move. Hardly dared to breathe.

By now Peter had gained the upper hand, and Derek was trying to crawl away. Away from Stiles, luring Peter after him, leaving him safe behind. The doctors followed them in their strange march. Stiles, ever the risk taker, followed.

In the end Derek was trapped inside an exam room. Peter in his ridiculous Matrix leather coat sauntered in after him. He didn’t seem to notice he had followers. Or he didn’t care. He paused by a mirror – one of those round ones you could turn around and it magnified your reflection slightly. The doctors followed, and stopped in a half circle behind him. On the floor Derek gasped audibly. Stiles peered inside the room.

“I was going to wait, for dramatic flair – but – When you look this good, why wait?”

Peter grabbed hold of the mirror just as one of the doctors grabbed hold of his neck, tilting it to the side. A huge syringe with a yellowish liquid appeared magically out of nowhere. The doctor rammed it into Peter’s neck and pushed the contents in. Peter screamed and thrashed. Derek growled.

The mirror flipped round and round, and before their eyes Peter’s burns shrunk and healed. When the mirror stilled, the doctors were as gone as Peter’s burns. The last thing Stiles heard before the memory faded out was Peter pleading with Derek.

“Derek, you have to give me a chance to explain. After all, we are family.”

Please no more, begged Stiles in desperation. His head felt like it was about to explode from the onslaught of memories that had been unlocked. He couldn’t possibly take any more. There couldn’t possibly be more. Right?
Wrong.

When his surroundings came into focus again it wasn’t his living room. In fact he was still at the hospital. In a hospital room this time, the torturous sound of a machine beeping periodically in the background. He was lying on a cot, sleeping restlessly.

Oh no, oh no. This couldn’t be true. This wasn’t happening. Stiles panicked, trashed and kicked, but he was just a bystander. His former self slept on. In the bed beside him his dad laid, pale and hooked up to a myriad of tubes.

The lights flickered. The Stiles on the cot mumbled in his sleep and twisted around like a contortionist. On the other side of his dad’s bed the Dread Doctors flickered into existence and fanned out in a line by the bed. Their wheezing sounded impossibly loud in the silent room. Loud enough to wake him up.

He flailed into a sitting position with no grace and a muffled yell. The doctors turned their heads towards him in perfect unison.

“Condition unsatisfactory,” diagnosed the one closest to Stiles.

“Control is strengthened,” added another.

“Suppressant is advisable,” commandeered the last one. It was wearing an embroidered vest and seemed to be in charge of the freak show. The other two nodded, which looked uncomfortable with the heavy masks, but it was not like he had any sympathy to give. Especially not when the one closest to him disappeared just to reappear a second later, right next to Stiles. A scary looking contraption with a claw-like end were forced down towards his eye. The scream that followed should’ve woken the entire hospital. He was laying panting on the cot while the doctors realigned at his dad’s bedside.

“Subject is contaminated.”

“Injuries caused by chimera. Subject is changing. Not part of our pool of subjects.”

“Should subject be terminated?”

“No,” wheezed Stiles, trying to scramble to his feet. They were talking about his dad. Don’t they dare hurt him!

“Subject is responding favorably,” concluded Fancy-Vest. “An unintentional candidate. Subject should be monitored.”

One of the doctors grabbed his dad’s chin and forced his mouth open. Next a yellow liquid was poured down his throat. His eyes blinked open as if electrified.

“Doctor,” he muttered.

“Reset memories,” commanded Fancy-Vest. Then the light flickered again, and when they stopped the doctors were gone. Stiles was once again asleep on the cot as if time had been reversed. When his dad murmured again, he woke.

The memory faded out.

Stiles felt sick. He needed to throw up. He needed to wake the fuck up from this freaky trip down memory lane. He took it all back. He didn’t want to know this. God, it was bad enough that the
doctors were tinkering with Derek and him. But now they were messing with his dad as well. And that was Theo’s fault. Stiles was going to pummel him into an unrecognizable pulp the next time their paths crossed!

Unfortunately the visions weren’t over. The hospital room faded out. For a moment all Stiles could see was white. Just white. But then contours started to appear again. First a chair, then a door. With a jolt Stiles realized they were still at the hospital. God! Had the doctors did more freaky stuff to his dad?

But it wasn’t his dad laying in the hospital bed this time. Stiles’ heart fell straight through his stomach and landed on the floor, flat and broken.

It was his mom.

His beautiful, wonderful mom. Looking small and weak, but still stunning, like all young boys regarded their mothers at that age. In a chair next to her sat young Stiles. Looking forlorn, sad and small. Shoulders hunched, eyes down-cast. Stiles remembered that day. It had been a bad one. A day when his mom’s memories were particularly poor. She hadn’t recognized him when he came to see her. His dad was outside in the corridor talking to the doctors. When he strained his ears he could hear muffled arguments.

Her voice was weak, but the boy had no trouble hearing her.

“Who’s there?”

Little Stiles jumped to his feet, almost lost his balance in his haste to rush to her bedside. His mom was startled and confused.

“Who are you?”

Young Stiles’ face fell. He actually shrunk, curled in on himself. This wasn’t the first time. But it hurt just as much. And it wouldn’t be the last. These were the kinds of memories of his mom Stiles had done his best to push to the back of his mind. Lock down. Hide.

The lights flickered. Outside thunder rolled across the sky. By now the shock had worn off. By now it was expected. Ever since this vision materialized Stiles knew the doctors would appear again. It was still pure torture to see them suddenly in the room. Little Stiles gasped and reared back. He crashed into the chair and fell to the ground with a muffled oomph. He stayed there. Whimpered and called out almost inaudibly for his dad.

The doctors gathered by Claudia’s bedside. Shockingly she seemed unafraid. It was with a jolt Stiles realized that she actually remembered them. Her brain was breaking down, was failing her, but these monstrous beings she recalled. It was as unfair as it was heart-stoppingly terrifying.

“Prognosis not promising,” chanted Fancy-Vest in the monotone and mechanical voice Stiles now knew and hated with abandon.

“Subject will soon terminate,” affirmed a second doctor. His mom just watched with a half-smile as a needle was injected into her arm. Another entered the back of her neck. She hissed slightly. Her arm reached out and fiddled with the clasps on one of the doctor’s coats.

Stiles wanted to scream at her. Wanted to shake her. But there was nothing he could do. He watched in frozen horror as the syringe was slowly filled with some kind of yellowish liquid. Idly he wondered what it was, but with a jolt he realized he knew the answer. It was the essence of someone supernatural. Their ability. What made them special, different from human beings. It’s what the
doctors used to create their own experiments. Like with everything else, you couldn’t make something out of nothing. You needed an agent, a catalyst, a genome of sorts to induce the desired change. And he was now watching the Dread Doctors pull it out of his mom. His mom who was dying. Whose mind was withering away and who would not be of any use to the doctors for much longer.

Had they created her? Was she a chimera like Theo? Or had his mom been supernatural somehow? All questions he might never learn the answer to.

“The boy has promise.”

The statement came unexpected. Even the other two doctors seemed – well, not surprised exactly. That was probably an emotion outside of their range. But still clearly something they hadn’t factored in judging by their silence. The one with the monocle bent down and lifted little Stiles off the floor. Stiles was crying, tears streaming down his face. He was kicking, feet going fast but too short to hit its intended target.

“Subject will be receptive,” the doctor agreed. “He could be the key.”

The lights flickered again, and then Stiles was surrounded by the doctors. Fancy-Vest brandished the syringe with his mom’s essence. When the needle penetrated his neck he screamed so loud a flock of birds took flight from the tree outside the window.

Thunder rolled again. The lights flickered. When the door opened and his dad walked in looking tired and drawn, little Stiles was back in his chair as if nothing had happened. His mom was asleep.

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Stiles snapped back to reality with a groan. He doubled over on the floor, stomach churning. Spots danced before his eyes, and his breath were coming in shallow gasps.

“Stiles? Stiles! What’s the matter? Stiles?”

From far away he could hear Derek’s worried voice. It sounded tinny, hollow and god, he was cold-sweating. Don’t let me pass out, he thought pleadingly. He was pathetic enough as it was. He didn’t need to add “fainting” to the list. Especially not in front of Derek.

“Stiles! STILES!”

Derek sounded panicked. Warm hands grabbed his shoulders and pulled him off the floor. Soon he was back on the couch, Derek beside him. Stiles needed air! He needed oxygen. He couldn’t breathe. God, he was suffocating.

“Calm down, it’s okay. Stiles, it’s okay.”

Stiles doubled over, felt his stomach turn. God, he was going to throw up!

“Move,” he wheezed out, arms wind-milling in every direction. Derek let out a low groan. Stiles had hit him – somewhere. He didn’t care. He scrambled towards the end of the couch and barely managed to get his head over the edge before the entire contents of his stomach landed with a sickening splat on the floor.
It took forever for the spasms in his stomach to die down. By then he was drenched in sweat, tears streaming freely. It wasn’t until he let his head loll back against the couch that he realized Derek was holding him. Tightly.

“What’cha doing?” he asked woozily.

“God, you scared me, Stiles,” muttered Derek, voice oddly small. Stiles could feel his warm breath on the back of his neck.

“Sorry,” he muttered, body boneless and limp.

“Don’t apologize. I’m just glad you’re okay.”

Stiles shook his head. “I’m not. I’ll never be okay again. And my mouth tastes like the remnants of an Orangutan that crawled into a sewer, died and rotted away.”

“You stink like it too,” offered Derek helpfully. Stiles elbowed him – well, not hard. He didn’t have the strength for that. Derek laughed softly. It tickled.

“You want to talk about it?”

Stiles froze. No. Not really. He wanted to forget all about it, to be honest. Reading the book was a terrible idea. Perhaps his worst yet and sort of like unlocking something out of Nightmare on Elm Street.

“No. I don’t want to. But I have to. I just…. I just need a minute.”

He more felt than saw Derek nod. With exception of the smell he was quite comfortable right here. It must be murder on Derek’s sensitive wolf nose, though.

“You go take a shower,” suggested Derek with a light push, confirming his suspicions. Stiles groaned. “I’m not carrying you up, you can crawl if need be. I will however clean up this mess, for which you will owe me, big time.”

Stiles tried to mobilize his last shreds of energy. It wasn’t much, but it was enough to keep him upright.

“S’not fair,” he mumbled.

“Neither is your smell,” retorted Derek. “Now kindly point me towards your cleaning supplies.”

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Half an hour later Stiles was clean, fed (Derek had whipped up an omelet while Stiles was in the shower) and feeling marginally better. He’d also haltingly managed to tell Derek about the unlocked memories, both the ones with and without Derek.

“They’ve been around since I was a kid, Derek,” wailed Stiles, borderline hysterical. “Probably much, much longer. Clearly they’re trying to accomplish something, and their pool of subjects keep expanding. My mom was a subject, but I guess her illness got in the way. Or the experiments made her sick. I don’t really know, I only have that one memory to base it on. But it did look like she recognized them, so I’m guessing it wasn’t the first time they paid her a visit.”
Derek had been silent for a while, face unreadable.

“I’m going to demand Scott and the others read it backwards as well. Even my dad will have to. At this rate everyone in this freaking town could be a chimera, Derek. What is this place? What’s so special about Beacon Hills?”

Derek simply shrugged, but didn’t comment. Stiles for his part was livid. What kind of non-reaction was that? He was spilling information of monumental importance and all amnesiac-wolf did was sit around looking slightly pensive. They should be rallying the troops, getting their head in the game, organize some deep-shit research effort to discover the origins and agendas of these freaks.

“What’s your problem?” he hissed, none too kindly, pacing back and forth in front of the couch. He was regaining his strength, getting a second wind. And also getting pretty worked up. How could Derek just sit there and say nothing? This was huge!

“Too many to count,” muttered Derek, evidently not rising to Stiles’ bait.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Stiles was back to his one man flailing show. If there were scholarships for that he’d be all set for college.

Derek sighed deeply, and leveled Stiles with one of those penetrating looks. The ones that pinned you in place. The kind you couldn’t escape.

“It means exactly what it means, Stiles. I have many problems, memory loss being just one of them. This adds to it, sure it does. But freaking out about it won’t help me. It won’t help you either.”

“Freaking out won’t make it worse either!” half screamed Stiles in frustration. “Weird out-of-this world, possibly time-travelling doctors of dread are poking at us with sharp instruments, injecting or ejecting freaky yellow stuff into us, which means I think I have justifiable cause for at least a minor breakdown. Okay!”

“Okay.”

That took the wind out of Stiles. He slumped down onto the couch again, and fell into a prolonged silence.

In the end it was Derek who broke it.

“Okay, so this is worse.”

“Huh?” Stiles vaguely registered the remark. He’d been buried ten feet in depressing and increasingly self-destructive thoughts.

“This,” Derek gestured to Stiles general facial area. “It is unnatural for you to be quiet for this long. It unnerves me. And I’m pretty sure you’re busy mentally pushing yourself off a cliff and into a bottomless pit for which you have no intention of resurfacing.”

Stiles just gaped. Again. Because - Derek. Derek and words. Such a weird combination. Though, he was oddly good at it. Proficient even. But yeah, odd.

“Well,” he began defensively. “Firstly, you talk too much. That unnerves me. And secondly, don’t presume to know what I’m thinking, okay. I’m just trying to piece it all together. To come up with a game plan.”

Derek shook his head with a sad smile. “No, you’re not.”
“Excuse me?”

“No, you’re not,” he repeated, no trace of either joking or trying to provoke. He looked at Stiles with understanding. Which was – well, he didn’t know what it was, but it made him squirm. And he felt oddly naked. Like Derek was seeing him. Really seeing him.

“You’re not working on the hints or trying to find patterns. Not right now. You will, though. You always do. But right now, I’m betting you’re thinking that the doctors did something to you. Just like they did something to the other teenagers you told me about. And they acted out. They attacked people. Killed them even. And all without really knowing it themselves. As if they didn’t have control.”

The room turned deadly silent. It took a while before Stiles realized he wasn’t breathing. There wasn’t any oxygen left in the room. Derek had sucked it all out with his too close to home analysis. But he wasn’t done.

“Right now I’m betting you’re thinking there was no Nogitsune. Aren’t you?”

And there it was. Damn you Derek Hale.

Stiles pursed his lips together and averted his eyes. That was exactly what he was thinking. Had been thinking for a while even, before the doctors came and before the memories were restored. Fearing that perhaps all that fly thing had done was to break down his natural defenses, peel away the morals and the rules and release the real Stiles.

“Stiles?”

Derek’s voice was low and surprisingly mild. He didn’t sound angry. He should be. He should be mad as hell! Stiles had wreaked havoc on the town, no matter what the cause was. And worse yet – the weird abilities he was finally coming to tentative terms with were surely artificial. A result of whatever weird juice had been pumped into him. It wasn’t something dormant and pure, something that had been cultivated and grown organically. It was something foreign, something toxic, and something stolen from his own mother.

“Don’t do this, Stiles,” urged Derek. “I know what you’re doing. You’re blaming yourself. You’re thinking there is something wrong with you. That you’re bad.”

“I am,” mumbled Stiles. “I am bad.”

Was the walls getting closer? It felt like they were. Like the house was shrinking around him, boxing him in. Suffocating him. It was all too much. I make everything worse, he thought dejectedly.

“You’re not.” Derek’s voice was unwavering. Stiles shook his head. He didn’t need some former alpha werewolf to coddle him or try to make this better. There was no getting better.

“It doesn’t matter if it’s the doctors, a nogitsune or a demon fly,” he mumbled into his hands. “I’m too weak to resist when something attacks my mind. I can’t be trusted. I don’t trust myself anymore. Not my own mind, not my control and not my ideas. I used to think I was at least useful at the research and the plans. But no one ever listens to what I have to say anyway. No one trusts me. Why should I trust myself? I keep yelling at Scott for not trusting me, but the truth is I don’t trust me. So why should he?”

It felt like he was breaking apart. Dried up, slowly turning to dust, like that fucked up clone. He’d been ready to die that day. Lately Stiles had been thinking he should’ve. He was on borrowed time as it was.
“I trust you.”

Stiles heard the words, but they made no sense. They had no meaning. The people who he’d counted on the most had gradually, either through words, actions or in-actions shown him that he didn’t hold their trust anymore. Scott, who trusted everyone but him. Malia who had been more fixated on her mom and also seemed to have a connection with Theo – both things she’d kept from him. He realized he was mostly to blame for the shaky state of his relationship with his dad. But they were mending fences, re-building the Stilinski bond. And his dad would never turn his back on him, he knew that now. But trust him? He wasn’t so sure they were there yet. Lydia he still felt was mostly in his corner, but locked away at Eichen, she could little do to quell his doubts.

Having Derek Hale saying he trusted him? Well, that seemed like a platitude and nothing more.

“You don’t believe me.”

He didn’t even phrase it as a question. It was written all over Stiles’ face, the hunch of his shoulders, his entire body language.

“You should. You should believe me, because it’s the truth.” Derek spoke softly, and he sounded sincere, Stiles would give him that. But it didn’t compute.

“I don’t trust easily, Stiles,” he said calmly. “Neither do you. Don’t even bother denying it. I think anyone who’s lost someone while young; whose heart have been shattered by seemingly senseless and unfair actions, will meet the world and people with skepticism.”

He was hitting close to home. Stiles shrugged minutely.

“When Laura was killed I lost the last remnants of faith in the world. I was left with a mess of rogue alphas, a newly bitten beta in denial and a clan of hunters out for my blood. I was in a dark place. I never expected anyone to give a damn about me, to trust me, to help me. I had given up on people, I expected the worst. And then you flailed into my life.”

Stiles froze, then felt his heartbeat pick up. What was Derek on about?

“This obnoxious little shit with the sassy commentary and in-my-face attitude. Scott was trying his best to avoid the supernatural. You on the other hand ran straight into it, willingly and recklessly. I still remember how you confronted me in your dad’s squad car after you’d dug up Laura’s body and you thought I’d done it. You were scared, but you were even more curious.”

Stiles snorted. “If I’d known what I know now I would’ve moved to dad’s sister in Iowa.”

Derek laughed softly. “No, you wouldn’t.”

“Probably not,” Stiles reluctantly conceded.

“My point is,” continued Derek. “You’ve always tried to help me. When I thought I was dying of wolfbane poisoning you were willing to cut my arm off, even though it terrified you. You dived into a pool and held me up for two hours. And when everyone else, Scott included, still regarded werewolves as monsters, you never did. You always saw our human side. You always knew it was about balance. You saved Cora. You helped look for Erica and Boyd. Need I go on?”

His cheeks were burning. Nothing of what Derek had mentioned was wrong. And yet believing that he actually did trust him – well, it still didn’t seem right.

“You know about anchors right?”
The question came out of nowhere. Stiles met Derek’s eyes for the first time since his little outburst.
What did that have to do with anything?

“Yeah, it’s something to help you keep control. You taught that to Scott when he was first bitten. His
anchor was Allison, which was fine and dandy until they broke up. Seems to me like the whole
anchor thing is a bit dodgy. Anchors hold you in place, sure. But it also keeps you static and hinders
development and change. So it can potentially drag you down with it, or if you lose it, you’ll be
unprepared to weather the storm alone and you lose yourself completely.” Stiles paused for a
moment, then shrugged. “I do believe it’s about balance, but I don’t see how anchors help achieve
that.”

Derek nodded. “You might be right. But it is what I was taught, so I don’t know anything else.”

Stiles shook his head. “That’s not true actually. Although you don’t remember this part, I guess.
Satomi – you remember her right?” Derek nodded. “Her pack uses this mantra – “what three things
cannot be hidden – the sun, the moon, the truth”. That is basically about balance - you’re wolf
under the moon, human under the sun and the truth is basically that it’s the balance of it all that
counts. I think the alpha, beta, omega stuff with the Triskele is sort of about the same thing, only it’s
not as obvious and relatable. The Triskele didn’t work for Liam. The mantra did, though.”

“That sounds vaguely familiar,” said Derek slowly. “Huh, perhaps some things are coming back to
me? Or I’ve maybe heard the mantra before? But yes, if you place all your faith in one thing or a
person, things might get murky if something happens to it, or to the person or the relationship. For
me my anchor used to be family. It was my constant and it kept me in balance. It seemed safe,
because my family was so big. Even if one would leave or die, it would still be a unit I could count
on. And then it was taken from me. And I was to blame for that. And I know you know about Kate.”

He paused, eyes trained at his hands. “You’ve known for a while, haven’t you?”

“Maybe.”

Stiles had never felt comfortable thinking about that part of Derek’s history. Not because he blamed
him or thought less of him. Far from it. But feeling guilt over someone’s death, even when logically
there was no way he could be to blame, yeah that was something Stiles knew all too well. He still felt
to blame for his mom’s death, even though there was no rhyme or reason to that. At least not in other
people’s eyes. Most recently there were Allison and Donovan.

“I thought so.” Derek didn’t quite meet his eyes. “But you never said anything about it. Not to me at
least? And not to Scott either I guess.”

Stiles shook his head. “Not my story to tell.”

“Well, I appreciate that. And it actually adds to the reasons for why I trust you. Anyway, family was
taken from me, and I was consumed with anger. Mostly directed at myself mind you. It became my
new constant. My anchor.”

“Well, that’s just stupid,” commented Stiles without thought. Derek actually laughed.

“I agree. It helped with control, but focusing your entire existence on such a destructive emotion…
Let’s just say I wasn’t the happiest of beings.”

“Understatement of the Millennia.” Stiles felt a good eye roll was appropriate. “There was a reason
why I named you sourwolf, you know. I still don’t get why we’re talking about this.”

“I’m getting to it.”
Derek was silent for a moment. He cleared his throat and leaned forward slightly making sure he had Stiles’ attention.

“I didn’t notice at first. That my anchor had changed. In all honesty I don’t think I fully realized it until yesterday, to be honest. I know there are stuff I don’t remember, like shifting to a full wolf. I asked my mom about that when I was a kid and she said anyone could do it, but that it required fully accepting who you are. You told me I lost my powers. I think that must have kick-started it and I hope I get those memories back, Stiles, I really do. But I’m pretty sure my journey to that transformation started when my anchor changed.”

Stiles still wasn’t getting it. His frustration must have shown, because Derek sighed deeply as if steeling himself and then –

“You’re my anchor, Stiles.”

What the - ?

WHAT?

If he wasn’t sitting down, Stiles would’ve fallen to the floor. It was like being hit by a ten ton rock of what-the-actual-fuck.

“I don’t get it.”

He really didn’t. Why would Derek Hale feel that skinny, defenseless Stiles would help tether him?

“You became my constant. You were the only one who always came back, who always tried to help, who wasn’t afraid of me, who didn’t see me as a freak. Because Stiles, when I was shot by the woman who tricked me, who killed my family and stole my innocence, my mind escaped to a safe place – to you. I needed you to guide me. Because I trust you. I trust your judgment. And I don’t give a flying fuck about nogitsunes or demon flies, Stiles. I trust you.”

A dam broke, instinct took over and before he knew what he was doing, Stiles was clinging to Derek. Clutching him so tightly he’d bruise if he weren’t blessed with healing powers.

“Thank you,” he muttered into his shoulder. Derek hugged him back. No more words were necessary. They stayed like that for a long time, and when they finally broke apart, it wasn’t even awkward. Not as much as it should be at any rate.

Utterly spent and exhausted to the core, Stiles retreated to bed, leaving Derek behind in the living room. For the first time in a long while, Stiles breathed freely. He fell asleep immediately.

Chapter End Notes

IF you haven’t ever noticed the odd changes mid-scene to both Stiles’ room and Peter’s hospital room in episode 1x09 I recommend a rewatch. It's so odd I decided to use it as a plot point in this story and link it to the doctors. These are far from the only such weird shifts in the show. In meta circles we call it "mirror verse".
Chapter 11

Stiles woke incredibly early. Before the alarm even. Lately his sleep habits had been at polar opposites. Either he didn’t sleep at all, or he slept deeply, trapped in nightmares and didn’t wake until the alarm blasted his ears off. Today he woke of his own accord, feeling rested. It felt like being born anew.

It was too early to head out for school, so he spent an hour googling Dread Doctors and chimeras. Needless to say he didn’t find anything particularly helpful, and was instead pulled into a Wikipedia wormhole that led him in strange an unexpected places, but with little practical applications. He hoped Scott had gotten hold of Chris Argent again. He’d promised to look for information with the Calaveras but that was days ago. They could use a fresh perspective and some new books to comb through. They would also need Lydia and her amazing translation and organizational skills for that. But one problem at a time.

Bounding down the stairs like an overexcited hippo, he’d totally forgotten Derek was camped out on the couch. However, Derek was already awake, curled up in the corner with the Grisham novel he’d started the day before, looking soft, cuddly and as if he belong there. Stiles immediately activated his best tactic for well, anything, and ignored the notion. Besides he had hunger pains that needed to be remedied. Come to think of it, lack of nourishment was probably why he was having such silly delusions in the first place.

They ate breakfast (just cereal, Derek had used the last of the eggs for the omelet last night) in companionable silence. Derek rinsed their bowls afterwards and put them in the dishwasher while Stiles ran upstairs to brush his teeth.

It struck him while driving to school that life with Derek, although it had only been a day, felt surprisingly natural. Which was both frightening and awesome. IT would also most likely end in some sort of epic heartbreak on Stiles’ part. Not that he was really comfortable thinking about that or god forbid admit to any such thing. Just hypothetically.

Yeah. He was screwed. And not the fun, sexy kind of screwed. Also, his inner monologues were getting weirder by the day. Probably not a good sign.

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The school day was – well, sort of anti-climactic actually. Observing the students milling between classes, the teachers droning on about the topic of the day and the uninspired lunch served in the cafeteria, it was almost as if supernatural experiments, hunters and general mayhem wasn’t happening right under their noses. Which basically meant it was boring as hell. Safe yes, but mind-numbingly dull. Stiles had to admit he was probably in the process of developing a dependence on adrenaline just to function normally.

So yes, definitely screwed, and on more than one front. Lovely.

Stiles got a test back with an A. He’d forgotten all about it, so it was a nice surprise to be reminded that although his personal life and mental health was in shambles, at least his academic achievements would withstand the trials. It was marginally reassuring.
Without getting into specifics Stiles informed Scott, Liam and Mason that he’d had a breakthrough and wanted to see them after school. During lunch he made photocopies of the Dread Doctors book and stealthily brought Kira (who was back in school) up to speed on what had happened. She promised to be there as moral support. He appreciated the gesture. Getting the boys to reread the book would be a challenge. Except Mason. Mason would be through the roof. Stiles secretly suspected Mason lived on pure sugar and Redbull.

The only moderate action of the day came about in the boys’ bathroom of all places. Stiles had been doing his business and was washing his hands when the door burst open and Theo sauntered in.

“Ah, Stiles Stilinski, there you are,” he announced unnecessarily. Stiles only narrowly managed to clamp down the urge to splash the front of Theo’s jeans with water. Childish yes, but what could he say? Theo brought out the worst in him.

“Stiles Stilinski is leaving now,” he retorted flatly. He made a production out of drying his hands, then balled up the paper towel and lobbed it over Theo’s head. Skill (luck, all luck) placed it perfectly in the bin by the door.

“Have a good day, sir. I hope you get run over by a trailer or slowly pecked to death by starving hens.”

Theo leaned casually against one of the stalls, arms crossed. He was smirking. Stiles possibly wanted to beat him repeatedly. With a lead pipe. Wrapped in barbed wire.

“Hens? Really?” Theo raised the obligatory villain brow. “You do realize that I probably heal faster than hens can cause me fatal damage?”

Stiles shrugged. “Probably. But I’d pay good money to watch it anyway. And who knows, perhaps I’ll get hold of some chimera hens. Crossed with, hmmm let’s go with some sort of snake. The Hen Viper has a nice ring to it. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m late to -” He paused dramatically, hand to his chin in a pensive pose. “Come to think of it I’m not late for anything. I just want to put as much distance as possible between the two of us.”

“Wait, Stiles! We need to talk, you know we do.” Theo’s smarmy composure crumbled. “I can help you guys. I know more about the doctors and what’s going on than the lot of you combined. If you’d just join up with me then –“

Stiles didn’t hear the rest of it. He’d exited the room with speed and agility few knew he possessed. A muffled “Hey!” could be heard on the other side of the door. Stiles walked on. He smiled manically when loud banging echoed in his wake.

“Stilinski! STILINSKI! Get back here! Did you fucking lock the door? How did you lock the door? It doesn’t even have a lock… STILES!”

Stiles kept on walking. His good mood lasted the rest of the school day.

***

“You’re kidding me!”

Liam threw the newly photocopied Dread Doctor compendium on the table with a dull thud and an
unnecessarily raised middle finger. Rude much?

“I am in fact not kidding,” clarified Stiles calmly, exuding patience. He knew this would be an uphill battle and had mentally prepared all day. He picked up the book and threw it back at Liam’s lap.

“Like I just explained to you people, in vivid detail I might add, reading this book backwards will unlock memories of the doctors. Provided you’ve come across them, of course. I’m praying you’ve not had the displeasure, but better safe than sorry, right?”

He looked around the room with false cheerfulness. They all had his deepest sympathy. The book was. Well, reading it backwards did not notably improve its quality.

“But I just finished it,” whined Liam, feet on the table and arms crossed like a petulant child. Wait – he was a petulant child.

“It was horrifically bad. Like Twilight bad, only worse. I don’t want to do subject myself to that again.”

Five sets of eyes stared at him with open disdain. “What? Why are you looking at me like that?” Liam was confused. “It’s not like any of you love this book or anything, right?”


“Really, Liam? You’ve read books about sparkly vampires and imprinting werewolves? Hoping to pick up pointers?” Stiles couldn’t resist. It was wonderful to not always be the brunt of every joke. So yay for new betas.

“No…” Liam protested weakly, but the werewolves in the room had clearly picked up on an irregularity in his heartbeat. He flushed crimson.

“It was for research purposes,” he clarified. “In case vampires were real – which yes I now know they aren’t. For which I’m grateful. Also it contained werewolves, and I’ve basically read most of the existing literature on the subject. Chances are some of these authors know what they’re talking about. Stephanie Meyer not so much. And yes I know the name of the author,” he added matter-of-factly when Liam in particular looked too smug for his own good.

“I knew Lydia loved the Notebook, so I thought perhaps she liked all sorts of romance novels and stories. I basically read it to impress her, but I actually ended up with a 45 minute lecture on how Edward is a total creep, how he strips Bella of her autonomy and is a huge setback for feminists everywhere. I learned a lot that day,” he reminisced with a slight shudder. “A word to the wise – never breach the topic of 50 Shades of Grey with Lydia Martin. Now – can we please get back on track?”

Scott, Liam and Mason reluctantly picked up their copies and settled down to read. They perked up
slightly when Stiles set out bowls of popcorn as a small token of his appreciation. Stiles and Kira settled down by the dining table to do some homework. Derek had evidently finished the first novel and was now engrossed in a tome of unknown origin. Stiles was conveniently positioned so that he had a prime view of the werewolf sitting in his dad’s favorite chair. Somehow he managed to make reading look like porn. Stiles possibly enjoyed watching Derek lick his fingers before turning a page.

“What?” he asked when Kira started giggling under her breath. She shook her head and tried to school her face in serious folds, but if there was one thing Kira Yukimura was not, it was subtle. Stiles actually found that quality oddly endearing.

“Nothing,” she mumbled, faking interest in her current assignment. Stiles knew there was no way anyone could look that engrossed in Polynomial Functions and not be hiding something.

“Please indulge me,” he pleaded, pushing his history assignment to the side. “The hapless trio over there won’t be done for a long time yet. I know how slowly Scott reads. Doing it back to front will not help speed things up. Also, I need a break.”

Kira looked flushed. “A break from what? Not your homework at any rate. You haven’t turned the page once.”

Stiles flailed. “So not important. Besides I’m constructing mental mind maps.”

Kira snorted. “Sure you are. It’s nothing really. I just get it now. What Scott meant when he said it’s different now.”

Stiles was confused. He was clearly missing a piece of the puzzle. Or all of the pieces. He was so very lost. “I’m not sure I follow.”

Kira sighed. “It was when we went to see Valack at Eichen House. You and Lydia went on and we had to stay back because of the mountain ash. I asked Scott if you still liked Lydia. He said yes, but it’s different now. I thought he meant that you’d moved on from crush to love. But clearly not the sort of love I was thinking of. You’re not in love with Lydia anymore, right?”

Stiles had not expected that. Frankly it threw him for a loop. He hadn’t thought of Lydia like that for a long time. Probably not since before Jackson left. But Kira was right. He did love her. And yes it was different now.

“No,” he admitted. “As strange as it might be, and given the detailed 5 and then later 10 year plans I had mapped out to win her love, I must admit I’m not in love with her. I do love her, though. And I miss her. Terribly.”

“Me too,” whispered Kira. “It’s not the same without her. I miss Malia too.” She paused, biting her lip and fiddling with her pen. It was leaking. Her fingers had several blue ink spots on them.

“I guess you do too. Right?”

And there it was. The question. The question he didn’t really know the answer to. Did he miss Malia? In a sense, yes. She was direct, to the point and easy to be around. But she was also slightly out of tune with him and didn’t fully get his jokes or brand of humor. And more importantly – he wasn’t in love with her either.

“Yeah,” he said reluctantly. “And no. I think we’re more or less broken up. It was implied at least.” Kira’s eyes flitted around the room, eyes creasing with mirth at one point, before focusing on him again.
“That’s too bad,” she offered. “And if I’m perfectly honest, not entirely unexpected. I love Malia to bits, I really do. I just never got the impression you were all that happy together. I’m sorry if that is blunt.”

“I appreciate blunt, hard as it might be,” joked Stiles.

“Good.” Kira smiled sheepishly. “I don’t have a diplomatic bone in my body. And I’m about to ask a very personal question.”

Before Stiles had the good sense to be scared she dropped this bomb on him.

“You’re bi, right?”

Off to the side a loud bang startled them both. For Stiles it was a welcome reprieve and gave him a few seconds to gather his wits. What was it with girls and asking him these kinds of questions anyway? Where were they getting their suspicions or whatnot?

Out of the corner of his eye he registered that Derek had dropped his tome to the floor. Probably in shock or disgust. And of course he had been eavesdropping, like the creeper he was. Liam and Scott on the other hand didn’t seem to master the gift of multitasking and remained engrossed in their books. At least they had stopped huffing and groaning every five minutes.

He decided to ignore the werewolves among them. Derek should respect his privacy and if he didn’t, well he’d have words with him later. Or possibly just avoid him. Yeah, probably the last one.

Kira was looking at him expectantly. Damn, he’d hoped she’d let him off the hook.

“Why do you ask?” He was both curious and angling for time. He had no idea how to respond to that – and with Derek’s long ears in play it wasn’t like he could lie about it either.

Kira shrugged. “I’m not entirely sure. Mostly because of something Lydia said –”

“What? What did Lydia say? And since when do you sit around analyzing the scope of my sexual attractions?”

Kira shook her head vehemently. “No, no, Stiles, calm down. It was just a passing comment, not a whole topic. We were at the coffee shop, you know the one off Maine? Yeah, not really important, but the barista was this guy, you know tall, dark, handsome with just the right hint of bad boy. In a word he was a hottie. And he flirted pretty shamelessly with Lydia, so I asked her about it after. If she was interested. She said something along the lines of “I’m done with both bad boys and teenagers, so no. Also he’s more Stiles’ type than mine, I think.” “

Stiles had no words. The few words he had before Kira said that had fled his mind with Mach 5 speed and left nothing behind but confusion. Kira didn’t seem to need any words from him anyway. She was clearly on a roll. And she was also right. He knew exactly what barista she was referring to and he was indeed a hottie. A terrible barista, though. Mangled his coffee order every time, but still very pretty to look at.

“Lydia said it in a tone that suggested I should know what she was talking about. I didn’t though, and I think she caught up on that pretty quickly. She tossed her hair like she does when she’s amazed people don’t know the things she knows.”

Stiles knew the toss well.

“I asked her what she meant, but she wouldn’t say anything more. So I’m kind of hoping you’ll tell
me instead.”

Stiles laughed, loudly and possibly a bit manically. Only Mason took notice. Liam and Scott were engrossed. Derek’s book must be a thriller of some kind. He was gripping it so hard, his knuckles where white. Or he was scared of losing it again.

“Trust me when I say this topic has never been discussed between Lydia and myself. What Lydia thinks she knows and what I know are not always in sync, this being a perfect example.”

Kira looked – well, disappointed.

“However,” Stiles continued hesitantly. “Although I have no practical experience to back this up, I think there is a chance the hypothesis might hold some water. Maybe. Possibly. Positively. Oh crap.”

He banged his forehead on the table and then just collapsed in an ungainly heap scattering books, pens and notebooks in all directions. Kira patted his back awkwardly. Even if he couldn’t see her face he knew she was grinning – widely.

“Stop enjoying this so much,” he pleaded.

Kira giggled. “Was Lydia right about your type? If so I think I should warn you that I will be obnoxiously trying to push hot guys at you. You know, for science.”

“Please don’t. All I want in the world right now is to not be in mortal peril or a piece in a game of supernatural chess I know nothing about. Hot people can wait, regardless of gender.”

“Buzz kill,” Kira pouted.

The conversation was effectively put to a stop when Liam keeled over and fell to the floor, gasping for air.

“Holy shit!”

Stiles, Derek and Kira was on their feet in no time. Before they’d reached Liam, Scott let out an ear-deafening roar before starting to hyperventilate. Kira shoved an inhaler (perfectly wolfsbane free, thank you very much) in his hands while Derek hauled Liam to his feet.

“I guess this means it worked,” Kira said, wringing her hands. Mason looked helplessly from the one to the other. His copy of the book laid forgotten on the couch, half unread.

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Although Scott and Liam’s reactions weren’t as bad as Stiles’ had been, it still took close to an hour before they’d calmed down and managed to tell them all about their memories. Mason still hadn’t had any visions, which was good for him. He still had a few chapters left of the book, and he promised to finish it, and certainly not while alone. It could wait till tomorrow anyway.

“This is getting worse by the minute,” muttered Kira, voice quivering slightly. “I knew this place was weird and all, but this is like Buffy bad. Do we live on top of a hellmouth? I feel like we do. Do we?”

Liam and Scott still looked queasy. Mason had managed to find a couple of cans of coke from –
Stiles didn’t know where. Either his dad had secret stashes he didn’t know about, which was so not okay. Or Derek had gone shopping again. Which was – Stiles didn’t know what it was, but it made his chest feel warm and weird. Anyway, so not important right now.

“Probably not,” said Derek distractedly. As far as reassurances went it was a pretty bad one. He didn’t sound like he fully believed it himself.

“So, to recap,” interjected Stiles before the Buffy thing got out of hand. Kira looked like she could burst into a rant at any moment and he had a vague feeling he would be labeled the Willow of the group.

“So in summary, Scott, you remembered the doctors turning up in your kitchen the night of the senior scribe just as you were going to get Kira from the highway. Which means they probably went to Kira straight afterwards. I feel like I should give them props for efficiency or something.”

No one looked to share his sentiment. “Okay, or not. They did a thing with a weird instrument of sorts, you’re hazy on the details which is understandable. They did the same the night we tried to trap them at school. Did I get it right?”

Scott nodded dejectedly. Next to him Liam looked like someone had socked him in the face and then ripped out his soul just to add insult to injury. For all Stiles knew that was exactly what the doctors were doing, one visit at the time. It was not a comforting thought.

“And Liam, oh boy. That was a bit of a shocker, I guess. You’ve actually encountered the doctors more times than any of us. Several times at school if I understood you correctly?”

Liam nodded mutely. “In my mind I thought I was hallucinating the berserkers. Turns out it was the doctors every time. They put that contraption on my arm, like when they took Hayden and me. I have no clue what it does. They came to my room as well.”

Stiles jotted it all down in a notebook in a shaky scrawl he hoped he could decipher later. Not that he was likely to forget it. Or perhaps he was. Who knew when the doctors would turn up to mess with their heads again?”

“But that wasn’t the weirdest part.”

Liam had spoken so softly Stiles didn’t even catch it at first. Derek did though.

“What do you mean by that?” he asked. Liam lifted his head cautiously. He didn’t really know Derek all that well, but the night in the van in Mexico seemed to have left a good impression. He hesitated for a second, then took a deep breath. Stiles had that weird foreboding feeling that their worlds were about to be rocked.

“I remembered them from before as well,” he whispered, voice hoarse and raw.

“What do you mean by that?” he asked. Liam lifted his head cautiously. He didn’t really know Derek all that well, but the night in the van in Mexico seemed to have left a good impression. He hesitated for a second, then took a deep breath. Stiles had that weird foreboding feeling that their worlds were about to be rocked.

“I remembered them from before as well,” he whispered, voice hoarse and raw.

“Before what?”

“Before all of – this.” He gestured limply at the room at large. “Before I was bitten. Before I started acting out at school. Before the IED and smashing my coach’s car. Before I changed schools. I remembered the doctors finding me in the locker room after practice. I’d barely made the team, because, well because I truly sucked. But I was so proud because my stepdad had been teaching me. I was getting better, or at least good enough to warm the bench.” He sighed deeply. “I guess it’s safe to say most of my lacrosse skills are due to supernatural steroids.”

The room was eerily quiet. You could hear a pin drop. No pin was dropped though. Stiles’ mug did
however. Drop to the floor that is, where it broke into a fine dust of porcelain and sprayed coffee in all directions. No one seemed to notice or care.

“Before?” repeated Stiles. “Before before?” He gestured to Scott in particular and then the room at large. Liam nodded.

“I don’t get it,” said Scott. Stiles’ mind was reeling, Scott was processing his own newly discovered memories, so he guessed it was to be expected that he was a bit slow on the uptake.

“Holy cow! That is – that is – WOW!” Kira was going in circles, rotating on her own axis, pulling absentmindedly at the strings on her hoodie.

“What am I missing?” Scott was getting frustrated.

“It means that Liam was probably already changing. Transforming or whatever before you bit him, Scott. If this means what it looks like it means, it basically means that – “

“It means that you didn’t really turn him, Scott.”

Derek broke through and saved Stiles from the knot of words he was spinning in an effort to - well, not hurt Scott, he guessed.

“I didn’t?”

“We can’t be sure, of course. But if the doctors have tinkered with Liam before – which does sort of fit with behavior we’ve noticed with the others, then I guess the bite didn’t really turn him. Perhaps it just expedited the process or something.”

“So you’re saying he’s a chimera?”

Scott was a bit too blunt for Stiles’ taste. Liam shrunk in on himself and whimpered softly. Stiles leveled Scott a fed up look that he seemed to understand if the backpedaling he started was any indication.

“I’m sorry, Liam. I didn’t mean to suggest it would be a bad thing – “

“But it is a bad thing!” cried Liam. “I’m a bad thing, aren’t I?”

“In that case we’re all bad things.”

Derek had moved silently and was now standing right behind Liam. He placed a hand on his shoulder and squeezed lightly. He met Stiles’ eyes across the room and smiled softly. Stiles’ heart jumped. He’d once done that to Derek when he was distraught. Did the smile mean that Derek remembered and appreciated it? And when did he turn into an overanalyzing dork? Who was he kidding? He’d always been an overanalyzing dork.

“These weird doctors have done things to all of us. I’ve read the book today as well –“

“What? You did? ALONE!!!???”

Derek rolled his eyes. “Yes, Stiles. I did it alone. I’m okay.”

Stiles narrowed his eyes at him. Derek looked away for a second. He might not have a wolfy lie detector, but he’d bet good money that he’d not been okay and Derek should stop acting like such a loner. Didn’t he know Stiles would totally be there for him?
Derek plowed on. “I do remember the episodes that you described to me, Stiles, as well as one time in the train depot. By this rate half the town is probably part of their subject pool. We shouldn’t lose our heads just yet. We’re all aware of it now, we should have each other’s back and lastly we need to figure out what they’re trying to accomplish.”

Kira had tugged so hard on the string it had now come completely undone. She was busy twirling it around her fingers in intricate knots.

“They’re clearly trying to create some sort of Ultra Supernatural hybrid monster, right?”

“That much seems obvious,” muttered Stiles. “The real question is why. And what. I have a feeling the answers to those will both be illuminating and terrifying. Scott, did you get a hold of Argent yet?”

Scott shook his head. “No, he’s not picking up. Braeden gave me a number for the Calaveras but it’s been disconnected. I’ve left several messages for him to get back to me, though. I’m crossing my fingers he’ll get them eventually.”

“Peachy.”

Stiles was not feeling optimistic at the moment. But in the meantime there wasn’t all that much they could do. Except try to gather as much information as they possibly could.

“I gather Deaton is still in the wind?” Scott nodded again. “Awesome. Well, I don’t know about you guys but these doctors seem old to me. Their outfits and all just screams vintage in a bad way. I wouldn’t be surprised if they’d been at this for a while. Also we need to remember that I saw them doing stuff to Peter as well. And he turned into a beast alpha thingy. Perhaps that was a result of what they did to him. So given the lack of any real clues I propose we gather as many books we can and start looking for historical encounters of weird hybrids and beastly creatures that doesn’t really fit any “normal” supernatural categories. Derek, do you have any more books and stuff in your family’s vault?”

“It’s possible. There might be some at the loft as well. I managed to salvage a stack of books from our old house. I haven’t looked them over yet, so no idea if it will be of any help. But it’s worth a look.”

Stiles clapped his hands together. Liam jumped slightly. Mason was uncharacteristically somber. Evidently there was a limit to what even he couldn’t meet with untamed enthusiasm.

“Time to go, amigos. My dad is coming back from hospital tomorrow which means I have to sanitize and patient-proof this place.”

Scott snorted. “You’re going to hide all your junk food aren’t you.”

“That too,” admitted Stiles. “Now please leave. We’ll pick this up tomorrow, okay.”

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“What’cha doing?”

Everyone but Derek had left. When Stiles came back from a quick bathroom break he found Derek
that had folded the blankets from the couch neatly into a pile and placed the pillow on top of it. He was idling by the door.

“I’m leaving,” he said, eyebrow raised. “I’m perfectly fine staying at the loft now. You should get the house ready for your dad. I don’t think he’ll be wild about a house guest.”

Stiles just stared at him. What was this gibberish? Why would he have to leave? That was – stupid. And not at all what he wanted. For reasons. And not just because he wanted help with the cleaning.

“Do you want to go back to your loft?”

“Yeah.”

“Really? Back to where the last thing you remember was getting shot in the stomach by your arch nemesis. That doesn’t sound like a good plan. You still have like, amnesia or whatever.”

Derek raised an eyebrow. Damn, he was good at that!

“I would actually think going back there would be a good thing. Perhaps it would trigger some of the repressed memories.”

“Or bring more trauma to the forefront!” Stiles sounded a bit hysterical. Okay, a lot hysterical. He should get a grip. But Derek needed to stay. He wanted him to stay.

“Stiles…” Derek had moved closer. Stiles didn’t realize he was pacing. “Stiles? Hey, would you please stand still for a moment?”

Derek reached out to still him. Stiles felt the touch down to his pinky toe.

“Stiles, do you want me to stay?”

It was such a simple question. However there was no simple answer. Or there was. The answer was simple. The answer was obvious even. It was also complicated. Really complicated.

“Maybe,” he mumbled, not meeting his eyes.

“Then I’ll stay.”

Warmed to the core, Stiles stared uncomprehendingly at Derek who removed his jacket and without prompting started to clean up the mess Liam, Scott and Mason had made. Maybe it wasn’t so complicated after all?

Derek did help clean the place. Afterwards they watched the first Matrix movie and ate popcorn with lots of butter. Stiles argued they needed to eat it all before his dad came home. Derek just smiled and shook his head. They fell asleep next to each other on the couch, both feeling entirely comfortable. If someone had told Stiles this would be possible just a year before he’d chalked it up to a glaring glitch in the Matrix. And maybe it was, but if so he was definitely Cypher in the sense that he didn’t want to wake up, and instead just stay blissfully inside this fake reality for as long as possible.

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Stiles was late getting his dad. He was so, so late. Epically late. He’d overslept, and there had been
no alarm because, well because he’d fallen asleep while watching TV and Derek was such a comfortable pillow he’d slept like a baby for almost 12 hours.

12 hours! It was unheard of! Not since he was a wee child had Stiles slept so long, consecutively and without nightmares. He’d woken up warm, happy, rested and did he mention happy?

On the couch.

With Derek.

_Spooning._

Yeah.

It had been very comfortable. Apparently he really liked being the little spoon. And it was a good thing he was, because parts of Stiles had been particularly happy about the situation, but thankfully not poking at any parts of the werewolf.

It would probably have been all kinds of awkward, but they’d skipped that entirely and moved straight into a Stiles Stilinski panic mode incident when he’d realized the time.

He’d hopped around looking for shoes and his keys. He eventually located the shoes, but the keys were a lost case. In the end he’d just shouted goodbye to Derek, stormed out without them and started his car with his magic mojo thingy. He definitely needed to come up with a better name for it, patent pending.

His dad was all set, camped out in a wheelchair, paperwork already signed and arranged in a neat pile. He looked sourly and annoyed, but as soon as he spotted Stiles it was like a light was switched on.

“Thank god! There you are. I was beginning to think you’d forgotten all about me and was shipping me to a home.”

Stiles panted and shook his head. “No way. No home for you. Not even when you’re senile and in diapers. No home, no sir. Except you know, for your home. At home. You’re – eh, you know – homebound.”

He did a silly little finger dance, then stopped when he realized he was babbling and being a dork. His dad smiled fondly.

“Never change,” he demanded. “Now where is that Melissa with my medication? I swear to god, she’s stalling.”

“I most certainly am not,” said Melissa McCall, voice mock stern, and materializing like a stealthy ninja out of nowhere. “I was just dodging your doting fan club. I thought you might want to skip the teary farewells.”

The sheriff shuddered. “You’re a godsend. I’m recommending you for sainthood.”

“Oh, jolly, will it involve a raise?” she asked sarcastically. “Now, here’s the instructions for your medication. Do not deviate from this. Do not skip anything. Do not experiment with new combinations.”

“Give that to me woman, so I can be on my way.” The sheriff snatched the bag out of her hands, and she stuck a finger in his face.
“I will be watching you, mister. And – “ she turned towards Stiles. “Do not get him wet, and under no circumstance feed him after midnight.”

“Gremlins? You’re comparing me to a gremlin?”

“Aaaaaand we’re out of here,” interjected Stiles and grabbed hold of the wheelchair pushing it hastily down the corridor. Melissa’s laugh was heard until the elevator doors effectively muffled it.

“Cheeky woman.”

Stiles looked down on his dad who was smiling slightly. He knew he had a sort of thing going with Lydia’s mom, which was sort of freaky but also good. But sometimes he wondered if it wouldn’t be a better fit with Scott’s mom. Not that he had any interest in playing cupid.

All thoughts of romantic couplings were forgotten when his dad promptly demanded to know everything.

Everything. Such a scary concept.

***

They arrived home safely without his dad discovering that the Jeep ran smoothly without a key in the ignition. Stiles did his best to distract him with recaps of the search for Deaton and Chris, Theo and the chimeras (which his dad did agree sounded like a bad indie band) and the supernatural chaos at large. When his dad’s eyes strayed in his direction he kept pointing out stuff along the way, claiming his dad needed to take in the sights of the world beyond the hospital. It actually worked. Forced hospitalization actually did make you appreciate things like Starbucks and playgrounds. Two places he incidentally was not ready to let his dad near just yet, so he better admire the view from afar, alright.

When they arrived home, it took half the day to get the sheriff out of the car and into the house. He refused to use the crutches Melissa had insisted he needed, and limped forward at a glacial pace. All offers to help were met with grunts and huffs.

“I’m the sheriff of Beacon County, son. I’m perfectly capable of walking into my own house. Now, shut up and get the door will you?”

The door in question opened as if by magic. For a terrifying moment Stiles thought he was the cause of it. That was not how he wanted to breach the subject of his weird abilities.

“I didn’t do that!” he burst out, arms up. His dad just looked at him oddly.

“Of course you didn’t. You’re next to me. Ah, Mr. Hale. Good to have you back in town.”

Derek stood in the doorway looking caught between extreme awkwardness and ill-concealed adulation.

“I’ve made lunch,” he said somewhat stiltedly.

“Excellent.” The sheriff looked as if Christmas had come early. “Hospital food is a weird concept. They want us to get better, and yet they serve us food that makes you sick.”
“No bacon for you!” yelled Stiles hysterically, an accusing finger pointed at his dad who was making his way slowly up the stairs.

“I see nothing has changed in my absence,” commented his dad dryly. He reluctantly took Derek’s offered hand and limped into the kitchen while Stiles dumped the bag and their jackets in the hallway. In the kitchen the sheriff watched in amused silence as Stiles and Derek weaved in and out of each other’s way, passing plates and dishes around in what looked like practiced sync.

“Oh maybe it has,” he muttered to himself.

***

Derek insisted he needed to go check on the loft after they’d finished breakfast. With his dad firmly situated in his armchair and with a series of recorded games lined up on the DVR Stiles offered to drive him. He needed to get some more groceries anyway, and he wanted to stop by Scott’s to ask about Argent. At the loft, they sat in the car in tense silence for half a minute. Stiles was debating whether or not he should offer to come up with him just in case, but before he’d mustered the courage, Derek exited the car, promised to check out the books at his place and call him later.

And then he was gone.

***

Stiles popped by Scott’s for an update on his way back from the grocery store, but it didn’t yield much new info. He’d once again tried to get a hold of Mr. Argent but still no answer. Stiles noticed that Kira’s red Toyota was parked in the driveway, so he didn’t linger. Not that he wanted to stay exactly, and Scott wasn’t exactly eager to extend an invitation. Without anyone else around to distract or police, their conversation felt stilted and awkward anyway. It was hard imagine just a few weeks back them hanging alone was as natural as breathing. Now it was hard breathing while hanging around each other.

It was as if they both felt a sigh of relief when Scott promised to call the minute he heard anything, Stiles nodded and backed out the door and turned to leave. They might have made tentative plans to get together for another brainstorming the next day, but Stiles knew that without any new developments, that wouldn’t happen.

When he got back, weighed down with more groceries than strictly necessary, his dad was munching on some Oreos. Stiles cursed and snatched the rest of the pack out of his hands, glaring murderously for all the good it did. His dad simply shrugged and licked his fingers. Stiles silently cursed when he realized there were only two cookies left in the pack. The sheriff had clearly gotten his fill and then some. Where he’d found them was a mystery, but Stiles knew better than to try and interrogate him. Reluctantly he let it slide with a look of doom that seemed to intimidate the sheriff about as much as a litter of kittens.

After putting the groceries away, Stiles joined his dad. For a blessed while they just sat in companionable silence. He savored the moment. He needed to tell him about both the memories and his weird abilities. He dreaded both.

“So,” said his dad in a causal tone that Stiles instantly recognized as anything but. “Malia and you
broke up, huh?”

“What? How? Who?” Stiles was confused. He hadn’t talked to his dad about Malia at all. He hadn’t talked to anyone about that, except Kira. Sort of. “Who told you that?”

His dad just glanced at him sideways, face set in a familiar expression that meant he thought Stiles was being obtuse on purpose.

“No one,” he said patiently. “I just assumed, since –.“ He twirled a finger in the air. Stiles had no clue what that was supposed to mean. Was he off his meds already? “Since, you know,” he finished, accompanied by narrow eyes and a head tilt mostly reserved for people under arrest.

Stiles did in fact not know. Whatever his dad knew, he thought he was being clever about it. Stiles recognized the interrogation technique. He was implying that he knew, when in fact he didn’t know, in order to make Stiles think he knew so he’d spill the beans and incriminate himself. It didn’t mean he was wrong though.

“I’m not entirely sure we’ve broken up,” he admitted. Yeah, he kind of walked right into that one. Deliberately. He craved a fresh perspective anyway. “She’s left town. With Braeden. They’re looking for her mom. I guess she’ll be back later, but we kind of left it -- not on a good note, I guess. Relationship-wise I mean. We’re still friends and all, I just don’t –.“ He paused, head down. “We’re too different I think. She doesn’t really understand me. Maybe I don’t understand her either. I don’t know. It just didn’t feel – right, I guess.”

His dad tilted his head and regarded Stiles, an odd expression on his face. It took a while before he responded.

“It’s always sad when relationships end, no matter the reason. I liked Malia. You seemed like a good fit, but the only people who can really decide whether that is true or not are the two of you. I don’t think it’s important for people to be alike. In fact I think it’s important that they’re not. BUT – “ he raised his voice slightly when he noticed Stiles was about to object. “But – being different doesn’t mean you shouldn’t understand where the other is coming from. I think Malia is still adjusting. Perhaps things will be different later. Or perhaps it won’t. I just want you to be happy, son.”

“Thanks, dad.”

His dad chuckled slightly and shook his head. “You’re a fast mover though. I never really thought you would be, you always struck me as oddly obtuse when it came to matters of the heart, whereas you’re too sharp for your own good when it comes to cases and dangerous situations.” He chuckled softly. “Then again, I guess I can’t pretend to know everything about you. Just be careful alright. In all aspects of the word. And the sleepovers ends now that I’m back in the house. I’m still the sheriff, and I’m elected to the job. I’d like to be reelected when the time comes. You catch my drift, son? Keep it on the down low, yeah?”

What the hell?

Stiles needed to call Melissa McCall. Five hours home and his dad was already tripping balls on his medication.

“And you high right now?” Stiles had to ask. “You really shouldn’t self-medicate. You talk about being reelected and if the public gets wind of you getting creative with prescription drugs, then it’s bye bye sheriff’s star. You catch my drift, dad?”

His dad did not look amused.
“Are you being intentionally obtuse? You are, right?”

Stiles flailed in frustration. “I’m really not. I have no clue what you’re trying to say. Words are coming out of your mouth, but it’s like a foreign language. Like Elfish or something, just not as melodious.”

The sheriff sighed deeply, putting on his bad cop persona. Great. This should be interesting. Or terrifying, depending on the topic. Stiles still had nightmares about The Condom Talk of ’09.

“I see you want me to spell it out. That’s fine. I’ll lay out the evidence if I have to. So, while you were out and about I ventured upstairs -“


“Do I strike you as a 96 year old woman, Stiles? I was fine. I took my sweet time, I was safe. You have school on Monday again, I need to be able to move around on my own. Besides I’m healing nicely, thank you. I did however notice that the guestroom still looks like a clothing dirt bomb went off in there. There is no way Derek slept in that mayhem. The couch was pristine and not a blanket or pillow in sight, which made it pretty clear that you’ve been having intimate sleepovers. In your room. Combined with the sickening domestic display in the kitchen this morning the case was pretty much open and shut.”

Stiles was gaping. His dad was delusional!

“Just please, spare your old man the details okay. Just tell me you’re being safe and I’ll let the matter rest. There will however be curfews and no sleepovers on school nights. And I’d like the opportunity to threaten him with my wolfsbane bullets. I have quite the collection now.”

Stiles rewound. Played the words over again. And again. And – OH MY GOD!

“You think that Derek and – that we - . No. NO! NO NO NO NO!”

Stiles almost fell to the floor, cheeks red and limbs out of control. He emerged with no dignity and his dad’s head tilted to the other side which meant he found him amusing, but didn’t believe him. Great.

“You’ve got it all wrong dad.”

“Do?”

“Yeah.”

“All wrong?”

Stiles nodded vigorously. “Derek did sleep on the couch. He must have put the blankets away. Just yesterday there was this half mountain of blankets and quilts next to your chair. Because I kind of slept in it before he woke up after the whole Mexico thing. Liam, Scott and Kira was here yesterday, they can attest to it and all.”

“Really? You’re calling in witnesses? And were Scott, Liam and Kira -“

“And Mason! I forgot Mason. He was also totally here.”

“- and Mason,” corrected his dad wearily. “Were they also here during the night?”

“No.”
“No, I didn’t think so. Stiles, I don’t give a rat’s ass whether you’re straight, gay or bisexual - I just want you safe and happy. You don’t have to keep secrets from me anymore, we’ve talked about this remember.”

Stiles nodded, eyes wide. “Yes, of course I do. Which is why I’m setting the record straight. There has never been any intimate sleepovers with Derek. Not the kind you’re talking about. I swear. We did fall asleep on the couch last night watching a movie, but that’s about it.”

His dad stared at him for a long time. “Okay,” he finally said. He still looked dubious, but that was miles better than the alternative.

“Will you at least inform me when the status of your relationship changes?”

“Sure,” said Stiles without thought and immediately realized his mistake when the sheriff leaned back wearing a wide grin the likes reserved for when he’d cracked a particularly hard case.

“Oh crap,” mumbled Stiles, head lolling back in utter defeat. The sheriff guffawed and patted his arm.

“Tricking almost confessions out of you has always been my favorite thing,” he admitted gleefully. “I feel better already. I think it helps with the healing to be honest, so thank you.”

Stiles grimaced and braced himself. “Actually the fast healing might possibly be more tied the mysterious Dread Doctors than normal Western medicine and the emotional torture of your only son.”

The sheriff was back to cop mode in 0.7 seconds flat. Needless to say he did not take the news particularly well. With mounting dread Stiles sat down to bring him up to speed, praying for Derek to return and help him out. He had promised to call later, after all.

The call never came.
Chapter 12

The days that followed were ones of strife and endless frustration.

After his dad was fully briefed on the latest Dread Doctor status (a process that spanned hours and every emotion known to man), he’d been so exhausted he’d actually accepted Stiles’ help to get up the stairs with a minimum of protestations. After he was appropriately medicated and tucked safely into his bed, Stiles spent a few hours cleaning and de-fumigating the guestroom so Derek wouldn’t be forced to stay another night on the couch. Also it would hopefully get his dad to drop any future hints of sleepovers of the naughty kind. Not that Stiles would necessarily mind any such slumber parties per say, but ever since the discovery of surprise! Werewolves! he’d learned better than to hold out hope for unattainable miracles.

He filled five boxes with clothes he could donate and as a result set off a typhoon of heavy dust that took half an hour to settle and twice that to get rid of. Stiles then cleaned the room twice more for good measure, using the strongest cleaning supplies they owned. When he was done he sat uselessly in the living room waiting for Derek to return while watching reruns of Veronica Mars. When he’d reached the point where he couldn’t tell Beaver and Weevil apart, Stiles reluctantly admitted that yes, he was a bit preoccupied and succumbed to the urge to call Derek. Only to realize that he couldn’t. Derek’s phone was as lost as his recent memories.

He spent the rest of the night looking through the pictures and texts saved in his special Chemistry folder. Derek never showed or called. Stiles went to bed in a foul mood.

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He woke the next day, his mood as black as the sky outside. A downpour the likes of a biblical deluge kept Stiles and his dad on lockdown from morning to night. This turn of events was probably for the best where the sheriff was concerned. He was far from fully healed yet, and his doctors had recommended bedrest for the first week. The sheriff however spent breakfast mapping out his return to active duty despite Stiles’ adamant objections. It was therefore a joyous victory for Stiles’ mental health when Parrish called and informed them half the roads were blocked, which effectively stopped his dad’s planned endeavor of going back to work that day. Even the sheriff had to admit he was not up for strenuous policing in heavy rain.

Sadly that opened up the time for another dreaded task, namely getting his dad to read the Dread Doctor book. Backwards.

Stiles was not the kind of person to give up easily, but getting his dad to read anything that wasn’t the sport’s section in the papers or reports for work, was a struggle braver men had fought and lost before him.

In the end Stiles had to fake a blackout to get his dad to agree to it. He’d been on an intensive American Ninja Warrior marathon all morning and by noon he was moving on to reruns of old games. No amount of rationalizing, threatening or bribes had proven effective, and Stiles was at that point where he’d begun scouring the house for duct tape to pin his dad down. It was his last ditch solution if his half-assed prayers for a blackout or TV malfunction didn’t come through.
No sooner had the last thought fully formed before the house was covered in darkness, the bleak weather offering nothing in the form of natural light. Stiles suspected his weird mojo thing might be the source again. Old Mrs. Watson’s house across the street was the only other house they could see from the living room, and it was lit up like a Christmas tree. Thankfully it was not in view of the sheriff who had parked it in his favorite chair, enjoying being waited on hand and foot by an increasingly frustrated Stiles. Not that Stiles was all that worried. Even if his dad had noticed, he would never be desperate enough to venture over there. Mrs. Watson’s love for scented candles knew no bounds, but everyone with a working nose certainly knew to stay clear if possible. Her sour disposition didn’t help attract visitors either, for that matter. The Stilinskis and the Watsons had been on frosty terms for well over a decade anyway. Stiles didn’t know why, only that it involved his mom and something not even her death could wash away. Which meant it was probably insignificant and pointless like most neighborly disputes were. But as long as their silly feud helped keep his dad unaware of the very local nature of the power failure, Stiles was happy.

Stripped of alternatives the sheriff finally relented, although not without complaints. Stiles effectively blocked them all out. Instead he supplied his dad with ample reading light in the form of a few flashlights and a set of candles neither of them remembered buying and momentarily left them both misty-eyed.

It was actually almost cozy. Stiles briefly contemplated making hot cocoa. The ambiance was somewhat ruined every time his dad broke out in frustrated cries of “Remind me why I’m doing this again?” , “I’m not on candid camera am I? Have you rigged the security cameras to broadcast live feeds of the gullible sheriff of Beacon County reading what could only be described as the dregs of American literature?” or things like “I’m hungry, make me lunch”. After an hour of that the urge to indulge in chocolatey drinks had passed. He was however considering a stiff drink with just a hint of arsenic for his dad.

Several trying hours later and the task was complete, perfectly vision and memory free, expect for the recent visit at the hospital that Stiles had also witnessed. The sheriff celebrated with a symbolic burning of the book. Stiles was so relieved he was reevaluating the cocoa – at least until his dad started bemoaning the hours wasted for nothing. Stiles’ subconscious wizard promptly let the electricity back on and threw the remote at his dad.

He went to bed at eight, mood just as foul as the night before and still no sign of Derek. He’d promised to call with news if he found any interesting books, but so far he’d been incommunicado. Stiles rationalized it away with lack of phone, or he’d probably lost Stiles’ number or was catching up on the latest season of Dancing with the Stars. At the back of his mind a treacherous little devil whispered convincing tales of Derek not needing him, and Stiles being a nuisance. Despite Derek’s claim to trust him completely, Stiles still had his doubts.

After he’d popped down to say goodnight to his dad, Stiles threw a final wistful look out the window, hoping to find Derek perched on the windowsill. Instead he saw someone looking awfully like Donovan, lingering across the street. He pulled the blinds and went to bed feeling unsettled.

***

School on Monday was like school on Mondays usual were, just with elevated levels of worry for most of his friends, fiery hatred towards Theo and flat out irritation over Deaton and Argent for skipping town and leaving them to fend for themselves.
By the end of the day he could add another thing to his list. Exhaustion. Lacrosse training was back in session and Coach Finstock was – well, he was back from whatever rock he’d been hiding under for the last couple of months and exactly as he’d always been. Loud and louder.

After practice Stiles, Scott and Liam lingered in tacit agreement to get in a quick update on things before Scott had to rush off to the clinic. A substitute veterinarian had showed up out of the blue over the weekend and called in Scott to help with the work that had piled up in Deaton’s absence.

“Still no word from Argent?” asked Stiles. The question was muffled by the t-shirt that he was trying to wrestle on without properly drying off first. It was clinging to him in places he couldn’t quite reach.

“Nothing,” confirmed Scott with a deep sigh, helpfully untangling the clingy fabric. “Kira had her parents dive into their archives as well, and she brought over a few texts and books, but it’s mostly related to Asian supernatural stuff. I’m not sure how relevant it is, but I’m combing through it anyway. Do you want to read it when I’m done?”

Stiles nodded. Reading something was better than doing nothing. “Still no word from Deaton then?”

Scott sighed. “Not a peep. I was so relieved yesterday when I saw the number to the animal clinic pop up on my phone. Sadly it was just a temporary replacement. I have no clue who sent him, though. I’ll make subtle inquiries as to his relationship with Deaton. Perhaps he’s an emissary or druid as well.”

“You? Subtle?” Stiles raised an eyebrow. Liam snorted. Scott look slightly wounded, but then shrugged.

“I’ve gotten better. I think… But yeah. I’m going to give it a try at least. He might not even know Deaton at all for all I know.”

“If he’s a friend of Deaton then chances are he’s about as unhelpful as he is. Let’s be honest, Scott, the guy can’t give a straight answer to save his life. I’m convinced Deaton knows heaps and bounds more about everything around here than he’s letting on. If waterboarding was an acceptable interrogation technique I’m sure we’d get some interesting tidbits.”

Scott looked slightly offended on Deaton’s behalf. “He’s not that bad,” he argued weakly. “He’s been very helpful to me at least.”

“Sure,” said Stiles, finally finished with the t-shirt and now battling a sock. “I particularly liked the secret plan to poison Gerard with mountain ash and how you both decided to keep it a secret to everyone. That plan would’ve backfired spectacularly if it weren’t for Lydia by the way. Just saying.”

Scott glared from the opposite bench, but didn’t comment.

“Did Derek find something useful?” he asked tersely. Stiles felt his cheeks burn unnecessarily hot. What was wrong with his bodily functions? He prayed the others would just think he was still flushed from practice.

“Dunno,” he muttered. He’d conquered the socks, and didn’t really have anything else to occupy his hands with. “Haven’t heard or seen they guy since Saturday morning. He fled Casa Stilinski after breakfast. I guess he lost his phone while kidnapped, and I was stuck inside with dad all weekend updating him on things and forcing him to read The Book.”

Liam shuddered. Stiles rolled his eyes. “No visions, no memories of the doctors save from the one at
the hospital. He burned the thing when he was done. You won’t find glowing reviews from him on Goodreads, just FYI.”

Liam perked up at the mention of the book burning. Stiles had a feeling he would do the same as soon as he got home.

“You need to find Derek,” said Scott. Stiles immediately went on the defensive.

“I do, do I? And why can’t you find Derek? Or Liam for that matter?”

Stiles didn’t know why he was being so standoffish all of a sudden. It was a natural thing for Scott to request. Derek had just spent a few days on the Stilinski couch after all. And yet Stiles felt a deep seeded need to distance himself from him. It made no sense, and it made perfect sense, and yet again Stiles had a feeling he should set aside some time to properly sort through certain feelings and inclinations. Right now he wasn’t doing himself or his friends any favors by ignoring it. It wouldn’t go away. That much was certain.

“I have work,” said Scott somewhat testily.

“I have a history test tomorrow that I’m horribly unprepared for,” said Liam. “Also, I hardly know the guy. He’s your friend, Stiles. Isn’t he?”

How to answer that one? Was Derek his friend? When did they become friends? And why did his heart beat so fast? And why was Scott staring at him like that?

He sighed and leaned his head against the locker. Ignoring Liam’s question he simply said “I’ll drive by his loft afterwards.”

They picked up their bags and sticks getting ready to leave. Stiles was leaning against a locker, waiting for the others to get a move on, when he felt more than saw something move in his peripheral vision. Spinning around, lacrosse stick at the ready he expected to at the very least find one of the chimeras, or possibly a doctor. Instead he almost took Chris Argent’s head of with his lacrosse stick. He ducked out of the way at the last minute in a move worthy of Neo from The Matrix. He was very limber for a man his age. In comparison Stiles looked like Bambi on ice as he flailed around, almost losing his footing.

“Oh my god!” he yelled, heart hammering away. “You scared the shit out of me!”

He whirled around and glared daggers at Scott and Liam. “You two call yourselves werewolves? You should be able to smell someone coming a mile away. Next time warn a guy, alright.”

“This is a boys’ locker room, Stiles. It smells like wet balls and sweat to a normal person. Imagine it with heightened senses. I shut it off as best I can in here.”

“Makes sense,” mumbled Stiles, still ogling Mr. Argent wearily. “No apology?”

Mr. Argent just stared at him, face expressionless. It was all the answer he needed.

“Did you get my messages?” asked Scott. Chris nodded and wordlessly handed Stiles a bag. It was heavy. Very heavy. It was packed with books. Stiles felt like singing with joy.

“I did,” confirmed Chris, voice hoarser than usual. “I’m sorry I couldn’t get back to you. The Calaveras are – well, I guess you can say they are not particularly enthused with my involvement with you. They monitor my communications, and I’ve been at mostly remote locations with no resource available besides my phone.”
“What’s their problem?” asked Stiles hotly. “We’ve never done anything to warrant their distrust.”

Chris laughed. It was devoid of mirth.

“That is all in the eye of the beholder, Stiles. You’ve helped turn a centuries old Hunter’s code on its head and dragged one of the oldest families of hunters into it. They are suspicious, they are weary and they think it’s only a matter of time before the other shoe drops. I made a deal with them, and I’d rather stay on their good than their bad. Also, I needed them to hunt for Kate.”

“Speaking of your lovely sisters,” began Stiles, voice oozing sarcasm. “Kira found Derek behind another wall in Mexico – again – just a few days ago. Care to elaborate on how she’d been able to do that, again, if you’re hot on her trail?”

Chris pursed his lips. “I heard about that. It can’t have been Kate this time around. I’ve been on her trail for months now. She wasn’t anywhere near either Mexico or America for that matter.”

Stiles narrowed his eyes and stared at him suspiciously. “You sure about that?”

Chris nodded. “Very. Surveillance tape of her in Guatemala sure.”

Scott bobbed his head, indicating Chris was telling the truth. His heartbeat was steady.

“I can’t stay long I’m afraid. I have a fresh lead on Kate and it’s in the country. I don’t want to lose it, but I just wanted to pop by with these books that might or might not help you.”

Stiles stared at Chris with narrow eyes, then bent over and picked up a random book. It was leather-bound and very old. The spine creaked ominously when he opened it. He shuddered slightly at the sight of a very realistic drawing of a creature scarily similar to Gollum.

“Might or might not help? Care to elaborate? I was certain that between the Calaveras and the mighty Argents there would be some relevant information to spare.”

Chris’s mouth stretched into a thin line. A small smirk tugged at one corner. If Stiles didn’t consider him an ally he’d be seriously wigged out by now. He idly wondered if he should take a class or two in hunter style conduct. He could definitely use it.

“Doctors flitting in and out of sight is not something I’ve ever heard about, Stiles. Neither is chimeras for that matter. I got the books from a trusted friend in the community who believed there was some references to doctors and experiments in one of these books. The problem is he didn’t remember which. Ergo you get the whole stack.”

Stiles cursed under his breath. There was at least 12 books of varying size here. It would take days to go through all of them without Lydia. “You could at least skimmed them. Perhaps made some quick notes. Just to get us started.”

Chris smiled that smile – the one that made a chill run down his back.

“Oh I would, but my Archaic Latin is a little rusty. Have fun, boys.”

Stiles, Scott and Liam stared at each other, then at the pile of books and back to each other.

“Fuck,” said Scott.

“What now?” asked Liam, eyeing the books wearily. Stiles stepped forward shielding the books from Liam’s view. He’d been considering book burnings earlier, he didn’t want him to get any ideas.
“Now,” said Stiles, looking resigned at the book in his hand. “Now, we need to go and get Lydia the hell out of Eichen House."

***

Stiles was nervous.

He’d never really been nervous before when going to Derek’s loft, but apparently this was a time for change. Change was all the rage in Beacon Hills nowadays. Perfectly normal humans were changing into chimeras. The status of his relationship with Malia was changing. The same could sadly also be said for his friendship with Scott. They still hadn’t really resolved their issues. Just postponed them for now. Or if history was any indicator, they would just ignore it until it reached a volcanic eruption of sorts again later on. Most likely at an inopportune moment, which meant it would be ignored again. He sensed a pattern.

Stiles was also changing. He was slowly coming to terms with having some not so normal abilities. Now knowing that the doctors had tinkered with him on occasion, it was likely not something natural. Which of course meant he should be wary of it. But it was starting to become second nature. He hadn’t locked or unlocked a door the normal way for several days, and it had not been a conscious decision.

Lastly, his feelings were changing. Or not so much changing as him slowly – *glacially* some might argue – inching closer to admitting certain long hidden truths. Or maybe not even all that hidden. Looking back it seemed obvious that even if it hadn’t been a deliberate strategy or anything, he sure had alluded to it quite a lot. Hinting even. Too bad he was quite slow on the uptake when it came to matters of his own heart and mind.

So, here he was. Outside Derek Hale’s sliding door. Being nervous. For reasons.

It was unclear how long he’d been standing there, hand raised ready to knock and mind going a mile a minute. But before he could make his knuckles connect with the surface, the door in question opened. Stiles possibly startled.

(He did).

Derek stood there, watching him with ill-concealed amusement (Stiles was still flailing a bit), wearing sweatpants and a soft-looking t-shirt. His hair was slightly mussed. As if he’d just come out of the shower, or perhaps had just woken from a nap. No matter he looked delectable and Stiles felt his mouth dry and his jaw drop. The same did his heart. Also, it was hammering away like a carpenter on speed.

“Hey,” he squeaked mock-casually.

“Hey,” replied Derek, a smile tugging at his lips. “I didn’t expect to see you here today. Do you want to come in?”

Stiles all but fell over the threshold in his haste to accept.

“Why didn’t you expect me?” he blurted before Derek had even closed the door. “I was expecting you days ago. I thought you’d come back to my house after checking on the loft and going to the house to hunt for books. I don’t have your number – or I do, but it’s been disconnected or
something. Do you even have a phone now?”

Derek wordlessly waved a new iPhone in the air. Damn the Hales and their mountains of money. Stiles’ phone had a cracked screen and a mind of its own.

“Give me that,” he demanded and snatched the phone out of Derek’s hands with a huff. He hastily programmed his number into it and sent himself a text to make sure he had Derek’s new digits as well.

While he did this Derek had padded over to the rather uncomfortable looking couch and dumped down on it. Stiles tossed the phone at him. He caught it expertly without even looking, the show-off.

“Why didn’t you come back?”

The question hung in the air, impossibly huge in the big and near empty space. Derek didn’t answer right away. He just sat there looking pensive, but Stiles knew he’d heard him. He took the opportunity to sneak a photo of Derek. He didn’t even notice. Or he simply didn’t mind.

“I wanted to give you time with your dad. To catch up. I didn’t want to impose on that.”

Stiles snorted. “I would have paid good money for you to impose yesterday. I could’ve used the backup. I had to force him to read the Dread Doctors book. It was a struggle. I think he would’ve behaved better if you’d been around. He even asked for you. Thrice. Between you and me I think he wants to recruit you as a deputy. He keeps muttering about how useful it would be with someone supernatural with knowledge on the force. Parrish might be supernatural, but up until a few months back he had no idea. They poor guy still doesn’t even know what he is.”

Derek looked honestly surprised at that. “You’re not serious? Are you?”

Stiles smiled smugly. “Serious as a chimera attack. You’ve grown on him I think. Is that something you’d consider?”

Derek shook his head. “Not even for a second. No offence to your dad and it’s a noble profession and all, but I see enough death, conflict and gore as it is. I don’t want to have to seek it out professionally. Besides, I’m exceptionally unqualified.”

Stiles snorted. “Yeah, right. Speed, strength, scenting and you can hold your own in a fight. Everyone at that precinct looks unqualified compared to that.”

“I think you know that being a good cop is more than tracking and strength, Stiles,” said Derek defensively. That got Stiles’ attention. What was Derek qualified for exactly? Besides modelling for GQ and being able to rip someone’s throat out – with his teeth. He’d probably also nail the obstacle courses at American Ninja Warriors. Did he mention modelling?

“I know that. Of course I know that.” Stiles wrung his hands, mentally debating whether he dared ask or not. In the end he threw caution to the wind. “I can’t believe I’ve never asked this before, but did you go to school in New York? Or did you work?”

For a moment Stiles was afraid he might have crossed a barrier into hostile territory, but Derek surprised him by looking almost fond at the question.

“Both, sort of. I worked briefly as a security detail.”

Stiles’ eyes bugged out. “Seriously? A bodyguard? Did you babysit anyone famous?”
“Beyonce,” replied Derek looking perfectly serious. Stiles just stared at him, but when Derek showed no signs of joking, the next logical step was to start hyperventilating. In no time he was making wheezing noises reminiscent of dying whales.

“Seriously?” he rasped out with difficulty.

“No, obviously I was kidding,” said Derek with an eye roll. “Honestly, you’re too easy.”

Stiles more crawled than walked to the couch, scowling menacingly as he went. Derek got up and came back moments later with a bottle of water that he handed over wordlessly.

“You’re horrible,” Stiles croaked between mouthfuls. “Never scare me with tales of celebrities. And if you do, pick someone nasty. Like Donald Trump. Not the queen of the world.”

Derek grinned, eyes alight with mirth. Stiles glared. “And since when do you make jokes?” he asked accusingly. “I didn’t get the memo. I was this close to going into anaphylaxis shock and it would’ve been all your fault. I thought bodyguards were supposed to protect—not scare.”

“And when exactly did I become your bodyguard?” Derek raised an eyebrow playfully. Stiles gaped, mind unable to come up with either a good reason or a witty retort.

“So not the point,” he muttered. Derek looked smug. “You said both sort of. So what did you study?”

Derek’s mirth disappeared, instantly replaced with uncertainty and apprehension.

“History. And art.” The last bit was said in an almost inaudible voice. He looked like was bracing himself for mockery.

“Cool.”

It really was. He wasn’t even kidding. College was such a far-fetched idea at the moment, despite being a senior. With the way their lives were going, planning anything that was more than a week away seemed foolish. But he wanted to, longed for it in the dark of his room when he struggled to fall asleep. To be dull and normal again.

“Do you miss it?”

Derek looked taken aback. Like he was still waiting for Stiles to do a 360 and start making fun of him. After a few moments of Stiles waiting patiently, face utterly sincere, he nodded.

“Yeah, I miss it.”

“Why don’t you go back?”

Derek was silent for a while, face unreadable. When he finally met Stiles’ eyes the raw emotions almost knocked Stiles to the floor.

“I can never go back. Not to New York and our old apartment. It’s just—“

He trailed off.

“Laura,” whispered Stiles. It wasn’t even a question. He knew loss, he knew what sorrow looked like. He’d seen it in his own reflection for years, knew how to hide the pain, how to camouflage feelings with sarcasm and wit. Derek used anger and distance. Other than that they weren’t all that different. Which was an odd realization. He’d always put himself and Derek in two very different
categories. Different leagues, in more ways than one. Finding they had common ground was strange, yet soothing.

When he lifted his head and met Derek’s eyes the air was sucked out of him. It was raw, awed and so full of emotion. Stiles remembered the first time Derek had looked at him like that. It had been after they’d been trapped in the pool at school. Stiles had said something about the kanima being an abomination and Derek had looked at him just like he did now. At the time Stiles hadn’t know what it meant. He only knew that it was profound and his heart had gone almost haywire. Now he recognized it as understanding, as common ground.

As trust.

They fell into silence, the air abuzz with a tension Stiles had trouble identifying. It didn’t feel awkward, but it still had Stiles on edge. It felt as if they were standing at the verge of a precipice. Behind them were a long and rocky road. They’d stumbled, fallen, argued and almost died to get here. Ahead of them was unknown territory. Stiles couldn’t see what was beyond the abyss. He was hesitant, didn’t know how to make the final leap, whether he wanted to or not. And if he did, would Derek jump with him or remain standing?

A shrill beep penetrated the air making them both jump. The moment was broken. Stiles was both relieved and disappointed.

“It’s probably dad,” he muttered and fished out his phone. “Yep, it’s him. He’s threatening to put out an APB on his dinner if I’m not home with food soon.” He rose reluctantly, feeling every inch of distance between himself and Derek as a cold chill spreading through his body.

“You wanna join us?”

Derek looked startled. “No, that’s okay. I’ve got something in the fridge.”

“Sure you do,” said Stiles. He’d seen the state of Derek’s fridge on multiple occasions. There was seldom anything edible in there, save for, oddly enough, yoghurt.

“You can’t live off yoghurt alone, buddy. Besides, this place is depressing. And your last current memory is of Kate Argent shooting you. That can’t be very comforting. I’ve cleaned out the guestroom. You can stay with us until – well, until whatever.”

“I don’t want to intrude – “

“You’re not. So pack a bag with your favorite Henleys and let’s go already before my dad issues a SWAT team to locate me and drag me home.”

Derek didn’t answer, but vanished up the winding stairs and returned a minute later with a small bag.

“Oh!” Stiles whirled around, arms flailing. “I almost forgot! Did you find anything worthwhile at the house?”

Derek shook his head. “Nope, but I had better luck at the vault. You forgot to mention that someone tried to break into it,” said Derek with a scowl. “The sign outside was ripped off completely. That doesn’t get you into the vault however. You need a set of claws to manage that, and whoever attempted to break in was using brute force and nothing else.”

Stiles raised an eyebrow. “Huh? I hadn’t even noticed that to be honest. We can ask my dad about it later. Now please tell me – did you find anything?”
Derek pointed at a pile of books on the table by the huge windows. They looked old and promising. Stiles descended on them like a pack of hungry hyenas, possibly even salivating slightly.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” he exclaimed in frustration as he leafed through the pile.

“What?”

“These are all in Archaic Latin as well! We need Lydia. Like yesterday!”

The ride back to the Stilinski residence was spent discussing increasingly daring yet utterly hopeless rescue scenarios for Lydia. At the back of his mind Stiles knew the answer lied with him. He just wasn’t that sure he was ready to explain it to everyone else yet.

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Derek had insisted on cooking dinner as a thank you for letting him stay. That meant stopping at one of the more premium grocery stores that Stiles seldom set foot in. The whole thing took ages. Derek insisted on sniffing every piece of produce before making his selection and the less said about the process of picking out meat the better. Someone who looked suspiciously like Donovan stood at the coffee aisle when they walked by. When Stiles turned around there was no one there.

When they finally arrived the sheriff was ready to tear Stiles a new one, but mellowed considerably when he saw Derek. The fact that Derek had also bought a bag of organic cashew nuts and a bottle of fancy import beer that he handed over with reverence, didn’t hurt.

For a moment Stiles was afraid his dad would launch into more embarrassing hints about improper sleeping arrangements and whatnot, but thankfully he didn’t seem inclined to torture his only son just then. Instead he sat down at the kitchen table and supplied Derek with a combination of unhelpful cooking tips and questions about everything from his memory loss to his plans for the loft and future employment. He was about as subtle as a stampede of hippos in a china shop. Stiles mouthed “I told you so” to Derek who only rolled his eyes and grinned fondly.

Eventually, Stiles left them to their devices and went to his room to finish the bare minimum of required homework. He might also possibly have practiced locking and unlocking the bathroom door with his mind just for kicks.

***

An hour later the house was filled with a heavenly smell that drew Stiles down the stairs, his mouth watering and stomach rumbling in anticipation. He walked into the kitchen to see Derek allowing his dad to sip daintily from a spoon of what he assumed was sauce. He smacked his lips happily, a dreamy expression on his face.

“Perfection!” he declared. He spotted Stiles and made elaborate gestures for him to set the table. A few minutes later the only sounds in the kitchen was that of cutlery against plates and satisfied hums. It really did taste exceptionally good.
“Stiles, you need to marry this man!” declared his dad between mouthfuls. “This is so good. I wouldn’t mind making a habit of a weekly Sunday dinner of this caliber. Not a bad word about your mom’s cooking, son, but it pales in comparison.”

And there it was!

It was too good to be true to hope that his dad would let the matter rest. Stiles’ face was as red as his hoodie, and he choked slightly on a piece of meat (which was a feat because it was so tender you could chew it with an eyelid). Derek wordlessly refilled his glass and nudged it over, his ears alight in hues of burgundy.

“Way to go, dad,” chocked Stiles, actively avoiding looking in Derek’s direction. “You do realize arranged marriages are both illegal and generally frowned upon. Also, marrying someone purely for a domestic skill isn’t exactly the healthies of foundations for a lasting relationship. This isn’t the 50s.”

When your dad did his best to embarrass you, Stiles had learnt to retort with accusations of illegality and slight racism. It was his go to tactic. He should’ve known it wouldn’t do him much good. It never had before.

The sheriff snorted and winked elaborately at Derek. He looked caught between light embarrassment and confusion.

“It wasn’t a decree, Stiles. Just a friendly suggestion. And I didn’t even specify cooking skills as the only reason for a nuptial. Honestly, Stiles. He’s both handsome, trustworthy and he must care at least marginally for you since he tolerates your company for prolonged periods of time. That’s the Litmus Test of Stiles, you know.” he said conspiratorially to Derek. “He tends to grate on people’s nerves over time. God knows I love the kid, but he can be, you know, a handful.”

“Dad!” Stiles whacked him on the arm with his fork. It left an imprint of gravy on his sleeve. The sheriff looked at it with a resigned expression, then sighed.

“See what I mean?” he commented drily. “Messy, loud, talkative, too curious for his own good, no self-preservation skills at all by the way, that one is worth making note of. He will run headfirst into danger to save a friend without a second thought to his own safety. Noble, but foolish.”

Derek’s cheeks had a slight rosy tinge to them that Stiles hadn’t really seen before. He also smiled softly. “I’d noticed that,” he admitted. “I wouldn’t be here today actually if he hadn’t done that. He’s saved me more than once.”

His dad raised an eyebrow and lifted his glass in a mock salute in Stiles’ direction. “Well in that case I guess I should thank you for this meal then, Stiles.”

“Stop it, please,” muttered Stiles, picking at his mashed potatoes and entertaining the notion of smearing some across his dad’s smug face. He was having way too much fun with this. But if he took the bait it would only get worse. The trick was to feign disinterest or act Jackson Whittemore levels of aloof. Stiles had never really excelled much at either. Thankfully his dad seemed to think he’d been tortured enough for one day.

“At any rate, this was an excellent meal, Derek. Thank you again. Stiles usually whips up terrible things made of vegetables not known in the Western hemisphere. Some things I suspect he just digs up in the Preserve.”

“It’s called eating healthy,” muttered Stiles darkly. “And it tastes just fine. You’ve just ruined your taste buds on cheap fast food. Otherwise you’d know it was both good and good for you.”
“See what I have to put up with?” he asked Derek with a huff. “He’s a mad health dictator, but will eat garbage whenever I’m not around. Grown men were not meant to eat kale, Stiles. I’m sure there is research that will support my claim.”

Derek shrugged, a soft smile tugging the corner of his mouth. “I like kale,” he said simply, meeting Stiles’ eyes across the table.

It probably didn’t mean anything. Other than the fact that Derek Hale enjoyed kale. But it felt like more. Stiles’ heart had sped up, which he knew Derek would hear and interpret however he wanted. But he didn’t really care. Stiles was weird, he knew that. An acquired taste, much like kale. And if Derek liked kale, did that mean he also liked -

The moment was broken by his dad getting noisily to his feet, crutches banging against the table and chair legs as he went.

“Excuse me, fellows,” he said, voice full of mirth. “This is sweet and all, but I think I’ll skip this particular dessert. I’ll be in the living room, watching the news. Loudly.”

He disappeared with a soft chuckle, probably entirely too pleased by his own wittiness.

“Have you met my dad, the comedian?” asked Stiles sarcastically when the sheriff’s back had disappeared from view. Derek didn’t answer, just shrugged and began clearing the table.

“I can do that,” protested Stiles. They both reached for the same plate and for a short second it was like one of those scenes in romantic movies, where hands touch, music swells, everything is in slow motion, wind suddenly blows and a rosy filter tint is added to enhance the moment.

Only in the Stilinski kitchen Derek had a dirty dishtowel over one shoulder, a bit of gravy on his shirt, the table chairs were mismatched, the light above the sink flickered erratically and in the background they could hear that the Lakers had just taken the lead over the Giants. The only rosy tints were in their cheeks.

And still Stiles felt the touch in every fiber of his being, however clichéd that sounded.

“I – I – eh,” he stuttered, taking a step back and promptly knocked over a glass of water. His foot made sure to land smack in the middle of the growing puddle on the floor. “Shit,” he added, voice shrill. Derek spun around looking for the dish towel and it was almost funny how it took a few seconds before he realized he was wearing it.

“I have some more homework,” squeaked Stiles and escaped the room in a flurry of flailing limbs. He knocked his elbow on the door frame in his haste to exit, something that was sure to bruise.

“Dessert over already?” called his dad gleefully after him as he sped through the room towards the stairs.

“Fuck you very much,” he called out, more frustrated than angry.

“That’s a dollar in the swear jar,” sing-songed his dad. Stiles slammed his door shut in reply.
Stiles didn’t venture back downstairs until a few hours later when he realized he’d left all the books from both the Hale vault and the haul Chris had given them in his car. In the living room Derek and his dad were watching a basketball game and arguing good-naturedly about something or the other.

Stiles felt a tinge of jealousy. His dad never asked him to watch sports with him. Mostly because Stiles didn’t have the patience for it, and besides he didn’t really care for much of it, besides baseball, and his dad usually grew tired of him spewing out statistics and facts before the first inning. Derek and his dad however looked perfectly cozy, and the fact that none of them had even bothered to ask if he wanted to join in, irked him.

Stiles first hauled in the bag from Argent. It was heavy. Very heavy. He dumped it on the floor behind the couch with lots of huffs and sighs. “Don’t help or anything,” he muttered in annoyance.

“I’m still injured,” replied his dad deadpan without looking in his direction. “You don’t want your old man to pull his stitches, do you?”

Stiles glared. “Of course not, Mr. Obvious. I was actually talking to Derek. Half of these tomes belong to his family. Seems appropriate he lug it in.”

Derek wordlessly rose, left the room and returned in no time, holding the bag of books from the vault effortlessly between two fingers, eyebrows arched and looking all too smug for Stiles’ liking. This playful side of Derek was something he still wasn’t all that used to.

“Show-off,” he hissed, middle finger raised. Derek replied by dumping the bag uncomfortably close to Stiles’ toes, making him leap aside with all the grace of a headless chicken.

“Rude much?” he wheezed when Derek snorted in content amusement. “Some of us don’t have supernatural healing powers, you know.”

“Ain’t that the truth?” The sheriff raised his almost empty bottle of beer in a half salute. “In fact I could use a dose of painkillers right about now.”

“Fat chance, mister.” Stiles glared at his dad while he set the books out on the dining room table. Dust rose in all directions. Stiles sneezed loudly. “Your next dose isn’t until nine tonight, so you just have to tough it out.”

He sneezed again, dropping a few of the books in the process. Derek took pity on him and together they laid all the books out. None was written in a language either of them could read.

Stiles sank heavily into a chair staring dejectedly at the mound of information before him. So close, and yet so very unattainable.

“What are you boys working on?” His dad rose gingerly to his feet and shuffled over. “Jesus, Stiles. Did you rob the town library again? And what’s with all the dust?”

Derek pulled out a chair and mouthed “again” at Stiles who grimaced and shook his head. This was not the time for tales of crimes past. The sheriff sat down carefully, eyes alight with curiosity.

“We need to figure out what the doctors are up to,” explained Stiles. “Just from the few memories we’ve managed to uncover, it seems as if they’ve been around for a while. They’re obviously creating chimeras, but that doesn’t seem to be their endgame. They’re trying to create something specific, but I don’t think they know how, or what to mix to achieve it. But I have a feeling they will know it when they see it, which probably means it’s been done before.”

His dad looked pensive, but nodded. “It’s a place to start at least. So what are all these? More
bestiaries?”

“Honestly, we don’t know.” It was Derek who spoke. “They’re all in Archaic Latin, which only Lydia seems to know how to translate. Stiles has been through the material we do have, and haven’t really found anything that fits the bill yet.”

“And what is the bill exactly,” asked the sheriff, his voice slipping into professional tones.

Stiles gestured at a piece of paper in front of him with too few bullet points for his liking.

“So far I’m thinking we’re looking for a creature or monster that only pops up once in a while. Perhaps just once before even for all I know. Probably something really scary, so I’m thinking we should look into legends and myths as well. I can get into that later tonight. Google should provide us with a long list. So basically all I have is beastly, rare and probably scary as fuck.”

“Sounds like every supernatural creature ever,” said his dad with a sigh. “No offence,” he added to Derek who simply shrugged. “My point is, it’s not much to go on. And most of the chimeras of late fits that description as well.”

“I’m aware of that. Thank you.” Stiles bristled. This wasn’t exactly helping to boost morale. Derek seemed to sense that Stiles’ mood was about to turn for the worse.

“I found a fair few of these books in the Hale vault, but when I was there I noticed that someone had attempted to break into it. Do you know anything about that?”

The sheriff looked confused. “Do I even know where this vault is?”

“I told you about it, dad. It’s underneath the school sign. Another entrance is from the basement. It’s were Scott and the rest of us hid when the Chemist tried to kill us all.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right. My mind’s a bit slower than usual. I blame the pill cocktail they force down my throat thrice daily.”

“A cocktail you begged for just moments ago,” muttered Stiles under his breath. His dad pretended not to hear him. Derek chewed his lips in an effort not to smile.

“At any rate I have a suspect for you.”

Stiles’ head whipped up so fast he almost gave himself whiplash. “You do?”

The sheriff grimaced and waved his hand in a half circle that Stiles knew meant he was stalling. Or fishing. At any rate it wasn’t as good as it first sounded. “Suspect might be a strong word,” he began. Stiles sighed. Yeah, the back-paddling was starting.

“We did chase the suspect to the school where it engaged in what the reports have described as “excessive property damage”. I guess attempted robbery is more accurate.”

“IT?”

The sheriff sighed deeply. “I’ll get you Deputy Clark’s official report, or a copy at any rate. But we got several reports at the station of a creature running down streets alternating between running on two legs and all fours. Hence the “it”.”

“Great.” Stiles dropped the book he was holding sending up a cloud of dust. The sheriff sneezed. Derek wordlessly removed the rest of the books from Stiles’ reach.
“So, we either have a rogue werewolf with a penchant for looting on our hands, or another chimera. Worst case scenario the doctors haves succeeded and that was the beast to end all beasts. Neither options are desirable. Wait – “

He spun towards Derek, grabbed his arm making several of the books crash to the floor. “Could it be Peter? He escaped from the loony bin with Valack and he’s run on all fours before.”

Derek shook his head. “I doubt it. Also why would he try to break into a vault he could just open?”

“You’re right, I’m stupid for even suggesting that. I wasn’t thinking. Or perhaps I’m losing my ability to think straight? With my luck all this dust is filled with brain-eating spores.”

“Don’t be absurd.” Derek actually looked genuinely annoyed. “You’re anything but stupid. You just do stupid stuff – a lot. You probably just need to get some sleep.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. It’s getting late anyway. You turning in too, dad?”

The sheriff shook his head and limped back towards his favorite chair. “Being on bedrest actually means I sleep too much. I’ll stay up and see if I can’t find some mindless thriller to tide me over.”

Stiles scurried to the kitchen to get him a glass of water and his medication. He then made a production out of fluffing his pillows and locating several blankets that he tucked around his dad ignoring every protest. Secure that his dad was well equipped to handle a few hours by himself, Stiles headed upstairs, Derek right behind him.

“Good night, dad.”

“Good night, sheriff.”

“Good night, boys. Sleep tight. In separate beds.”

Stiles went to bed with thoughts on how to get away with murder.
Chapter 13

“We’re what?”

Mason’s eyes were threatening to pop out of their sockets. Stiles made frantic shushing sounds and dragged him into an empty classroom. This was the problem with inviting new people into the inner circle. They had not yet mastered the skill of hushed whispers (though people could argue neither had the rest of them). In addition they were still fresh-faces, innocent and cared about mundane stuff like school rules. It wore off fast though. Mason would be fully indoctrinated by Christmas. It was a somewhat depressing thought. Stiles felt slightly guilty for corrupting the innocent.

“We’re going to go rescue Lydia,” repeated Stiles, still in a hushed voice, but more slowly, taking time to enunciate every syllable.

“From Eichen House?”

Stiles nodded with ill-concealed frustration. Mason had asked the same question three times now. The answer should be sticking.

“We’re breaking into a high-security psyche ward? In the middle of the day? That is insanity!” Mason looked caught between intrigue and shock. “Isn’t there like a better way? A way that won’t end with me in juvenile detention. Haven’t you been there before? Both as a visitor and a patient? Can’t you just like – visit her? Or get yourself readmitted?”

Stiles pinched the area between his eyes in silent frustration. If this was the level of help Mason was bringing to the table, perhaps he should reconsider and just fly solo.

“If I readmit myself, how will I get Lydia out of there?”

“You’re 18 now, right? If you admit yourself, can’t you also check out whenever you want?”

“Possibly. But how will that help me get Lydia out? She’s not allowed visitors, and I doubt her father, the attorney, or the staff that gets paid to treat her, will allow me to carry her out under my arm like a farewell gift.”

Mason’s face fell. Apparently the cost of being in the inner circle was dawning on him, and the price of admission was possibly a lot steeper than he’d anticipated.

“I see your point,” he admitted reluctantly. “But I still don’t get how the pair of us is going to stage a breakout. We have no special powers. We’re just, you know – human.”

“We can’t bring anyone with powers anyway,” said Stiles, expertly avoiding confirming Mason’s claim. “The place is more or less built with mountain ash anyway, at least the sublevels. I’d be surprised if Lydia isn’t kept down there. Scott couldn’t get in anyway.”

Mason still looked like he was filled with nothing but misgivings. “We’re so going to get caught,” he muttered darkly.

“That all depends, really,” said Stiles. A grin slowly formed on his face. He hadn’t felt this devious since – well, since he managed to get Jared to puke his guts out on the bus to the cross-country meet that never happened. Mason looked alarmed, and with just cause.

“Depends on what?”
“On you. Mason, my friend,” Stiles said conspiratorially and laid an arm around his shoulders guiding him towards the door and the sophomore’s official entry into a life of deception and subterfuge.

“On a scale from Paris Hilton to Leonardo DiCaprio, how good would you say your acting skills are?”

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Stiles had to admit it. Mason was a natural. He should consider the drama club. Perhaps he already was in drama club? Did Beacon Hills High School even have a drama club? It was almost depressing how little Stiles knew and involved himself in extracurricular projects at school. Or it would be, if he like, cared.

The timing of this little coup was not random. Stiles had made certain observations while he was admitted to this facility and one was that the orderlies and nurses really valued their lunch hour. It was probably one of the few rays of light in a dreary and depressing place like this. At any rate, it meant that for a blessed period of 45 minutes the front desk was manned by just one person. All Stiles needed was to get in undetected. He knew his way around the place, or at least passably well. But in order to do that, Mason had to put on a little show to distract the lone watchman.

“What do you mean this isn’t the White House?”

Mason’s shrill voice echoed off the walls. He was tearing at his t-shirt, tugging the collar down as if it was suffocating him. The other hand was rubbing, twisting, tugging at his hair. It looked painful.

“Excuse me, sir but this is *Eichen House*. Not the White House.”

The orderly looked part frustrated, part alarmed. He had ventured out from behind his desk to try and calm down a clearly distraught Mason whose mission was to keep him away from his phone and also the panic button Stiles was sure was behind it. They didn’t want to risk Mason getting injected and forcefully admitted. Which meant he had to draw the orderly to him, close to the entrance so he could make a mad dash to freedom as soon as Stiles was in.

“What do you mean this isn’t the White House? But it’s a white house,” bellowed Mason.

He’d begun spinning in circles. Oh lord, now he was hitting himself on the forehead, movements jerky and slightly uncontrolled. It was accompanied by mutters of weird gibberish and the occasional whine. It really was an Oscar worthy performance.

When Mason broke into a very out of tune rendition of *Slim Shady* that he at odd intervals mashed up with stray lyrics from *I Dreamed A Dream*, Stiles knew the moment for action had come. He slithered as stealthily as he possible could along the walls of the room to the door next to the admissions desk. Unsurprisingly the door was equipped with a keypad. The light was red. The poster on the door read “No visitors beyond this point.”

“Here goes nothing,” he muttered. Stiles closed his eyes, envisioning the door popping open and, feeling quite ridiculous, waved his hand in front of the key pad. A soft click and the light turned green. Stiles gently opened it just wide enough for him to sneak in to arguably the worst place he’d ever had the misfortune of visiting. When the door shut behind him with a thud, he knew there was no turning back. He’d either return safely with Lydia in tow, or risk getting locked up here right
along with her.

He didn't much like his odds, but then again he'd always been a gambling man.

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Ten minutes later Stiles had to admit he'd perhaps slightly exaggerated his knowledge of the layout for this place. There was still time left before lunch was over, but for each minute he spent wandering the hallways looking for the door not even Brunski had a key to, the less likely it was that he could escape the premises the same way they entered. As of now there was no plan B. There was hardly a plan A to be truthful.

“This is your worst idea to date, Stiles,” he muttered darkly. He rounded another corner, stared down the corridor, but it looked identical to the dozen others he'd already poked his nose down. There was no need to venture upstairs, and so far he hadn't come across any entrances to a sublevel. Perhaps he should just admit defeat, get Mason and regroup.

Or maybe not.

About halfway down the corridor – was that a - ? Stiles crept forward, making sure to duck under any doors with windows. It was all eerily quiet, almost as if the whole house was holding its breath, paying attention to what he was doing.

He was right. The hallway broke into another hallway, the entrance partially obscured by a large trolley. It was dimly lit, had hardly any doors at all, except for…

“Yes!” Stiles fist-pumped the air. That was the door. He was sure of it. He all but ran over, tried the door knob but it wouldn't budge. His spine tingled, hairs standing on end. There was something about it, like a low buzz. If he’d been a werewolf Stiles was certain he would be repelled back.

“Mountain Ash, always a good sign,” he whispered to himself. “Or bad, depending on the situation, I guess. Now, please tell me you'll bend to my will.”

He placed his hand on the knob again, felt the buzz teasing his skin, tickling almost. He closed his eyes, reached inside and willed an image of the door ajar to the forefront of his mind. “Open sesame,” he muttered.

For a second that felt like an eternity, nothing happened. Then a soft click and the knob gave way. Stiles possibly did a little jig.

Once he was through the door and down three set of stairs, there was precious little to dance about. He remembered the depressingly dark corridors, the cells, the greenish light and the hums and whines that filled the air. Walking here with Dr. Fenris had been unpleasant enough. Walking here alone – not something he wanted to do again.

The place was massive. Where to start? There were no signs on the cells. Many didn’t even have a window or bars for him to look through. And if he did, would they yell, scream and alert the guards?

He checked his watch after having wandered aimlessly for what felt like a lifetime. Lunch was officially over. Getting out the way he came in seemed impossible. But that was a problem he would have to face after he'd solved the more pressing issue of locating Lydia.
Something cold and clammy suddenly grabbed hold of Stiles’ shoulder. “Smells gooood,” hissed a voice. He screamed as what felt like talons dug into the flesh, and the still not fully healed bite that Donovan had left. He tried to twist away, but that only seemed to strengthen the grip. A sickly smell of rotten cabbage wafted over him. It stung his eyes making them water.

“Smells like humaaaaaaaan,” continued the voice accompanied by a disgusting slurping noise. “Mostly human. There’s a whiff of something else as well.”

“Must be my natural musk,” hissed Stiles as he tried to pry the hand off. He wiggled and squirmed but to no avail. The hand had stretched out between bars in a small window on a door. He’d foolishly thought it was protected by glass as well. Not so much it turned out. He glanced over his shoulder but couldn’t make out the creature. Its features were swallowed by the darkness inside the cell, but the arm that spilled out was filled with sinews and looked pale, thin and sickly.

“Let go,” pleaded Stiles, voice getting slightly panicked and squeaky. It hurt. It felt as if Donovan’s bite was reopened. As if a set of tiny, pointy teeth dug through his three layers of clothing and into the flesh of his shoulder.

“Smeeeells gooood,” wheezed the creature again and the pain in his arm intensified threefold. Stiles couldn’t hold back any longer. He screamed. Then he screamed some more. Dots started to appear before his eyes, breath was coming out in uneven gasps.

He was failing.

Failing his impossible mission to get Lydia. If this thing didn’t kill him, the staff at Eichen was sure to find him soon anyway and then it would be all over. Not even his dad could get him out of trouble if that was the case. This was a clear case of breaking and entering. The case was open and shut and Stiles could pretty much kiss his future goodbye. Not that it was looking particularly bright to begin with.

Without forewarning a scream so chilling, haunting and hair-raising the walls seem to rattle, echoed down the corridors. It felt as if his eardrums were about to explode. Weakly he attempted to block it out, but with just one useful hand, there was a limit to what he could do.

The scream seemed to affect the creature as well, because the grip on Stiles’ shoulder lessened and then let go. The hand disappeared back into the dark abyss, a gut-churning whine barely heard above the high-pitched vail that seemed to drag on forever.

Stiles dropped painfully to his knees on the cold concrete floor, shoulder hanging limply to one side as if it was numb and unresponsive. Something warm trickled down his arm. He suspected it might be blood. He crawled awkwardly away from the cell door, not wanting to risk getting caught in its deathly grip again.

The scream stopped as abruptly as it started. For a blessed few seconds, everything was quiet. Then the vail started anew. Suddenly it dawned on him.

“Lydia,” he whispered weakly. A sound halfway between a sob and a cry of relief gurgled out of him and he staggered awkwardly to his feet, following the sound as it ricocheted off the walls.

He finally found her in a cell so dark, depressing and spartan it felt like an insult to everything Lydia stood for. His face pressed up against the dirty glass in the door, he could weakly make out a figure with long, tangled hair sitting up on a cot. Without thought, with just instinct guiding him, Stiles slammed his palm down on the door. The lock clicked open and he yanked it up and stood panting in the opening. Lydia Martin in a state he’d never seen her in before, sat ram right on the bed, still
screaming, eyes glassy, skin sickly pale.

She stopped the moment he set foot inside the room.

“Lydia,” he wheezed and rushed forward. She just sat there, unblinking. Unmoving. If it wasn’t for the shallow breaths she could’ve been a statue for all he knew.

“Lydia,” he repeated a tinge of panic seeping into his voice. “Lydia, can you hear me? It’s me. It’s Stiles.”

He touched her arm gently, but she didn’t react. He noticed a thin line of dried blood on her cheeks and chin.

Somewhere far away he could hear the sound of heavy doors being opened and voices drawing closer. They had to move. Now!

“Lydia, we need to get out of here,” he pleaded, grabbing the thin blanket covering her legs. She was just wearing a thin hospital gown. Her feet was bare. There was no shoes in the room.

“I’ll carry you if I have to, don’t think I won’t. I want no lectures on how you’re not a damsel in distress and all that jazz, you hear me?”

Evidently, Lydia didn’t hear a thing. Cursing, Stiles grabbed her arm and moved in for her legs.

She weight next to nothing. That or Stiles was just so chock full of adrenaline he didn’t even notice. He ran out into the hallway, stopped for a fraction of a second to hear what direction the footsteps and sounds were coming from, and then turned and ran the other way.

As he ran down a corridor, it was as if the beings inside the cells came to life. Roars, whines, and groans all blended into a horrifying choir of spine-chilling symphonies. Soon after banging and rattling added to the orchestra. Arms appeared from between bars, grabbing, reaching, and scratching. Stiles weaved in and out as best he could. Someone grabbed hold of Lydia’s gown and tugged. He heard it tear but didn’t stop.

Around a corner and into a second corridor, this time with a huge glass wall at the end, the frame of a door visible to the left. Stiles didn’t so much as brake, just barged on, mind fixated on unlocking it. It swung open by its own accord. Stiles burst through, scared it might swing close at any minute. Safely on the other side, he willed it shut again, and heard the satisfying sound of a lock clicking into place. Whoever was following their trail would have a key, but a locked door took longer to get through than an open one at any rate. Every second counted.

“Stiles?”

He almost dropped Lydia in shock.

“Lydia?” He gently lowered her to the floor and crouched down in front of her. She still looked groggy and disoriented, but her eyes had lost the glassy shine, and she blinked repeatedly, almost as if she was trying to will away a veil of fog.

“Where am I?” she asked weakly, voice raw and hoarse.

“Eichen,” said Stiles. “Your dad sent you here, it’s a long story that we frankly don’t have time for right now. We need to get out of here, like right now. We need you, Lydia. You don’t belong here. Can you walk?”
Lydia winced as she rose, legs obviously shaky. But she nodded her head resolutely and took a tentative step forward. And almost face-planted on the cold concrete floor.

“Come on,” said Stiles encouragingly, offering Lydia his arm. “I’ll support you. I must admit I’ve no idea exactly where we are now, only that we need to move in that direction. Only jail cells and straightjackets awaits the other way. The plan is pretty much bust, so we need to like, improvise, just a smidge.”

“You had a plan?” asked Lydia sounding half awed, half ready to faint.

“A horribly crappy one,” confirmed Stiles as he ushered her onwards.

“Sounds vaguely familiar,” muttered Lydia and Stiles laughed so hard and loudly it echoed off the walls. It sounded creepy. It also pretty much gave away their location.

They wobbled down another corridor and then turned left. The next corridor was dark, and only had two doors. Stiles yanked opened the first but it was just a small storage room. The next door was heavier, with a steel bolt across, secured with a huge padlock for good measure.

“I can’t go on much longer.” Lydia leaned heavily against the wall. Stiles could see her legs shaking. Somewhere in the distance they could hear voices shouting and doors being opened. It was this door or surrender.

“Hold on just a little bit longer,” pleaded Stiles.

“You don’t have a key, Stiles and none of us have supernatural strength to crush that thing. I can’t just scream at it to make it unlock,” said Lydia, frustration oozing off her in waves.

“No, probably not,” confirmed Stiles. “Congratulations Lydia, you’re officially the first one to witness the magic of Stiles.”

“What on earth are you babbling about – Holy crap! How?”

For dramatic effect (he really was a showoff, alright) Stiles had waved his hand elaborately in front of the lock. The next minute it sprung open by its own accord.

“I don’t have time for the specifics now, we need to move.”

He ushered her through the door before following through and locking it again once they were both safely on the other side. Lydia was still spluttering and demanding answers, but he just waved her off. Stiles was too busy trying to figure out just where the hell they were.

“Shush, Lydia. I’ll tell you more about that later. Now we really need to focus on getting out from wherever we are.”

Amazingly she did as asked. For a few moments they hobbled in silence down a long, wet and dimly lit corridor. There were no doors, just a long line of huge pipes along the upper wall.

“I’ve been here before,” muttered Lydia in a small voice. “Stiles, I know where we are!”

She picked up speed, clearly finding energy from some unknown reserve. Stiles had trouble keeping up.

“Lydia. Lydia? Tell me, where are we?” He had a vague sense of déjà vu, but he couldn’t place it. Lydia only barged forward, muttering under her breath, but Stiles couldn’t make out what she said.
She sounded distraught. He was afraid that whatever Theo had done was still messing with her mind. Perhaps she was leading them further into a trap for all he knew.

Maybe ten minutes later they emerged into a clearing Stiles remembered only too well. Emotions and memories assaulted him, and he sank to his knees. Lydia followed. For a long time they simply sat there, on the dirty ground, clinging to each other.

When finally Stiles felt some of the paralyzing thoughts lift, he fished out his phone and dialed a number he knew by heart.

“Hey Scott, it’s me. You need to come and get us, we need extraction. We’re at Oak Creek.”

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“I can’t believe you did this! Stiles, are you out of your freaking mind?”

Scott McCall was livid. Arms wind-milling, spit spraying, eyes flashing livid. Which was not a good combination while operating a moving vehicle.

For once Stiles had to concede he sort of had good reason. His actions had been reckless to say the least, and it was more luck than skill that had brought them safely out of Eichen House. Stiles crossed his fingers that Mason had escaped the facility without being admitted or arrested.

“Are you even listening to me? What kind of idiotic, moronic idea was it to break Lydia out of Eichen without help? You could have ended up arrested for this, Stiles!”

Scott took a turn a tad too sharply. Lydia groaned in the backseat.

“Calm the driving, man. This is a car, not your bike.”

“I’m driving perfectly fine!” yelled Scott. His next turn was just as aggressive. Lydia cursed softly as she was jostled from side to side. She clipped on the seatbelt and Stiles did the same. Neither had healing powers and if Scott didn’t calm down soon, it would be a miracle if they arrived in one piece.

“Sure you are,” muttered Stiles. Scott fumed but didn’t comment. They drove on in tense silence.

After a while of resolutely not talking Stiles became aware of where they were.

“Scott, why are we here?”

“What do you mean? I’m taking Lydia home.”

Stiles groaned in annoyance. “Turn around. Turn around right now!”

Scott glanced at him, face still oozing anger but now etched with confusion. “What? Why?”

“Come on, man! Think! I just broke Lydia out of the restricted section of Eichen House. A place her dad had her forcefully admitted after getting custody rights from her mom. Her mom’s house will be the first place they look for her, and we don’t want to get her in trouble. You should take her to my house.”

Scott pursed his lips but evidently understood the argument. He slowed down, pulled over and
turned the car around. Soon they were on the way to the Stilinskis.

“Why your house?”

“What do you mean?”

Scott sighed deeply. “I mean, everyone with a pulse know that you’re overly fond of Lydia. You’ve proclaimed your undying love for her ever since the 3rd grade. Won’t people swarm to your house as well?”

Stiles shrugged. “Somehow I don’t think so. They might suspect me, I’m not exactly known for my strict adherence to the law. But they’ll never assume my dad – the sheriff – will harbor a runaway or whatever we should label Lydia. And he’s at home full time now that he’s on sick leave. I doubt anyone would dare accuse him of breaking the law.”

He smiled fondly. “Derek did the same back when he was a fugitive. He came to my house for help, knowing no one would think to look for him there.”

Lydia snorted in the backseat. Stiles had momentarily forgotten she was there, and he didn’t expect her to be paying attention to their conversation.

“I suspect that wasn’t the only reason,” she added smartly. Stiles felt his cheeks redden.

“Why? What other reason would he have to go to Stiles for help?” asked Scott with the usual absence of tact.

“Obviously some people find me useful and trustworthy,” sniped Stiles, unable to keep his feelings in check. Scott bristled.

“Oh sweet lord, are you still on about that?”

“Oh my God, you make it sound like I’m snippy because you stole my last Snickers bar or something. Why wouldn’t I still care about that? Not only did you believe and trust Theo over me, you’ve repeatedly ignored my ideas and input for ages, and then you go and say shit like this as well, making me sound like something insignificant and inconsequential when in fact I’ve done more than my fair share since all this began. Especially considering I don’t have the physical attributes some of you are now blessed with.”

“Blessed?”

Scott’s voice went up several octaves. “Do you think this is a blessing? Being a werewolf, being hunted and having to save everyone? It’s not. It’s more of a curse. A cross I have to bear in large thanks to you!”

“And there we have it! The crux of the matter.”

Stiles threw his hands up in despair. “I knew you blamed this all on me. Fine, I suggested we go into the woods that night to look for the body, but Scott – I didn’t have to drag you with me. You agreed pretty readily if I remember correctly. And if you don’t think I partly blame myself for that already, you don’t know a thing about me. Which I think perhaps sums this up nicely.”

“Guys –“

“What is that supposed to mean? We’ve know each other for ages – “
“And yet you don’t trust a thing I suggest, and when I actually do a good thing – like get Lydia the fuck out of a mental asylum of supernatural dimensions, you find it prudent to yell and berate me. Why is that? Is it because that makes me the hero of this little adventure and not the almighty true alpha Scott McCall who singlehandedly defeated the alpha pack, and who always saves the day all by his lonesome, while his useless friends stand idly by, cowering in his glory.”

“Guys –“

“I don’t do that! I don’t take all the credit!”

“Well, you sure as hell never correct anyone’s assumptions to that effect. Which is kind of the same really. Tacit consent and all that jazz. Not that I care about the glory. But you don’t get to yell at me for doing a good thing. It was dangerous and risky yes, but no one save my dad gets to tear me a new one for this.”

“You’re out of your mind – “

“SHUT UP THE PAIR OF YOU!” screamed Lydia and leaned forward to flick their ears.

They both cried out in indignation more than pain, but wisely did as she suggested. She huffed in annoyance, glaring at the back of their heads. Stiles could feel frustration coming off her in waves.

“I’ve obviously missed something while I was under lock and key,” she started, voice dripping with sarcasm. “I’d like the cliff notes version of this little spat explained to me later. Now, all I want is a long shower, followed by a bath and then another shower. After that I will do my best to empty out your fridge. When these tasks are complete, we will talk. And we do have a lot to talk about.”

Scott and Stiles murmured their agreement. Lydia hummed in satisfaction. The rest of the ride continued in awkward silence, at least for the two boys.

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“What in god’s name possessed you to –“

“Seriously, you could’ve been caught!”

“You could’ve been hurt!”

“You could’ve DIED!”

The sheriff and Derek were taking turns hurling reprimands at Stiles. Even if he wanted to he wouldn’t be able to get a word in edgewise, which was why he was calmly imitating an oyster.

Scott simply watched the exchange with what could only be described as self-satisfied glee. Stiles got the message loud and clear: His best friend felt he deserved this bashing. Stiles personally felt he deserved a medal. Or at the very least a pat on the back, perhaps even a celebratory high five. Neither his dad nor Derek seemed inclined to grant these wishes.

They’d been at it ever since they’d showed up with a still somewhat shaken Lydia. Amazingly they had managed to restrain themselves until she’d been safely guided to the bathroom, well equipped with towels, a pair of Stiles’ old sweatpants and a hoodie that could probably house two of her. As
soon as the door had clicked shut behind her, it was as if someone had hit unmute, and all hell broke loose.

Years of experience had taught Stiles to simply shut up and take it. His dad would run out of steam eventually, but talking back or trying to inject explanations and reasoning at this point was futile. With minor infractions he sometimes managed to wear his dad down with half-ass excuses, but in cases like this, it was like pouring gasoline on fire. Stiles didn’t know what to expect from Derek, but he hoped the same tactic would work. Or at the very least, not get him in even deeper trouble.

“I should just lock you up once and for all and throw away the key,” spat the sheriff. He was pacing the living room in long, angry strides.

“That wouldn’t do much good,” muttered Stiles under his breath. His dad didn’t hear him, but both Derek and Scott picked up on it. Scott snorted and shook his head slightly. Derek on the other hand narrowed his eyes and stared, as if that would unravel the mystery of Stiles. It took more than that. Stiles had spent years perfecting his invisible walls.

“One more stunt like that and I swear you’ll think Rapunzel had it good, son. You should probably start growing your hair out because that will be the only way to escape the endlessly tall tower of misery I will be building to keep you from killing yourself.”

With that colorful imagery his dad seemed to run out of steam, or at least words. He was still huffing under his breath though, so he might just be gearing up for a second round. While he recharged, Derek took over.

“Of all the reckless stunts you’ve ever pulled, this has got to be the worst. What were you thinking? And why didn’t you get help at least?”

Stiles threw his hands up, gesturing wildly at Mason who was curled up at the end of the sofa. He looked exhausted.

“I did! I brought Mason.”

Derek rolled his eyes. “No offence to Mason, but he’s as human as you are.”

“Offense taken, Amnesiac Wolf,” barked Stiles. Honestly, what was it with werewolves and looking down their noses at the mundane?

“Even if I don’t have disappearing eyebrows, claws and sprout body hair at the first hint of a moon beam, I can take care of myself just fine. The same goes for Mason.” He nudged him carefully on the shoulder making him startle.

“How did things go on your end by the way? You got away okay I gather?”

Mason shrugged, his every move syrupy and languid. “Sort of. My getaway was anything but suave, and it did involve me running about six blocks to shake a pair of very eager overlies. Let’s just say I need to work on my stamina.”

He yawned as if to emphasize the point. It was contagious because soon Stiles was yawning along with him in perfect unison.

“Well, it was an award-winning performance you pulled off at any rate. I’m forever grateful.”

Mason bowed his head in a lazy acceptance of the praise, then grabbed a pillow and melted bonelessly into it.
“And I’m forever in a constant state of alert where you’re concerned,” remarked the sheriff in that tone of voice that meant Stiles was still very much in the doghouse.

“I still want to wring your neck and put you in a gauntlet until you graduate. But you’re home safe, which is a slight wonder, for which I am grateful, I really am. BUT – “ He gestured with his finger for Stiles not to interrupt.

“I understand the why – to get Lydia out. Her mother is very grateful, by the way. I texted her letting her know she was safe, but didn’t tell her where she is. That way she’s got plausible deniability, and just the fact that I am aiding in this little subterfuge is solely because I think Mr. Martin has behaved appallingly in this matter.”

He took a deep breath, possibly to get his inner sheriff and the urge to always abide the law under control. Stiles had to give him props. This was probably killing his dad on most levels. Slowly he was learning how to bend.

“But I don’t get the how,” his dad continued, voice rising an octave. ”How did you get past locked doors without setting off alarms?”

Damn it! That was the question Stiles really didn’t want to get into. Not now with so many witnesses at any rate. He’d wanted to talk to his dad in private, and certainly not with Scott in the room. Not with the current state of their relationship. Scott was still leaning against the dining room table, arms crossed and face permanently stuck in a grimace that spoke more of anger than amusement. Stiles curbed the urge to throw something at him. Preferably something that would hurt enough to wipe the scowl of his face, and perhaps, if he was lucky, even get him to leave.

It was depressing and yet not entirely unexpected that their friendship had taken this turn. At least it wasn’t unexpected for Stiles. There was little to suggest Scott had reached any self-realizations as of yet. And Stiles was running out of patience. So telling his dad while Scott was in the room? So not an option. A thing like this would probably push him off the edge and out of their somewhat flimsy friend zone.

Oddly enough he didn’t much mind Derek being there. Or that wasn’t entirely true – he feared his reaction. But not as much as he feared his dad’s. It seemed like the sheriff’s sighs and woes got longer and heavier with each new supernatural encounter. Sometimes it seemed like they almost offended him. As if they disturbed his perfectly constructed world of black and white, law vs crime, right vs wrong. Stiles usually operated in some shade of grey.

“Oh dad, you know I pick locks like small children pick noses – messily but effectively.”

Derek snorted and almost smiled. His dad looked about 367 % done.

“Nice try, son. Now, how about the truth. Also, why didn’t anyone see you?”

“Cloak of invisibility?” suggested Stiles. His dad upgraded his face to 403 % done. Not a good sign.

“I don’t know, I guess Mason just did a spectacular job of distracting the one guy guarding the reception.”

“That still doesn’t explain the locks,” sighed the sheriff. Oh no, he was crossing his arms. Crap.

It was a terrible thing to realize that when you needed a creative and believable lie the most, they were nowhere to be found. Stiles prided himself on his abilities to think under pressure and produce believable half-truths at the drop of a hat. Obviously he didn’t have any hats to drop at the moment.
Lydia could not have timed her entrance better if she tried.

“I’m starving,” she exclaimed loudly as she sauntered down the stairs looking miles better than Stiles had ever done in those clothes, despite them being ridiculously oversized on her. Her hair was clean and untangled and swept to one side. Her eyes bright with – Stiles thought it looked like mischief – others might call it intelligence. He knew better.

Derek more or less sprinted to the kitchen, his dad shouting out a suggestion of tea and where to find the ingredients. Scott hastily nudged Mason’s feet out of the way so Lydia could sit on the couch. He grumbled in his sleep, but snored on, head at a fairly awkward angle. No one bothered to correct it, everyone was too busy taking in the sight of Lydia Martin in all her glory.

She sat down, all grace, and accepted the blanket Stiles offered her with a smile and a wink. He mouthed a silent “thank you”. Lydia’s mouth curled in a half smile, but she remained silent. The mischievous glint in her eye stayed though, accompanied by a small wink.

Derek rushed back with a bowl of chicken salad that Lydia more or less devoured in record time, but still left not so much as a crumb on her clothes or the couch. Stiles did not know how she did it. While she continued to polish off a yoghurt, two avocados and a large glass of juice, everyone was quiet. The clock ticked quietly in the background and Mason snored softly with the occasional snort.

Stiles was brimming with questions, but now that the worst hunger pains had been taken care of Lydia was eating maddeningly slowly. His knee had started to bob and twitch and he was back to chewing on his nails. A hand on his elbow first startled him. Without turning he knew it was Derek. Calming him down, telling him to be patient without saying a word. The weirdest part of all was how easy it was. His entire body relaxed. As long as Derek’ hand was on him, he felt calm and serene. At peace. Lydia grinned into her napkin.

A century later she finally put down her napkin, sighed in contentment and placed the plate on the table. The collective group of onlookers held their breaths, not sure what they were waiting for but still knowing – or hoping – she could shed even a shred of light on the situation.

“So,” she began, eyes sweeping over her captive audience. “What’s new? Other than Derek being back, that is.”

Stiles let out a yelp in frustration that not even Derek’s calming hand (now on his lower back) could temper. Lydia pursed her lips but didn’t comment. Instead she shifted her focus to Scott, who squirmed under her attention.

“I’m glad to see that you’re unharmed, Scott. I feared Theo might’ve tried to kill you.”

“He did. It didn’t stick.” Scott didn’t elaborate. Lydia nodded minutely. If she was annoyed by his clipped tone, she didn’t portray it.

“The True Alpha prevails as usual,” she said with a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. Now it was Scott’s turn to purse his lips. Stiles was confused. Was there tension between Scott and Lydia? He was out of the loop on that one, and had a sneaking suspicion it would be wise to stay clear of it.

“I think at this point the important part is that Theo’s attempt to usurp Scott’s place as alpha of our pack didn’t work. So he’s created a pack of his own.”

Lydia’s head whipped around. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“He resurrected a bunch of the dead chimeras, we don’t know how.” Lydia looked alarmed.
“So that’s why he wanted to know where the Nemeton was! This is not good.”

Stiles couldn’t agree more with the assessment. “That’s what we gathered. Parrish found you by the Nemeton, more or less catatonic. He made sure that you were taken to the hospital, but by then your dad had swooped into town with a posse of legal aides and he took custody of you and sent you to Eichen House. But not before I managed to talk to your mom. She’s noticed marks on your neck, and they looked like claw marks.”

Lydia nodded slowly. She was chewing on her lower lip which Stiles knew meant she was processing the information.

“That is the last thing I remember. Theo ramming his claws into my neck. He knocked me out in the library, but I woke up someplace else. It was wet, lots of pipes, tubes, tanks with some yellowish liquid in them.”

“That sounds like the place Liam described where the Dread Doctors took him and Hayden,” commented Derek. Stiles nodded. It made sense.

“Do you know where it was, Lydia?” She shook her head. “No, I just woke up there. Sorry.”

The sheriff had been oddly quiet throughout the entire conversation, but then again there was little he could say. Stiles was just eternally grateful that he’d agreed to house Lydia here at all. He was bending his rules for once.

Scott sighed deeply. “I’m really glad you’re out of Eichen safe and sound, Lydia. But I have to admit I was hoping you’d know something more. Are you sure Theo didn’t say anything else of interest?”

Lydia didn’t answer at first, just rose from her seat and wandered over to the dining room table where the books they’d gotten from Chris and Derek’s vault was spread out. She picked up one and leafed through it.

“These are all in Archaic Latin,” she said. “I should get started on them as soon as possible.” She turned towards Scott. “That way my rescue wasn’t entirely in vain.”

“That’s not what I meant,” he spluttered indignantly. Lydia tossed her hair. “I never claimed you did either, but I do find in interesting that you jumped to that conclusion. Anyway – “she raised a finger in Scott’s direction to stop him from arguing further. He clamped his mouth shut, a tinge of red flashing.

“As a matter of fact I do know things of interest,” she continued, leafing through the index of another book. Her finger paused and then she flipped the book open at a specific page. She laid it down and signaled for everyone to gather around.

“I know what Parrish is and why he’s here.”

A collective gasp went through the room as they stared down on the book. All except Mason who was still snoring softly on the couch.
Chapter 14

“A hellhound?”

“Scott – “

“A HELLHOUND!”

“Scott, for the love of God, pipe down,” said Lydia with an eye roll. She had pulled up a chair and was busy skimming through the indexes of all the books. So far she’d separated them into three piles. Stiles had no clue what criteria she was going by.

“Why should I pipe down? You just told me we have a hellhound in our midst. A HELLHOUND!”

“Yes, we all heard. Half of the neighborhood heard. Now please calm down and let me explain. It’s not as bad as it sounds.”

Scott balked, threw his hands in the air and laughed mirthlessly. “Not as bad -! Do you even hear yourself? Hellhounds can’t possibly be a good thing. NEVER! It has the word “hell” in it. Alarm bells are ringing!”

Lydia simply arched an eyebrow, then put another book in the third and decidedly largest pile.

“How would you know? When did you become the expert on all mythological creatures? You’ve been watching too much Supernatural, is what I think. Hellhounds are not here to drag any of us to hell or tear us to shreds. Honestly.”

Scott did not look convinced. He spun around looking from Stiles to the sheriff and back again.

“Why aren’t you two freaking out? Sheriff Stilinski, you apparently have a hellhound on your payroll. I say this is cause for alarm!”

The sheriff was pensively rubbing his chin. “I think I will wait and reserve judgment until I’ve heard more about what Lydia has to say. Parrish has been a good deputy and he’s never done anything that warrants suspicion, aside from being fire proof that is. When he found out he was the one taking the chimeras, he locked himself in one of the cells at the station. He doesn’t remember what or why he’s doing the stuff he’s doing, and we’ve had too many accounts of that happening to good people without their control. I won’t start judging anyone without just cause, and frankly I’m surprised to see you jump to this so readily. Besides, aren’t you a dangerous creature as well? It’s all about what you chose to do with it, rather than what you could potentially do, right?”

Scott squirmed under the sheriff’s heavy stare. Stiles was possibly enjoying it just a little bit.

“I guess you’re right,” he muttered and slumped down on the couch. Mason was awake again and looked confused, sleepy and curious. He opened his mouth, but Stiles shook his head. He wisely clamped it shut again, and shrank back into the pillows with a wary glance towards Scott who still didn’t look convinced.

For the first time in a while Stiles felt empathy towards Scott. Theo had done a number on him, rocked his world, shaken his believes and turned everything on its axis. Finding your balance after that was not easy, Stiles knew this only too well. Scott was used to the world being black or white, used to trusting people wholeheartedly. This had failed him, and now he was jumping at every shadow.
I can help him through this, thought Stiles. If he’ll let me.

But this wasn’t the time.

Lydia had finished her sorting of the books and was now staring expectantly at Derek.

“What do you know about hellhounds, Derek?” she asked point blank. Derek looked slightly taken aback, and crossed his arms. Stiles took what he hoped was a subtle step closer to him, and brushed his upper arm against his. It was still odd to realize that this Derek didn’t remember all the progress he’d had the last year or so. He was still defensive and resorted to hostile stances and arm crossing when confronted. But Stiles knew he had it in him. To be helpful, trusting and open. He just needed a little nudging. Or a forceful shove.

“What makes you think I know anything about that? Not everything scary is connected to the Hales you know.”

Lydia’s eyebrows arched sky high. She didn’t know about Derek’s memory loss, didn’t know about the second kidnapping. Derek had mellowed considerably the past few months, but all of that development was locked away somewhere deep in his mind. Or so Stiles hoped. At any rate this was certainly not the time for that story. He’d fill her in later.

“Derek, I think Lydia is just asking if you’ve heard any stories about hellhounds before. She’s not accusing you of anything, dude.”

“Don’t “dude” me, Stiles,” muttered Derek, arms still crossed and forehead creased. Lydia’s confusion was mounting. Stiles shook his head minutely, mouthing “later”. She took the hint.

“Stiles is right,” she confirmed, focusing on Derek again. “I’ve come across some information on hellhounds. In fact that was what I was looking up when Theo attacked me in the library, so I only have the one source to back it up as of now. I was hoping if you’d heard anything as a kid or growing up, it would either back it up or discredit it. Nothing more, nothing less.”

The furrow between Derek’s eyebrows eased up a bit. Stiles nudged him again, and slowly his crossed arms untied and he relaxed a bit.

“Eh, I don’t remember much,” he started, eyes pensive. “My grandmother, my dad’s mother actually, was the one who sometimes liked to scare us with stories of hellhounds and – “

“- and what?” pressed Lydia, leaning forward in her chair. Derek met her eyes, still somewhat distrustful, as if he couldn’t really fathom why Lydia Martin was looking at him with such rapt and genuine attention.

“Hellhounds and the Wild Hunt,” he finally whispered and Lydia whooped in triumph.

“Hardly a topic worth cheering about if my grandma is to be trusted,” he added dryly. “She used to threaten us with it. Especially at times when one of us had come close to revealing our secret, like accidentally almost wolfing out in public and the like. Werewolf powers usually manifest during the teenage years, and with a body already brimming with hormones, control can be an issue.”

“I don’t get it.”

It was Stiles’ dad that had spoken. “I’ve also grown up with a grandmother filled to the brim with scary stories. The Polish love to scare their young, I had nightmares for weeks after spending holidays with her and my grandpa. She often spoke of the Wild Hunt but it was all about strife, plagues and horrors for whoever saw them. It was her way of making us stay close to their house and
not wander off into the night I think.”

Lydia nodded her head eagerly while she thumbed through one of the books that had made it into the center pile. It was by far the smallest.

“That’s the thing about mythologies isn’t it? It varies from place to place, it takes on new meanings and twists. Sometimes even two separate phenomenon end up with similar names and they get confused. Derek, tell me more about what your grandma said?”

She smiled encouragingly, and Derek, still looking entirely overwhelmed, continued somewhat stiltedly.

“To my grandma it was all about balance. We’re both human and animal, and the key is to embrace both, find the balance that makes us blend into both worlds. If we gave into our savage side that would mess with the order of things, I guess. If the order, or the balance was broken, the Wild Hunt would show up to correct it.”

“Like a supernatural Police force?”

The Sheriff looked positively giddy at the thought. It was probably the most logical and familiar thing he’d come across since being introduced to the otherworldly happenings of Beacon Hills.

“I guess that is one way of thinking about it,” said Derek with a shrug. “I never thought of it like that, it always felt like this big bad thing. One toe out of line and the hellhounds come to bite it clean off.”

Stiles guffawed into his hand. His mind was full of images of Parrish nibbling on people’s toes. Lydia threw him a withering glare, and he did his best to school his face in neutral expression (he failed).

“I don’t remember the text verbatim, but what I found at the library went something like this

"Woden’s Hunt, also known as the Wild Ride or Wild Hunt. A myth of devilish riders in the sky accompanied by black dogs, spectral beasts whose eyes glowed with fire, A Bearer of Death and Guardian of the Supernatural, the black dog is also known by its more common name... The Hellhound.”

“Okay, so what does that even mean?” asked Scott, voice clipped. He still looked as if the idea of hellhounds was equal to the end of the world.

“I think it means that Parrish is here as a way to right an unbalance,” said Lydia breathlessly. “Guardian of the supernatural – that doesn’t sound like he’s a threat to us just because we’re supernaturals. Not like the hunters at any rate.”

“Exactly,” supplied Stiles, dots connecting in rapid-fire succession in his brain. “The Dread Doctors are the biggest unnatural fuck you to all things Supernatural. They’re creating supernatural beings from perfectly normal people in a synthetic and unethical way. They’re the one disrupting the balance!”

Lydia nodded. “That’s what I’ve been thinking as well. Kira was the one who mentioned the Wild Hunt to me just as this entire mess started. I think it was her mom who talked about it during that storm the night of the senior scribe. Storms like that are traditionally thought of as a sign of a coming hunt.”

Scott still didn’t look convinced. Stiles was partly impressed and proud that Scott was developing a penchant for questions and doubt, but on the other hand, couldn’t he have activated another time
when it was more glaringly needed. Like when Theo came waltzing into their lives?

“It doesn’t really add up. Parrish showed up long before the Doctors. Is he psychic as well? He
doesn’t even know what he is, what he’s doing and why.”

“That is true,” conceded Stiles. He turned to his dad. “When did Parrish transfer? And do you
remember from where? Or why?”

The sheriff chewed thoughtfully on a pen, eyes knitted together. “It was after I’d learned about all of
this that I’m sure of.” He gestured to the room at large. “I would have to check the paperwork if you
need and exact date, and other facts. I must admit I haven’t memorized it.”

“So, after your kidnapping and the stuff with the darach, then,” said Stiles. “And it was definitely
before the whole evil fly possessions, because Parrish was around by then.”

His dad nodded. “That seems about right – wait a minute! I remember something. It was a slightly
odd conversation we had during that time of, you know, the possession business. I apologized for the
state of things, because as a new deputy to be thrown into that kind of mayhem, that had to be both
scary and making him regret moving here. And Parrish said something about feeling drawn here.
That he couldn’t really remember why he moved here, just that it felt right. Or something like that. I
didn’t think much of it at the time, I was too worried about what was going on with you.”

“Well I’ll be damned,” said Stiles with a sinking heart. “This brings us right back to the Nemeton,
doesn’t it? Which fits, since Parrish keeps bringing the abominations there.” He looked to Scott who
looked confused.

“Remember what Deaton said, Scott? Before we stepped into the ice baths? That it would help find
our parents, but that it would awaken the Nemeton. That it would draw thing there. Valack said the
same thing to us, don’t you remember, Lydia? That the Nemeton brought the Doctors here. And
Parrish obviously came to counteract them again. Or something.”

No one said anything after that. Everyone clearly needed a moment to process the information. In the
end it was Mason who broke the silence.

“So, what do we do now? Just sit back and let Parrish and his Wild Hunt deal with the Doctors? Or
do we, like turn off the Nemeton? Is that even an option?”

It was good questions. Stiles sure didn’t know the answer to either of them. Looking at the dejected
faces around the room, neither did any of the others.

“Well, I will look through these books, perhaps one of them can shed some sliver of light on the
situation,” said Lydia with an air of determination. “But not tonight. I’m exhausted.”

“Me too,” muttered Mason. Stiles never knew acting could take so much out of a person, but Mason
was already snoring softly, curled up on his side. He looked to his dad, who simply shrugged.

“Anyone have the number to his parents? I’m going to give them a call and tell them Mason is
spending the night. He’s dead to the world.”

Stiles flipped through his contacts and handed the phone of to his dad. “Thanks, son. I gather the
guestroom is habitable again?” Stiles nodded, ears going slightly pink.

“Good, please show Lydia to it, will you. And dig the cot out of the cupboard while you’re up
there.”
Stiles’ confusion must have shown because his dad sighed deeply, as if he was having inner issues with what he was about to say. “For Derek. I gather by his overnight bag that he’s staying as well?”

Stiles spluttered incoherently. Derek instantly began muttering about not wanting to be a bother. The sheriff waved them both off. “I’m too exhausted to even care, just set the cot up in your room, will you. There’s hardly room for it down here. Unless Derek can stay with – “

His sentence was cut off by the front door slamming shut. “- Scott?” he finished lamely.

“Scott McCall has left the building,” said Stiles petulantly. Derek hit him with a pillow. The sheriff rolled his eyes and went into the kitchen to call the Hewitts.

“I always thought of our lives as a mashup of supernatural tropes,” said Lydia innocently. “But I must admit I’m enjoying the added romantic Telenovela elements. Kudos.”

“Shut up, you banshee,” muttered Stiles and pushed her towards the stairs.

“Oh play nice, Houdini,” she retorted smartly. Stiles quelled the urge to magic her jaw shut.

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The cot was rickety, old and the springs in dire need of grease. Just the tiniest movement sent it into a tsunami of squeaky sounds that would fit perfectly into an old German porno. It didn’t help matters that Derek was a restless sleeper. Not that he was sleeping yet. His breath was too rapid for that. But if he didn’t settle down soon Stiles would whack him with his bat. Every movement played out an indecent melody of suggestive sounds that mortified him as much as it gave him ideas. Dirty ideas. Filthy even.

Derek moved again. Stiles froze in terror. It really did sound incredibly incriminating. At this rate he would never get any sleep, and it was only a matter of time before his dad would barge in, wolfsbane bullets at the ready.

“Get up,” he hissed into the darkness. He was answered by another wave of squeaky sounds as Derek moved again.

“What?”

“I said, get up. Get off the bed. NOW!”

Stiles was already out of his own bed, halfway across the room towards his desk. He switched on the desk lamp and the room became bathed in a soft yellow glow. Derek was sitting up looking confused and sleep rumbled. His hair was sticking out in odd little tufts on one side. Stiles itched to take photos.

“What are you doing?”

Stiles was rooting around in one of his desk drawers, throwing out useless things like paper clips, old tests, candy wrappers, CDs and – hey, so that was where his iPod was. Sweet!

“I’m positive I had a small tube of oil – and no, not that kind of oil,” he added hastily when Derek’s eyebrows shot sky high. “Oil, for my skateboard. Those springs need oiling, dude. Either that or my
dad will slap you with a charge of statutory rape in the morning. Not that I’m underage or anything, but I’m certain my dad is in some sort of denial on that part. Anyway, the point is every time you move a muscle – and you have a lot of those, it sounds like my room is either a cheap motel room of the more seedy variety, or the base of some very naughty porn production.”

“It’s not that bad,” said Derek defensively. He also must have moved his pinky or something because the cot broke into a long sequence of vails that hurt Stiles’ nerve endings on a molecular level. Derek leapt off it with the grace of a – well, a werewolf, and stood awkwardly in the middle of the room, scratching his head.

“Okay, so I was wrong. It’s bad. Really bad. German porn bad.”

“Thank you, I’m aware of that. Hence the search for oil. And I did not need the German porn reference. Dude that shit is traumatizing.”

He continued to dig through drawers without result. He did find the book report from junior year that he was certain he’d handed in and had argued his case so convincingly the teacher had ended up giving him an A just to shut him up.

Meanwhile, Derek bent down to inspect the damage and came back looking dejected.

“I think you can call off the search,” he muttered and showed Stiles a finger. It was covered in rust. “The entire underside and all the springs look like that. If you want that thing to stop making noise, the answer is to toss it out the window and then have me to sleep on the floor.”

Stiles cursed creatively. He didn’t even have a carpet and he couldn’t for the life of him remember the last time someone had cleaned the floor. Even for someone with an above average immune system it wouldn’t be advisable. And certainly not comfortable.

“I’m not letting you sleep on the floor, dumbass,” said Stiles, teeth clenched. “Just let me think for a moment.”

They might have a mattress up in the attic but chances were it was molded, mouse-eaten and all around worse than the floor. And what the fuck was Derek doing now?

“What’s going on?”

Derek froze mid-zip. Stiles crossed his arms. This was so typical.

“I’m going back to the loft, Stiles,” said Derek, reaching for his jacket. “There is nothing wrong with my bed there.”

Stiles clenched his fists and resisted the urge to whack Derek with a spoon. Or his bat. “The bed might be okay, but the place gives you nightmares, Derek. You don’t sleep there. You told me that yourself.”

Derek didn’t meet his eyes, just continued to get dressed. God, he was such a martyr. And here Stiles thought they were over that phase. Or rather Stiles was over it. Derek didn’t remember any of that. Sometimes Stiles felt like he was trapped in an endless game of Chutes and Ladders, only he never got to climb any of the ladders. Just fall down the chutes. The emotional turmoil was exhausting.

“Well,” he said with a determination he didn’t know where was coming from. “If you’re not going to sleep, you might as well not sleep here. At least this place doesn’t give you echoes of past trauma, right?”
“What do you mean?” Derek had paused before he’d gotten to his shoes. Stiles suspected he was planning on escaping out the window as per usual.

“I mean that we stay up all night watching terrible B-movies or something.”

“Stiles, don’t be stupid, I can’t keep you up all night like this – “

“Don’t be a prick. You know I don’t sleep much even on a good night. It’s not like I require all that much sleep to function in the first place. Now grab your pillow and get over here, I’ll get my laptop and we can see what terrible treasures I can dig up on Netflix.”

Derek idled by the window, looking torn between his usual mode of operandi which was to summersault out the window with entirely too many unnecessary loops, or actually stay. Stiles made up his mind for him but tugging him over and shoving him down on the bed. He lobbed the pillow at his head while he grabbed his laptop.

“You’re very bossy all of a sudden,” grumbled Derek, but he didn’t even look one bit annoyed. Quite the opposite in fact.

“Deal with it,” replied Stiles as he logged on and inspected his queue. “Now tell me honestly, if you had to pick between The Notebook and Mall Cop, what would it be?”

“You’re horrible.”

“Oh I am, am I? Answer the question, Amnesiac-wolf and don’t think for a moment I won’t know if you’re lying.”

Predictably Derek arched an eyebrow. Stiles grinned widely. “You’ve got werewolf hearing all of a sudden do you?”

He shook his head. “Nope, not at all. I’ve just figured out your tell is all.”

Derek looked honestly offended at that. It was terribly adorable. Stiles wanted to take a picture of that pout.

“I don’t have a tell,” he muttered, elbowing Stiles in the side. He cackled in pure glee and had to clamp a hand over his own mouth to quell the volume. There were people (hopefully) sleeping in this house.

“Oh you do,” replied Stiles in a song-song voice. “I’m as good as certified in micro-expressions, call it my super power if you will. You scrunch your noise just the tiniest bit when you tell a fib. Also you stare just a tad too intensely at whoever you’re lying to. I think you believe that will make the lie more believable, and most people are probably fooled. I’m not most people, though.”

Derek just stared at Stiles, but he didn’t say anything. In the end he shook his head slightly and muttered “that’s true.” Stiles wasn’t sure if it was a response to his analysis of his tells or the claim that he was not like most people. He didn’t ask.

“So, now that you know I will know if you lie, please tell me, when forced to choose, which do you prefer and why?”

Derek looked to be in agonizing pain. Stiles could sympathize. Lydia had forced him through several viewings of The Notebook and he had the emotional scars to prove it. On the other hand, Mall Cop was torture of another caliber.
“Can’t we pick something else?”

Stiles shook his head. “Nope.”

“You’re a terror,” grumbled Derek, rubbing his forehead.

“I can live with that, now pick or I’ll choose for you.”

“Alright, alright. I guess – oh crap, just you wait, next time I get to pick and you’ll regret this little stunt, mark my words.”

Stiles didn’t respond. He’d frozen in elated anticipation at the words “next time”. That had promise. And threat, of course. But he was pathetic enough to admit to himself that he’d suffer through the worst movie ever if it meant doing it with Derek Hale.

“The Notebook,” mumbled Derek finally and Stiles crowed out a triumphant “I knew it” that awarded him with a pillow to the face.

“Shut up and hit play.”

“Sure thing, softy wolf. I had a feeling you were secretly a romantic at heart. Should I get some Kleenex for you?”

Derek stuck out his tongue and crossed his arms. Stiles hit play. Half an hour into the movie, neither was making jokes anymore. They had moved to sit next to each other at the head of Stiles’ bed. Now they were more or less lying down, the laptop on top of Stiles’ stomach. He was warm both inside and out, content and happy in a way he couldn’t remember ever feeling. And that while watching The Notebook, and not with Lydia Martin. Who’d known?

“This was Laura’s favorite movie,” whispered Derek. “She made me watch it with her at least once a month. I always put up a fight, because Laura always ended up springing for pizza as an incentive. But I would’ve done it even without the pizza.”

Stiles didn’t know what to say to that. Instead he reached out and squeezed Derek’s hand gently. Just a short but firm pat to know that he understood. He released but didn’t move his hand far.

“I would give anything to watch it with her again.”

Stiles felt his breath hitch. “I would’ve given anything to watch this with my mom,” he replied almost inaudibly. “I think she would’ve loved it.”

They continued watching in silence. When Allie saw Noah’s picture in the newspaper, Derek’s hand found Stiles’. After that Stiles didn’t remember anything from the movie. All he could process was the feel of Derek’s warm hand that sent out heatwaves in all directions until Stiles was nothing but one giant nerve cell registering just one emotion – bliss.

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Stiles woke in increments.

His first thought was fuzzy and incoherent. The room was bathed in that warm yellowish glow of the rising sun, the kind that didn’t hurt your eyes and also didn’t make your heart skip thinking you’d overslept. It was the kind of glow that spoke of time to snooze just a little longer. Stiles was warm,
content and nuzzled further into the pleasant heat beside him. He drifted off without another thought.

His next thought was slightly more lucid and decidedly naughtier. Forcing one eye open just enough to register the level of light in his room, he reluctantly noted it was probably time get up if he wanted to get to school in time. He’d skipped out after lunch the day before, and with his lengthy absence while dad was in the hospital, he really didn’t need any more tardy slips to his name.

He mentally whined at the mere notion of leaving the warm and comfortable cocoon he was nestled into. Once again he’d slept peacefully without distorted nightmares of swords twisting into stomachs and bombs going off. In fact he hadn’t slept so soundly since he’d accidentally fallen asleep on the couch next to Derek.

Derek.

Dots were starting to connect.

The horrifying and squeaky cot.

The Notebook.

*Handholding*.

The last pieces slipped into place and Stiles knew without even turning that the warm heat more or less draped over him wasn’t his duvet, but rather one somewhat memory-impaired werewolf. And yes, Stiles really did enjoy being the little spoon. *Really* enjoyed.

“Crap,” he muttered to himself. His pajamas pants were one the loose side thank god, but they still did not by any means hide the fact that his nether region was very pleased with the current situation. All that was missing now was either for Derek to wake up or god forbid, his dad to barge into the room, crutches and all. Stiles trained his ears, but he couldn’t make out any sounds. The good thing about his dad being injured was that he couldn’t sneak up on anyone even if he wanted to.

Which only left him with the threat of Derek waking up. Derek, who Stiles had just discovered, had his arm curled around him and thus pretty much trapped. Great. Awesome even. 10 out of 10 on the Amazing Things to Happen To Stiles scale. Just slightly bad timing. Who was he kidding? It was *horrendously* bad timing.

He tried to gently remove Derek’s arm. It didn’t work. At all. Instead it set off a sequence of events that started with Derek tightening his grip around Stiles, proceeded with him nuzzling into Stiles’ neck (which did nothing to ease the downstairs situation) and ended with Derek Hale’s morning glory rubbing against Stiles’ ass.

“Holy fucking - ! Oh my god, no no no!”

Stiles clamped one hand over his mouth and the other over his dick to make it behave, but regrettably it had the opposite effect. In desperation he bit down on his pillow, but its muffling abilities left a lot to be desired. To Stiles’ ears it sounded as if his room was doused in the moan that followed when the inevitable happened.

He jizzed his pants.

Crap.

This was bad. This was epically bad. The only thing missing now was -
“Stiles?”

Oh god! Derek was awake. Derek had heard! And Stiles was still shaking, coming down from the most intense orgasm of his life, and Derek Hale was awake to witness his complete and utter humiliation.

Not even he could talk his way out of this one, so Stiles did the only sensible thing. He fled. To the bathroom. Which in hindsight was a terrible idea, because that meant he was essentially trapped. Without a second thought he locked the door with his mind, and spent a few seconds spinning in circles while he tried to get his brain up and running again. Turned out epic orgasms pretty much paralyzed his mental hard drive. It took several minutes before it rebooted and by then he’d discovered that circular movements with cum-filled pants was a pretty horrible idea.

“Stiles? Are you alright?”

Derek sounded concerned. Perhaps he hadn’t noticed? Stiles clung desperately to the hope like the crazy saber-toothed squirrel in the Ice Age movies clung to its precious nut.

“Eh, you know, it’s a perfectly normal reaction. So – uhm. Yeah, normal. Totally.”

Hope had just followed the elusive nut down the drain. Stiles stepped out of the disgusting pajamas bottoms and fleetingly considered burning them. Could he start a fire with his mind? Better not try. At least not now, when his emotional state was unstable to put it mildly.

“I’m late for school,” he shouted in what he hoped was a casual tone, but the edge of panic draped all over it more or less killed the attempt. “I need to shower, and you know – like, eat. I should probably eat something. Nutrition and all that jizz – I mean jazz.”

He banged his head against the shower stall. He was such a pathetic spaz!

“Stiles.”

Derek’s voice was low and there was no hint of laughter or teasing. Still he couldn’t bring himself to answer or god forbid open the door. Instead he stepped into the shower, turned it on and yelped loudly when he was hit face first with ice cold water.

“You okay in there?”

“Peachy,” replied Stiles shrilly. His mental functions was back on track at least. He’d forgotten about Lydia for a moment. Warm water for his morning shower had never been an issue, so this sub-zero treatment was in all likelihood a result of another one of her hour long showers.

Which meant that Lydia was awake.

He cursed under his breath and went to work on getting as clean as humanly possible in 30 seconds or less. He figured that was as long as he could last before frostbite and hypothermia set in.

When he reluctantly (and with clattering teeth) exited the bathroom three minutes later, his room was empty and his bed made gone. The window was open, the curtains billowing slightly in the brisk morning breeze.

On his laptop was a yellow post-it. It simply said “Thank you.”
When Stiles entered the kitchen Lydia was sitting at the table, looking fresh-faced and pristine in what he assumed was one his mom’s old nightgowns. His dad had never gotten around to clearing out her closet. Sometimes Stiles would sneak into the master bedroom, open her closet and just stare at the rows of dresses. She’d loved dresses of all kinds. Seldom wore pants unless they were going hiking or the weather was particularly bad. Some of them still smelled like her. Or perhaps that was just wishful thinking on his part. No matter, it was just another one of the many Claudia-related things that they never talked about. Now that his dad had finally taken off the wedding ring, perhaps that would change.

No matter, Lydia looked good in it. If it had been anyone else wearing it, he suspected it would irk him. But Lydia was like family now. Just not the kind of family he’d once fantasized about.

Her fingers were curled around a steaming mug of coffee while she perused what looked like the economic section of the paper, an air of supreme calm radiating off her.

“Good morning,” she greeted without looking up. “Did you sleep well?”

The question was innocent enough, still Stiles blushed to the tips of his ears and possibly his nose. Lydia licked her finger and turned the page. A shrewd smile was tugging at the corner of her mouth. Or maybe Stiles was just a paranoid freak?

“You sounded – busy last night.”

Okay, so no, not a paranoid freak. A right freak. Of course Lydia knew. Or suspected. Or had it pieced together. She was Lydia Martin after all, and clearly not even a severe case of chimera claws to the neck could put a damper on her observational skills. Stiles often wondered if she was omnipresent. It would explain so much.

“For a mental patient you’re surprisingly quick-witted. But still quite delusional. In hindsight I actually regret bursting you out of the cuckoo’s nest. I should return you at once.”

“Sure, if you have another way of deciphering the stack of books on your dining room table, written in Archaic Latin, then by all means. Take me back.”

“Damned hunters and their love for dead languages,” muttered Stiles darkly. Lydia harrumphed.

“Latin isn’t a dead language, Stiles.”
“Really? No one speaks it, and just a handful can read it. I’d say it’s as dead as it gets.”

Lydia pursed her lips. “It’s not dead, it’s just – resting.”

“Whatever you say,” replied Stiles with a cheeky grin. He was getting the upper hand again, and judging by the slight rosy tinge to Lydia’s cheeks she was sufficiently distracted. Mission accomplished.

“Where’s dad?”

Lydia gestured towards the study. “He’s locked himself in there. He’s been on the phone with the station for the last hour or so. I think he’s more or less set up headquarters here. You shouldn’t expect him out anytime soon. Oh, and he asked me to give you this. It’s a report on some sort of creature? He didn’t get into details, just referred me to you.”

Stiles grabbed it greedily and skimmed it. It was just as his dad had said – reports on a creature that alternated between running on two and loping on all fours. The chase ended at the high school where the school sign had been tossed into the building. He quickly explained it to Lydia, who agreed it could very well be another chimera, or possibly something nearing a success, whatever that might be.

Stiles had been pacing while he talked. The door to the fridge was still open. Lydia glared at it, then finally hopped off the chair and closed it with a huff. She returned to her chair and picked up a phone that had been lying underneath the newspaper.

“Oh, for the love of God, please quit pacing, Stiles. You should just sit down, eat some breakfast and perhaps tell me all about these interesting pictures I came across on your phone.”

Lydia battered her eyelashes innocently. Stiles for his part was possibly having a mild cardiac arrest. He stared dubiously from Lydia’s face to the phone in her hands and back again. That wasn’t -? Was it?

It was.

“Chemistry, Stiles? Honestly?”

Stiles went cold all over, reaching futilely for the phone, but his feet were stuck to the ground, paralyzed with mortification. Lydia talked on, ignoring the distressed noises Stiles was making.

“You abhor chemistry with a passion only surpassed by your hatred for Harris, and lately Theo Raeken. Why would anyone find it believable that you’d keep a separate folder for this subject? On your phone no less.”

She tutted disapprovingly all the while swiping the screen, flipping from one incriminating photo to another.

“Where did you get – Why do you have my phone?”

Stiles continued to make grabby gestures with his hands across the table, but Lydia had calculated the distance to perfection. She smiled demurely and instead handed Stiles a piece of pristinely prepared toast with jam. He accepted it wordlessly.

“Your father kindly let me borrow it. I believe you let him have your phone last night when he called the Hewitts, remember?” She stopped and cooed appreciatively at the screen. “Wow, Cora looks stunning, doesn’t she? Getting away from Beacon Hills certainly agreed with her.”
She made a production out of showing Stiles the picture as if he hadn’t seen it a thousand times already. Cora had her arms around a bare-chested Derek, she was smiling and he was mock scowling. It was the first selfie Derek ever sent. It was special. Stiles drowned the whine threatening to escape him by fitting half the toast into his mouth at once. Lydia shook her head and resumed her scroll through the folder.

“I wanted to call Kira, but seeing as the lovely staff at Eichen House have all my personal belongings, I had no phone. You have a landline, incredibly enough, who even has that these days? Anyway, I needed Kira’s number, and your father knew you had it. He didn’t think you’d mind if I borrowed this. Little did he know he was handing me such a treasure. I particularly like this one with the huge ball of twine? Who knew Derek could be this playful?”

“Can I have it back, please?”

Lydia paused the scrolling, looked up at him and her face softened.

“Of course,” she said and slid it across the table. Stiles grabbed it like a man starved, stuffing it deep in his pocket out of Lydia’s reach. He put the rest of the toast in his mouth and avoided looking at her, though he could feel her eyes on him the entire time.

“Kira told me about finding Derek in Mexico. That explained some of the things I found odd yesterday. Have you found out anything about the Aztec carvings? That was why I was rooting around your photo folders by the way. Kira said she’d sent you some.”

Stiles shook his head. In all the hoopla of late, that bit had been pushed to the bottom of the pile. Lydia looked pensive.

“That’s understandable, I guess. I’ll look for it when I get started on the books. I can’t exactly turn up at school, so I’m making that my project for the day.”

Stiles nodded as he swallowed the last of the toast. He prepared another one while Lydia refilled her tea and got one for Stiles as well.

“Kira also brought me up to speed on the Dread Doctors and what you’ve all remembered. I guess I will have to read the book back to front too at some point. This really is one hell of a mess. It seems messier than usual even, which is not a good sign.”

Stiles snorted. “There are too many villains at the moment. I don’t know where to start, and somehow I have a gut feeling it’s all connected, but I can’t really see the pattern yet. Adding amnesiacs to the mix isn’t exactly helping.”

Lydia was clutching her cup, blowing at the steaming beverage. “It could be worse. With Derek I mean. So he’s lost almost a year, but at least he seems the same. That has to count for something.”

“I guess,” said Stiles, heart heavy. Lydia was right. Derek was still Derek. And they were on their way to becoming better friends. Again. But somehow it still felt as if he’d lost something that he would never get back. That a foundation was torn down, and they had no way of knowing if the new groundwork would be as sturdy – that it would support the same structure.

Lydia giggled softly, eyes bright with merriment. Stiles looked at her in confusion.

“Are you sure you’re okay? You never really giggle. It’s freaking me out.”

Lydia grinned widely. “Oh, Stiles. If nothing else, this whole ordeal has made me reevaluate the concept of fate.”
Stiles paused in his chewing, crumbs cascading down as he spoke. “You’re acting weirder than normal. This is not a good sign. Fate? Really? This doesn’t sound at all like you.”

“Oh yes. Fate. It’s clearly a thing. In any version of reality, memory loss or not, you two still gravitate towards each other. It’s like an invisible pull. Magnetism even. Also it’s highly entertaining to witness. Kira agrees with me.”

“I have no clue what you’re on about.” Stiles rose quickly, putting the plate in the dishwasher with much noise and fanfare.

“Oh you do too,” chirped Lydia. “Now, please go to school. And bring me back my homework.”

“What? Why? You’re officially missing. You can’t go handing in assignments!”

Lydia pursed her lips and tossed her hair back in a way that Stiles knew meant business.

“I have weeks of material to catch up on.”

“You have enough credit to graduate already!”

“Oh, be still! And get Scott to bring me all his notes from Biology. I have a feeling they might come in handy.”

“What’s with you and Scott, anyway?” asked Stiles, suddenly remembering Lydia’s somewhat hostile comments yesterday.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about,” retorted Lydia flatly. Stiles just glared at her. Honestly, she was not as good an actress as she thought she was. In the end she huffed, tossed her hair and set the cup down.

“Okay, I admit it, I have some issues I’d like to take up with him. And I might’ve come off a tad harsh yesterday, but I think that was as much because I was exhausted and worn out, and my filters not functioning properly. By the way, judging by the somewhat icy front between the two of you, all is not well with you either.”

Stiles nodded. That was such a long conversation and not one he had time for now.

“I suggest we talk later, okay? And not just about this. I have questions about locks” said Lydia with an astute grin. Stiles paled but nodded. It was only fair. He had promised her after all.

“And just to be clear,” continued Lydia primly, “I’m not really mad at Scott, just a bit frustrated I guess. He always means well, he just doesn’t always go about it in the best way, and sometimes he ignores the possible consequences of his actions. So far he’s been lucky, but some day that will change. Did you know he rammed his claws into Corey, the way Theo did with me?”


“When Liam and Hayden were missing. That was such a reckless thing to do and it could’ve ended badly. It did end badly for me. He needs to understand that, he needs to be able to see the bigger picture, think about the ramifications and not just the immediate gain.”

Stiles patted her hand with a smile. “You should definitely be the one to talk to him about that. He’d take my head off if I tired.”

“And the headmaster will give you buckets of detentions if you don’t get a move on,” said Lydia
smartly with a glance at her watch.

“Holy crap,” muttered Stiles, gathering his backpack and storming out of the house. He didn’t notice Lydia running after him yelling that he’d forgotten his keys. By then Stiles was already pulling out onto the street, the Jeep running smoother than ever before. While waiting impatiently for a red light to turn green, Stiles thought he spotted Donovan idling by a bus stop. When the light turned green he sped away without a second glance.

***

School was – well, school. Stiles got another detention for his little disappearing act the day before, which was expected, but unwelcome. Mason would be joining him. He looked partly proud, partly scared of the pink slip in his hand when they met up for lunch. It was his first of the kind apparently. Stiles had a feeling it would be a slippery slope from here on. Especially if the Dread Doctors and their ilk continued to haunt the town.

“My mom will tear me a new one,” Mason moaned between bites of stale fish fingers. “She’s promised me a new sound system if I would get through the year with good grades and a clean slate. This won’t be on my report card, will it?”

He looked hopefully at Stiles who felt almost bad for being the catalyst for Mason’s squashed dream. His grimace told Mason all he needed to know.

“Oh well,” he said with a sigh. “I guess it was for a good cause, right? And at least we didn’t get caught. And Lydia is alright, isn’t she? She seemed okay this morning at least. She’s quite bossy, though. And a bit scary.”

Stiles nodded. He agreed with all of it.

Scott never showed at their usual table for lunch. Stiles talked briefly to Kira before History, thanking her for getting Lydia up to speed. When he asked about Scott, she became tightlipped.

“He’s moping,” she informed him tersely. “He’s not exactly talkative at the moment, and I’m walking a fine line between trying to nudge him along and at the same time not butt too much in. Some things you just have to work through on your own, you know.”

She sighed deeply and fiddled with the buckle on her magical katana belt. Stiles often feared it would spring loose at an inopportune time and pierce some poor unsuspecting bystander. Kira could be a bit clumsy at times.

“Between you and me I think he’s coming around. I think it’s dawning on him that he might actually lose you if you don’t fix things, and it scares him. And it should. We shouldn’t take anyone or anything for granted. Moving here has certainly taught me that,” she added dryly. “With this whole Derek thing on top of everything, he’s hit with a bout of jealousy as well. Boys are so stupid sometimes.”

Stiles dropped his history book. It landed painfully on his toes, and he had to bite down on his lip not to whimper out loud. What on earth was Kira on about? Why was Scott jealous?

Kira cocked her head to one side, a teasing smile spreading across her face. Stiles had just about had enough of smirking girls for one day.
“You’re adorable, just so you know it,” said Kira, voice full of mirth. Stiles stared at her uncomprehendingly. “Scott and me fighting is adorable? That makes no sense.”

She honest to god rolled her eyes. When all of this was over Stiles was initiating a field study to see if there was possibly something in the water, or even the telluric currents, that made inhabitants of this town more prone to eye rolling than other places.

“I hope you’re kidding, but I fear you’re not.” Stiles’ blank face gave her all the answer she needed. “Dear God, you are clueless. Lydia was right. Oh well, at least it will be entertaining. Tell Lydia I’ll call her later.”

And with that Kira sauntered down the hall. Stiles was left with more mysteries than when he arrived at school. The trend was troubling.

***

“Oh, good, you brought food.”

A pair of manicured hands relieved him of the two pizzas he was carrying. Stiles had no idea how she’d had gotten hold of the equipment to treat her nails, and frankly he didn’t much care. It just added to the mysteries of Lydia. Though he suspected Kira was involved.

“No hello? No how was your day, Stiles? Come on, where is the love?”

He’d dropped his bag in the middle of the kitchen and was following the disappearing pizza boxes into the living room. There he was greeted by the sight of his dad and Parrish both bent over the overflowing dining room table. In addition to books, there was now also printouts, reports, what looked like maps and the old Encyclopedia that they’d stored away in the attic because it was so outdated.

His dad looked up when he entered the room. “The love? Sorry son, I have no clue know where Derek is,” he replied casually. Lydia grinned so wide The Cheshire Cat paled by comparison. Parrish looked confused for which Stiles wanted to hug him. At least there was one sane person in the room. For a moment he contemplated leaving again, but his grumbling stomach won out. He’d just have to endure his dad’s baseless taunts.

“You’re hilarious as always,” he retorted calmly, whacking his dad’s hand away from the top box. “Not so fast, mister. The Meat Lovers is not for you, patient dear. Veggie pizza in the bottom box. Enjoy.”

“See what I have to put up with,” the sheriff whispered conspiratorially to Parrish. He received no reply. Parrish was too busy devouring a huge slice dripping with meat and grease, moaning in content with every chew. The sheriff looked like he was contemplating taking away his badge.

“You’ll live, dad. Which is the entire point.”

Stiles put down a slice overflowing with vegetables in front of his dad who stared at it like it had just offended his grandmother or killed his pet. Possibly both.

“I’m removing you from my last will and testament,” he threatened in a borderline whiny tone and then proceeded to pick off everything that even looked vaguely healthy.
“Liar,” countered Stiles. He made a production out of choosing the biggest slice he could find of the meaty pizza. “Now eat your greens or I’ll tell on you to Melissa.”

“Is this how every meal plays out in this household?” asked Lydia looking genuinely intrigued.

“Pretty much,” confirmed Stiles. “His cholesterol has been high for years, and all my valiant attempts to keep him on a healthy diet is sabotaged by this idiot and his love for greasy food. He acts as if it’ll kill him to eat a carrot.”

“It might! I choked on a piece of carrot once,” protested his dad huffily. Stiles was unmoved by his argument.

“Only because you’re unaccustomed to actually chewing your food. That’s what you get for existing on soft burgers and marshmallows that are pre-processed and hardly require chewing at all. If people keep this up our bodies will stop producing teeth in a few decades.”

“At least that will save money on dental bills,” the sheriff grumbled huffily. He was eyeing a piece of pepper with open hostility.

Lydia shook her head. Parrish looked like he wanted to blend into the floorboards.

“And odd dynamic and it actually explains a lot.” Lydia’s head was cocked to one side. She’d finished her slice with no signs of grease stains anywhere. She really was a force of her own. “But Stiles is right,” she added to the sheriff. “You should eat more vegetables. In fact I’ll lend you one of my vegan cookbooks. It really is astonishing what you can do with tofu.”

Sensing that his dad was about to launch into another tirade Stiles hurried to change the subject. The Sheriff and tofu was not on good terms.

“So, have you made any headway with the books?”

Lydia shrugged. “Yes and no. I’m through about half of what I judged as most promising by looking over the indexes. I’ve made a list of all the weird and unexplained creatures that have been recorded and not fully labeled. It’s too soon to draw any conclusions. I’ll look more closely for a pattern once I’ve been through the rest. In fact I’m counting on you to help me with that. Perhaps we can use the board in your room?”

Stiles nodded. He’d clear it later.

“What’s with all the reports?”

His dad was making a production of chewing his food much like a petulant toddler. Stiles ignored him with practiced ease and instead directed the question to Parrish.

“Oh, well your dad thought it could be helpful to go over old reports of odd incidents. He made me bring over records going back decades. Most of it is in the boxes over there.” He gestured to a huge pile of cardboard boxes all labeled “Sheriff Station – do not remove.”

“Found anything worthwhile?” Parrish shook his head. “Not really. We have a huge Kanima pile (Stiles was not surprised, his dad was oddly fascinated with that) and another one that we’re pretty sure are were-related incidents because they all correspond with the full moon. That leaves that pile over there. I think we should do as Lydia does and sort through it all first and look for patterns afterwards.”

Stiles nodded and squared his shoulders. “In that case, I guess we’ve got work to do.”
The next hours were spent in relative silence, each engulfed in either reports of varying caliber or old tomes of mostly unintelligible scrawls. It was time-consuming and frustrating. After four hours they took a break. Stiles raided the fridge and found the leftovers from Derek’s shopping spree and whipped up a meal of mostly breakfast foods. Everyone was ravenous and devoured it all without complaint.

“I’ve been thinking,” said Lydia, twirling her fork between her fingers. It was mesmerizing to watch. “Looking for a pattern of weird creatures throughout history might give us some ideas of what the Doctors are trying to accomplish. With any luck it might also give us a clue of how to eliminate it. But there are no guarantees.”

“It’s not like I was overly optimistic in the first place or anything, but way to kill my buzz, Lydia,” said Stiles wryly. She poked her tongue out. It was such an unexpected reaction Stiles couldn’t help but laugh.

“So not my point, but feel free to interrupt anytime. What I meant was we need information on the Doctors themselves. And I doubt these books or reports will help us there. They erase people’s memories of them and what they’re doing. It’s doubtful we’ll find detailed text on them anywhere, assuming they’re good at what they do.”

The sheriff nodded. “Very true. That’s a conundrum of epic proportions. It’s like getting fingerprints of ghosts.”

“Not sure that made any sense to me, but yes. They’re like ghosts. So we basically need to find a medium to converse with.” She smiled sweetly, but Stiles wasn’t fooled. He shook his head valiantly. “No, Lydia. No way! I know what you’re getting at and I abhor the mere suggestion.”

“It’s a mean to an end, Stiles.”

“He put you in a catatonic state for more than a week, Lydia. And it’s not like he hasn’t spent every second since he arrived lying to us, or anything. We can’t trust him!”

She slumped into the chair looking dejected and uneasy. “I know that too. But he resurrected four chimeras, Stiles. I doubt that was part of the Doctor’s plans, which means he’s defied them. You said so yourself, they’re more likely to try and eliminate him rather than help him. I get why you all hate Theo – hell, I bear no love for the guy either, but he has information that we don’t. We don’t have to trust him to work with him.”

The sheriff’s eyes were steely and hard, but he nodded along. Stiles wanted to scream. They shouldn’t go crawling to Theo for help. They should arrest him and lose the key!

“Personally I want to give this guy a sound beating,” his dad declared, voice low. “But Lydia is right, we should approach him and ask for his help. You can beat him up later, Stiles. If that is even feasible. You know with him having werewolf strength and you having – well, just a bat. And poor aim.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, dad,” said Stiles derisively.

“Hey, don’t blame me for your unwillingness to work out. And no offence to the supernaturals in the room but I’m rather thankful for your humanity, son. So thankful in fact that I’ll totally look the other way if you’d want to try your hand at a beat-down,” his dad added. “I’ll even buy you a new bat. That might even the odds a little.” Parrish actually rolled up his sleeves in solidarity. Stiles was definitely keeping him in his corner.
“Okay, fine! I know you’re right. I just hate the guy and the idea of asking him for anything makes my stomach turn. But I’ll do it. Just not tonight, alright. I have a mountain of homework and I’m exhausted. I’ll approach him tomorrow after school.”

The others nodded and resumed what they were doing.

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An hour and several piles of police reports later Stiles excused himself to go tackle some of the homework he had absolutely no motivation for. Still it needed to be done. He’d just about used up all of his goodwill with the teachers after his dad was hospitalized, especially with the truancy and detentions he’d accumulated the last week.

He flopped down in his desk chair and reluctantly fished up his History books. He had to catch up on the material he’d missed out on, and they had a paper due in just a few days. If he wanted to avoid slipping a grade he needed to ace it. Putting it off any longer would just mean all-nighters and who knew what the next few nights would bring now that they were asking Theo for help. Somehow he had a feeling that was like poking a beehive.

Stiles was half a page down before he noticed something was amiss. He scanned the room twice before he realized what was wrong. The window was open. In fact it was wide open, something he knew it hadn’t been when he returned from school. There was only a handful of people that tended to enter that way. Malia was out of the town, Scott probably sulking at home. Which left - .

“Derek?” he asked tentatively. “Derek, are you out there?”

He looked around the room. Derek’s duffle bag was on his bed, half unpacked. Or half packed.

*Fucking stupid werewolves.*

“Get in here,” hissed Stiles between clenched teeth. It was so typically Derek, lurking in shadows. “I know you’re out there, hiding in a tree, dangling from drainpipes or skulking behind the chimney. Either way, get in here! Now! Or I’m setting fire to your worldly belongings.”

It took three seconds, then, in a whirl of black, a great mass summersaulted into the room, curtains billowing. Derek landed smoothly on his feet, facial expression annoyingly blank. Stiles crossed his arms and pursed his lips. His mind was flashing back to the events of this morning, which was very unfortunate. Very. His traitorous body obviously remembered it with joy and fondness, and he was extremely glad his desk provided a much needed cover.

“So, what’s this?” Stiles gestured towards the bag. “You’re running off in the middle of the night? You could’ve just come to the door you know. It’s not like I would’ve stopped you if you wanted to leave.”

Derek didn’t say anything. He just stood there looking slightly forlorn and a bit awkward. Which was understandable. Perfectly understandable in fact. If Stiles had up woken next to someone not quite his friend and said person had proceeded to jizz his brains out, then he’d probably flee as well.

God, he was such a moron. He swallowed audibly, eyes downcast. Suddenly he felt sick.

“I – I need to apologize,” he started somewhat stiltedly. “For what happened this morning. God, I
feel mortified - “

“Don’t.”

Stiles startled, and glanced at Derek who had sat down on the bed, arms resting on his thighs, head bent.

“Don’t feel mortified,” he continued softly. “And there is no need to apologize, okay.”

“But – “

Derek looked up, meeting Stiles’ eyes and his heart sped up. “No apologies, okay?”

Stiles just stared for a moment. Eventually he nodded. “Okay,” he agreed. Derek visibly relaxed and smiled that soft smile Stiles had just recently become acquainted with. If it made his heart flutter that was not something anyone needed to know. Though Derek probably knew, crazy werewolf hearing and all. Somehow that didn’t embarrass him as much as it should.

“Where are you going?”

Derek had resumed packing. He zipped the bag and rose slowly, one hand scratching his hair nervously.

“I’ve booked a room at a hotel. I’ll start looking for a new place soon. I’ve spent the day talking to contractors to fix up the loft so I can rent it out.”

His back was turned, but Stiles didn’t need to see his face to know what Derek was feeling. Too many bad things had happened at that loft. Jennifer and her betrayal. Boyd dying. Kate kidnapping him and crazy Oni fights. The place was tainted no matter how you looked at it. It was nothing a coat of paint or a decorator could erase.

Something pulled Stiles forward. He’d experienced something similar once before, that time when Boyd died. Just like then, Stiles reached out, somewhat tentatively. When his hand landed on Derek’s shoulder the werewolf visibly exhaled. The touch was firm, yet soft. Hopefully reassuring, not intrusive or pushy.

They stood like that for a while, both just breathing, not saying a word. Then, with a speed only werewolves possessed Derek whirled around, grabbed onto his shoulder and pulled Stiles in. It was a hug like none he’d ever experienced. It was as if Derek was holding on to him for dear life. Seeking reassurance and comfort – things he’d been deprived of for far too long. Stiles felt honored that this was the place Derek chose to show this side of himself. That he was the one he sought out to share it with.

*Anchor.*

That was what Derek had said Stiles was to him. He stood engulfed in an embrace that was setting in motion continental drifts inside Stiles. His whole world was changing, had been for a long time. He’d felt rootless and alone for most of it, but now, in a weird way Derek was providing Stiles with the one thing he desperately needed. To be trusted. To be needed. To have someone depend on him so fully, to be the center of someone’s attention.

They were like two ships adrift in the stormy sea, finding solace. Finding calm seas. A safe harbor. Casting anchors.

Stiles had no idea how long they stood like that, clinging to each other, their breaths in sync. It
could’ve been a minute. But it could just as easily have been an hour. When they finally let go, Stiles’ cheeks were wet with tears he wasn’t aware he was shedding. Derek was also wiping at his eyes.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay?” Stiles couldn’t keep his voice from sounding pleading. Derek looked conflicted.

“I want to,” he admitted softly, something unreadable in his eyes. “That is the problem. So I shouldn’t. It’s best if I go.”

“Best for who?”

Stiles was confused. Derek was back to being cryptic and closed off. It made his chest feel cold. Derek just shrugged and moved towards the window.

“Will you at least come with us tomorrow? We’re going to talk to Theo. Try to get him to spill the beans on the Dread Doctors.”

Derek nodded. “Just text me when and where. I’ll be there.”

And then he was gone.

Stiles stood staring at the open window, wondering if what had just happened was real or just a dream. When he finally forced himself to resume the history assignment his mind was a jumble of conflicting thoughts and impossible feelings. Not until he received a text from Derek did the electric hum running through his body, keeping him on edge, die down.

The text simply said “Sweet dreams.”
“When you said we needed to talk, Stiles, this was not exactly what I expected.”

Theo had agreed enthusiastically when Stiles approached him at lunch, and they’d agree to meet on the lacrosse field after school. When they arrived he was straddling the bench in all his cocky glory flanked by Tracy and Josh. His face fell somewhat when he spotted Stiles’ entourage.

“I don’t much care for your expectations to be honest,” said Stiles matter-of-factly. He ignored Josh and Tracy completely. They looked uncomfortable.

“Pity,” said Theo condescendingly. He was eyeing Stiles’ two companions with ill-concealed disgust in the case of Scott, and open curiosity with regards to Derek.

“I’ve stayed clear of your path, McCall,” he said with a sneer in Scott’s direction. “I’d hoped you’d return the courtesy. Let bygones be bygones and all that.”

Scott’s only reply was to flash his alpha eyes and growl. Theo looked wholly unimpressed. “No matter,” he said casually, though Stiles could detect a slight twitch to his eyes. He wasn’t as calm and aloof as he was trying to convey. “I’m guessing you’ve approached me for a reason, so please don’t keep me in suspense all day. Since Scott is present I’m guessing you’re not here to broker an agreement to join my pack, Stiles?”

“Not even if you were the last chimera on earth,” said Stiles humorlessly. Behind him Scott kneaded his knuckles making the joints pop and crack. Thankfully he stayed quiet per Stiles' instructions. He’d been openly annoyed when Stiles told him to take a backseat and let him do the talking.

“Color me disappointed,” drawled Theo, inspecting his fingernails like a true Disney villain. He wasn’t exactly original in his approach, but at least he was predictable, which worked perfectly in their favor. “The offer will still stand when you change your mind.”

“I hardly think that’s likely.”

It was Derek who’d spoken before Stiles had the chance. Theo arched an eyebrow and cocked his head.

“And who is this tall drink of water, Stiles? He’s clearly a werewolf; that much is obvious. Aren’t you going to introduce us?”

“Nope,” said Stiles popping the P as obnoxiously as possible. Theo was a nosy little shit and letting him stew in ignorance would be satisfying. “Let’s just say he’s a friend and move on.”

Theo shrugged, but continued casting probing glances in Derek’s direction, who in turn did a masterful job of treating him like foul-smelling air.

“Sure, what can I help you with on this fine day?”

“Information,” said Stiles, grinning widely in that mad way he knew made people anxious and for good reason. “I want to know everything you know about the Dread Doctors.”
Theo’s eyes widened comically. His mouth opened, then closed and opened again. No sound came out. Stiles crossed his arms and waited somewhat impatiently as he went through a range of emotions from incredulous shock to ill-concealed fear.

“No,” he said, voice cracking just the tiniest bit. “No, I’m not telling you anything. I can’t – They’d kill me.”

Stiles shared a glance with Scott. As if on cue the alpha moved closer, advancing, but still not saying anything.

“Oh Theo, they’ll kill you anyway, won’t they?” Stiles cocked his head and intensified his grin. “You might be their first successful chimera, but I somehow doubt they’re all that happy about you resurrecting a bunch of the failures they made sure to kill off in the first place. You defied them, which means you’re probably on borrowed time as it is. Come on, we talked about this already.”

Theo spluttered. Next to him Tracy was staring at him in confusion as if this was news to her. “They promised me a pack!” he barked, eyes flashing. “They said I would be the alpha of a pack if I helped them out. When things didn’t go according to plan, they didn’t care or help. So I took what was rightfully mine! You should all belong to me now! Everyone except for you, McCall. I’m not stupid. A pack can’t have two alphas.”

Scott was growling again. Stiles gestured for him to stay back. Derek had moved up and was standing next to him, eyes glowing; claws ready.

"For once, we can agree on something," said Stiles with a condescending smile. "We have firsthand experience with multiple alphas in one pack. It's not something we'd recommend. Then again, neither is coup d'états."

"Amen to that," muttered Derek. Theo’s head whipped around, glaring daggers in his direction.

“I still don’t know who this clown is supposed to be! Does he have special powers as well? Is he worthy of being in my pack?”

“Not even lice are worthy of being in your pack, Theo,” drawled Stiles. “No offense to you two,” he added with a shrug in Josh and Tracy’s direction. “Let us know when you grow tired of this doofus, alright.”

“Stop talking,” wheezed Theo, taking another step forward, hand raised. Scott and Derek moved as one, stepping in front of Stiles.

“Stop stalling,” hissed Scott. “Your precious plan failed, and now you’re in a pickle. Hear us out, won’t you?”

“Fine.” Theo ignored Scott completely and focused on Stiles. “Let’s hear it. Your big sales pitch.”

“It’s nothing fancy, really.” Stiles made a production of folding his arms nonchalantly in front of his chest in an off-hand manner. He could practically feel Derek mentally rolling his eyes, which only made him grin wider.

“Fact: You screwed over your benefactors. In all likelihood they don’t need you anymore. They certainly don’t trust you. I wouldn’t. Which means you’re either a nuisance or a liability. Probably both. Either way I’m thinking they won’t think twice about using any of their pointy weapons to split you open and make you bleed mercury as well. So basically your options are to either take your chances with the Doctors, hope they’re the merciful kind, or you could help us out. Tell us all you know about them, and we’ll do our level best to get rid of them.”
Theo laughed mirthlessly, arms thrown up in the air. “You’ll never manage to get rid of them.”

Stiles shrugged. “Perhaps not. Or we might surprise you. We’ve come through quite a bit of scrapes so far against opponents much stronger than us. And here we still are. I’m not going to lie to you, Theo. We’re not like you. We don’t manipulate and make up shit for kicks. You can stand alone against the Doctors and meet certain doom. Or you can help us and if nothing else, we can offer you a sliver of hope.”

Theo’s scream of frustration echoed across the lacrosse field. A flock of birds took flight from the nearby trees. Stiles didn't blame them.

“If you’re finished scaring the local wildlife, perhaps we can get an answer?”

Theo glowered at the trio, breath heaving, and his composure completely shattered. “What can a pack of riffraff like you, with a weak alpha and pack members scattered in all directions possibly offer that I don’t already have?”

Stiles, Scott and Derek exchanged arched looks, and crossed their arms so synchronized you’d think they were in a boyband.

“Oh, I totally forgot,” said Stiles, mock-apologetically. “We have something on our side that you don’t have.”

“Like what?”

On cue Parrish rounded the corner and sauntered towards them. He stopped right in front of Theo, eyes blazing with orange flames.

“Meet Jordan, or Deputy Parrish if you will. Ex-military, trained for combat and did I mention he moonlights as a hellhound?”

Theo stood lost for words, but became considerably more cooperative after that.

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“I can’t believe this is the place,” muttered Scott. They were walking down endless corridors on the sub-level of the town’s old and abandoned water distribution plant. The floors were wet, the air damp and above them rows upon rows of pipes stretched as far as the eye could see. “This is where we went to look for Hayden and Liam. We walked up and down here for hours, not finding anything.”

“The Doctors can wipe memories,” scoffed Theo. He was leading the group deeper and deeper inside the facility, making turns seemingly at random. “Don’t you think they can hide their lair from nosy idiots if they want to?”

“Obviously I do,” replied Scott bitingly. “It’s just frustrating, knowing we were this close without finding anything.”

“I’d be surprised if you could find your way out of – “.

“Oh for the love of crap, please stop bickering,” pleaded Stiles. Their voices echoed off the walls,
making him think of Eichen House. Or Echo House as Oliver had called it.

“Are you sure this is the right way?” asked Parrish. He was clinging to a handheld GPS that was mapping their route. Hopefully it would be useful to guide them safely out again later without getting lost in the mazes down there, but also to get them back in again sans Theo if the need arose. “According to the GPS we’ve already been down this corridor.”

“I’m sure,” said Theo tonelessly, forging on.

“I swear to God if this is some sort of trap –” began Scott threateningly, alpha eyes ablaze. Theo whirled around, claws out, snarling. It was like watching back alley cats posturing before a brawl.

Stiles clasped a hand over his face and let it drag down slowly, eyes screwed up in annoyance. The constant sniping had been going on since they left the school grounds and it was grating on his nerves.

“This has got to stop. Seriously. You’re both act like toddlers.”

“But he’s clearly leading us in circles. The GPS doesn’t lie!” growled Scott.

While Stiles had been advocating for Scott to develop a more liberal relationship with skepticism for years, Theo’s betrayal seemed to have pushed him straight past even Stiles’ somewhat elevated levels, and into unbridled paranoia.

“Let’s just hear if there’s a method to this madness before you shred him completely. Alright? Now, claws away.” Stiles laid a calming hand on Scott. He bristled but nodded reluctantly.

“Why are you leading us in circles?” asked Parrish, claiming the voice of reason.

Theo stopped, turned around and seemed to be steeling himself before he spoke. “We’re walking down the same corridor, that’s true. But that’s the thing – the Doctors don’t just move around in space. You’ve seen them flicker and disappear, right? Well, they also move around in time.”

What the - ?

If this had been a movie, and if they weren’t so far below ground, Stiles was sure crickets would be chirping. It was definitely that kind of moment. Everything silent, all frozen – and minds spinning.

“Hold on.” Stiles stepped in front of Theo, holding up a finger. “Are you telling us that we’re in the same corridor as before, but not in the same time? Like time travelling?”

“Sort of, yes.” Theo looked uncomfortable. Parrish, Derek, Scott and Stiles shared looks of un concealed disbelief.

“You do realize how utterly preposterous that sounds?”

Stiles had to check. This was – This was mind-blowing! If Mason was here he’d be yelling “intense” right about now.

Theo sighed deeply, throwing his hands up. “I do. Of course I do. And before you ask, I don’t have the foggiest idea how it works. I’ve just been taught where to go, where to turn at each corner and I always arrive where we’re going in the end. I know when I’m getting closer, because things start to change subtly. Look around.” He gestured around the corridor. “Look at the pipes. When we started they were all rusty, covered in layers of moss, some of them leaking. Look at them now.”
Stiles glanced up and was astonished to see that Theo was right. The pipes looked considerably newer, with no rust in sight.

“Holy moly,” whispered Scott. Parrish and Derek looked to be at a loss for words.

“We’re almost there. Should we stand around to admire the architecture or get on with it?”

Stiles gestured for him to lead the way, and they all began trudging back in time. *Literally.*

A short time later (or perhaps it was long. It was all very confusing) Theo stopped and turned towards the wall. “We’re here,” announced, pointing. Stiles crept closer and gasped. On the wall was the carving of an Oroboros. Identical to the one Kira and the Yukimuras had found next to the wall Derek had been hidden behind in Mexico.

“What is it?” asked Derek. He’d sidled up next to him, shoulder bumping reassuringly into Stiles’. Stiles just shook his head.

“I’ll tell you later,” he whispered not wanting the others to catch on. He’d been right – there was a connection between what had happened to Derek and what was going on here. Which meant that somehow Kate was involved in this as well. His head hurt. There were too many loose ends, too many threads that needed to be tied and connected. But it would have to wait.

Theo touched the snake and it seemed to flutter slightly, almost like a mirage. It reminded Stiles oddly of The Chamber of Secrets, but then again he’d been on a Hogwarts comparison binge for days now. Hopefully there weren’t any Basilisks lurking inside.

Before their eyes the wall sort of dissolved and a dark staircase came into view.

“Come on,” said Theo and disappeared into the darkness. Within seconds he was gone from sight. He could’ve dropped off the face of this earth for all they knew. The fading echoes of his footsteps was the only sign he was still around.

Stiles shared a concerned look with Scott who shrugged. He closed his eyes and when they opened the bright red alpha eyes stared back.

“I’ll lead the way,” he said and disappeared as well. Stiles hurried to follow. Parrish and Derek made up the rear.

The decent was steep but not long.

“Holy shit!” Parrish let out a low whistle. “This place is seriously über creepy. What is that whirring sound?” He’d already whipped out his flashlight and was examining the room they’d entered, cop-mode activated.

The first thing Stiles noticed was the tiles. The hexagon shaped pattern reminded him of beehives. If the Doctors were the worker bees, he had no need to cross paths with the queen. The air was damp with a slight rotten stench to it. The kind you sometimes encountered at beaches. The light was eerie, almost greenish. All in all Parrish was dead right. The place was creepy.

“What the fuck is that?” Scott’s voice reverberated off the walls. Stiles started, and spun around. The beam from Parrish’ flashlight bathed an old-fashioned looking doctor’s bench with mounts of straps and restraints.

Derek bent down and ran a finger over the floor. When he showed it to the group it glistened with a silvery substance.
“Mercury,” said Stiles. He turned towards Theo who was standing awkwardly next to a panel of odd screens and instruments. It looked to depict moon phases and various graphs.

“I guess thank you is in order. I never really expected you to come through. At least not without possible traps along the way. Are you sure the Doctors won’t glitch into existence at any moment to kill us all?”

Theo shook his head. “They’re not here. Not now. I can sense them when they’re close. I guess it’s a sort of warped “pack bond” if you will. They did create me after all. I don’t know how it works, just that I get this sort of tingly feeling in my blood when they’re getting closer. I haven’t felt it at all today.”

Scott eyed him dubiously, but remained silent. Stiles gestured towards the panels. “What’s all this then?”

Theo shrugged. “I have no clue. No really,” he added when Stiles snorted in disbelief. “I asked them once, but they just glared at me and chanted “Inconsequential.” I don’t know if they meant me or that the information was inconsequential to me. Both I guess. But I think it’s how they keep track of the subjects. Monitoring their progress – or in most cases, deterioration.”

Stiles had his phone out and snapped photos of everything. The screens, the operation bench, the creepy instruments laid out next to it. He recognized some of them from his memories. It made them that much more real.

“There’s more over here,” said Theo, gesturing them into another section of the area. The same tiles, the same sickly green light. And –

“WHAT THE HELL IS THAT?”

Scott and Stiles had shouted in almost perfect unison. They all stood gaping at a huge tank with a yellowish liquid hooked up to multiple tubes and ancient looking instruments. Rows of manometers were attached to the front panels. Inside the tank floated a monstrous looking being.

“I call him Bob,” said Theo flatly. “He doesn’t do much. They keep injecting it with this sort of tincture I guess you can call it. They extract it from their subjects. Sometimes they even inject themselves. I think it’s some sort of healing potion or whatnot. I guess they’re hoping to make him better. Or they’re using him to make them better.”

Stiles shuddered. “Well, he can’t get much worse can he, poor sod?” He rapped on the glass with his knuckles.

“Don’t do that,” hissed Theo.

“Why not? It’s not like he’s – OH MY GOD!”

“Bob” suddenly spasmed, arms and legs knocking into the cylinder creating a whole lot of noise.

“I told you not to.” Theo glared. Stiles’ heart was beating so hard it was threatening to escape his chest.

“Is that normal?” he asked. Judging by Theo’s slack face it wasn’t.

“I’ve never seen that before, but they never really let me near the tank to begin with. Honestly, I try to avoid spending all that much time here, so what do I know?”
“More than us, at least.”

Stiles hadn’t noticed Derek approaching, but he felt calmer already when he felt his hand pressing gently at his lower back. It was clearly a thing they did now. Stiles didn’t mind one bit.

“Is there anything else you can tell us? Or show us? Anything at all? Do they keep journals or records of any kind? Have they ever discussed the subjects when you were around?”

Theo scoffed. “Discussed? Honestly I don’t think they’re capable of constructing more than two syllable sentences. Come to think of it, calling it sentences is in fact generous. They only throw out imperative demands, or chant. They excel at chanting.”

“Anything in particular? That they chant, I mean?” Parrish was still investigating the premises, going over it methodically inch by inch. “If so it might be important.”

Theo knitted his eyebrows together. “Normally it’s been mostly “Failure imminent” or “Subject promising”. Those are hugely popular. Lately however I’ve been hearing something else, but I have no clue what it means. It’s not easy to decipher what they say on a good day. Those masks swallows half the syllables making most sound like garbled gibberish.”

“Perhaps it will make sense to us?” suggested Stiles.

“Yeah,” added Scott. “What did it sound like?”

Theo was silent for a few seconds as if going over it in his mind once more, looking for a logical meaning. “It was just a long string of what sounded like “A bet”. But these are not creatures that would grasp the concept of betting, so I don’t think that’s it.”

“A bet?” Stiles looked to Scott who looked to Parrish. Parrish shrugged and turned to Derek. He looked just about as lost as the rest of them.

“Like I said, I don’t think that’s right. And they kept repeating it, like a mantra.”

“A bet, a bet, a bet, a bet, a bet.” Stiles started repeating the words. Soon Scott joined in. Their voiced blended and the chant ricocheted off the walls. This went on for about a minute, but when no one looked any wiser, they stopped. Scott looked particularly glum.

“So to sum it up, the doctors perform and monitor their experiments here, there’s a creepy dude in a tank, this place smells foul, and they’re chanting something that sounds like a bet but probably isn’t. I don’t know about you guys, but I don’t feel particularly enlightened.”

“Pretty much, yeah,” said Stiles. He turned to Parrish who’d stopped at the far side of the room, and was staring at the wall, an odd expression on his face.

“You find anything?”

“You could say that.” He gestured them over.

“Oh yeah, I totally forgot.” Theo rolled his eyes. “The fresco. That’s new. And they’re really fond of it. In fact, that’s where they normally do the “a bet” chanting.”

“Fresco? Like a painting – WHOA!” Stiles stared wide-eyed at huge fresco that was etched into the wall. It looked as if the Doctors had smashed parts of the tiles away, revealing it underneath. It was – eerie.
“Is that what they’re trying to create?” asked Parrish weakly. “In that case I need to locate the transfer forms ASAP. And that’s not one beast – that’s two beasts!”

“Holy crap,” muttered Stiles, inching closer to inspect the art.

“Those make beast alpha Peter look like a puppy,” muttered Scott. “Is it possible to request a new round of alpha packs instead? What even is that? And how do we fight it?”

“Maybe we don’t.”

It was Derek who’d spoken. His arms were crossed, head cocked to the side, eyebrows knit together. It was his thinking pose, and Stiles felt both odd, warm and slightly embarrassed to know this.

Derek moved closer to the fresco and everyone else followed. “Look at it. These beasts are fighting each other. Somehow I doubt the Doctors are trying to kick start a supernatural fight club. What would a Beast Thunderdome gain them?”

“Well,” said Stiles with a mocking grin, “it would explain the chants about “a bet”. Probably lots of money in those kinds of fights.” Derek simply glared at him. Stiles threw his hands up, mimed zipping his mouth shut and wordlessly handed Derek the invisible key. The performance was met with lots of eye-rolling.

“If you’re done with the lame jokes, I’d like to continue?” Derek arched a brow. Stiles gestured to his locked mouth and gave a thumbs up. Derek looked like he was fighting off a smile. “Like I was saying, it’s possible the Doctors are trying to create one of these beasts.”

Stiles gulped audibly. That was certainly a possibility. But if they created one of them, then who or what was the second one? It felt as if they’d opened up a box without any answers, just more questions.

Theo didn’t say anything either, simply stared at the fresco like he was seeing it again with fresh eyes. Judging by the look on his face, he was as clueless as the rest of them on the matter. Stiles snapped a photo of the mural. Perhaps Lydia could make more sense of it.

“We’re not going to figure this out by hanging around here all day. We should head back,” suggested Parrish.

“Thank god.” Scott sighed in relief. “I feel chilled to the bone. This place gives me the heebie-jeebies. Also, the smell is horrid.”

They started towards the stairs, when suddenly Stiles stopped and turned towards the rest, a wicked gleam in his eyes.

“Oh no, what now?” sighed Scott in resignation. “I know that look. It means trouble.”

Stiles’ answer was to grin even wider. “Oh yea of little faith. I was just thinking why make it easy for the Doctors to continue what they’re doing? What if they suddenly experienced some technical difficulties?”

Scott looked puzzled. Parrish and Derek however exchanged knowing glances. Stiles nodded towards the monitors and odd equipment, lifting his chin in a “have at it” way. As it turned out, pulverizing a villainous lair took surprisingly little time when you had four supernaturals at your disposal. Even Theo participated with unadulterated glee. It was possibly even a little therapeutic for him, though in Stiles’ book the guy still needed years of therapy and possibly a lobotomy before they could consider him even vaguely normal. And not even then would Stiles trust him even for a
The trip back was—well *trippy*. Both because Stiles actually did trip. Twice. Derek caught him both
times, which might have resulted in a slight blush and some elevated heartbeats. Thank god for the
poor lighting in the corridors. But it was mostly trippy because now that he knew that they were
actually walking *back to the future* or the present or whatnot, his mind was in overdrive. Cataloguing
the changes were—well mind-blowing.

Parrish kept glancing at the GPS as if he couldn’t quite believe modern technology was letting him
down. Still, there was no denying the fact that the digital path on the screen claimed they kept
walking the same corridors over and over again.

Stiles was bursting over with questions, theories and couldn’t wait to get back to tell Lydia all about
it. He vaguely remembered her talking about asymmetry in time at one time, and he was dying to
discuss the concept further.

“Hey guys.” Stiles’ excited voice echoed off the walls. “If we walked *back in time* when we came
here, and now we’re *walking back to the future*, shouldn’t we like, cross paths with ourselves soon?”

“Don’t be absurd,” said Derek. Stiles flailed beside him.

“Absurd has left the building, Derek! It’s fled the country! So what I want to know is, is this like
Hermione’s time turner? Will we remember everything we did, but when we get back, no time will
have passed? We’ve been there for like an hour or so, right? We should check our watches or
something.”

“Do you think that’s possible,” asked Scott. “To bump into ourselves?”

“I have no clue,” Stiles hadn’t been this giddy since the first time he got slightly drunk off a bottle of
questionably wine Scott and he had “borrowed” from Melissa when they were 13. “But I would love
to meet myself. I’ve always wanted a twin!”

“The world is not ready for Stilinski twins,” muttered Parrish under his breath.

Stiles shushed him. “Double the fun, double the awesome! What’s there to dislike?”

“Double the sarcasm,” replied Derek deadpan. Stiles hit him playfully on the arm.

“You adore my sarcastic wit. I’ve caught you suppressing smiles on multiple occasions.”

“What you call smiles, the rest of us call winces.” Derek managed to keep a straight face. His eyes
gave him away, though. Stiles laughed loudly. When the laugh echoed back he fist-pumped the air.

“Hear that? My twin is coming.”

“Shush! Guys, shut up. Holy crap, I think someone actually *is* coming!”

Scott had stopped abruptly a few meters from the next corner where they, according to Theo’s
directions, should be turning left. He was sniffing the air. Stiles quelled the urge to make a dog joke.
“Please, don’t encourage him, Scott,” said Parrish. “The only thing I feel coming is a headache and the alluring call of my shower. I reek. We all reek.”

“I’m not kidding,” hissed Scott. “Keep your voices down. There’s someone else down here – and no, it’s not your twin, Stiles.”

Derek had moved to the front, and was now scenting the air as well. Stiles instantly sobered when he realized they were both serious.

“Is it the Doctors?”

The thought alone chilled Stiles to the bone. Theo shook his head. “No, it’s not them. I’d known it if they were close. Besides, I don’t think they even have a scent. It’s more of a sensation than anything, like a buzzing in my blood.”

“It smells familiar,” muttered Scott. “But I’m having trouble separating the scent from the general stench down here. Parrish is right, we all reek like dung bombs and rotten cabbage.”

“Human,” mumbled Derek. His eyes were glowing blue in the dim light. “Definitely human. Also – I smell gun powder, wolfsbane and – .”

Derek’s body froze, a low grumble sounding from his throat. Stiles was startled to realize his claws were out and he’d shifted into beta form. Something clearly had him spooked.

“How far away?” whispered Stiles, inching closer, curiosity almost as huge as his fear. Scott and Derek both grabbed hold of him and forcefully shoved him to the back of the group.

“Get back,” hissed Scott.

“Stay put,” growled Derek.

They resumed their positions in front, both shifted and ready for a confrontation.

“So rude,” muttered Stiles, straighten his sweater. Theo grinned smugly, probably in an effort to swing Stiles’ loyalties towards him. He’d rather fling himself off a cliff.

“Idiots, the both of you,” he whispered shrilly in Scott and Derek’s direction. “What if it’s just a maintenance guy or something, how will you explain the wolfy faces?”

“Since when do janitors carry wolfsbane?” Scott threw Stiles an exasperated look over his shoulder. “Besides, we’ll just say we’re cosplaying or something.”

“Now he gets creative,” mumbled Stiles. He was rewarded with a wave of shushing from the rest of the group.

“Anything?” asked Scott. Derek was sniffing in all directions. He looked frustrated.

“It’s impossible to say which direction it’s coming from. The stench here drowns out most of it.”

They inched towards the corner. Stiles’ heart was beating hard. Scott was probably right. The chance of someone innocent wandering these corridors were slim to none.

“Ready?”

Derek and Scott exchanged nods and in the blink of an eye they disappeared out of sight, claws at the ready. Theo and Parrish moved forward like a second wave, ready to assist if needed.
Stiles held his breath, straining his ears for sounds of fighting, growls and distress. All he heard was the drip, drip, drip of water from above. A drop hit his arm and the cold substance made his skin break out in goosebumps. It was followed by a second chill down his spine, like someone was watching him.

“Guys,” he began in a shrill whisper, but Theo and Parrish didn’t hear him. They’d just rounded the corner and was out of sight. The prickling sensation of being observed didn’t leave him though. In fact, it intensified. And still there was no sound of the others.

“Great, leave the human behind. Awesome plan,” he muttered darkly, trying to shake of the creepy sensation. He turned around –

“HOLY CRAP!”

Stiles stared straight down the barrel of a gun. A very huge, very deadly looking gun. Memories of similar situations flashed before him and he staggered backwards, blinking hard, trying to find his footing.

“Stiles?”

The barrel had spoken in a very familiar voice.

“C-Chris?”

The barrel disappeared and Stiles stared foggily into the somewhat haggard face of Chris Argent. It was covered in what looked like several weeks’ worth of old stubble. He looked exhausted, determined and scary as fuck.

“What the fuck man?” Stiles grabbed the nearby wall, catching his breath and getting his pulse under control. “That’s the second time you’ve pulled a gun on me. I’m starting to get the impression you don’t like me very much.”

Chris stalked forward and clasped Stiles on the shoulder just as the other four burst back around the corner in a fray of flashing eyes and fangs. Chris dropped his hold on Stiles and raised both arms in surrender.

“Sorry about that,” he said with a tired smile. “I wasn’t aware it was you, otherwise I wouldn’t have crept up on you like that. What are you doing here, by the way?”

“We should be asking you the same question,” said Scott. “I thought you were away tracking Kate.”

“I am.”

Scott narrowed his eyes and generally looked confused. Stiles and Derek seemed to understand the implications of that statement at the same time. Derek’s reaction was to shrink further into the wall, Stiles’ was to throw his hands up in astonished shock.

“Shit, everything really is connected, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean? What does Kate have to do with Dread Doctors?” Scott had sidled up to Argent, giving him a curt nod. Their relationship would probably always be strained. The ghost of Allison lingered heavily in the air. Stiles felt the familiar tug of guilt in the pit of his stomach. The demon fly had used his body in the confrontation that had taken her life. He’d never really get over that. He might not have wielded the sword, like he pulled the pin with Donovan, but it was still a scar on his soul that would never fully heal.
“The Dread Doctors? That’s what you’re here for?” Chris looked taken aback.

“Yes,” said Stiles, feeling both terrified and giddy at the same time. “We’ve coerced one of their creations to show us their lair.” He gestured to Theo who looked like he wanted to protest, but whatever he’d planned to say was muffled by Parrish’ hand. Theo looked murderous. Parrish did a one fingered salute in greeting. Argent simply stared deadpan at the display, not even so much as a twitch of the eye. The man really was a soldier through and through.

“We found the place,” continued Stiles in a breathless rant, “and apparently they’re trying to recreate some sort of beast to fight another beast. And when I say beast I mean BEAST – capital letters all the way, and nothing like I’ve ever seen in any of the bestiaries. According to Theo over there, they’ve succeeded and keep chanting about “a bet” while looking at this fresco or whatever.”

He showed Chris the fresco on his phone. He stared at it unblinkingly for several minutes.

“So?” Stiles was wringing his hands impatiently. “What does this have to do with Kate?”

Chris shook his head. “I have no idea. I’ve never seen anything like this before in my life.” He handed the phone back to Stiles. “I’ve asked about the Dread Doctors to all the sources I think might be able to help, and all I came up with was those books I gave you. Personally I’ve been focusing on tracking Kate.”

“And you tracked her here?”

He nodded. “I lost the trail a little while ago. I’ve been walking up and down these corridors for a while, trying to pick it up again. It’s like she just vanished into thin air.”

“More like she moved in time.” Stiles was grinning from ear to ear, adopting a conspiratorial tone. “Time travel! It’s a thing.”

“Seriously?” Chris’ face had never been a fountain of subtle expressions, even on a good day, so it was hard to tell whether he meant it sarcastically or not. He probably did.

“Seriously,” confirmed Stiles, once again with a head jerk in Theo’s direction. “The doctors can move in time, and they’ve hidden their base of operations in this plant, just not in the here and now, but in the way back when. It’s trippy as hell.”

“That makes no sense.”

“What does? I mean, werewolves? Kanimas? This isn’t that much further up the Weird-O-Meter the way I see it.”

“But –,” interrupted Scott. He’d been quiet during the explanations, but was now seemingly caught up. “Does this mean that Kate is a chimera? A successful one? How? When? I thought the Calaveras took her to Mexico right after she died because Peter’s claws turned her?”

“They did,” confirmed Chris. “They told me the whole story in vivid detail. I might not like them much, but I have little grounds to doubt their account. Their hunter code goes back centuries. Also, they’ve documented it pretty well, photos included. If there’s a connection, and Kate is a chimera, I’m inclined to suggest the Doctors got to Kate before the Calaveras did.”

“Oh my god!” Stiles clasped a hand to his forehead, then scrambled to find his phone again. “Hold on, hold on, yes! Here! Look.”

He handed over the phone to Scott so that he and Chris could take a look at the photo of the
ouroboros Kira had taken in Mexico, right by the wall Derek had been hidden behind.

“That is the mark outside the lair or lab we just found,” said Scott.

Stiles shook his head, grinning madly. “Nope.” Scott looked confused. “What are you talking about? We all saw it.”

“You saw a mark just like it, yes. But not this one. Because this is a picture of the same kind of mark, taken by Kira – in Mexico.”

“What?” Scott snatched the phone out of Chris’ hands to look at it more closely.

“They found it next to the wall where Derek was hidden,” said Stiles, chancing a glance in his direction. Derek had been oddly quiet ever since Chris arrived.

“So, you’re saying that the Doctors are also involved with the stuff that happened with Derek? *Both times*? And since Kate was the one that brought him there, it stands to reason she’s involved as well.” Parrish had moved up to look at the photo over Scott’s shoulder.

Stiles was flailing. “It sure does seem like it. Derek did uncover memories of the Doctors as well when he read the book, so it doesn’t really come out of left field. And now that Chris has traced Kate back to this place, the pieces are slowly coming together. Dude, you really must be important if Kate’s willing to kidnap you twice!”

Derek didn’t answer. Instead, he looked like he might be sick at any moment. Or possibly tear down a wall. Stiles still hadn’t deciphered all the nuances of his facial expressions.

“I don’t know about you guys, but my head is spinning. And the pieces might fit, but I can’t get a grip on the big picture yet.” Parrish did in fact look a little pale. “No offense to you, Mr. Argent, but I’m not really in the right frame of mind for tracking a - what is Kate again?”

“Were-jaguar,” answered Chris and Stiles in perfect unison.

“Lovely. That doesn’t sound ominous at all. Anyway, if she’s disappeared back in time, all she will find is the place trashed beyond repair. Which means, she’ll probably reappear soon enough. We know we’re on the right path, so I guess some of you could just lie in wait or something. I on the other hand actually have a shift in less than an hour, so count me out.”

“I’ll stay,” said Argent gruffly. “I would appreciate a bit of backup if possible.” Stiles kneaded his hands together.

“Sure, say no more. I’ll stay –“

The rest of the sentence was drowned in a string of gurgling noises as someone yanked him back hard by his hood.

“You’ll do no such thing.”

*Derek.* He should’ve known.

“Let go of me!” Stiles kicked and squirmed like an eel, but Derek’s grip was like steel. “Honestly, I thought the days of unnecessary violence was over. You’re quick to point out how human I am, but seem to forget that I bruise like a peach and won’t survive at all if you snap my neck.”

That did the trick. Derek dropped his grip abruptly as if burned. Stiles massaged his tender throat, but
actually felt bad when he caught a glimpse of Derek’s face. Truthfully he was more annoyed by his
own uselessness than anything. And neither his esophagus nor his neck had never been in any real
danger.

“I’m sorry,” he added quickly. “I totally overreacted. It didn’t really hurt. Not physically. I’m more
hurt, or should I say annoyed by not being able to help. I know you won’t hurt me, I’m just being a
dick.” He stared at Derek through lowered lashes, hoping he’d understand how sincere he was.

“You do help, Stiles,” said Derek, voice low but firm. “Claws and fangs aren’t the only weapons we
need.”

He shrugged, feeling slightly warmed by the sentiment, though it didn’t feel entirely deserved.
“Lydia’s the brains of the operation, not me.”

Derek pursed his lips and sighed deeply, as if fighting off the urge to shake him. Stiles recognized the
signs. His dad did the same thing almost daily.

“Intelligence and smarts are not necessarily the same. You’ve got both, you know that right?”

He shrugged, feeling suddenly very self-conscious. Behind him he heard Theo mutter something
about tension and idiots.

“What the holy hell is this? Stiles?”

Scott’s voice echoed off the walls startling everyone. Derek, Parrish and Theo were claws out before
Stiles could blink. The sound of Argent cocking his gun sounded impossibly loud in the otherwise
deserted corridor.

Everyone whirled around to look at Scott who’d yelled out. But no immediate danger seemed to be
lurking. Instead he was staring wild-eyed and slack-jawed at the phone in his hands. Stiles’ phone.

Wait – oh no.

Stiles felt his heart pummel out of his chest and hit the floor hard. The photos from Mexico Kira had
sent – he’d accidentally saved them to the chemistry folder. He’d meant to move them, but never got
around to it, and now – Stiles made a wild grab for the phone, but Scott was quicker. He did manage
to catch a glimpse of Derek and the ball of twine.

“Give me that. Please.”

Scott still hadn’t said anything. Just continued to stare at the photo, then to Stiles, over to Derek and
back to the phone again. A swipe of his thumb and another image appeared. This one with Cora and
the bare-chested Derek. Stiles felt his insides freeze. It was like he was paralyzed with Kanima
venom again, unable to move, fearing for his life – or at least his dignity. And his secret. The past
with Derek that Stiles wanted to forget, but couldn’t. It was an open wound he definitely didn’t want
anyone, not even Scott, poking around in.

“Scott. Please.”

Scott looked torn. Like he wanted to know more, but at the same time didn’t.

“What’s going on?”

Derek was approaching. He could feel it. Scott finding the folder was one thing. Derek seeing it
again was so far into NO territory, it wasn’t even funny. Having your memories erased was bad
enough. Derek knew about them, had even seen a few of them that first night after he woke confused on Stiles’ couch, but still it was probably not cool being reminded about it again like this. In addition, exposing him to it might make Derek feel like he owed Stiles something. Feel obligated. He didn’t want to put that kind of pressure on him. And it would be like cheating somehow. Sure, Stiles wanted to get back to the place they’d been before he’d screwed up with the invitation, but springing events on Derek when he had no clue it had ever happened, was just plain wrong. It was like forcing a reaction, and he’d much rather they get there naturally or not at all.

“It’s nothing,” he muttered, pleading with his eyes for Scott to understand. To show a little compassion.

“Clearly it’s something.” Derek sounded alarmed. “Your heartbeat is through the roof.”

“It’s stupid, nothing to worry about. I – It’s just some – eh, incriminating photos. Of the – you know. The nude kind.”

He blushed to the tips of his ears, and didn’t dare look at either Scott or Derek as he said this. Theo snorted. Stiles just hoped and prayed that Scott would remember how he’d once helped him and Kira with incriminating pictures using the same lame excuse.

Scott swiped the screen again, seemingly of his own accord. Stiles’ held his breath. It was a screen dump of The Text. The one he’d never answered. Scott lowered his hand, hopefully to hand it back to Stiles. Don’t look, pleaded Stiles silently.

Of course Scott looked.

Whether he managed to read the text or not before all hell broke loose Stiles didn’t know. The next second a roar the likes of nothing he’d ever heard before reverberated down the halls.

“What the FUCK was THAT?”

“CRAP!” Theo had fallen to his feet, covering his ears. Now he stumbled up again, feet shaky. “The Doctors. They’re getting closer. I can feel them!”

“That was not the Doctors! I’ve never heard them make a noise like that!” Scott had dropped the phone when the roar came. Stiles snatched it up and jammed it deep into his jeans pocket.

“Definitely not the Doctors,” yelled Theo, his voice thick with panic. “My guess is it’s their successful chimera.”

“Kate?” asked Argent, gun out and at the ready.

“Hell if I know. I just think we should get the hell out of here.”

No one objected to the suggestion. Parrish had the GPS out again, but Theo took on the role of human tracker, sprinting to the front, the others right behind him. They zipped around corners, dodged right, and then turned left, all at a breakneck speed.

A second roar made the walls rattle.

“Are you sure we’re going the right way?” bellowed Parrish between heaving pants. “My GPS tells me we’re out of sync with the route we took going in.”

Another roar made them all stop abruptly. This one was significantly closer. Like right around the corner close.
“Holy hell,” muttered Stiles. “What now?”

No one answered. Instead, they all stood there, perfectly still, listening. At first all they heard was the steady drips of water. Then came the wheezing sound. Like something big, breathing really hard. And worse yet, not too far from them.

The next roar caused the walls and ceiling to crack, showering them in sprays of debris.

“RUN!” yelled Argent. No one needed to be told twice.

Blood was pounding in his veins, his heartbeat almost deafening. Panic oozed out of every cell as he ran as fast as his feet could take him, almost tripping more than once, using the wall as leverage, and pushing himself forward. Arms, legs, elbows knocked into him, and he probably did the same to the others as they scrambled down several corridors in a mad tangle of limbs, wheezes and labored pants.

“Where to?” yelled Parrish. He was at the front, saddled with the impossible task of choosing their path. Theo had fallen behind after colliding painfully with a pipe. Blood was running down his face, making him look like something out of a horror movie.

Parrish had lost the GPS, not that it was all that helpful in the first place. A crunching sound mingled with gut-churning growls confirmed that its days were numbered.

“Left I think,” wheezed Theo. It was a good thing for him that he could still be of some use getting out of there, otherwise Stiles was tempted to offer him up to whatever hell beast was on their trail. If that was the last chimera, it was significantly larger and scarier than all the others combined.

They all tumbled left in an uncoordinated heap. Stiles heard Argent cock his gun and fire off several rounds. Bullets ricochet off the walls. One or two evidently hit its intended target if the angry yowls was anything to go by. But if it slowed it down, the effect was minimal. The sounds of the beast’s feet or paws or whatever hitting the floor was still uncomfortably close.

“Auch!”

"What the - ?"

"OH FUCK!"

It was impossible to make out who’d yelled out, but Stiles soon found out why as he collided rather painfully into the body in front of him. The domino effect was complete when someone, Argent by the feel of it, that was definitely a gun poking into his lower back, barreled into him in turn.

“We need to move!” barked Chris, reloading his gun. “My bullets are 90 % wolfsbane and they’re barely tickling this thing. It’s either get out or get mauled!”

“We’re working on it.” panted Scott somewhere in the front. “It’s a double door of sorts, and it’s bared on both sides. We’re going to need a moment.”

“That’s about all you’ve got before we’re all chimera stew!”

Chris’ voice was pure ice. Stiles chanced a look over his shoulder and instantly regretted it. Something huge, black and encased in what looked like shadowy tendrils was prowling towards them, all teeth and impossibly huge claws. It looked like nothing he’d ever seen before.

“Are you werewolves or lock picks?” Stiles yelled frantically. “Just bust through that thing. NOW!”
“There’s no lock to pick, no handle to break and – GOD DAMN IT! – The whole thing is made of mountain ash. I can’t even touch the thing!” growled Derek.

“Get Scott to do it! He’s done it before. And Theo, you’re not even a real werewolf. Mountain ash doesn’t stop you. Do you want to live? If so, GET TO WORK! Also, Parrish, time to test your mountain ash resistance!”

The creature that Stiles had instantly dubbed Elwood because it was the ugliest beast he’d ever seen, was halfway down the corridor by now. Argent kept shooting and reloading, but it hardly even flinched when hit.

“I need a status report!” he barked. “We’re running out of time, guys.”

“I - I can’t do it,” panted Scott, sounding as if he’d run a fucking marathon. “I’m not fully healed yet after what Liam and this fucker did. I’m – FUCK.”

“THEO! You better fix this, you fucker! Parrish! Status?”

“I can’t touch the thing either,” cried Parrish sounding anguished. All he got in return from Theo was a string of curses, bangs and yells as he evidently did what he could, but judging by the panicked tension in the air, no one seemed to believe it could work.

Believe.

Holy crap, Stiles was the stupidest idiot of the lot.

“Let me through,” he shouted, voice high-pitched and frantic. He elbowed his way past a more or less paralyzed Parrish and a baffled Derek. Scott was back to trying to breach the barrier, but it looked like a lost cause. Theo was hammering away, but for all his exertion the door didn’t show so much as a scratch.

“I said move, MOVE. For the love of crap! Theo, stop that – STOP IT!”

Amazingly Theo did just that, and Stiles more or less collided with the door, sprawling his hands across the point where normally a lock would be visible. Concentrating all his thoughts and will, he believed, or more accurately demanded the door to unlock and open.

It did.

Crowding in joy, Stiles pushed at it with all his might, which truthfully wasn’t all that much, but he managed to get it ajar. Almost enough for them to get out.

“Someone, help me push this thing open,” he yelled, and a split second later two sets of hands joined his, and together they managed to open it wide enough for Stiles to slip through. Evidently unlocking it broke the mountain ash barrier. Theo followed, then Derek, Scott and Parrish. They heard a new round of bullets being fired and then Argent too slithered through the crack. They wasted no time in pushing it shut, Stiles not even bothering to touch the door, just willing it to lock. In all the commotion no one heard the click, but it didn’t matter. Stiles knew he’d succeeded.

The door and surrounding wall shook slightly as Elwood collided into it. They held their breath for a few seconds, but it soon became apparent that the door would hold. Long enough for them to get out of dodge at any rate.

No one said a word for the longest time. Stiles could feel all eyes on him, and knew they were bursting with questions. Understandably so. But he wasn’t necessarily all that interested in a show
and tell session at the present time. Besides, he had no clue where exactly they were.

“So, eh, that was a close one, huh?”

There was no answer. Elwood collided with the door again making the ground shake. Stiles squirmed. “Anyone know where we are?”

Still nothing.

“Okay…” he said, drawing out the word, letting his arms dangle awkwardly at his sides while he pivoted on the spot, looking for a way out. They were in a hall of sorts, lots of pipes along the ceiling and walls. A set of stairs along one wall seemed to lead up to a second story. It was as good an option as any other.

“I’m going to go see where these stairs lead. Just FYI. Feel free to hang around or join in on my quest. Whatever floats your boats? Yeah…”

He did a complicated sort of gesture towards the stairs that probably looked intensely stupid. It certainly felt that way. Deciding he’d made enough of a fool of himself, Stiles set off at a light jog, taking the stairs two at a time. He didn’t look back, figuring they would probably follow when the worst shock had worn off. Maybe.

At the top, there was sadly nothing except another corridor stretching on and on. At the far end there seemed to be some sort of red light. Perhaps an emergency exit? It was worth checking out-

“WHOA!”

Someone grabbed his shoulder, and Stiles startled so badly he whirled around and accidentally socked his assailant on the cheek. Overhead the florescent lights flickered, oddly in sync with his erratic pulse.

It was Scott.

“What the fuck dude? Warn a guy will you? Stupid ninja werewolves.” Stiles massaged his hand. Scott looked as if a mild wind had simply grazed his skin.

“Sorry.” He actually looked like he meant it, which was at least something. “I didn’t mean to startle you, honestly. I just wanted to -.” Scott trailed off, pointing stupidly at Stiles then in the direction of the door that still rattled every now and then, and back again.

“What the fuck was that?”

Stiles felt his cheeks tinge. “Elwood?” he offered unhelpfully. Scott looked, if possible, even more lost.

“I have no clue what you're talking about. What the fuck do you mean Elwood? Is that what your wand is made of? Are you a wizard, Stiles?”

The last part was whispered conspiratorially, complete with a nervous glance over his shoulder. Stiles noticed that the other four were loitering by the stairs, clearly listening in on their conversation but trying to be casual about it.

Stiles almost choked on his own spit, caught between hysterical laughter and just plain hysteria. “Wand? WOOD? Are you high? Elwood is the beastly thing, Scott. Honestly.”
“I’ve never heard of that before. Did you recognize it from some bestiary?” Scott was adorable when he was confused. A total puppy, way, way, way at the other end of the spectrum from the aforementioned Elwood. Stiles clasped a hand on his shoulder, patting it paternaly.

“Scott my man, Elwood is not a supernatural creature. It’s actually the name of the world’s ugliest dog. Look it up later. I thought it was fitting, because that –“ he gestured towards the still shaking door –“will not be winning any beauty pageants.”

Scott pursed his lips, evidently not finding the misunderstanding nearly as amusing as Stiles did. “That still doesn’t explain the *Alohomora* moment back there.”

Stiles cocked his head and clasped a hand to his heart in mock astonishment. “Ah, look at you, using pop culture references like a pro. I’m so proud.” He wiped away an imaginary tear. Scott rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. It was almost a spitting image of a pissed off McGonagall. The comparison was oddly fitting.

“Don’t deflect the question, Stiles,” he said, voice serious. “I mean – that was all kinds of awesome! Really. You totally saved our bacon, I just want to know how.”

Stiles sighed, shoulders slumping. There was really no use in denying it. Four eye-witnesses were hard to get past. “You and me both, buddy,” he admitted softly. “It’s just something that I’ve been vaguely aware of, but never really truly believed in. Ever since that time with the mountain ash at the rave, I think it’s been sort of buzzing at the back of my head, without me really acknowledging it. You weren’t there, Scott. But I didn’t have enough to make the circle, in fact I lacked several meters worth of the stuff, and still I managed to make it stretch.”

“I remember a frantic voice mail about that,” admitted Scott with a nod. “I never asked about it, though. It got lost in all the other crap that was going on.”

“I know.” Stiles smiled and shrugged. “And I never pushed the issue. You know how good I am at ignoring stuff, right?”

“Positively the best.”

“Ah, you flatter me.” Scott scoffed, face fond. “Not meant as flattery, but you’re welcome. So, this is like a recent development then?”

Stiles twitched, torn between a full confession and a curved truth. He landed somewhere in between.

“Sort of. I think I became more conscious of it after the whole demon-fly possession. It was as if that shook something lose in a way. All I know is that I came out of that whole nightmare with a sort of suspicion that I could at times achieve almost impossible stuff.”

He paused for a moment, wondering how to explain it without sounding like a total freak.

“I have no way of really proving this, but in Mexico, under the church I somehow managed to get cell signals so that a call from my dad came through. I was worried about Lydia, because we’d left without her and not knowing where she was, and I remember thinking I wished for a way to make sure she was okay. It shouldn’t be possible, but it did. In the middle of the desert under an abandoned city I all of a sudden had reception enough for my dad to reach me. And he did end up saving Lydia and Mason from that berserker, so yeah.” He shrugged, feeling both relieved and ridiculous for voicing it out loud.

“It usually happens in stressful settings so most people don’t even notice. I think Peter did though, he kept looking at me oddly…”
Stiles trailed off. That sort of explained how Peter knew that his ability had flared up, so to speak. But Peter would have to wait until later, he didn’t want to spring information about him on Scott and the others right now. They had enough on their plates, and he’d gotten the distinct impression Peter was on his way out of town. With any luck he’d stay gone. Permanently.

“Anyway,” he continued, hoping Scott hadn’t noticed that he’d been momentarily derailed. ”I did my best to ignore and deny it. I was so scared it would set lose more crap, like if I released it, it would consume me, or I wouldn’t be able to control it somehow. I guess I didn’t trust myself, still don’t really.”

Scott chewed on his lower lip, a sure sign that he was in deep thought. He met Stiles’ eyes directly, not even a flinch or doubt in sight.

“Well, I do.”

He took a deep breath, held it for an impossible long time and when he let it out, it was as if Stiles could visibly see tension and stress seep out of his body. When he spoke again his voice was firm, yet tinged with vulnerability and what Stiles recognized as guilt.

“I do trust you, Stiles. I’ve had a lot of time to think about it, and I’ve done you a great disservice. I might not agree with how you handled that whole thing with Donovan, but I had a long talk with my mom a few days ago, and it sort of shifted my perspective. You’re right that I’ve been narrow-minded and seeing things in black and white. I think that was mostly a coping mechanism on my part. I feel so over my head most of the time, and just like you, I don’t really feel all that in control most of the time. So I sort of hide behind a wall of what I think are expected of me, and those bars are impossibly high. And if I can’t live up to it, I can’t really expect others to do it either.”

It looked like it physically pained Scott to admit to this, but to his credit he forged on, a determined glint to his eyes.

“I think you’re right - we need to set aside some time to really talk this through, because this isn’t really the right place for it. The crux of the matter is that I do trust you. I don’t think you’re bad, I don’t think you’d willingly hurt any of us. But the truth is we all hurt people, sometimes out of spite, other times because of ignorance or shortsightedness. And most often we hurt the people we care most about, the deepest.”

Stiles just stared at Scott, uncomprehendingly. Something wet was running down his face, and it wasn’t until it reached his lips that he realized it was tears.

“Really?” he croaked, voice breaking. Scott nodded, his own eyes misty as well. “I always knew you were brilliant, Stiles. Incredibly weird, but brilliant none the less. This just makes you even weirder and more brilliant.”

“And possibly a bit dangerous,” whispered Stiles. As heartwarming as it was to hear this, he didn’t fully believe it himself. “I have no clue how to do it, or what I can do. It’s just… instinct I guess.”

“So that’s how you locked me in the bathroom,” yelled Theo, breaking the moment. “Wanker! I was stuck in there for 20 minutes. That place reeked.”

“Oh shut it, Raeken.” Stiles grinned through the tears, heart soaring when Scott mouthed “awesome, bro” holding out for a fist bump. “Or should I call you “Reeken”? Also, why didn’t you just break open the door, oh mighty chimera?”

“You’re hilarious, Stilinski. I was trying to avoid suspicion and the destruction of property. And for
the love of crap,” muttered Theo. “Would you just hug it out, so we can get the hell out of this place?”

“Can someone please gag him?” Stiles cast a pleading look towards the rest. Parrish grinned lopsidedly and clasped a hand over Theo’s mouth again. “Gladly. Shall we?” He gestured towards the corridor, and they hurried onwards, accompanied by Elwood’s muted bangs and Theo’s muffled curses.

The light did in fact turn out to indicate an exit and soon they were outside in fresh air again, albeit on the opposite side of where they’d entered. When Argent had taken leave with a promise to meet them again later, and the rest of them sat cramped inside Stiles’ jeep, Scott voiced the question they were all wondering.

“So, does this mean Kate is the last chimera?”

Chapter End Notes

Naming the beast "Elwood" is borrowed from meta discussions on tumblr. Not sure who came up with it in the first place, possibly Athenadark (seraphim_grace/DarkAthena)?? Correct me if I'm wrong. Anyway, hope you don't mind me using it in this fic :)

On another note, I have finished writing the story, only an epilogue left. I think around 20 chapters total is a good estimate. When I'm posting this 519 has just aired. Suffice to say I'm taking this story in a different direction :) Interpret that however you want. Also, feel free to find me on tumblr, over there I'm darachmoon.
“Elwood? Seriously Stiles?”

Lydia graced him with one of her patented “not impressed” looks. She had a vast arsenal, each more condescending and lethal than the next. Stiles was so used to them, he was practically immune.

“You come up with something better then, and I’ll happily convert.” He was busy devouring a twelve layer sandwich. Well, not really, but it wasn’t that far off. He was ravenous.

“I will,” she replied tartly, and continued to skim through the pictures that Stiles had taken of the lair. Every once in a while she would stop, zoom in and make notes on one of the many notebooks she had in front of her. Stiles had glanced at it in passing, but it all looked Greek to him. Or Latin. Whatever.

She’d seemed slightly disappointed when he’d returned sans Parrish, but had recovered quickly, her face now the picture of concentrated poise. Stiles found her fascination with the deputy oddly endearing and if it wasn’t painfully obvious that she was in a slightly snippy mood, he’d totally tease her about it. Lydia Martin was one of those people who thrived in the sun and spotlight. Lack of social interactions was clearly taking its toll. Thankfully Kira and Scott would come over soon, otherwise Stiles wasn’t sure he’d chance being alone with her much longer.

They’d dumped Theo at school (literally, Scott had taken great pleasure in kicking him out while the jeep was still moving), ignoring his protests. After that Stiles had dropped Scott off at the Yukimuras where he would make another dreaded attempt at sushi, this time without eating wasabi by the spoonful.

Which had left Stiles alone with Derek.

It had been a very awkward ride. Intensely awkward in fact.

The werewolf had not commented one way or the other on the newfound discovery of Stiles’ magical mojo. As a matter of fact, Derek simply stared stiffly out the window clearly pretending Stiles was air. There had been an elephant-sized lump of tension in the car, and Stiles hadn’t managed to pluck up the courage to confront it head on. He didn’t know whether Derek was pissed, scared or apprehensive. All he knew was that his eyebrows were knitted tightly together, his forehead lined and his mouth wired shut in his grumpiest expression.

Stiles had hardly dared ask where to drop him off, but in the end he didn’t have to. Derek barked out a street address not too far from his old loft that Stiles assumed was his new apartment. When they arrived, he’d done a half assed attempt to break the silence. Turned out Stiles was not much of an ice breaker.

“So, yeah. Eh… so is this the new digs?”

Derek jerked his head stiffly in answer, but it was impossible to decipher if it was supposed to be a nod or a head shake.

“Awesome.”

It clearly wasn’t. Not even remotely. Stiles tried again.

“So, weird day.”
Stiles wanted to slap himself repeatedly. In the face. Wearing brass knuckles.

“Yeah, obviously… So, any idea what to do next? Kate – that’s probably not who you wanted back in town, you know…. Given your history.”

Derek leveled him with a look so steely it threatened to slice him cleanly in two. Stiles wondered if there was a world record for the number of feet you could fit into one’s mouth. If so Stiles was a strong contender. He might even go pro.

“Right, yeah. Sorry, I didn’t mean to, you know, like pry or anything… Anyway, will you come over – ”

The question remained hanging midair, never completed and never answered. Derek had exited the Jeep swiftly and disappeared inside the building before Stiles could blink. He’d driven home feeling just as bad as the time when he’d not returned Derek’s unexpected text invitation. The problem this time was that he wasn’t exactly clear on why Derek was so cold. Sure, he’d concealed his burgeoning ability, but he’d hid that from everyone. Even tried to hide it from himself until it was more or less dancing on his nose wearing a neon tutu and tap shoes.

In hindsight he could admit that suppressing and ignoring it wasn’t the wisest of choices, and of course he knew he could’ve trusted Derek with it. And yet. Ignorance was after all bliss. Until it wasn’t.

In anger Stiles banged his hand on the steering wheel and cursed creatively. They were practically trapped in a maelstrom of shit and still he managed to shovel even more manure into the fray by complicating every personal relationship he had.

As he’d pulled out and headed home with a last hopeful glance over his shoulder just in case Derek had changed his mind (he hadn’t), Stiles battled the sinking feeling there was more to Derek’s newfound sullenness. But, without knowing what it was, it was difficult to address. Had Derek recovered some of his memories and was now pissed about this summer? Or was he disgusted by the accidental orgasm from the other day? Was a magical Stiles Stilinski the biggest no no of them all? Or worse yet, all of the above?

The whole thing was giving him a migraine, and possibly an ulcer. So he did what he did best – tried to ignore it. The Dread Doctors and Elwood provided the perfect opportunity, and Lydia his perfect and unassuming accomplice.

“When you’re finished mangling that piece of bread, would you mind going over this with me?” She smiled sweetly, which – if you spoke Lydia – meant “get over here now”. Stiles did as instructed.

“You’re right, it’s clearly connected with what Kate was up to in Mexico.” Lydia was comparing the two photos of Ouroboros. They were identical down to the shape of the scales. Stiles shuddered.

“And with Chris tracking Kate into the plant, it does make a strong case for her being the creature that attacked us.”

“Seemingly, yes,” agreed Lydia. “But it’s far from conclusive evidence, so we should keep an open mind. So far all the chimeras have been teenagers, and perfectly normal humans as well. She doesn’t really fit the profile.”

“You’re forgetting about glowstick wolf,” said Stiles, busily jotting down the names of all the chimeras they knew about. “You know the wolf that attacked us at school before Senior Scribe, the one with the blue glowing talons. He was older, and I got the impression he was a werewolf to begin
with. He knew a lot about True Alphas and our history. That sort of thing isn’t common knowledge among normal human teenagers."

“I know, Stiles.” Lydia showed him a perfect chart listing every chimera, their name, age and what supernatural creatures they were combined off. Stiles crumpled the paper in his hands, throwing it over his shoulder with a huff.

“Like I said, Kate does seem like a strong contender right now. I just don’t see why she kidnapped Derek – twice I might add – if she was the prime chimera candidate all along.”

“Let’s just focus on the Doctors instead then,” suggested Stiles, rubbing at his temples.

“Good idea. I’m looking at the photos you took now. Oh my, what is this?” Lydia positively cooed and held up the phone showing the creepy fresco.

“Some sort of mural that, according to Theo, The Doctors uncovered after they declared the last chimera was a success. To be honest the thing chasing us today did bear a slight resemblance to one of those beasts. Anyway, Theo said they got all excited and started chanting as well.”

Lydia perked up. “Really? What did they say?”

Stiles shrugged. “We don’t really know. Theo said it sounded like “a bet”. It didn’t make any sense to him. Doesn’t make any sense to me either for that matter.”

“A bet, a bet, a bet, a bet, a bet,” began Lydia. Stiles joined in, feeling utterly ridiculous. This went on for some time without any ideas or epiphanies striking, even if they tried different paces and pitches. Stiles idly wondered if it could be turned into a remix, but soon dismissed it. Ain’t nobody got time for that.

“What on earth is this? Clash of the Choirs?”

His dad emerged from his study, leaning on a crutch and his reading glasses perched on the tip of his nose, threatening to slide off at any moment.

“Join in the fun,” crowed Stiles with a grin. “We’re chanting the Dread Doctors’ hymn trying to figure out what they’re so excited about.” He started up the chanting again, going slightly off-sync with Lydia and lowering his voice to a faux bass. It sounded terrible.

“It’s like cats be tortured,” commented the sheriff with a pained grimace. “Sweet lord, please promise me that neither of you will ever join the glee club.”

Stiles gave his dad a dubious look. “Beacon Hills High doesn’t even have a glee club. Your eardrums are safe.”

“Thank god for small mercies. What are you doing by the way? Is this some sort of banshee voice rehearsal or something?”

Stiles shook his head and handed his dad his phone with the ominous fresco. “No, we found the Dread Doctor’s secret lab today, and according to Theo they keep chanting this while staring at this thing. We think it might be a – “

“OF COURSE!”

Both Stilinskis froze as Lydia practically shot out of her chair like a rocket. In a blur of red she began leafing through the mountains of books on the dining room table, muttering under her breath.
“Eh, Lydia? You okay?”

“It was so obvious! I can’t believe I didn’t think of this before. Honestly, it was perhaps the first supernatural creature I ever heard about, the problem being I didn’t really pay much attention since no one had bothered to fill me in at the time. Ah, here it is!”

She whirled around in triumph holding up a book. Somehow Stiles expected it to look exceptional in some way. It didn’t.

“Listen to this,” she said, thumbing through it until she found the passage she was looking for, eyes alight.

“The beast of Gevaudan. A quadruped wolf-like monster, prowling the Auvergne and south Dordogne areas of France during the year 1764 to 1767. La Bete killed over a hundred people, becoming so infamous that the King Louie the 15th sent one of his best hunters to try and kill it. Cryptozoologists believe it may have been a subspecies of hoofed predator, possibly a mesonychid. While others believe it was a powerful sorcerer who could shape-shift into a man-eating monster. It is believed that La Bete was finally trapped and killed by a renown hunter who claimed his wife and four children were the first to fall prey to the creature. His name was Argent.”

“A bet – La Bete! Lydia you’re a genius!”

Stiles jumped out of his chair, grabbed her by her waist and began spinning her in furious circles around the living room, accompanied by a mad chant of “La Bete”. His dad looked confused but amused. Lydia was laughing, her head thrown back, the red hair billowing around her like a fiery glory.

“What on earth did we just walk in on?”

Scott and Kira had materialized by the door and stood staring dumbfounded at the proceedings. Stiles steered them towards the pair and grabbed hold of Kira’s hoodie in passing, dragging her along.

“Join the celebrations, kiddies! We know what the creature is.”

Kira happily allowed them to spin her around with them, but Scott took a few cautions steps back, looking at the sheriff in borderline horror.

“Don’t look at me, kid. I’m about as confused as you are. Just be glad you missed most of the chanting.” He looked at the messy tango of limbs with a fond smile. “My son is normally a terrible klutz with an even more terrible singing voice, but I’ve got to hand it to him – he’s got moves.”

“Fuck yeah I’ve got moves! These hips don’t lie,” agreed Stiles followed by a whoop and a positively filthy hip thrust as he deftly spun both Kira and Lydia at the same time. The girls landed on the couch in peals of laughter.

“That was fun,” declared Kira, catching her breath. “We should definitely go out dancing sometime, Scott. We never get to do fun normal stuff like that.”

“Yeah, it’s a real shame,” muttered Scott, not sounding sad at all.

“It really is,” concurred Lydia, choosing to ignore the sarcastic undertone. “When this mess is over, and I can reclaim my place in the sun, we’re all going dancing. It will be a thing of beauty.”

“It will also be someplace where I won’t risk catching any of you attempting document falsifications. I’ve seen your miserable attempts at fake IDs,” he said with a long finger pointed at Stiles.
“Don’t worry dad, I’ve gotten loads better at it.”

“I don’t do anything but worry, son. Please try to minimize the number of laws broken if you can. Now, I’ve got to get back to work, but I expect a report later, okay?”

“I’ll brief you after, Sheriff Stilinski,” said Lydia primly.

“Thank you very much, Ms. Martin.” The sheriff bowed out of the room with surprising style considering the crutches. Stiles mouthed “suck up”. Lydia just shrugged looking unfazed. A few moments later the office door shut with a muffled click.

“So,” said Scott, looking around the room. “Care to share? Without complicated dance steps this time?”

“I don’t know,” mused Lydia. “I think we should do all our sessions while dancing from now on. I think you’d benefit from a set of pas the bourres.”

“That sounds both painful and complicated and I don’t even want to know. Shockingly I’d rather deal with Dread Doctors than dance routines.”

“Okay, I guess we should get back on track.” Lydia looked wistful though. Stiles made a mental note to suggest Parrish polish off his dancing shoes, providing he had any. He bet he was one hell of a hound on the dancefloor. He sniggered to himself. He was a hoot.

“We figured out the chanting. Or rather Lydia figured it out,” corrected Stiles hurriedly when Lydia shot him a cold glare. “It’s not “a bet”, it’s “La Bete”.”

“I have no clue what that even means.”

Lydia hurriedly reread the passage from the book. Scott still looked confused.

“Allison never told you about this, did she?” Lydia’s voice was small, careful. Allison was still a sore subject. For all of them. Scott shook his head.

“No, not really. I knew she came from an old family of hunters, but we never really talked about the origin of it all.”

Lydia had handed him the book, and he was looking over the pages with an unreadable expression. He closed it, looked at the front and the back, and then opened it to the first page.

“This was her book?” He carefully traced the delicate swirls of Allison’s name with a finger. Lydia nodded.

“Yes. She read me that story not long after she moved here. It was before I had any clue what was going on. Before Peter bit me. I borrowed the book again later, and it was still in my possession when – “

She trailed off. There was really nothing more to say on the subject. Thinking about Allison always hurt. She’d died while the whole evil Stiles replica was running around controlling Onis, and even if he technically had nothing to do with it, Stiles still felt horribly responsible in a way he’d never been able to express or admit to without sounding deranged or selfish. It was therefore oddly comforting that it was a trace of Allison that helped them now.

“So, now we know what they’re creating,” said Kira. “That’s definitely a start, right?”
Stiles had to give her credit. Seeing how just the thought of Allison still affected Scott, and yet she didn’t act defensive or jealous, but stayed focused. And supportive. He noticed her hand lightly on Scott’s lower back. It made him think of Derek. In fact it made him miss Derek. And he’d seen him just an hour ago. Basically Stiles was beginning to realize he was pathetic and a walking cliché. But dwelling on that didn’t do any good. With effort he wrenched his mind back to the present dilemma.

“But we still don’t know why? And I don’t know about you, but I’d like to know exactly how this is possible in the first place? We know mercury is involved, at least with the failures, but that can’t be all there is, can it? How can just ordinary people turn supernatural without something to flip the switch?” Scott looked around the room. Lydia nodded, Stiles followed suit.

“They can’t,” agreed Stiles, rolling his shoulders and hearing several joints pop. “Or it’s highly unlikely. It’s like with thermodynamics – you can change energy, turn it into different kinds, transform it and stuff, but you can’t create more of it. Just as you can’t really erase it. The sum stays the same.”

Lydia was positively beaming in her seat. “Exactly! So they have to be getting some sort of supernatural DNA from somewhere. Like some kind of donors.”

All of a sudden puzzle pieces began rearranging themselves before Stiles’ inner eye. Could it really be connected? All of it? He didn’t see why not? Everything else seemed to be as well, in a weird Pulp Fiction kind of way, in that everything seemed disjointed and unrelated at first and at a distance, but that was woven into an intricate and elaborate masterpiece.


“What about it?” Scott looked lost. Even Lydia seemed like she wasn’t quite with him. Not yet anyway, but her interest was certainly peaked.

“What did the deadpool do?” asked Stiles, pointing at all of them in turn with the pen. “It put a prize on the head of all of Beacon Hills’ supernatural creatures. When they died, their supernatural essence, their energy if we run with the thermodynamic example, left them, right? They were dead, they didn’t need it anymore. So what happened to them after? What happened to their supernatural energy?”

He got to his feet and started pacing the room. Lydia looked intrigued. “What if the deadpool in reality was nothing but a huge harvest, providing the supernatural ingredients they needed for these creepy experiments?”

“What, so you mean the Doctors swooped in and cut out a part of them?” Scott looked dubious. “Wouldn’t people at the coroner’s office have noticed something like that?”

“Probably,” conceded Stiles. “That is why I doubt they needed a physical sample like how we normally think of DNA. I’ve been thinking about something that Dr Valack said to us. He said the Doctors found the secret in electromagnetic frequencies. I think that’s the key to all of this.”

“Oh my god.” Lydia’s eyes were huge. “Stiles, the telluric currents! Those are electromagnetic currents. And they run all over Beacon Hills!”

Stiles nodded. He was leafing through a stack of reports and – yes! He’d found it. He folded out the map of the town, with all the ley lines drawn in.

“They do indeed. Remember Jennifer Blake?”
Scott shuddered. “How could anyone forget? She was a dark druid, a darach masquerading as our English teacher who almost killed our parents as sacrifices,” he rattled off to a somewhat confused looking Kira.

“She sacrifices a lot of people. Sets of threes, guardians, healers, warriors and so on. And she got stronger. Druids are humans to begin with, but her dark sacrifices gave her supernatural abilities, like healing. And remember where she took our parents?”

“The Nemeton,” whispered Scott, leaning over the map with renewed interest. “Which is somewhere around here if I’m not mistaken. Whenever we can find it, that is.”

Stiles nodded. “And isn’t it interesting how all the ley lines converge and meet at that exact area?”

“So, is it like a generator of supernatural power? Or a battery?” asked Kira.

“I’m not sure,” admitted Stiles. “But I do know it’s been tampered with, hell, we even had an unwitting hand in that. And we know that people are drawn here now because of it. So perhaps it’s some sort of pressure valve, making sure things stay in balance. It’s all very confusing. But what I do think is that the currents were overflown with supernatural energy so to speak, and that the Doctors collected what they needed through them.”

“Which again begs the question, who was behind the deadpool.” Lydia’s lips were pursed in a determined line. “Does anyone else get the feeling that both we and poor Meredith have been duped?”

“We’ve all been duped.”

Scott’s voice was low but firm. There was something new to it, something Stiles hadn’t heard before. Something hard. “We’ve been just as much pieces in this game as all the rest. We activated the Nemeton after all.”

Yeah, thought Stiles grimly. We did. And your precious Deaton suggested it. He didn’t voice this aloud though. One problem at a time, and Scott might have had a hard wakeup call as of lately, but he doubted he’d be willing to throw suspicions on Deaton just like that.

“We still need to stop Kate. Or whoever that beast thing really is,” said Kira getting things back to a more practical mode. “Something like that running amok in town can’t be good.”

Scott nodded. “We need to talk to Chris as well, tell him what we’ve discovered. I’ll go, and perhaps take Liam with me. We can try to help him track her down.”

Stiles nodded. “Good idea.”

“I’ll stay here, obviously,” said Lydia with a resigned note. “I’ll dive into La Bete and see if I can find anything that might shed some light of why the Doctors wants to resurrect it. Or should I say recreate it.”

“I’ll talk to my parents. Dad’s an historian, he might have access to resources outside the reach of Stiles and Lydia’s Google-Fu. And mom, well, she’s as old as they come. She would’ve been alive back in the 1700s as well. It’s a shot in the dark, but I’ll give it a go.”

It was a good idea. Which only left one more thing. One more option to explore… Stiles sighed, hoping his heartbeat wouldn’t give his emotions away.

“I’ll get Derek to take me back to the Hale vault tomorrow.”
“Why?” Scott looked at him oddly. “And why is your heartbeat going bonkers? Are you scared to
go into the vault? I guess it was a bit traumatic the last time, but still. Do you want me to come
along?”

Great! So much for a steady heartbeat. Stiles mentally groaned. And here he thought he’d mastered a
modicum of control over it, but that evidently only applied to lying, and not – well, Derek.

Lydia grinned into her shoulder, patting Scott sisterly on the head. “I don’t think that’ll be necessary.
Right, Stiles?”

“Right,” he confirmed, sounding anything but sure. She wouldn’t, like say something... Would she?

Scott looked adorably muddled. Kira was biting her lower lip, like she was fighting off a giggle.
“Okay, if you’re sure,” he said slowly, squinting his eyes like he knew he was missing something,
but wasn’t sure he wanted to know. Stiles prayed he went with that instinct.

“I’m sure.” Stiles nodded perhaps a bit too enthusiastically. His heartbeat was still going haywire
though, the stupid thing.

“Why do I get the feeling you’re pulling my leg here,” asked Scott, glancing from Stiles to Lydia and
back. Lydia was the picture of disinterested calm. Stiles was a patchwork of blotchy cheeks. “You’re
clearly worked up about something. I know your heartbeat, dude. This isn’t normal. So what’s with
the vault that’s got you so spooked? And why won’t you let me help? Besides, why are you going to
the vault again?”

were, which I’m not, then it’s absolutely about something completely different. Like totally, way
way different. Not even in the same ballpark. Possibly out of state different. Lightyears even. And
we’re going to the vault because the beast thingy possibly tried to break into it. Don’t you remember
the school sign that was tossed into the school?”

“Oh, right. I’d forgotten. You’re rambling.” Scott narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “Why are you
rambling? What am I missing?”

“You’re not missing a thing, I just have to – eh, you know….” He gestured awkwardly at nothing in
particular, almost accidentally tying his limbs into knots. God, he was suck a freak.

Literally. Of course!

“I’m just working up the courage to go talk to my dad.” He looked at Scott with what he hoped was
a suitably worried expression. “You know, about the thing.”

Scott’s brows knitted together. “What thing?” Stiles grimaced, gearing up to the coming hailstorm.

“The “alohomora” thing,” he whispered conspiratorially, complete with air quotations. Scott’s eyes
bugged.

“Of course! Oh my god, yes. I can’t believe I didn’t think of that. I totally get it, man. But it’s better
you tell him. I totally support that. That’s way better than having him find out in the middle of a
sheriff station siege, like my mom did.”

Stiles smiled gratefully, relieved that he’d dug himself out of a painfully awkward discussions about
feelings, but at the expense of keeping his already hard-tried dad out of the loop on that particular
part of his life.
“What’s he talking about?” Now it was Lydia’s turn to narrow her eyes, and a hand was already on her hip. A dangerous sign if there ever was one.

“Stiles is like a warlock or something,” declared Scott, voice oddly proud. Kira and Lydia exploded in yells.

“Dude, what? No, I’m not anything of the sort,” exclaimed Stiles in panic. “Warlocks doesn’t even exist. Do they?” He automatically looked to Lydia and regretted it.

“We’ll have words later,” she hissed menacingly. “I guess this is related to the stuff you pulled when you broke me out of Eichen. I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that. I have questions. So many questions.”

Dear god, was she kneading her knuckles? She totally was.

“So do I,” piped Kira, but Scott was leading her towards the door, promising to tell her all about it, while giving Stiles encouraging thumbs up.

“I’m going to go now,” he said weakly, backing towards his dad’s study. “Wish me luck,” he pleaded weakly. Lydia guffawed, the heartless wench.

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“So,” said his dad, not taking his eyes off the report in front of him. “Are you ever going to tell me why you burst in here almost fifteen minutes ago like a spooked animal, and have been sitting in that chair nibbling on your nails ever since. Or do I have to guess?”

He licked his finger carefully and turned the page, a small grin tugging at his lips. Stiles groaned. Dear god. His dad probably thought this was about Derek. Which it sort of was, but not really. He was in this situation because he wanted to get out of another situation that did involve Derek – and sweet Jesus, now even his own inner monologue was rambling.

“Can’t a son just enjoy his dad’s company without an ulterior motive?” he asked in what he hoped was a passably indignant tone. His dad simply laughed and shook his head.

“No, not when the son in question is you. I’m a trained interrogator and I live with you. I know all your tells, mister. And right now you’ve got something you need to share and you’re stalling. Which means it’s either something that will make me angry, disappointed or shocked. Or you fear that’s how I’ll react.”

He carefully set down the report, and removed his reading glasses, meeting Stiles’ eyes. “I might surprise you, kid. I’m slowly learning how to bend. In your case I might need to be a contortionist but it’ll be worth it.”

Stiles swallowed with difficulty. God, it was hot in here. He needed to stop with all the layers.

“Stiles.”

The sheriff leaned forward, elbows on his desk giving him his entire attention. “If this is what I think it is, then you really have nothing to worry about.” He smiled fondly. “Like I said, I live with you, for better and for worse. And I’m observant. Also I know how to look up someone’s browser’
history.”

Stiles let out a terrified squawk, eyes bulging in horror. His dad honest to god laughed, the fucker.

“That’s invasion of privacy,” he whispered, panic blooming from every cell in his body. His dad just leaned back and guffawed.

“Oh, your face! I’m sorry, I couldn’t resist. And relax, I have not touched your computer. Just the thought of what I might find terrifies me.”

“You make me sound like a pervert,” pouted Stiles, already mentally planning suitable revenge scenarios. He’d start by hiding all of his dad’s Oreos. That would hit him hard. Also he’d make sure to always used incognito browsing, just in case.

“Sweet lord, son.” His dad grimaced. “I was actually more concerned about all the weird and borderline psychopathic stuff you research in the name of the supernatural, but now I’m getting mental images I’d much rather be without. Please, just promise me you’ll never get into anything kinky with Derek while I’m in the house.”

Stiles flailed so hard he fell out the chair.

“DAD!” He scrambled to his feet, cheeks a deep burgundy. “Would you quit it with the Derek innuendoes? Please! There isn’t – and never has been – anything like that between us. Honestly!”

His dad started at him shrewdly. Stiles stared right back. For once he was actually telling the truth.

“Huh.” His dad looked puzzled. “Really?”

Stiles nodded vigorously. “Really,” he confirmed.

“Well, I’d be damned. I was so sure – .” He trailed off, scratching the back of his neck. “I’m sorry. I just kept thinking about that time outside Jungle when I shot you down when you alluded to being gay, and you were so indignant I always assumed there might be more to it. And you two seem so – well. You bicker like an old married couple and look at each other like you think the other hung the moon. And then there was those incriminating noises coming from your room the other night.”

Stiles snorted. “Neither of us think the other hung the moon. And those sounds were rusty springs on a cot that hadn’t been used in years. Just looking at it caused it to squeak.”

“I think I know better what the two of you look like,” said the sheriff, voice firm. “But don’t worry, I believe you when you say there’s nothing going on. Just know that you can tell me if that ever changes. Okay?”

“Okay.”

They both lapsed into silence. Stiles had no idea what his dad was thinking, but his own mind was a jumbled mess of worry about the thing he’d come to talk about and marvel over how his dad saw Derek and his interactions. It gave him hope, which was not something a guy in his position should have.

“I’m not gay.”

He didn’t know where that had come from. Or why. Which was often the case with stuff tumbling out of Stiles’ mouth.
“No, I didn’t think so.”

Stiles laughed mirthlessly. “No? Are you going to tell me again how my fashion sense rules that out?”

The sheriff sighed deeply, rubbing at his face. He looked tired. Pale, but that wasn’t so odd give what he’d just been through and that he was still healing. But he was pushing himself with all this work, and it showed.

“No, Stiles. Not at all. I’ve wanted to apologize about that night for a long time. I was mostly frustrated, and I took it out on you. I was knee-deep in cases that made no sense, and you kept showing up at every other crime scene lying to me about everything. So in my haste I just assumed that was another in a long line of your fibs. But there was a grain of truth to it, wasn’t there?”

Stiles squirmed. He’d come in here knowing he’d have to divulge one huge secret. He hadn’t planned on two.

“It was halfway right, I guess,” he admitted, voice small. He stared at his hands. He needed to trim his nails.

“Stiles.” His dad’s voice was deep and warm. “I don’t give a crap what gender you prefer, or if you mix it up. Love is love. There isn’t anything halfway right about that. It’s just right. You know when you’ve found it. And don’t let me or anyone else’s glib comments ever make you doubt that.”

Something tugged at his heart and a half-choked sob mixed with hysterical laughter burst to the surface. He was grinning stupidly and his dad looked oddly misty-eyed. Things around them might be a cluster fuck of epic proportions, but at least Stiles and his dad were making great headway in mending fences. Unless the next revelation would screw that all up.

He sobered immediately. The sheriff clearly noticed the change and adapted accordingly.

“That wasn’t at all what you came here to talk about, was it?”

Stiles shook his head minutely. “No,” he confirmed, his resolve dwindling by the second. “Not really.”

“Well. You’ve already told me about accidental deaths caused by self-defense and made some tentative revelations about your sexuality, and I hope I’ve yet to scare you off by my reactions. I love you, son. No matter what.”

“I really do hope so,” muttered Stiles, squaring his shoulders. This was a band-aid he needed to rip off quickly, otherwise he’d never get it done. “It’s a good thing you’re sitting down, I think.”

He glanced over at his dad’s weapon cabinet that was always securely locked and the one door in this entire house Stiles had never managed to find the keys to, and not for lack of trying. It should provide a good demonstration. If he could make it work, of course.

He screwed his eyes shut, concentrated – believed.

He didn’t know what made the most noise – his dad’s astonished cries when the lock clicked open or the weapons tumbling to the ground when the door burst open by their own accord. No matter, Stiles felt lighter for it.
Stiles was exhausted.

No, scratch that. He was mind-numbingly shattered to the point where he’d barely managed to stay upright while brushing his teeth. He was leaning heavily on the sink, the brush movements languid and half-hearted, a bit of toothpaste dripping down his chin. He looked like shit too. But then again his mirror was still cracked, distorting his image. It was oddly fitting to his mental and physical state.

He glanced at his hand that just a few days ago had a deep gash across his knuckles. It was completely healed. As if it had never happened. If it weren’t for the obvious evidence in front of him, he’d totally chalk it up to a bad dream. He had a lot of those. Healing though, that was new, and not entirely welcome. Practical as fuck, obviously. But too close to actual supernatural creature for his liking. Magic mojo was about all he could take at the moment. Perhaps it was longer ago than he remembered and it had healed naturally?

Probably not. But he was too exhausted to even dwell on it, let alone freak out. He’d save that one for tomorrow.

Suffice to say the evening had been draining. After the initial shock had worn off, and his dad had been reassured Stiles hadn’t rigged the cabinet with sensors and whatnot, he’d gone into sheriff hyper drive, which meant about a billion questions and a string of demonstrations. Stiles’ control of the thing was shaky at best, and so far he seemed to have the best success with locks and his Jeep.

After that it was Lydia’s turn. The less said about that part, the better. She’d been just as relentless in her pursuit of information and even more thorough.

“Peter’s bite kick-started my thing. So what was your catalyst? When did this start?”

She’d stared at him with a mixture of genuine interest and betrayed disappointment. As if she’d run to him with all her secrets of the past year or two? Hardly. It seemed unfair that Lydia was holding him to a higher standard, but then again that was Lydia for you.

“I’m not really sure,” he’d admitted. “I don’t really know what the scope of this thing is, so it’s hard to pinpoint it.”

“How do you mean?”

Stiles had shrugged, not really knowing where to start. “I mean, I know I can unlock doors, and I’ve done that a few times. I did it at the hospital right after Brunski tried to kill us, mostly to make sure Malia couldn’t leave and I could apologize for keeping Peter a secret. I’ve done it at the school library a few times. I also managed to unlock the restraints Brunski put on me. I was about to attack him when Parrish swooped in.”

Lydia had looked pensive while she jotted everything down. “Okay, so these all happened after the possession, is that so? If so, that was probably what activated it, right?”

“Maybe.” He’d squirmed, practically shrinking under her unwavering glare.

“Maybe? Exactly how long has this been going on, Stiles?”

So he’d told her about all the things that he’d been secretly wondering about, alone at night when he couldn’t sleep. When he was desperately trying not to doze off to avoid the nightmares. The little
things that had been swept under the rug, carefully forgotten even though in hindsight, they were rather astonishing. Like stretching the mountain ash outside of the rave. Holding Derek up for more than two hours in a pool when they were both wearing clothes and Derek was paralyzed and basically just one big anchor that logically should’ve dragged them both down after about 30 minutes tops. There was a baseball bat that had splintered into a billion pieces, which not even seasoned professionals managed. And the list just went on and on. Lydia listened to it all, not saying another word.

“I think it might be because of the Dread Doctors,” admitted Stiles in the end, when he’d finally talked himself dry. “I remember them doing stuff to me. Even as a kid, before mom died. Perhaps I’m a chimera too? Which means they can probably just swoop in at any given time and just take control over me, and then make us forget all about it when they’re done.”

Lydia had just looked at him, head cocked to one side. After an impossible long pause, she shook her head.

“You’re worried about control. I get that. I’ve been there. Trust me. Up until recently I didn’t even vaguely understand my own ability. And that phase is scary. Personally I don’t think you’re a chimera. Not in the sense that Hayden and the others are. The Doctors came for Kira, Scott and the others as well – and like you said, they needed ingredients. Who’s to say they didn’t harvest from you, whatever it is that you’re supposed to be.”

He’d shaken his head, the notion too farfetched and crazy. “I don’t think so.” Lydia shrugged, face determined. “Well I do, and you should always trust the instincts of a banshee.”

“You mostly sense death. I’m not overly assured, to be honest.”

“Shush your mouth. You’re no more dangerous than I am stupid. I think it was always in you. The Doctors might have shaken it loose, I’m not ruling that out. But it seems to flow from you in a very natural way.”

And that had been that. Lydia seemed firm in her conclusion and she was rarely wrong. He should find solace in her faith in him, but instead it made him even more uneasy. It had been draining and hard, telling his dad, telling them all really, and yet at the same time far easier than he’d anticipated. Which meant he was just waiting for the other shoe to drop. Or possibly an anvil. On his head.

Instead he got a ninja werewolf lurking in the shadows of his bedroom.

“Jesus FUCKING Christ!”

Stiles startled as Derek materialized like a freaking hologram just as he was busy wrestling his lethargic and somewhat uncooperative limbs into a clean t-shirt. He ended up face planting on the rug, one hand partially trapped inside the too small garment. It seemed like only yesterday he’d been swimming in this shirt. It was funny how things changed when you weren’t really paying attention.

“Warn a guy, won’t you next time,” he grumbled as he more or less crawled over to his bed, climbing up and slithering under the covers like a concussed cobra. Derek didn’t answer. He just continued the silent treatment he’d started after their traumatic trip down the tunnels. Awesome. Just what he needed.

“If you’re just going to glower at me and not talk, could you like do that from across town? I’m really wiped and want to crash. I don’t think I will manage to relax with you hovering in the room like a fanged Sith.”
Stiles had closed his eyes, which meant he couldn’t see Derek, but strangely he could feel him. Feel that he was moving. But surprisingly not towards the window. He’d been sure he would take the opportunity to cartwheel out like the trapeze artist Stiles suspected he secretly yearned to be, at least if all the unnecessary backflips were anything to go by. Though honestly Scott was worse, something Melissa’s floorboards knew a thing or two about. Maybe it was just a weird werewolf tic?

Through his disjointed mental rambles, Stiles noted that Derek wasn’t leaving as expected. Instead he was inching closer. With each step it was as if the tension in the room doubled, tripled, quadrupled.

Dammit!! Trust Stiles’ ADHD impaired brain to discover that the proximity of Derek Hale was disproportional to the tension in the room. It also did unwanted things to his blood pressure. If there’d been a manometer measuring tension levels, it would be exploding all over the floor by now.

His bed dipped. Stiles’ body burned as if lit on fire when Derek’s thigh brushed one of his. He didn’t move though. Just screwed his eyes shut tightly and pretended to relax.

“How did it go?”

Derek’s voice was soft in the dim room, a contrast to what Stiles had expected. He didn’t sound angry like he’d assumed. Instead he sounded – well, concerned.

“How did what go?” asked Stiles, voice muffled by his pillow. He didn’t dare look at Derek. Derek sighed in a way that conveyed fond annoyance. It was a combination usually only heard from his dad, occasionally Melissa and Scott. In rare moments, Lydia.


Now Stiles did look up. Had he been wrong? Derek didn’t sound angry like he’d assumed. Huh?

“You’re not mad?”

Derek glanced heavenward, like he couldn’t believe the question. Stiles on his part couldn’t believe this reaction. He’d been so silent, so glum in the car. Leaving without saying a word. It wasn’t exactly unreasonable for him to assume he’d been pissed off.

“No, Stiles. I’m not mad. I’ve –.” He rubbed his neck nervously. “I’ve sort of, suspected for a while.”

“What?”

Derek nodded, looking at his hands. “Ever since the pool I think. That just wasn’t natural, you holding me up like that for so long. And then there was the mountain ash thing at the rave – you were so giddy, waxing on about turning a handful of fairy dust into a long line of uncrossable ash. And you pushed the Kanima poison out of your body almost as fast as I did. That’s not entirely normal. So yeah, I suspected.”

Stiles had scrambled out of the covers, not without difficulty and was now staring big-eyed and slack-jawed at Derek.

“But – but you never said anything?”

Derek shook his head minutely. “You didn’t seem to realize. And I wasn’t 100% sure. It felt wrong somehow to say something only to find out later it was nothing. That seemed cruel. But I kept track of possible signs, I guess. I think that’s why I wasn’t all that surprised by the possession like most
others were. They didn’t see why a demon would choose a normal human. But it didn’t choose someone normal and mundane. It chose someone with untapped powers and potential. For god’s sake Stiles, you cloned yourself! Who does that?”

Stiles fell back on the pillows with a groan. “I know! I’m just so endlessly glad no one ever asked about that. That was just so odd, and I have no clue what or how or anything. I’ve sort of known for a while myself, but I’ve been ignoring it.”

“So how did they take it?”

Stiles chewed his lip. Derek looked away. Was he - ? No. Stiles erased that notion instantly. Derek Hale did not blush. Honestly, what was he thinking?

“As well as can be expected I think. Dad is insisting I talk with Deaton about it when and if he ever returns, so that I can find out the scope of this thing without accidentally setting fire to the school, or myself for that matter. Not that I’ve had any indication that’s an option, but you know. Precautions I guess.” He trailed off.

“Scott took it well.”

Stiles nodded. “Yeah.”

“It’ll be alright. You’ll be fine, Stiles.”

“Will you?”

Once again Stiles’ word to mouth filter was defected. That was not at all what he’d meant to say. Sure, it was what he wanted to know, but the topic was such a hornet’s nest he’d decided to skirt it, and let Derek approach the whole lack of memories thing when he was ready. So much for that.

“I’m fine, Stiles.”

Well, that was a load of bullshit wrapped in an obvious lie. Stiles knew those well. He was the reigning champion after all.

He snorted, shook his head and flopped back down on his pillow, not even bothering to hide just how little he believed him. “Sure you are. Peachy keen.”

“Don’t worry about me,” said Derek curtly. “I can take care of myself.”

“And I can’t? Is that it? Thanks for the vote of confidence, dude.”

Derek honest to god poked him. In the ribs. What the -? “Ouch! What was that for?”

“You’re being an ass. I wasn’t saying you were useless. I was saying I’d be okay. One thing does not mean the opposite applies for you. Your logic is skewed.”

Stiles massaged his rib with a pout. More for show than anything. It didn’t particularly hurt. “My dad would tell you I have no logic, you should start a club. And your attempt at deflecting is wasted. I know you’re lying. You’re not fine.”

Derek inhaled slowly. He sat very still, not breathing not doing anything for longer than Stiles found reassuring. When he finally exhaled it was as if his shield came with it. He looked raw. Deflated.

“I want to talk about the pictures.”
Oh. OH!

“The ones on your phone of me and Cora. I can’t remember any of that. I saw a few of them the first night, and I caught glimpse of even more today. If I sent you those, I guess that means we’re better friends than you’re letting on. I just – “

He paused, lips pressed so tightly together that they were white.

“I just feel – I don’t know what I feel. Not remembering months of my life is weird and scary, sure. But I suspect it’s worse for you. I don’t know what I’ve lost. You do. And it’s like you’re walking on eggshells around me, and not just you, everyone. I want to remember, so I’ve decided to get some help.”

“Help? What kind of help?”

Derek shrugged. “I was thinking Deaton, but he’s not around. So I reached out to his sister.”

“MORRELL? Are you kidding me?” Stiles sat up abruptly, almost knocking over his bedside lamp. “She’s not exactly what I’d call reliable. She’s Deucalion’s emissary for starters. And she gave me illicit drugs in Eichen. And just the fact that she even works there, is cause for alarm in my book.”

“I’ll be careful,” said Derek. “Emissaries aren’t good or bad, Stiles. They’re advisors and they care about balance first and foremost. I’m not in balance, not with so much missing.”

“Just please tell me this is more of a psychological thing, and not something that involves ice baths and sharp objects.”

Derek smiled softly. “No baths, no stakes. Just talking.”

“Oh good, because you so excel at that.” Stiles rolled his eyes. “Not sure Morrell knows how to speak Eyebrow.”

“Well,” said Derek lightly, “we can’t all be motor mouths, like you.”

They lapsed into silence. Stiles’ mind was skipping from anxiety about Morrell and what mind games she might try her hand at, worry about the beast in the tunnels, to apprehension about his own weird abilities. But most of all his mind and body was hyperaware of the proximity of Derek. How his thigh touched his. How his breath was perfectly in sync with Stiles’ and how incredibly beautiful he looked sitting there, bathed in soft moonlight looking momentarily relaxed.

“I should go.”

With three small words the moment was broken. Stiles wanted to reach out, tug him down and wrap his arms around him. But he couldn’t. Because like Derek had just said, they weren’t in balance. Stiles knew things Derek didn’t. He didn’t remember what an ass he’d been, how he’d rejected their kind offer without explanation. Doing anything while that issue was unsolved – well, it just felt wrong. Like deceit. And even if they cleared that up and moved on, there would still be an unbalance, just of a different caliber. Stiles was done keeping secrets from himself. That wall was torn down for good. And he liked Derek. More than he should, in ways he was certain Derek didn’t reciprocate.

“You’re welcome to crash here if you want.”

He couldn’t help it. He shouldn’t torture himself like this, but again the brain to mouth filter was malfunctioning. But he was just being courteous. A good host.
Who was he kidding?

“Thanks, but I think it’s best if I leave. I’ll see you tomorrow, right? We’ll go visit the vault, see if we can’t figure out why the beast wanted to break into it.”

Stiles tried to mask the flood of disappointment with a vigorous head nod. “Yeah. You should meet me by the service entrance. It’s next to the teachers’ parking lot. We need to use the entrance in the basement,” he added when he saw Derek’s confused face. “The school sign was ripped away and tossed into the school building. The police has that area sealed off. Believe me, it will look all kinds of suspicious if we enter that way.”

“Okay.”

Derek rose abruptly, smoothed down non existing creases on his jeans, and stalked towards the window. He climbed onto the sill, all grace and smooth movements. It was like watching art.

“Goodnight.” He said it softly, with a final look over his shoulder, eyes unreadable and positively sparkling in the light of the moon. And then he was gone. Stiles clamped down on a whimper, not wanting Derek to hear it.

When he was sure Derek was long gone and out of range, he fished out his phone. He spent a long time looking at all the photos he’d saved. Photos that might never be real again. Perhaps Derek would never remember. And if so, it would be as if it didn’t happen.

I should just delete them all, he thought dejectedly. Start fresh. Living in the past was not doing him any good. And if Derek regained his memories, then they wouldn’t really need the photos anyway.

But when the popup asking if he really wanted to delete the photos appeared, his resolved crumbled and he couldn’t do it. Instead he spent most of the night soaking them all in and mourning a friendship he might never fully regain.
“Will you stop squirming? You’re like a nervous octopus. Sit still for a second please, I can’t see the blackboard.”

Scott was hissing into Stiles’ ear, which didn’t make things any better. In fact it startled him and sent both his notepad and writing utensils scattering in all directions.

“Mr. Stilinski, are you having a fit?” The substitute Econ teacher (Coach was taking another personal day) actually looked mildly concerned. The rest of the class, used to Stiles’ somewhat irregular movements, broke into uproarious laughter.

“Sorry,” muttered Stiles, clambering to gather his belongings, cheeks blooming. He usually didn’t care about being laughed at, but a night of minimal sleep and emotional turmoil had made him twitchier than normal. Knowing that he was meeting up with Derek soon, wasn’t making things any easier.

“Are you alright?” The teacher looked at him inquisitively, probably wondering if she’d be liable if anything happened to him during her class. Stiles might be odd, but he wasn’t in danger of choking on his own drool.

“I’m fine,” he muttered, eyes downcast. “It was my fault, Mrs. Leery,” piped up Scott. “I startled him. I’m sorry.”

The teacher sighed. “This is a senior class, Mr. McCall. Please behave accordingly. Any more of those antics and you’ll both get detention. Understood?”

“Yes, Mrs. Leery.”

The class continued. Something about inflation rates and devaluation of currency that frankly was about as interesting as watching paint dry. Also very irrelevant to the daily struggles of the McCall pack. Stiles tried his best to sit still, but only succeeded to a lesser degree. When the class ended, Scott dragged him out of the room, across the hallway and into another classroom, closing the door behind him.

“Lock it,” he said with a head jerk.

“What?” Stiles was still dazed and confused as to what was going on, and he’d crashed rather painfully into a desk. He could practically feel the bruise forming on his thigh.

“Lock the door,” repeated Scott.

“Why? And why don’t you lock if it’s so important? You’re closer.”

Scott gestured impatiently towards the door. “It doesn’t lock from inside the room, dummy. None of the classrooms do. They changed the locks remember, after that stunt Greenberg pulled freshman year. So, be a good warlock and lock the door.”

“That is so not – I’m not a warlock. Honestly!” spluttered Stiles, limbs once again doing odd things few men would consider graceful.
Scott just stared at him, head cocked in a way that told Stiles he was being a head case. In the end he shrugged, dropped his backpack and did what he’d probably done two hundred times the day before. He locked the door. With his mind. It was still freaking him out.

The click echoed through the room, and Scott was by the door in two shakes of a second, yanking at the handle. It didn’t budge. He spun around, beaming.

“That is so awesome, bro!” He yanked at it again with the same result.

“Careful there, Scott. Or you’ll end up tearing it off entirely.” Scott dropped the door knob as if burned. It was still entertaining watching Scott forget that he had super strength.

“So, why are we here having a clandestine meeting in the middle of the school day?” Stiles had hopped onto one of the desks, feet dangling.

“Clandestine?”

“Yeah, secret, covert, undercover, stealthy, surreptitious.” He nodded towards the door. “Why else drag me in here and lock the door unless you want to discuss something of a furtive nature. That or you want to get a piece of all of this, and as tempting as that notion is, I just couldn’t do that to Kira. I’ve grown quite fond of her.”

He grinned widely. Scott rolled his eyes like he normally did when Stiles made not so subtle lewd comments.

“It’s nothing secret. I just - I just wanted to check in with you. You know, since yesterday. Did you tell your dad? And Lydia? And are you okay? And also I just wanted to see it again, I guess.” He smiled embarrassedly. “It’s just so cool, you know.”

Stiles nodded, mouth turned down in a self-deprecating grimace. “Sure, it’s “awesome”. And yeah, I told them. It was… draining.”

Scott looked taken aback. “You don’t think it’s awesome? Why not?”

Stiles scratched the back of his head, shrugging. “It sort of is, and it sort of isn’t. Mostly because it scares the living shit out of me. At first it just kept happening when I didn’t mean to. And for the longest time I just brushed it off as a coincident or that I was just you know, imagining things. And it kept happening more and more after the whole possession thing, so I was afraid it was either some leftover dark shit from that, or that maybe it had been me all along you know. That this “power” or what I should call it, took over.”

He sighed deeply, wringing his hands. “I don’t want to be a threat, Scott. I don’t want to be a liability and hurt people, and I still don’t know where the possession ended and Stiles began. Perhaps it chose me because of it, or perhaps it activated because of it. I don’t know. But I did do stuff before that happened as well, so… I’m just scared, I guess.”

“I get that.” Scott had walked over and had hopped onto the desk next to Stiles, their shoulders bumping. “I’ll help you any way I can. You’ve been there for me since the beginning. You helped me figure out how to control my shift when you hardly knew anything yourself, risking your life in the process. At the time I was so caught up in my own woes and my feelings for Allison, I sort of forgot all about you. Which is rotten, and know that I feel terrible. So let me return the favor. Let me be there for you now, however I can, however you’ll let me.”

There was something pressing at Stiles’ chest. Something swelling. He loved this idiot next to him like the brother he never had. He was a dim twat at times, entirely ruled by his feelings and basically
a naïve idiot, but he loved him. And he was finally in Stiles’ corner.

“You’ve still got me, Stiles,” said Scott almost inaudibly. “I almost lost you, and I can see how that was mostly my fault. But from now on, please let me know when I’m being an ass, so I can course correct before it gets quite this far. Okay?”

“Okay,” rasped Stiles, fighting back a sob. “So,” he said a moment later, when he’d composed himself somewhat. “Does this mean that we’ve made up? Should we like, try to make out a little, isn’t that what people do?”

Scott shook his head with a snort. “Idiot,” he said fondly, bumping his elbow into Stiles. “I thought you said you didn’t want to do that to Kira.”

“What happens in the Biology classroom, stays in the Biology classroom.” He waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

“Nice try, Stilinski. And thanks for the offer, but I’ll pass. I don’t want Derek on my case if I can help it.”

Stiles flailed toppling off the desk. “What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked, voice high pitched and panicked.

Scott just stared at him uncomprehendingly. “Dude, you have nude photos of Derek on your phone.”

Stiles spluttered. “I have no such thing!”

“I saw chest hair!”

“He was on the beach! With his sister!”

Scott threw his hands up, backing away. “Whatever. I’m not getting caught up in your weird mating ritual, alright.”

Stiles’ protest died at the sound of the door unlocking.

“That wasn’t me,” he whispered shrilly and they clustered together, gathering their backpacks in a mad flurry of arms. A second later a teacher stepped through visibly startled when she laid eyes on the pair of them looking everything but innocent.

“What are you doing here? The door was locked… How did you- ?“

Stiles and Scott just looked at each other, then dashed towards the door. “Thank god you came. We’ve been locked in. Late for practice, got to go!”

“Thanks!” added Scott with his puppy dog grin. The teacher was left standing looking flummoxed while they thundered down the corridor, weaving in and out between fellow students and laughing hysterically.

When they moments later burst into the boys’ locker room and stood panting, stupid grins on their faces, it was as if the air was cleared somehow. Not literally of course, because as always the locker room smelled like sweaty balls and stinky feet.

They might not be back to how it used to be, Stiles mused as they started changing for practice. But that was probably a good thing. Their relationship had derailed without any of them really noticing sometime after Scott was bitten, and they might not be back on track – yet. But at least they were
pulling in the same direction. They’d pick up speed with time, the most important thing now was that they agreed on the destination. How they got there, well – that was something they just had to discover on the way.

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“Stiles. Stiles! Are you sure about this?” whispered Derek as Stiles more or less pushed him through the service entrance and pointed him to the stairs leading to the basement.

“Why are you whispering?” he asked, shooing Derek along when all he did was turn around and look at him with that stony grump face he usually reserved for cases of blatant idiocy and Peter. He felt it was woefully undeserved. “Classes are over, it’s just after school activities right now, which means the chances of bumping into a teacher is virtually zilch.”

He bounded down the stairs and could hear that Derek was following him, albeit not with the same spring to his step. “What about janitors?” asked Derek, voice echoing slightly off the walls? Stiles pushed open the door at the bottom of the staircase and held it open for Derek to walk through, doing a silly sort gesture to hurry things along.

“Janitors only comes in on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Budget cuts. Beacon Hills shares janitors with the high school across town. Also, they’ve cut down on overtime, which means we never see them after three in the afternoon.”

“But what if by chance a teacher comes along, then what? Don’t they store supplies and stuff down here?”

Stiles shrugged carelessly knowing perfectly well that the chance was next to nil. “We’ll just say that you’re a janitor in training or something.”

“I don’t look the part of a janitor,” grumbled Derek indignantly and Stiles had to agree. He was wearing dark jeans and light grey Henley looking like he’d stepped out of a glossy magazine.

“Here,” he said and shoved a mop into his hands.

“A mop? Seriously?”

Stiles grinned and winked at him. “It’s not such a far-fetched idea. Look.” He pointed at the hallway that stretched before them. It was littered with paper, pieces of cardboard boxes and lumps of metal. “It’s in need of a clean-up. We’ll just say that the county sent someone to get started.”

“What about you? And what happened here?”

“We’ll just say I’m in detention. No one will question that. Also, my dad blew up a berserker down here. He kind of spun that as a gas leak. I guess the budget cuts means the janitors haven’t gotten around to it yet. Ah, here it is.”

Derek looked stupefied. “Why do I even ask these questions,” he muttered. “Some days I think it’s just as well to not get my memories back.”

Stiles pretended not to hear the last comment. They stopped in front of the wall with the Triskele carved into it. Derek paused, and unreadable look on his face. “You alight?” asked Stiles. Derek had
been back to his usual tightlipped and somewhat grumpy self when they’d met up as planned.

“Not really,” admitted Derek. “It felt odd being here the other day. I just ran in, grabbed all the books I could find and left in a hurry. Up until then I’ve only ever been here with my mom.”

Stiles wanted to brain himself on the wall. He was such an idiot! He’d totally forgotten that Derek didn’t remember anything about the vault from the past couple of months. Not opening it for Kate, not that Peter’s bonds were stolen, and not that Stiles, Scott, Kira and Malia had hid down here when a crazy assassin tried to poison them at school.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t – I forgot…”

Derek waved him off. “It’s alright, Stiles.”

It clearly wasn’t, but what could he do? Derek took a deep breath, then reached out, claws at the ready and turned the dial. Stiles secretly wondered if that was a lock he’d be able to open if he tried? Somehow it didn’t seem right to even try.

Stiles stepped back and let Derek slide open the door and walk inside. He went slowly, tentatively. Then stopped in the middle of the room, slowly pivoting, taking it all in. Stiles walked in, trying his best to be quiet. It seemed like a private moment, and he didn’t want to intrude or spoil it.

Derek stepped on a piece of broken glass, bent down and picked it up.

“Sorry about that,” said Stiles hurriedly, realizing what it was. “We kind of broke a jar of mushrooms that your mom got from Satomi. We needed it to cure Scott, Kira and Malia. They got poisoned. Long story,” he added when Derek arched his eyebrows.

“It’s okay. I remember those, she used to make tea of it, it smelled terrible. No great loss on my part.”

“I’ll just clean this up for you, okay. You can look around, see if you find anything that might be – important or whatever. Just… give me that.”

Stiles snatched the mop that Derek was still clinging to like the dork he was, and got to work. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Derek shake his head slightly, perhaps even suppressing a smile.

“What happened to the safe?”

Stiles almost tripped on the mop in his haste to get over to where Derek stood looking at the empty safe, the handle all twisted out of shape.

“Eh, I think Malia broke the handle. Peter had hidden her birth certificate and adoption papers in there. Before that someone affiliated with the deadpool stole all of Peter’s bearer bonds. That was right after Kate had tricked you – I mean, the de-aged you into opening the vault in the first place.”

Derek nodded solemnly. “Kate,” he murmured, voice oddly flat. “So, she’s already been in here. If she’s the beast, then I guess she knew where it were, but not how to get in here. But why didn’t she take whatever she was after the first time?”

Stiles shrugged. “I don’t know. I wasn’t here for that. I just came right after the bonds were stolen. Someone threw a military grade smoke bomb or whatnot down here. Kate fled, Peter got mugged.”

“So, she left without getting what she came for?” Derek had moved over to one of the shelves and was poking at what looked like skeletons of small rodents. Stiles had no clue why anyone would even have that, let alone find it prudent to display it in a vault. Werewolves were odd.
“I guess so. So, where do we start? What do you want me to do?”

Derek looked around and finally pointed towards a stack of boxes next to the safe. “Look through those, will you?”

For the next few minutes nothing was said. Stiles did as instructed and got to work on the boxes. Derek continued his scrutiny of all the weird stuff on the shelves. The first box contained what looked like legal documents. Stiles skimmed them lightly. Most of them seemed to be about properties. He leafed through them, not really bothering with the details.

“You guys own a lot of buildings,” he muttered. “And a lot of land! God damn, Derek. Is the whole preserve Hale land?” He’d taken out a map that had the borders of their property drawn in. He whistled.

“No, not all of it,” replied Derek, voice muffled from behind a shelf further to the back.

“I don’t get it,” said Stiles. “Why did the state seize the house and tear down the ruins if you own the land? Can they even do that?”

“It was a danger to people. It could crumble at any moment, and I guess if no one does anything about it after a certain amount of years, the state takes over. We never wanted to move back here, so we just threw out all the correspondence regarding it without even opening it.”

Stiles felt a lump in his throat, body tingling with a sneaking fear that had always somehow been there. That Derek wasn’t here permanently. That he would leave as soon as he could, and never return. He didn’t press the issue, afraid to get his suspicions confirmed.

The next box contained bank records and economy stuff. Stiles tactfully closed the lid on that one pretty fast. He was a nosy shit, but even he had his limits. The third box however turned out to be a treasure chest of epic proportions but not for the reasons he’d expected.

“Oh my god! This is just – precious. I’m having this framed!”

He held up a somewhat faded photograph, the corners frayed, like it had been taken out and looked at often.

“What are you – STILES! Give me that!”

Derek pounded on him like a panther attacking his prey. Stiles had predicted the move and dashed behind the safe, cackling madly.

“You’re adorable! Pink really suits you. I never pictured you as a man who could pull off frills, but I stand corrected.”

He waved the photo in the air, laughing hysterically when Derek rounded the safe to get at it. Stiles narrowly escaped and ran for the shelves across the room. Derek caught him before he could make it to safety and they tumbled into a stack of boxes landing in a heap of limbs. Before he knew what was what, Derek had his hands pinned down on the floor, leaning over him with a determined expression. Momentarily blown away by the proximity and the somewhat incriminating position, Stiles forgot all about the photo. Derek took advantage of this and snatched it away.

“No, that’s not fair,” he whined and made grabby motions towards it. Derek was still straddling him, but was sitting up and holding the photo well out of Stiles’ reach. “Let me at least snap a photo of it? For prosperity. I’m sure it has historical value.”
“Not a chance,” growled Derek. To Stiles’ dismay he climbed off him and instead leaned against the wall, scrutinizing the photo, a soft and somewhat nostalgic look on his face.

“Want to tell me about it?” asked Stiles, abandoning his teasing tone. He’d just realized that was might be a hilarious photo to him, was in fact a childhood memory for Derek.

“Laura dressed me up for Halloween,” mumbled Derek, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “She went as the prince of course. She was always on a crusade for something, and someone at school had teased a boy about wanting to dress up as Wonder Woman. Laura commandeered the whole family to wear costumes to support him. Dad gamely but on a tutu and tights, and you’d never seen a more butch ballerina in your life, but Laura was so pleased. Mom went as The Joker.”

“They sound awesome,” said Stiles.

“They were.”

Well, what did you say in response to that? Nothing really. Besides, Derek looked lost in thoughts and memories of better times, and if there was one thing Stiles thought he deserved it was recollections. With so much focus on the months he’d lost, it was good for him to find echoes of a better past.

“There are more photos in that box over there,” he said. Derek perked up. He padded over and spent the next half hour hunched over it, leafing through old albums, what looked like greeting cards, invitations and baby photos. Stiles let him have the moment to himself without interruptions. He spent the time looking over the shelves, but couldn’t find anything that he’d think a beast or Dread Doctors for that matter might find interesting. But then again, what did he know?

“I’m taking these back to my place,” said Derek eventually. He’d gathered a whole box full of what looked like a mix of photos, books, old drawings and old trinkets. “Did you find anything worthwhile?”

Stiles shook his head. “Nope. But then again, I don’t actually know what I’m actually looking for.” He paused by the creepy skeletons and cocked his head with a grimace. “Dude, what’s up with this disturbing display anyway?”

Derek snorted. “I have no clue. I think they belong to Peter. He was always a bit of an eccentric, even when he was younger.”

“You say eccentric, I say psychotic. No normal person, or werewolf for that matter, collects skeletons and claws. That’s Hannibal Lecter levels of alarming.” Stiles poked at a box of werewolf claws much like you’d poke the cage of a rattlesnake.

“Did you say claws?”

Derek had dropped the box he’d been cradling and was breathing down Stiles’ neck before he knew what was going on. It took him by surprise and lured out an unwelcome yelp. Derek didn’t seem to notice.

“Yeah, claws,” said Stiles pointing at the set of werewolf claws displayed on a purple velvet cushion inside a box, the lid seemingly made of glass.

Derek let out a low whine, grabbed the box and fell to his knees, as if his legs just couldn’t hold him anymore. The whimper continued, like that of a wounded animal. Stiles felt at a loss what to do.

“Derek, Derek! What’s wrong?”
“The claws,” mumbled Derek, voice unsteady and breaking. “The claws they… they belonged to my mom.”

He opened the box gingerly as if it could break at the slightest touch. The claws laid side by side in a perfect row, on display, like priceless jewels. To Derek they probably were. He touched one of them almost reverently, as if he feared they could crumble if he provided too much pressure, or disappear like mirages before his eyes. They didn’t.

“Ehh – “ Stiles didn’t know what to say. Or do. Or not say. Or not do. Derek was almost in a daze, hardly noticing anything around him. “So,” he began again, “could this be what they’re after? The beast? Kate? The Doctors?”

It took a moment, but Derek finally seemed to shake himself out of the shock of this discovery and turned to Stiles, eyes shiny and raw. “I don’t know,” he whispered hoarsely. “But I want to find out. And you have to help me.”

“How?”

“I need to borrow your hand. And it might hurt a bit.”

Stiles grimaced. “Dude, seriously? You know me and pain, we’re not on good terms. Hey! What? Seriously? I thought the days of manhandling Stiles was over! Oomph!”

Derek had dragged him over the pile of boxes and pushed him unceremoniously down on top of one of them. He grabbed his hand and flipped it palm up. Next he emptied the box of claws onto it. They were cold to the touch. Stiles shivered, even thought it was far from cold in the room.

“The claws of an alpha contains memories,” explained Derek breathlessly. “We recovered these in Mexico and I had Peter push them into my neck. I saw my mom, Stiles. In her wolf form on top of the Nemeton. She told me our family has a sacred duty to guard the Nemeton and this town. We’re its protectors. Like you said, I think the Dread Doctors are tapping into it, using it, or possibly breaking it open for nefarious reasons. The claws might contain more information. I don’t remember putting them here, so Peter must have done it. Either that, or this is the other set. We only found one set in Mexico. It does make sense for her to split the memories in case one set got lost or fell into the wrong hands.”

Stiles had felt his face drain of color as Derek spoke in an increasingly more agitated voice.

“Hold on there, wolfy! Are you telling me I need to ram those claws into your neck? No way dude! I know that’s dangerous. Theo almost killed Lydia. She was comatose for days, Derek. I have no clue what to do, where to put them – and how am I supposed to make them stick to my fingers anyway? Tack- it? Duct tape?”

Derek shook his head, as if shaking it would get rid of Stiles’ objections.

“See here. The edges are sharp enough to cut into your fingertip and stay put.”

Stiles flailed and fell off the box in his haste to retreat. “Are you flipping kidding me? Haven’t we learned that you can turn a person if the claws go deep enough? Thanks, but no thanks.”

Derek hauled him back on top of the box with a huff. “It doesn’t work with claws of a dead werewolf, idiot,” he admonished. “And I’ll take your pain, okay? I’ll also show you exactly where to put the claws. It will be alright, you won’t hurt me. I trust you, remember?”

“You shouldn’t” muttered Stiles grumpily. “I can’t even draw a straight line to save my life, this is a
terrible idea."

“This is a great idea, and I can hear your heartbeat, Stiles. You’re lying, and you’ll do it. I know you will.”

“Cheater,” hissed Stiles out of the corner of his mouth, but Derek was right. Of course he’d do it. He was a sucker that couldn’t deny Derek Hale anything, least of all memories of his dead mother. He’d do anything for a similar chance with his own mom after all. He held out his right hand, fingers spread.

“I expect you to drain every single drop of pain or there’s a 97% chance I’ll faint.”

“Don’t be such a baby, Stiles.”

“Just for that, I’m going to miss on purpose and mangle your ears,” huffed Stiles, eyeing the claws with ill-concealed trepidation.

“No you won’t.”

Stiles could hear Derek smiling, the fucker. But he was right. “No, I won’t,” he confirmed and held out his hand. “Just get on with it.”

As it turned out, it didn’t hurt half as much as he’d expected. In reality the pain was tenfold that and rising. There was a reason people stuck pointy shit under peoples’ fingernails to get them to talk. He screamed so loudly and so long, his throat gave out. And that was just the first claw. He’d never survive this. And if he did, Derek Hale was one dead wolf.

Then, just as suddenly as the pain had hit him, it disappeared and he was left with a warm, tingly feeling spreading from his left arm and radiating out in all directions, until every square inch of his body was engulfed in it. Werewolf pain drain was the bomb.

“Woah,” he muttered, blissed out and misty-eyed. He half sensed Derek rolling his eyes beside him, but didn’t much care. As long as this oddly addictive flow kept coming, Derek could do whatever he wanted to him. He could strap on him antlers and pig tails for all he cared. Bring it.

“You alright?” Derek sounded half concerned, half amused. It was possible Stiles was keening just a tiny bit.

“I’m peachy,” he giggled. Derek snorted. “Okay then, I’m going to put on the other claws now.”

“Claw away, I’m good.” He didn’t even notice the other claws being attached. All he noticed was Derek holding his hand, stroking his fingers and every touch felt heavenly.

“Okay, I’m ready. Stiles. Stiles! This is important. I’ve positioned the claws, all you have to do is push in when I say “now”. Okay?”

“Push in? Wow, yeah. Alright. Pushy, push push.” He snorted, forehead heavy and collapsing against Derek’s back.

“Oh man, you’re high as a kite right now,” mumbled Derek. “I need to ease up on the drain, okay. You’ll probably feel some of it, but I can’t have you hanging like a sack of potatoes and possibly messing this up.”

“Potatoes?”
“For god’s sake. Stiles! Push! NOW!”

He did. He pushed. Through a haze and half-lidded eyes he saw the curved werewolf claws attached to his own fingers sink into Derek’s neck, like a knife in hot butter.

“Oh, man. There’s blood,” he muttered. Then the pain came back. Then he blacked out.

***

“Stiles?”

The voice was distant. Like someone talking in another room. In a padded room, nearly soundproofed. He felt nauseous and clammy. And the room was spinning. Why was it spinning?

“Stiles? Stiles!”

There was the voice again. It sounded panicked. Auch! The room had stopped spinning. Instead it was shaking. Was it an earthquake? Should he duck and cover?

“Stiles!”

The fog cleared and a pair of startling green eyes with flecks of - well a myriad of colors really, stared down on him with evident concern. He couldn’t focus enough to make all the colors. But they were pretty. And also worried.

“Stiles! That’s it. I’m taking you to the hospital.”

“Derek?”

The green eyes closed, possibly in relief. Derek sighed and slumped down beside him. Stiles squirmed. He was on the floor, and he was clammy, cold and hot at the same time.

“Oh god, I passed out didn’t I?” he muttered, trying to get up, but that just brought on a new wave of dizziness. “Did I hurt you? Oh my god, the claws! I didn’t like nick an artery or something, did I?”

Derek shook his head, and was he – he was. He was smiling. Blindingly, all teeth, eyes crinkling. It was a good kind of smile. It was also breathtaking.

“Did it – did it work?”

Derek laughed. Wow. That was such a beautiful sound. Stiles possibly wanted to record it and make anthems to it. Everyone should have the privilege to witness Derek Hale laughing. It was like nectar from the gods.

“Yes, Stiles, it worked. I saw my mother’s memories. I know what we have to do! I know how to shut down the Nemeton again, to restore the balance.”

Before Stiles had the time to process the information, Derek had swooped him into a hug he’d never experienced before. Heart beating faster than a terrified rabbit, he didn’t question it. Just hugged back, with all he had, feeling as if he died right this minute, he’d at least die happy.

***
It had gotten dark by the time they left the vault. As soon as they exited the school, Stiles whipped out his phone and sent off a text to Scott saying they had news and should meet up at Deaton’s as soon as possible. Scott replied just twenty seconds later, which might just be a record.

*Why do we need to meet there?*

Stiles typed out a quick reply: **Not sure, Derek says he’ll explain it all when we get there.**

*Deaton’s not back yet, though. Are you sure that’s where we should meet up?*

Stiles rolled his eyes. It was cool that Scott was developing the instinct to question things in general, but it would be a nice reprieve for him to just accept Stiles’ suggestions for once. But this was evidently not that day. Muttering under his breath he pulled up Scott’s number to call instead.

“Trouble?” asked Derek, still grinning ear to ear. Stiles shook his head. “Nope, just Scott being Scott. I’m gonna call – .”

The sentence died on his lips.

They’d arrived at the parking lot, Stiles’ baby blue Jeep the only car left there, bathed in the light from the street lamps. It was slightly foggy, and a harsh chill in the air. Derek’s Toyota was nowhere to be seen. He’d probably parked down the street anyway, the worry wart. But that was not what had made Stiles freeze in place, eyes wide with shock.

“Stiles?” Derek nudged him gently in the side, voice curious and at the same time edged with worry. “Is anything the matter? Is it Scott?”

Stiles didn’t answer. He just stared uncomprehending at the lone figure half hidden in the shadows by the jeep. It wasn’t possible. It couldn’t be.

“No,” he muttered, voice more whisper than anything.

“No as in no it’s not Scott? Stiles? Stiles? You’re starting to worry me here. Did you hit your head when you passed out? Is this a concussion?”

Stiles shook his head vehemently. Mostly to get rid of what had to be a hallucination. A mirage. A trick of the light.

“Oh for God sake,” muttered Derek and then he grabbed hold of his face, his palms warm and oddly right on Stiles’ cheeks. A perfect fit. If he wasn’t terrified beyond belief he’d be blushing furiously.

“Stiles, stop it. Please. Whatever it is, you can tell me. Okay?” Derek’s thumb brushed away a tear he didn’t even know he was shredding. How as it even possible to go from deliriously happy to absolutely petrified in such short a time? If he survived this he’d at least end up with a severe case of emotional whiplash if nothing else.

“He shouldn’t be here,” Stiles mumbled, closing his eyes and opening them just a crack – *hoping*. “Oh man, he’s still here. It’s not possible. He’s dead. I watched him die. I – Derek, I killed him.”
“Killed who? Stiles, I don’t see anyone –“

“What, are you kidding me? He’s right there. Oh man, his chest. It’s still got a hole in it. I’m going to throw up.”

Stiles staggered, then fell to his knees, body tensing up. It was as if muscle by muscle was stiffening until he was nothing but a petrified piece of flesh, heaving for breath.

Useless.

“You’re starting to worry me, Stiles.” Derek sounded panicked. He’d crouched down in front of him, holding him up. “Are you having a panic attack? If so, tell me what to do!” Stiles just shook his head, the only sound coming out of his mind was a low whine. This wasn’t panic. This was flat out terror.

“Breathe with me, Stiles. Listen to my voice, listen to my breath. Come on. Come on. Please! Oh lord, that’s it, I’m calling your –.”

Derek’s voice trailed off. Through barely open eyelids Stiles catalogued how his face went from flushed and anxious to pale and terrified in the span of seconds. The reason was soon revealed and made him momentarily forget all about the sickly display that was Donovan.

It was here. The beast.

Kate.

Could it really be her? If so what was the deal with all the human chimeras? The beast snarled and growled, baring its teeth and all thoughts on technicalities and experiments flew out the proverbial window.

If it really was Kate hiding behind the teeth, the flesh and the tendrils of trailing shadows, then Derek was facing a double enemy. His past demons and traumas caused by her, already fucking with his head, and now a potentially ruthless and vicious killing machine, probably much stronger than any normal werewolf. Which meant Derek would need all the help he could get, and Stiles couldn’t afford to break down now. He’d freak out about Donovan later. Heck, he’d even kill him again if that’s what it took.

With strength he didn’t know he possessed, Stiles scrambled to his feet, muscles still uncooperative and limp. He braced himself on the Jeep, staggering forward. His bat was in the back. It wasn’t much, but it was better than nothing.

“Stiles.”

Chills ran down his spine and he fumbled to get the door open. Donovan’s voice was eerie, hollow in a way that defied everything natural.

“Once again we meet by the Jeep. No wrench this time, Stiles? Are you going to hit me with the bat instead? Hate to break it to you, but you can’t really hurt me, Stiles. I’m already dead. I just came back for one thing.”

Stiles had managed to open the door. With eyes shut to block out the image of Donovan, who he could still hear approaching, he fumbled around for the bat. It took more time than he was comfortable with but he finally located it. The aluminum was cold and reassuring against his sweaty palms.
He slammed the door shut, casting a glance over at Derek who despite his fear had shifted into beta form, fangs out, claws ready. He was eyeing the towering beast that was still half hidden in the shadows with narrow eyes, reminiscent of cowboys and duels at dawn. Only dawn was hours away, and the darkness favored the chimera. The night was moonless. Derek would not get an extra push from above tonight.

"Stiles."

Donovan.

Stiles whirled around, bat at the ready. He stood directly under the street lamp, smirking. Stiles swallowed down bile. He could see straight through him, intensities and blood pouring out of the hole caused by the metal rod that had hit him when Stiles had pulled the fatal linchpin. The blood stains mixed with a silvery liquid that glinted in the light from the lamp post. Mercury.

"Stiles, did you hear what I said?" Donovan cocked his head. Smiled. "I came back for one thing. I came back for you. You were supposed to die that night. Not me." He shrugged, then opened his mouth in a feral grin, exposing what looked like rows upon rows of teeth.

From somewhere behind him Stiles heard Derek growl. He registered movement to his left. The beast was advancing. They couldn’t afford to fight enemies on two fronts, their odds were horrible enough as they were. Which meant he had to get rid of Donovan – again. Preferably now.

"Did Theo resurrect you too?" asked Stiles between clenched teeth. He needed to know who was responsible for this terror. To say that he was warming up to Theo was a huge exaggeration. The guy had almost killed his dad, after all. But he’d been somewhat forthcoming with the Doctors, so Stiles was at least be marginally more inclined to work with him. However, if it turned out Theo had a hand in this, then Stiles would have no qualms in putting him back on his ever-growing list of people he’d like to see get what was coming to them.

Donovan looked genuinely confused. "Who’s Theo?"

"Never mind," snarled Stiles. Then, without warning, he ran, swung the bat with all his might and felt his entire body tremble as it connected with the side of Donovan’s head.

Just like with the freaky twin alpha it felt like hitting a wall. The bat didn’t shatter this time, obviously, but the impact knocked Stiles to the ground. He landed painfully on his ass, the bat slipping out of his hands, clattering and rolling to the side and out of reach.

What the hell?

He stared open-mouthed at Donovan – only it wasn’t Donovan. Not at all. Before him stood a monstrous thing, like something out of a horror movie. If Stiles had to label it, troll would be the thing that came to mind first. It was that hideous looking.

He scrambled backwards on all fours, until he collided with the Jeep.

"What the fuck?"

The thing that most definitely was not Donovan seemed a bit dazed and was shaking its head slightly as if the impact had shook loose the contents of its head, and it was trying to slot things back into place. It provided Stiles with a precious few seconds to think.

It was vaguely familiar somehow. He mentally scanned the bestiary but came back empty. “Think, Stiles! Think!” he muttered desperately, feeling panic building in the pit of his stomach.
And then it dawned on him. He had seen this creature before! In Eichen House when Lydia and he had gone to visit Dr. Valack to ask about the Dread Doctor book. This thing had been in the cell next to him. Stiles remembered thinking he saw Donovan, but when he took a second glance this abomination had been there instead. Valack had even commented on it... Hadn’t he?

“Sluagh,” whispered Stiles. Relief washed though him and he hobbled over towards Derek. “It’s not Donovan!” he cried out. Not that Derek seemed to care or notice. Why should he? He didn’t know about Donovan anyway, and besides, he was far too focused on the huge monster idling in the shadows, baring too many teeth and looking slightly ridiculous. Like something out of a cartoon. Only it was enormous and snarling, and had already left a trail of bodies in its wake.

In comparison the Sluagh paled. Not that Stiles thought it was something to be trifled with, but thankfully it did seem to at least partially be out of commission. Not that it mattered much. With the combined army of Derek and Stiles they had little chance over ever coming out of this alive.

They needed help. Stiles fumbled for his phone and almost dropped it in his haste to unlock the screen and call Scott. His fingers were uncooperative and he miss-dialed twice before the call finally connected and Scott’s confused voice answered.

“Stiles? We’re at Deaton’s. Where are – “

The call ended abruptly.

“No no no,” cried Stiles, hammering desperately away on the touch screen, but before his eyes the image of Scott frizzled, flickered and then died completely.

“This isn’t happening! I charged it this morning, what the – “

The rest of the sentence died on his lips. Of course. He should’ve known. He should’ve anticipated it. The hairs on his arms rose like the fur of a cat sensing danger. The air had changed. It felt charged. Electric. Static.

“Oh no,” groaned Stiles, whirling around in all directions, trying to pinpoint what direction the static was coming from. “Derek, they’re coming! The Dread Doctors are coming!”

Seconds later they flickered into existence in perfect formation creating a half circle around the beast. Like a first line of defense. Like parents protecting a child.

“La Bete, La Bete, La Bete, La Bete.»

The chanting echoed through the darkness, and hit Stiles’ eardrums hard, like hail on windows. It was a hollow, eerie mantra, and perhaps it was his eyes playing tricks on him, but the beast seemed to swell and grow with each mention of its name.

“We need to stop them. Derek! We need to stop the chanting. It’s making it more powerful somehow.”

Derek didn’t need to be told twice. With an ear-shattering roar he lunged at the nearest Dread Doctor, claws out. Sparks flew as they collided with the metal of its mask. The head was whipped to the side, but the doctor maintained his balance. Derek managed to get in another whack, but it seemed futile. His claws were no match for whatever material the mask was made of. Before he could mount a third attack, the doctor lashed out with his cane, making Derek fly through the air and land hard against the nearest lamp post. The light flickered, died and then came back on, somewhat dimmed.
Without thought Stiles sprang into action. He jumped to his feet, dove for the bat he’d dropped after hitting the sluagh, and then pounced. The doctor stood motionless, surveying him as he approached, but made no move to stop him. Knowing that Derek’s claws and strength hadn’t even made a dent or a scratch on their armor, Stiles went for a different tactic.

He feinted a swing, and predictably the doctor lifted an arm to block it. No one should ever accuse Stiles of being a particularly adept lacrosse player. But several seasons with the team and one memorable game had at least resulted in a small arsenal of feints and moves. One of which he applied now. Mid swing he stopped, pivoted the other way and instead of hitting the head he rammed the bat, tip first, into the tubes protruding from the mask, hoping and praying it would cause respiratory issues. There had to be a reason why they insisted on wearing those monstrosities. Just like hitting the sluagh this felt like ramming his bat into a concrete wall reinforced with steel for good measure. One of the tubes had partially separated from the mask. Grey smoke were pouring out, engulfing Stiles and making his eyes water. The Doctor let out a metallic noise reminiscent of an old computer malfunctioning. Despite his poor vision, Stiles just spun around again, swung the bat and prayed to hit its target. It did. The impact knocked him once again on his back, the bat slipping out of his sweaty hands. He crawled awkwardly to his feet, scampering towards his Jeep. He heard Derek growling not far away, clearly once again in combat with one of the other doctors.

“We can’t beat them!” he yelled, voice well into falsetto and rising. “We need to get out of here!”

The door to the Jeep was open and he dived inside, fumbling for the keys which of course was not there. Mind jumbled it took him a few seconds to concentrate enough to make the engine roar to life.

“DEREK!” He stuck his head out to get a better view and felt his stomach drop. One of the Doctors – that prick with the fancy vest, why was he even surprised – had Derek by the throat, stupid masked head cocked to the side as if he was inspecting a vaguely interesting type of earth worm. Derek’s feet were kicking, arms trying to connect, but it was useless. He was clearly asphyxiating. Judging by the color in his face, or rather lack thereof, he’d been without oxygen far too long already.

“You fucking bastard!”

Stiles spilled out of the Jeep again, rage coursing through him. He’d just gotten Derek back! There was no way this metal head was going to take him away again!

It was as if a wave of – something built up inside him, gathering speed like a maelstrom. Without conscious thought Stiles spread his arms and raised them stopping at shoulder height, took a step back to gather momentum and pushed forward.

It felt like he’d just summoned a great storm. Expect for the part where there was no wind. The air was as still as it had been all day, but still objects soared through it as if carried by an invisible cyclone. His bat hurtled past him, just a grey blur, and connected with Fancy-Vest. It didn’t knock him out, but it was enough to distract him. His grip loosened slightly and Derek fought free, leaping out of his grasp.

A trashcan followed, its content trailing behind it like the tail of a comet. Banana peels, soda cans, half eaten sandwiches, notebooks, balls of paper – it all flew at the Doctors, trapping them in a whirlwind of garbage.

“What are you doing?”

Derek was leaning against the hood of the Jeep, bleeding profusely from several wounds on his arms and shoulder, voice scratchy and hoarse. Stiles shrugged which turned out to be a very bad idea,
since his arms somehow seemed to be connected to the onslaught of litter attacking the doctors. Some of it broke off and hit the windshield. Derek was narrowly missed.

“Sorry!”

He fought to control his arms and his mind, but he could sense that the power was dwindling. One by one the objects were clattering to the ground. “I have no clue what I’m doing, but we need to go! I can’t keep this up much longer!”

Evidently he didn’t need to tell Derek twice. He was already limping towards the passenger side, leaning heavily on the car leaving bloody hand prints in his wake. Stiles dropped his hands and the objects stopped midair and dropped to the ground. He backed towards the car, ready to get the hell out of dodge.

The sound of a gun being cocked echoed through the night. Next Stiles felt the unwelcome press of cold metal against his neck.

Chapter End Notes

Clearly we’re getting close to the end. Which means we’re getting into confrontation territory. Writing action and fights is not my strong suit, so the next couple of chapters will probably be a bit of a bumpy ride. Oh and sorry for this cliffhanger :)
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Long chapter with an abundance of villainous monologues. You've been warned :) Some surprises in this one that I've not put in the tags because it would be too spoilery. Nothing too gory or triggery I think, but if you want to be on the safe side, check out the end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“That’s quite enough of that,” growled a low voice. It was oddly familiar, but in his half-panicked state Stiles struggled to place it. His effort to place the voice was interrupted when metal rod was hurled past him with surprising force. It flew through the air and embedded itself in the trunk of a tree, a light blinking erratically while emitting a low hum.

As if choreographed, the doctors all froze in place. Stiles’ garbage cyclone laid strewn around them while they stared inquiringly at what Stiles startlingly recognized as an emitter. The kind that sent out frequencies. The kinds that Argents used.

*Frequencies.* It was just as Valack had told them. Someone had clearly figured out what frequency the doctors were operating on. And with the emitters Stiles had a pretty good idea *who.* Just not *why* said person was holding a gun to his neck.

“Argent, what are you doing?” he wheezed out, trying to look over his shoulder. Instead of an answer he was unceremoniously shoved forward, the movement so abrupt he lost his balance and fell painfully to his knees. He heard Derek growl and snarl in anger, but that sound was soon muffled. Stiles caught a glimpse of the Sluagh holding Derek in a vice-like grip.

Argent laughed, and chills ran down Stiles’ spine. It was Argent alright, just not the Argent he’d been expecting.

“Ah, Mr. Stilinski. We meet again.”

The press of the gun left his neck and Gerard Argent stepped in front of him, leering down on him like the deranged geriatric that he was.

“Tell me, Stiles,” he drawled slowly, clearly savoring the situation. “Do you still think you can take on an old man? It didn’t go over so well for you last time. As I recall I left you bloody and beaten. You did have a knack for painting vivid pictures with your words, if I’m not mistaken. Quite the word smith. I’ve always been of a more practical nature, painting a more literal motif using your face as a canvas.”

“Fuck you,” snarled Stiles, glaring daggers up at the man he still couldn’t fathom was Allison’s blood relative. “I’m better prepared this time, so who knows.”

Gerard laughed. Then coughed. Stiles watched in fascinated disgust as black goo oozed from his mouth and nostrils. He fumbled in his pocket for a dirty handkerchief and wiped most of it off. A faint smear remained under his nose. It made him look like a whitehaired Hitler. Stiles found the comparison fitting.
“True,” conceded Gerard with a small nod. “You’re not nearly as defenseless as when we last met, but then again I’m also equally as prepared, if not more. so” He gestured to the parking lot at large. “I have no wish to fight you, or harm you for that matter, Mr. Stilinski. Far from it. In fact I need you. Which is why I brought along the Sluagh.”

Stiles’ eyes automatically went to the creature holding Derek captive and gasped. It was back to looking like Donovan, complete with disemboweled stomach and psychopathic smirk.

The elder Argent smiled coldly. “I must admit I had banked on you being more affected than this. I’ve had the sluagh follow you around for weeks, and I know you’ve noticed it at times. But you’ve proven more resilient than anticipated. Usually people who’s been targeted by this creature go mad within days. I know his death has been plaguing you, eating away at you. But clearly you’ve found something to ground you, to counteract the guilt.”

Gerard let his gaze move from Stiles to Derek, a sneer cruising his lips. “In my defense, I hadn’t really factored in Mr. Hale returning to town so soon. Nor your bond to him. He was an unexpected hiccup, but I think we can work around it.”

He waved a hand and Donovan – no, the sluagh - tightened its grip on Derek’s neck. He’d already had his windpipe almost shattered once this evening, Stiles didn’t think he’d heal fast enough to endure it twice.

“Stop it!” he pleaded, eyeing the gun with trepidation. “Please.”

Gerard snickered. The sound felt like a million pinpricks hitting at once.

“Would you look at that? Yes, this works beautifully too. I had hoped the Sluagh would render you mentally weak, panicked and helpless, so that it would be easier for me to implement my plan. But threatening a loved one works too. Sometimes it’s even more effective.”

“You fucking bastard!”

Gerard looked positively elated. “Perfect. In fact, I don’t really need the sluagh anymore at all. We should keep this matter in-house anyway.”

He gestured for the fake Donovan to let Derek go. “You’re free,” he said with his usual pompous over-enunciation. It didn’t need telling twice. Derek was dropped like ragdoll at the feet of the fancy-vested Doctor and within the blink of an eye it had disappeared. Derek for his part was soon back in a chokehold.

Stiles exploded into a string of curses, escalating in its crudeness when Gerard made no sign of responding. Gerard waited patiently for Stiles to finish, looking almost bored.

“Words cannot harm me, Mr. Stilinski, so I suggest you save your strength for what comes next. You’ll need it. Comply without incident and I’ll consider letting Mr. Hale live.”

“How generous,” snarled Stiles. “Why are you helping them anyway? I thought you were the embodiment of Hunter – the Don Corleone of Anti-Supernatural mob, going around disregarding codes and cutting supernatural creatures in two with your stupid sword. And wasn’t it an Argent that killed the beast in the first place. Why would you recreate it? Isn’t that like betraying you family? I know the mountain ash messed with your body, but it’s clearly infected the brain as well.”

Gerard stepped closer, gun now pointed directly at Stiles’ heart. There was a manic gleam to his eyes, something that moved beyond mere obsession. Somehow it scared Stiles more than the firearm.
“It’s all about family,” hissed Gerard, a bit of spit hitting Stiles in the face. His breath smelled like antiseptic and cabbage. The combination was a vile as the man.

“Everything I’ve ever done has been about one thing – restoring my family. It was left broken and cursed years ago, and for generations we have worked tirelessly to correct this. And now, finally, we’re about to succeed.”

“Succeed with what?”

It made no sense whatsoever. What did a trio of time-bending doctors have to do with the Argents? And why recreate a monster they’d already defeated once?

“What are you trying to achieve exactly? Will killing it twice somehow elevate you to hunter royalty or something?”

Stiles didn’t see the fist coming. He should’ve anticipated it. Expected it even. Gerard had shown no qualms over beating up a 16 year old, so why would he hold back now? Stiles reeled back, cheek exploding in pain. Off to the side Derek growled and struggled, but to little avail.

“You stupid boy!” Gerard was seething. “You know nothing. Nothing! Not of centuries of suffering, generations of secrets carefully hidden and the burden of this curse passed down from father to son, from mother to daughter. It needs to end!”

End.

This sure did look like it could be exactly that. The end. At least for Derek and him. Gerard wanted Stiles for something that no doubt was way past nefarious and was guaranteed to involve pain and miniscule chances of survival. Derek only served as a bargaining chip and would surely be eliminated as soon as Stiles’ purpose was over.

If they were to stand a chance of living through this, however microscopic, they needed help. They needed for Scott and the rest to realize that they were in trouble and come look for them. And for that they needed time. As much as they could possibly get.

Which meant Stiles needed to change tactics. Antagonizing Gerard clearly wasn’t the wisest of moves, his throbbing cheek could attest to that. What they needed was to get him talking. As a lifelong fan of comics and superhero stories of all kinds, there was one thing Stiles knew to be true: A villain loved the chance to elaborate on his woes and plans.

“Then tell me,” pleaded Stiles, voice low but firm. “Make me understand. Perhaps if I know the reasons I might want to help you.”

The gun was still pointed at his chest. Boring into it in fact. It wasn’t wavering an inch. But Gerard looked to at least be considering it. Stiles prayed he’d succumb to the temptation of sharing his sob story.

He did.

“Alright. I’ll indulge you. It can do little harm at any rate. And it’s a story for the books, I’ll tell you that, Mr. Stilinski.” Gerard grinned somewhat manically, taking a deep breath.

“As the quote goes “There is no darkness but ignorance”. And you don’t strike me as the kind of person that thrives with either darkness or ignorance. The world is a stage and all men and women merely players. You’re a player too, but you know not the true extent of your part. Perhaps this will enlighten you.”
Stiles breathed an inner sigh of relief. It was working. Now all he had to do was make sure Gerard did what he clearly loved best. Talk.

And talk he did.

“They’re Argents.”

The statement was abrupt and clearly meant to have impact, but Stiles failed to see the connection. His confusion must’ve shown, because Gerard huffed impatiently.

“The Doctors you fool boy. They are Argents.”

“What?”

Stiles actually did a double take. He honestly hadn’t seen that one coming. How could anyone?


Gerard huffed. “I told you it was all about family. I trust you’ve heard the story of La Bete?”

Stiles nodded. “Yes, Lydia has Allison’s book. We figured that is what the doctors are trying to recreate. But I thought a man name Argent killed it way back when? If so, why would you want to recreate it?”

It was as if a shadow fell over Gerard’s face. Like the light in his eyes dimmed slightly.

“That is true,” he admitted. “Argents have always been excellent hunters, so he was more than qualified for the job. And as you might know, he also had an additional reason to go after the creature.”

“It had killed his family, right?”

A choked sound escaped the man. Stiles didn’t know if it was a laugh or a snort.

“Not exactly. His wife and his three children had all fallen prey to the beast.”

Stiles’ ears perked up. Fallen prey… The way Gerard was stressing that part, it was clearly important somehow. And then it hit him.

“It didn’t kill them? It bit them? It turned them!”

Gerard nodded, mouth twisted into a cruel smile. “Correct. The beast bit them. And the hunter thought them dead. The beast was vicious. Enormous. The scene he walked in on was like something out of a horror movie. Being bitten by something like that, well, surely there was no way to survive it. So he hunted and killed it, both because he’d been tasked to do so, but mostly out of revenge. And it was no easy feat either. He barely survived, and given what awaited him when he returned home, he probably wished he’d died instead. He found his family still breathing. Healing miraculously and with a speed unnatural to this world.”

The hand holding the gun was shaking slightly. Still Stiles didn’t dare to make any sudden moves. The clock was ticking and with every passing minute the chances of the others coming to their aid increased. He had to keep Gerard talking.

“What happened?”

The old man took a deep breath.
“He had the presence of mind to lock them up before they turned fully, recognizing the signs. His wife in particular was especially uncontrollable. Feral. Even in her human form there was no controlling her. She didn’t need the pull of the moon, her every fiber craved to kill, to destroy. Without an alpha to reel her in, control her, she was lost to her primal instincts. In the end he had to kill her. To save himself, the people of his village and his children.”

“What happened to the kids?” Despite himself Stiles was curious.

“The children.” Gerard paused for a moment, as if gathering his wits. “The children were slightly better off. That is the beauty of the young. Their minds not fully formed, still moldable. At least to a certain extent. He kept them hidden, and as the years passed, with training and strict discipline they seemed to adapt reasonably well. They moved to another town for a fresh start, and gradually he began to introduce them to other people, acclimate them to social gatherings and a normal life.”

He laughed mirthlessly.

“Of course all shreds of normalcy disappeared every full moon. As soon as the first moon beam fell on the land, their control vanished like dew in hot sunshine. And yet, the man yearned for grandchildren. For normalcy. For a family. He hoped that if they married humans, the children would escape the curse. That over time it would be watered down and weeded out.” He paused, wiped as this fore head absentmindedly, sighing deeply before he continued.

“Sadly that was not the case. Argent succumbed to his own selfish wishes despite better judgment. Several children were born, and at first everything seemed alright. But then they hit their teens and everything changed. Literally. All except for one. A girl. She went through her adolescence without incident, never turning once. She married at the tender age of 17 and a year later she had a child of her own. A beautiful boy, kindhearted and smart. All seemed well. Until one faithful evening, while out in the forest he was bitten by another werewolf. By then the grandfather had already gathered a bestiary full of information about all sorts of supernatural creatures. He knew that what he’d killed back in the day was no ordinary werewolf. He tried all the tricks he’d learned over the years dealing with his own children, but it was as if a switch had been flipped. Once he turned, something feral took over. Even though his parents were both human, he possessed the DNA of the beast, dormant and undetected until the bite set it free.”

Gerard pursed his lips, eyes cold as steel. “Argent realized in that moment that our family would only be safe as long as we stayed human. That is how the code of suicide was created. Whenever an Argent was bitten, we’d vowed to take our own life, never to let that feral part embedded deep in our DNA take hold.”

By now Stiles was openly gaping. “That is – wow! I mean. Holy hell!”

“Indeed,” agreed Gerard, voice raspy. “And that is how his children perceived it as well. As hell. A curse. They hated the code of suicide with every fiber of their being, the boy’s mother most of all. They knew their balance was fragile and how much it demanded of them to keep on the straight and narrow. And they felt it. Everyday. They described it as being broken. Like a piece was missing. They craved a bond with their alpha. And so began their desperate quest to recreate it.”

Gerard paused for a moment, seemingly lost in thought. Stiles exchanged a quick glance with Derek. He looked as shocked as he felt. He startled somewhat when Gerard continued his monologue.

“They sought the help of druids, dark, light and all shades in between. Consulted with all kinds of supernatural beings and scientists alike. And with the electromagnetic currents, the power of a Nemeton and an endless supply of test subjects, they started their experiments. Experiments that would come to expand half the world, and stand the test of time. Where the masks came from I do
not know. I have asked, but they refuse to answer. And with every passing year their obsession grew. I learned the secret from my father.”


“The women might be the leaders of the Argent family, but it’s the men who is saddled with this secret.”

For a few confusing seconds Stiles almost felt sympathy for this old, broken and terrifying man. It passed quickly when he thought about how Gerard had captured and tortured Erica and Boyd, had beaten him up with no regrets or qualms. Had manipulated, lied, killed and probably also had a finger in the Hale fire. Those things had been his choice, regardless of family history.

“So why are you helping them? Having an alpha might be beneficial to members of your family that are bitten, sure. But what about the population at large? What makes you value your family above the safety of everyone else? Why not get out of the hunter business altogether and avoid this mess completely?”

Gerard snorted in open contempt. “Idealism. The idea that safety of the masses trumps all. Such a childish notion. Family is important, Stiles. Blood is everything. You might not appreciate that since you hardly have any family, but it’s all that matters in the end. And the Argent name was once synonymous with power. That is what I want. That is all everyone wants. Power. And the doctors can give me that.”

“You’re deranged! Also, you forced Derek to bite you? Were you deliberately trying to go feral?”

Gerard hit him across the face again, making him see stars. Tears welled in Stiles’ eyes but he did his best not to show pain. Instead he simply raised his head again, looking defiantly up at Gerard. He glared back, but predictably continued his tale.

“I knew the doctors were close to a solution. I took a calculated risk. I couldn’t let the responsibility of this secret fall to Chris.” Gerard snarled, eyes flashing with anger. “He’s a competent hunter, but with a soft heart and no stomach for the hard decisions. Even Kate wasn’t as strong as I’d hoped. So I had to stay alive. At all cost! I’m a visionary!”

“If so, please enlighten me,” said Stiles boldly, hoping to trigger all of Gerard’s buttons for righteous ramblings. God, villains were so predictable!

“Gladly. It might serve you well to know exactly what part you’ll play later on. I’ve been helping the doctors for decades. They had a promising operation set up in Russia in the 80s but it proved unsuccessful, so we set our eyes on Beacon Hills. It was ideal. Do you know why?”

He arched a bushy eyebrow. He had nothing on Derek. In fact Stiles considered the effort an affront to sassy eyebrows everywhere.

“The Nemeton,” he answered in a clipped voice. Gerard looked caught between surprise and annoyance, as if he’d banked on being the one to deliver that shocking twist.

“Indeed. You’re more perceptive than I expected.”

Stiles simply stared at him in a “get on with it” manner, refusing to get ruffled over thinly veiled insults. Gerard rolled his eyes and continued.

“So, the Nemeton. Sadly, someone clearly surmised what we were up to, because the tree was eventually cut down. Cutting and harming a Nemeton greatly reduces its powers. It’s like putting a
cork in the natural flow of power, then sealing it shut. It is possible to activate it again, but hard. But together we devised a plan that would set in motion events to fuel the currents and aid our experiment. Did you know Peter Hale was the first time we came really close to achieving our goal?”

Clearly Stiles did a poor job of concealing his surprise. Gerard looked pleased.

“He showed such promise, and for a moment we were sure it would succeed. We’d prepared him for some time, and the fire was supposed to make sure the rest of the family was wiped out. With no living relatives the power of the alpha would transfer to Peter, and the rest of the supernatural energy would return to the telluric currents, and fuel the Nemeton further. As an added bonus it would rid the town of the Nemeton’s last guardians. Sadly a few escaped.”

Gerard glared in Derek’s direction. Stiles was seething. How could anyone talk about murder so casually? As if discussing brands of cereal.

“I blame Kate for that,” he commented off-handedly. “She evidently had a weaker spot than expected for the pup I sent her to trick. She knew he’d be out of the house. Sentimentality like that I can’t accept. It’s therefore very fitting that young Derek will play a crucial part this time around. I think it’s karma.”

“I think it’s crazy, is what I think,” wheezed Stiles between clenched teeth.

Gerard rounded on him, boring the gun deeper into his chest. He was well past bruises now, that much was certain.

“I wouldn’t be too glib if I were you, Mr. Stilinski,” he warned, eyes narrow. “You’ve foiled my plans before, and if it weren’t for the fact that I can use you now, you’d be dead already.”

“How exactly did I foil anything?”

“You helped kill Peter! He was well on his way to transform into the reincarnated La Bete. But you, Scott, Derek and even my own granddaughter prevented that from happening. Thankfully Peter did leave me with a parting gift.” Gerard cackled gleefully. “All was not lost. He scratched Kate, the claws going deep enough to turn her. I made sure the Calaveras took her and orchestrated for her to escape. Like all Argents she was succumbing to her more feral side, and she craved control. I had the doctors plant the tape in her car that set her on Derek’s trail again. I knew she’d want to see him again, she wasn’t hard to persuade. She took him to the temple in Mexico and sealed him behind the wall.”

Here Gerard stopped, glancing over at Derek, face smug. Stiles wanted to wipe the look of his face, preferably using a vegetable peeler.

“What Kate didn’t know,” continued the old man undeterred by Stiles’ gory plans, “was that the Dread Doctors hoped he would prove a viable subject, much like his uncle had been. The doctors had already prepared him, injecting him with the necessary ingredients.”

“We stopped that, we got Derek back,” interrupted Stiles. “So why did Kate kidnap him again? Hadn’t the doctors already found another candidate by then?”

Gerard looked confused. “Again? I’m not following?” Stiles rolled his eyes.

“Derek was kidnapped, we rescued him in a de-aged state, he reverted back to his old self, lost his werewolf mojo and then levelled up to full wolf transformation. And then, not long ago, he was kidnapped again, and found behind another wall in the same temple. That is what I’m talking about.”
Gerard shook his head, looking amused.

“You’re missing a part of the puzzle, Stiles. A center piece you might say. You see, what Kate didn’t know was that the doctors are skilled geneticist. When Kate kidnapped Derek they made a clone. Both were hidden behind walls, both with a specific role to play. The original Derek was incubating in hopes of showing the same traits as his uncle. The clone was de-aged. I knew the Hale vault concealed considerable funds that would help expedite the process of fueling the Telluric Currents and speed up the reactivation of the Nemeton, by killing supernaturals through a deadpool. Kate, unwittingly, did her part, and the cloned Derek opened it. Everything was going according to plan, the doctors working tirelessly on two fronts. Our plan B was the chimeras, in case Derek would prove unsuitable somehow. With each chimera the success came closer, and it was a good thing we had that contingency in place, because once again our plans were foiled. This time by some bothersome kitsunes who found Derek’s incubation chamber and released him before the change had taken place.”

Stiles was reeling. Cloned! Derek had been cloned? But that meant…

Oh god!

That meant that the Derek Stiles had become friends with, the one that had sent silly snaps and invited him to join him on his trip – that wasn’t the real Derek at all. No wonder Derek didn’t remember anything! He’d never experienced any of it. He’d been in Mexico this entire time, like a stubbly sleeping beauty, while Stiles and the rest of them hadn’t even noticed…

He felt sick. He didn’t even dare look at Derek. How could they not have known?

If Gerard noticed Stiles’ panic he didn’t comment or care. Instead he just droned on.

“In the end, we were forced to go to plan C. I had hoped to avoid it, but time was of the essence and we’d waited long enough as it was.”

Stiles fought down the bile threatening to pour out of his mouth at any moment, forcing his concentration back on topic.

“So, you were actually desperate enough to turn your own flesh and blood into that thing?” He gestured towards the towering beast, still partly concealed by darkness, as if it were made of shadows itself. Perhaps it was.

Now it was Gerard’s time to look startled. “I see that I’ve underestimated you, Mr. Stilinski. I didn’t think you’d guessed that part of the plan. But as I’m sure you know already, I always have contingency plans, and I’m not afraid to go to extremes to achieve my objectives.”

“The end justifies the mean, is that it?”

Gerard shrugged. “Something like that.”

“You still haven’t told me what you need me for anyway?” said Stiles tonelessly.

Gerard smiled broadly. It was a creepy sight. “Indeed. I have yet to reveal that part, haven’t I? You’re the key, Stiles. Literally.”

“The key to what exactly? You’re not making any sense.”

“Well, to the Nemeton of course,” replied Gerard in a tone that suggested this should be evident. Stiles hardly agreed.
“Of course,” he parroted sarcastically. “Silly me, I totally forgot. Of course I am the key to a magical tree stump which I’ve only seen a couple of times and have no ties to. That makes perfect sense.”

“Trying to derail me with witty commentaries and sarcasm won’t do, Mr. Stilinski. I know you’re connected to it. Certainly you must feel it. Have felt its calling. The Nemeton doesn’t only have guardians. It also has a gatekeeper. And you’re the keeper of the keys to this gate. You might not fully understand it, but it’s true none the less. Usually the Nemeton will call out when it feels threatened, when someone tries to access the power within.”

Without thought flashes of memories, dreams, and nightmares trickled to the surface. Stiles feeling drawn towards doors, opening them and finding the Nemeton on the other side. Tree roots grabbing his hand, pulling him in. Whispers of doors that needed to be closed. Of doors ajar that should be sealed. Being trapped in his own mind during the fly possession, sitting on top of the Nemeton playing go. A game all about winning territory. Winning the Nemeton.

Something must have shown on his face, because when he glanced back at Gerard he was grinning ear to ear.

“I knew it! I can see that you have connected the dots. You will open the Nemeton for me, and make me its new master. If you don’t, I will kill Derek. And then I’ll kill the rest of your friends and loved ones. But first we have one last hurdle to overcome. And I think the time has come.”

Clearly Gerard’s story time was coming to an end. And still there were no signs of Scott and the others. A hopelessness snuck up on him. A resignation that this was in all likelihood the end. He’d been mentally prepared for this day since Scott was bitten, but somehow the idea of Gerard Argent as the one to do him in, was not a notion he’d ever entertained.

The beast that had been oddly well-behaved and quiet, started to growl deep in its throat. Gerard visibly perked up.

“Ah finally,” he crowed with a manic gleam to his eyes. “The gatekeeper’s final protector is here.”

All of a sudden the parking lot was ablaze in light. Stiles had to squint his eyes shut, and still tears streamed down his face from the unexpected illumination. It took a few seconds for them to adjust. When they did the sight before him made him gasp.

It was Parrish, and he was on fire. Literally. On fire. He walked forward, each step concise and firm, like a robot stepping unafraid into battle. His eyes flickered in shades of orange, like flames burning merrily in the hearth.

From the opposite end of the parking lot, the dread doctors parted way for the beast to slowly make its way towards Parrish. With a jolt Stiles realized just what he was about to witness. It was the culmination of the fresco they’d uncovered in the Dread Doctor’s creepy base of operations. The two beast colliding – one born out of shadow and darkness, the other burning with the fires of hell, ready to protect the last gateway that stood between relative peace and what Stiles was certain would be pure pandemonium and the slaughter of mankind.

The beast stopped abruptly, and for a blessed moment Stiles hoped it had changed its mind. Decided that the foe before it was too formidable to engage. That it would retreat and take the Doctors and Gerard with it, and hopefully leave Derek and him behind.

No such luck, though. Gerard pulled Stiles to his feet with surprising strength and all but dragged him along in the direction of the Doctors and their otherworldly lapdog.
“I guess the fight won’t start until I’ve allowed them into the ring,” drawled Gerard. Stiles’ eyes fell on the emitter still blinking erratically. Of course. He’d forgotten about that.

Where was Scott? Why hadn’t they come yet? Their call had been cut mid-sentence. Surely he’d understood that something had happened? Right?

Stupid phone! Stiles cursed the useless piece of electronic in his pocket that had flickered and died when the doctors arrived with their stupid currents that clearly caused some sort of brown out. He needed that phone, dammit!

Then, before his inner eye, Stiles remembered. He remembered an impossible phone call deep under the deserted city of La Inglesia, where there were no cell reception. And yet he’d somehow made his phone work in a desperate effort to make sure Lydia was safe.

Could he managed that again?

It was worth a try.

Just as Gerard was about to remove the emitter, the air was pierced by the cheerful tones of “Call Me Maybe” echoing through the night. Stiles’ heart sang along with joy.

Gerard whirled around gun out, teeth bared in a snarl. He soon realized the sound was coming from Stiles’ jeans pocket.

“Eh, sorry. That’s my phone. Someone is calling me. Maybe,” offered Stiles awkwardly. His heartbeat sped up in desperation, not to mention anticipation.

“Don’t you dare answer that, Stilinski,” wheezed Argent, pushing the muzzle hard into his sternum making him almost topple over. “Hands out of the pockets, or your furry friend will pay the price.”

“I’m taking my hands out,” mumbled Stiles through clenched teeth, extracting his hand slowly out of the pocket he’d instinctively reached into when the ringing started. He hoped Gerard would be appeased by his cooperation and not demand he hand over the phone. Firstly because he was on his fourth phone this year alone and his dad would strangle him, and secondly because he’d already accepted the call and prayed that Scott or whoever was on the other end would have their wits about them and not hang up, and hopefully also hear some of what was going on here. Lastly, he was very thankful Gerard didn’t seem to be even remotely tech savvy. Except for the emitters, that is. He was kind of impressed with those, to be honest.

“Good boy,” Gerard smiled broadly, evidently pleased with his level of cooperation. He probably felt badass and cool right now, the idiot. Stiles plastered on his most chastised and pathetic frown for good measure.

“Now please, stay put and enjoy the show, Mr. Stilinski. You actually have a ringside seat for the most epic of battles. Behave, and do as I say, and I’m sure we can find a good spot for you under my reign. I will need someone with your skillset and I’m willing to award you handsomely for your services. And who knows, you might even come to enjoy it and see things from my perspective. Power do have a way of persuading even them most loyal and steadfast of beings.”

“I seriously doubt it,” hissed Stiles, unable to keep his tongue in check. Gerard’s eyes flashed dangerously, mouth curling in a nasty snarl.

“Always mouthing off,” he drawled. “Don’t worry, I’ll stamp that right out of you. I recognize this defiance. It’s born out of loyalty and love. Two very foolish concepts that will get you killed in the end.”
He flashed his teeth in a very unsettling smile. The kind that scared local wildlife and made Stiles’ blood turn cold in dread.

“I do wonder if perhaps I need to make my point more forcefully. Perhaps with a small demonstration?”

He jerked his head in the directions of the dread doctors and without so much as a word, the two that were not currently busy almost squeezing the life out of Derek sprang to life like robots being powered up and activated. They came straight for Stiles and before long they had taken hold of Stiles’ arms in vice like grips. In short he was trapped, pinned down. And Gerard? Well, Gerard was free to pursue other activities besides pointing his gun at Stiles.

Like pointing it at Derek instead.

“No!”

All pretenses, all sassy comments, all blunt insults were wiped from Stiles’ mind, giving way for one all-consuming, mind-numbing notion: Derek was in danger!

“Don’t, please. I’ll, I’ll do whatever you want, okay. I’ll be your fucking key, just don’t hurt him. Please!”

Gerard circled Derek, still held in a chokehold, and turning more and more deep-red in the face with each passing second, eyeing him with ill-concealed contempt.”

“Why would I do that, Stiles? Why would I want to save his life?”

“Because I’m begging you!”

Stiles was openly crying now, and didn’t give a flying fuck one way or the other who saw. “You need me, you said so yourself. Well, I need him, okay? If you kill him, I have no reason to help you! If you kill him, I’d rather die myself!”

Gerard eyed him, lips curled downward, and gun held directly to Derek’s heart.

“I don’t believe you, Stiles. No one is that self-sacrificing. Not even you!”

“No wonder you don’t believe me,” yelled Stiles, voice cracking. “You don’t love anyone, not even your own daughter! Otherwise, why would you turn her into that!”

Stiles gestured wildly to the beast, still trapped by the emitter, towering over them all.

A booming voice startled them all.

“That’s not Kate!”

Stiles’ heart soared! They were here! And they were wrong! Of course that was Kate! But still – here!

Gerard visibly startled, as if the idea of anyone interrupting was a foreign concept. He’d probably felt safe with the doctors around. But it seemed as if the emitters did more than just block their path, it also blocked their senses.

“Chris,” he hissed menacingly as his son stepped out from the shadows of the school, Scott, Liam, Kira and Lydia in pursuit. “The disappointment of our family. Why am I not in the least surprised to find you siding against your own blood?”

Gerard snarled. “I don’t believe you. In the words of Shakespeare “It is a wise father that knows his own child.”” He leered righteously in Chris’ direction. “I know you, my son. And you’re weak. Which is exactly why I’ve never told you the tales of your forefathers. But this is your family, Chris. This is our legacy. This is where the myth ends and the truth emerges. And you will not foil me, or disappoint me again.”

Chris’ eyes were steely, the ice blue colder than usual as he stared down his father, weapon trained. He advanced with determined steps.

“I won’t let you unleash chaos upon this town. No matter what reason you might have, it can’t possibly justify carnage of this magnitude.”

Gerard’s hand hovered on the emitter. One little pull and the beast would be free. Parrish had stopped in the middle of the parking lot, the warmth of the fiery shield surrounding him causing sweat to run down Stiles’ back.

“Someone get the emitter!” yelled Stiles in panic. “If he releases Kate we’re all doomed!”

Gerard actually laughed. Chris bared his teeth and cocked his gun, gaze never wavering.

“Like I said, Stiles,” Chris whispered hoarsely, “that is not Kate.”

Stiles was not computing. “What? Not Kate? But you tracked her here! Followed her down into the tunnels. The tunnels where this beastly thing emerged I might add! We were all there! How can you say that isn’t Kate?”

“Because I’m right here!”

Stiles whipped his head around as much as he managed while restrained.

There she was. Green eyes glinting dangerously in the night, fangs out, skin covered in patches of blueish patterns. She was carrying a shotgun, one that she very casually loaded as she strolled into the parking lot and came to stand, shoulder to shoulder with Chris. Gerard’s hold on the gun trained on Derek wobbled slightly. Derek on his part let out a muffled half-choke, probably brought on by Kate winking lecherous in his direction. Stiles wanted to smack her around with his bat.

“Hello, father,” she drawled. “Fancy seeing you here.”

“I could say the same,” rasped Gerard, a slight tremor to his voice. “I’d thought you’d be long dead by now.”

Kate laughed, tossing her hair back, the fangs glinting dangerously in the light coming from Parrish. “I bet you did. That was the plan all along, wasn’t it? To use me to set up parts of this plan, then sick Chris on me and have him kill me. Or better yet, have us kill each other.”

Gerard didn’t answer. Which was answer enough. Kate wasn’t done yet, though. She sauntered closer, regarding the old man through heavy lidded eyes.

“As surprised as you are to see me, daddy dearest, that’s not even half as surprised as I am to see you. Especially since I killed you myself. Weeks ago.”

“Preposterous!” barked Gerard. “I am alive and well, as you can see.”
“Alive yes,” conceded Kate. “Well? Hardly. I notice that you’re not leaking nearly as much black goo as I remember. Why is that? Found a cure?”

Now that Kate mentioned it, Gerard hadn’t really coughed up any more of the disgusting black goop. There was still a small spot left under his nose, but that was all.

“What? No, of course not. It comes and goes. What does it even matter?” Gerard looked towards the Dread Doctors. They closed ranks, inching closer to him, bringing Derek with them. The gun was still trained on his heart.

“You can’t stop me!” bellowed Gerard. “Don’t come any closer. I won’t hesitate to kill Derek, and once I turn off the emitter the battle of Beacon Hills begins.”

Kate lowered her shotgun and raised the other hand in surrender. She took a few steps back. Stiles’ heart fell. It was a weird day indeed when he was sorry to see Kate retreat.

A commotion of sorts had broken out behind Chris. Stiles couldn’t see what was going on, but something was clearly up.

“What’s going on?”

Scott’s anxious voice boomed back. “It’s Lydia. She’s having some sort of fit, I think.”

“What? What are you talking about? Lydia!!”

It took a few seconds, seconds filled with moans and whimpers, before she answered in a thin and shaky voice. “I can’t keep it in. Stiles! It’s coming! I can’t stop it. I – “

For a short while everything was quiet. There was no sounds, no one spoke. The night devoid of sound, like a vacuum had descended.

Then Lydia screamed. Someone was about to die.

The air vibrated, as if a sharp wind was blowing through the parking lot. Stiles clasped his hands over his ears, trying to block it out, but it penetrated everything.

When he sensed the scream was dying, he opened his eyes and gasped loudly in astonished shock.

Gerard was gone.

It was as if Lydia’s scream had broken a glamor. Before him stood Valack, dressed in the same clothes as Gerard has been, the gun in his hand.

Kate snorted smugly. “I told you that wasn’t our father, Chris.”

“So you did,” he admitted dryly, stepping towards the Eichen escapee. “Forgive me for not taking your word for it. You’ve had a tendency to twist the truth a bit.”

“Fair enough,” said Kate with a borderline feral smile, her face still shifted.

“But,” began Stiles, mind still reeling and fighting to get caught up with all the new information tossed at him in the span of seconds. “What was the point of the whole Argent backstory if you’re not even an Argent? So you’re just in it for the power?”

“Not exactly.”
Stiles had momentarily forgotten that Valack had a British accent. Somehow it felt horribly out of place.

“The Argent backstory is still true. As I’m sure you’ve surmised the banshee scream broke my glamour. Glamors are a specialty of mine, by the way. And I might not be Gerard Argent, but that doesn’t mean I’m not an Argent descendant. And Gerard was part of the plan until he met his untimely demise a few weeks back. I just left out the parts that I’ve played. The deadpool for instance was my orchestration, but this is hardly the time to gloat. I have an apocalypse to instigate after all. Need I remind you that one wrong move and Derek Hale dies?”

He smiled when Stiles made a horrible choking sound. “Good. I think we’ll get this show on the road, then. By the way, Kate,” he said conversationally, like he wasn’t about to set things in motion that would end in a massacre of biblical proportions. “Why did you return here to kill your father? Why risk it when you knew your brother was hunting you, and this town was full of people who’d rather see you dead?”

“Peter.”

Stiles’ jaw dropped.

“Peter came to find me. Told me I still had a role to play. Something that could help rectify some of the unwitting damage I’ve done. Told me what my own father had orchestrated.”

Valack’s face soured. “Peter you say? Well, I guess I under-estimated him. No matter, what’s done is done.” Smirking, he reached for the emitter.

“Don’t you dare!” snarled Chris and Kate in deadly unison. Stiles had to admit they looked pretty badass. Scarily so. Scott was also inching closer, Kira and Liam right behind him, which was good. They could definitely need the help. Kira and Liam stopped next to the Argent siblings, Liam claws out, face shifted and growling, Kira her katana held high, ready to swing at a moment’s notice.

Scott – Well, Scott didn’t stop. He kept on walking, trancelike towards the invisible line that separated them from the doctors and the beast.

“Scott, what are you doing?” Kira sounded panicked. Stiles shared her sentiment. Scott looked like he wasn’t hearing them, like he was in a world of his own. He stared transfixed up at the beast.

“Scott, stop. Scott, don’t cross the line! They’ll tear you apart. Get back here! SCOTT!”

Stiles lunged for his best friend, not getting anywhere, pinned down by the doctors. With a jolt he realized that he loved that stupid idiot, not matter how thickheaded and selfish he’d been lately. He was still a major part of his life, and a part he wasn’t ready to lose. And certainly not to stupidity like this.

Thankfully Scott did stop just in time. Stiles drew a relieved breath. Next to him Valack laughed softly sending waves of foreboding chills down his spine.

“You recognize it, don’t you, Scott?” he asked tantalizingly. “You feel the pull. You sense the person underneath, am I right?” He cocked his head, almost giggling. “It wasn’t my first choice, but I think it might be the best solution all around in the end.” He smiled broadly, all teeth and megalomaniac madness.

“You all thought it was Kate, which it could’ve been I guess. Only I know you wouldn’t think twice about putting her down, no offence to you, of course,” he added with a wink. Kate’s eyes flashed, but she remained silent.
“This however, this is different. For all of you. Which is why I will win.”

Stiles was confused again. He was missing something. Something vital.

“Scott? What’s he talking about? Do you know who it is?”

Scott nodded almost minutely. His face was ashen, tears streaming down his cheeks. In that moment Stiles knew it too.

“Allison,” he whispered.

The beast startled, as if it recognized the name. Or perhaps it – she – this was very confusing, recognized Scott. Chris and Kate let out anguished sobs and in the back Stiles dimly registered Lydia’s whimper.

“Allison,” said Scott again, a little louder. A little more firmly. The shadows surrounding the beast dimmed for a moment, became almost translucent. In the center, at its core, stood Allison, looking exactly as the day when she died.

“Now you know,” said Valack icily. The moment was broken. The shadows turned pitch black again and the vision of Allison vanished.

“Kill the beast and lose Allison forever,” he continued menacingly. “I refuse to be stopped by a gang of incompetent teenagers and has-been Argents! This isn’t over. I still have aces up my sleeve, and you’re all running out of time. The final battle will have to be rescheduled, though. Terribly sorry about that.”

He whirled around pointing his gun at Stiles again. “You however, are coming with me! I need you.”

“Don’t even think about it, Valack,” said Chris threateningly. “Release the boy.”

“Not a chance,” hissed Valack. “Stiles will come, and he’ll do so willingly. Unless he wants me to put a bullet in Derek’s heart.”

And then the gun was back to Derek. Stiles whimpered, not seeing a way out of this that didn’t end with someone dying. Lydia had screamed for a reason. There was no avoiding death. Banshees didn’t predict death, they foretold it. But he’d rather die himself than see Derek, or any of the others for that matter, die tonight.

Valack stepped closer, pushed the muzzle against his torso, the dread doctor holding him steady and constricted.

“If you’ve not stepped over the line until my count of three, Derek dies.”

The rushing of blood in his veins drowned out everyone else’s protestations. Stiles felt dizzy, and yet there was no doubt in his mind. He had to do it. The others would come up with a plan to stop Valack and the doctors. They had to.

“One.”

Stiles took a step towards the emitter. He didn’t dare look back. He didn’t want to risk wavering now. In the corner of his eyes he saw Derek, knew what he couldn’t look at him. Knew that Derek didn’t want this. That it would eat away at him, torture him, set him back. But Stiles was selfish and weak. The thought of Derek dead was not one he could accept. He just couldn’t.
“Two. That’s a good boy.” Valack sounded immensely pleased. Stiles took another step, so close now the emitter was bathing his feet in green light.

The count of three never came.

Instead there was a piercing boom like that of an exhaust pot exploding. Then Valack cried out in pain, and something metallic clattered to the ground.

His gun.

Stiles collapsed to his knees, feet unable to keep him up any longer. Through a haze of relief he watched how Kate and Chris dived for the Dread Doctor holding Derek, Kate’s claws ripping into it with feral abandon.

“Take us out of here!”

It was Valack. He was crawling towards the doctors, his shoulder blooming with blood. The grip on Stiles’ arms released and he tumbled to the ground.

“Retreat!” screamed Valack. “Retreat!”

A roll of thunder in the background, then the streetlamps began flickering. Next Stiles knew the Dread Doctors, the beast and Valack had vanished into thin air, the only thing left behind was the emitter.

“Scott? Scott, are you okay?” Kira was by his side, touching his shoulder gently. Scott was still staring unblinkingly towards the spot where the beast had stood just moments before.

“It, it – .” He swallowed audibly. “It was Allison,” he croaked. And then he broke down in tears, clutching Kira to him like a lifeline. Kate and Chris stood side by side, both looking devastated and traumatized.

A hand on his cheek startled him. He turned quickly to see Derek’s worried eyes staring at him. “Are you okay?” he asked, voice almost inaudibly. Stiles shook his head. How could anyone be okay?

“What happened to Valack?” he asked instead.

“I shot that bastard!”

Stiles whirled around, and with a cry of relief watched his dad walk onto the parking lot, an assault rifle in one hand.

“No one threatens my son like that and gets away with it. Thanks for calling me, Chris.”

“Dad,” cried Stiles, and that was about all he managed before the events caught up with him, and everything faded to black.

Chapter End Notes

I’m posting this chapter a few hours before the season finale of 5B. Even if it’s not the last chapter, it can be viewed as the first half of a "season finale". One more chapter and a sort of epilogue to go.
Spoilers not in the tags: Characters "appearing" Gerard, Kate, Valack and Allison. Someone is threatened with a gun. Someone is shot.
When Stiles woke up he had a headache.

He also didn’t know where he was. The only thing he knew for certain was that he was lying down and that it felt as if someone had used him as a punching bag. He moaned pathetically when he tried to lift his head. Pain exploded in his temples and he felt nauseous.

“Stiles? Son, are you awake?”

Through half closed eyelids Stiles saw his dad’s face materialize over him, forehead creased with deep lines of worry.

“Yeah, but I wish I wasn’t.” He slumped back on what he now recognized as the lumpy and decidedly uncomfortable couch in Deaton’s waiting room.

“I’ll get you something for the pain, okay,” said his dad, voice soft. Stiles felt a cool hand on his forehead and sighed in relief. It did little to soothe the pain, but did wonders for his soul.

“Thanks dad, you totally saved the day. My hero,” he muttered. The sheriff snorted, but there was definitely a trace of pride in his voice.

“Your old man still has perfect aim,” he gloated. Stiles rolled his eyes, only no one saw since they were closed. It was more of a mental roll anyway.

“Sure you do. So you meant to hit his shoulder, did you?”

“Naturally. I aim to disarm, not kill.”

“Mmmhmm, of course,” replied Stiles, oozing sarcasm. His dad huffed indignantly. “No matter, you would’ve missed the parking lot if it was you, so I wouldn’t go around giving me lip.”

Stiles grinned, which actually hurt. Gerard, no scratch that – Valack, he was still reeling from that revelation, certainly had done a number on him with those punches. “I will have you know that I actually threw a ball of paper into a bin the other day. It was a perfect shot. I have a witness and all.”

“I think you have a concussion, is what I think. He’s talking nonsense,” said his dad to someone Stiles couldn’t see from this angle.

“He always talks nonsense.”

Derek.

Stiles pathetically turned beet red and his heart sped up. One of these days he needed to get control of his bodily functions. It was possible, right? Otherwise he’d have to move to Antarctica and live among penguins. Which wouldn’t be so bad, because penguins were awesome. And better yet, they didn’t have crazy werewolf senses. But then again, the cold would probably kill him. Also, they might be right about the concussion. He was making even less sense than normal, even by his standards.

“That he does,” agreed his traitorous dad. “I’m just glad I’m not stuck in his head all day, I think that
would scar me for life. But he’s obviously in a lot of pain. Can you do something about that?”

“Of course,” said Derek, voice soft like velvet.

“It’s not that bad,” protested Stiles weakly. Derek kneeled down beside him and started at him, his head cocked and one eyebrow lifted in an expression Stiles knew meant he was seeing right through his bullshit and was not impressed.

“Oh, so maybe it’s bad. Possibly even nauseatingly bad. But that doesn’t mean that – whoa!”

Werewolf pain drain really and truly was the bomb. He totally understood why they didn’t do it too often. People could get addicted to this stuff.

“Your hands are magic,” he drawled, grinning dopily up at Derek. “Magic hand. Or is it paws? Wolfy magic paws.”

“I thought you were the magical one,” said Derek, corner of his mouth lifting into a small smile. “Feeling better? Can you sit up?”

Stiles nodded drowsily and readily accepted Derek’s help in sitting up. His dad was leaning against the registration desk, face unreadable and arms crossed. Stiles waved awkwardly at him. He shook his head with a smile and handed him a bottle of water.

A few minutes later the door to the backroom opened and Liam, Lydia, Kira and Scott walked in. Scott still looked ashen and shocked. Chris and Kate was making up the rear. Next to him Derek visibly flinched when he laid eyes on the latter who was ranting and raving like the lunatic she obviously was.

“- what a backstabbing, heartless prick of man! I can’t believe our own father would do something like that! I should kill him. Again!”

“Kate, calm down,” said Chris tonelessly. His face was expressionless, closed off. His eyes though, his eyes were haunted, hurt and tortured. No father would want to witness something like he’d done tonight, Stiles was sure of it. Unless you were Gerard Argent of course. But he hardly qualified as human anyway. Not even before he was bitten and poisoned.

“I can’t calm down! Chris, he turned your daughter – my niece - into a murderous beast! For what? I don’t get it. But I know I’ll burn down this entire town to find out and take my revenge!”

That was the wrong thing to say. Especially coming from her! With strength Stiles didn’t know he had, he jumped to his feet, reached into his pocket and pulled out a small handful of mountain ash. Without conscious thought he tossed it up in the air, where it expanded and fell in a perfect circle around Kate.

At first there was stunned silence. Then Kate roared, shifted and ran at the invisible walls. The impact threw her to the ground where she laid panting and cursing.

“What did you do that for, you little shit?” she snarled.

“Chris is right, you need to calm down.” Stiles dumped back onto the couch with a groan. He was exhausted. “Also, I don’t trust you. Certainly not when you throw around threats of fires and burning. Not cool.”

“It was just a figure of speech, you cretin.”
Stiles shrugged. “Perhaps, but at least now you’ll stay put and under our control. We can deal with you later. Besides, I can tell you why Gerard and Valack did this. He told me everything.”

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It took longer than he’d hoped to retell everything he’d learned earlier. Derek helped fill in where Stiles got lost, and Chris had lots of questions along the way, the same did Lydia.

“I still can’t believe it was Allison.”

Lydia’s voice was small and vulnerable. Kira’s hand was clasped tightly in Scott’s. He hadn’t let go of her since the Doctors and Valack disappeared with the beast; as if he needed a tether. Someone to ground him, and keep him from spiraling.

Chris was oddly silent. Probably taking it all in, cataloging the new information and rearranging what he’d been told to be true before. His whole world had been shaken, worse than any of the others. All things considered he was handling it very well. Too well, perhaps. Reactions always came, some later than others. Usually they had a tendency to build over time. Sometimes into something volcanic and toxic.

Kate had calmed down considerably, and had actually managed to stay quiet throughout Stiles’ lengthy recap. The first sound that left her was a pained whine.

“I didn’t know,” she whispered, face drawn and pale. “I swear, I didn’t know about anything this. Our father, he showed me evidence. Grotesque killings. Children slaughtered. Told me it was done by the Hales, and that they covered it up. Protected their own. I believed him. I – “

She paused, head bowed. “I never meant for this to happen to Allison. I wanted to teach her. I wanted her to be proud of our family history. But it was all a lie.”

No one said anything. What was there really to say?

“How?”

This was the first word Scott had spoken since they got here. Everyone shifted their attention to him. “How?” he repeated, voice flat and broken. “How could Allison turn into that? I – .” He swallowed audibly. “I watched her die. I held her as her heart stopped beating. She was dead –.” He whimpered, voice breaking.

“I don’t know,” said Stiles. He really didn’t. For once his mind was blank.

“Perhaps it’s tied to the Oni that killed her.” Lydia sat looking smaller than normal in Deaton’s swivel chair. “I noticed that the beast is partially made of shadows. Like the Oni was. Maybe that affected her somehow? Like how the claws of a werewolf can also turn someone if they go deep enough. Can the blade of an Oni do something similar?”

She looked to Kira. “Have you ever heard of anything like that?” Kira shook her head. “No, but I can always ask my mom, I guess.”

“How doesn’t matter.” Chris spoke firmly. “Right now the only thing that’s important is figuring out how to stop this thing. If what you told us is true, Parrish is the last line of defense. If he fails,
then the chance of stopping them is virtually none.”

“How is Parrish by the way?” asked Stiles. “And where is he? Last I saw he was lit up like a torch.”

“He’s sleeping,” said Lydia. “He’s okay. Just shaken. He doesn’t remember getting there or activating like that. It spooks him. But he was relieved to hear that he’s on the right side of things.”

“Doesn’t much matter if we’re losing, though,” said Kira morosely. “I don’t see a way out of this other than pitting Parrish and the beast against each other and hope for the best.”

“There has to be another way!”

Scott’s voice was low, but firm in a way that left no room for interpretation. It was the voice of an alpha commanding. “There has to be a way to stop them without it turning into a massacre. Without Allison forced to exist as something that monstrous. She wouldn’t want that.”

Chris laid a calming hand on Scott’s shoulder. “No, she wouldn’t. And I will try every possible solution to avoid a bloodbath. But Scott, you need to realize that at the end of the day, there is no way of bringing her back. Allison died. This isn’t Allison. Just her body being wielded into a weapon.”

Scott’s eyes flashed red. “She recognized me,” he wheezed angrily. “I know she did. She’s still in there. We can save her! We can save everyone!”

“No we can’t, Scott.”

Stiles’ voice cut through Scott’s rant with razor sharp precision.

“Shut it!”

“No, I won’t shut it, Scott. Not this time. And before you start in on me, yes of course we’ll try to find another way, a way without bloodshed and death. But you’ve said this before. Promised that no one would die. That we would save everyone. And we never do. This isn’t a Disney movie, Scott. Stop putting impossible pressure on us. Stop setting the bar so high we can’t possibly reach it.”

Scott deflated like a punctured balloon, melting into Kira’s waiting embrace. A pained sob escaped.

“Stiles is right, Scott,” said Chris. “We need to accept the fact that Allison is gone. We buried her. You were there, Scott. You took your farewell. This is someone exploiting her remains months and months later. She might seem alive, but we shouldn’t get our hopes up.”


There really wasn’t anything else to say after that. The room fell silent, almost in a tacit agreement to honor the dead. Minutes passed before Derek finally broke the quiet.

“I think I might know a way to stop them. Or at least slow them down.”

Lydia perked up immediately. “You do?” Derek nodded. “Yes. Granted, it might not work. But it might be worth a try. We found my mother’s claws in the vault. Stiles helped me access her memories.”

Lydia looked impressed and intrigued. “I know those claws. I heard whispers from them, whispers about Malia. There were more?” Derek nodded.
“She told me about the Nemeton and how the Hales are its guardians aided by their emissary. Our role is to protect it, keep it safe and strong. The Nemeton is a gateway to powers not suited for this world. Powers that would disturb the balance in ways we can’t imagine. Naturally the power hungry crave them and seek them. The guardians shields the tree from any such threats.”

“So why was it cut down?” Kira looked pensive. “When my mom told the story of how she buried the fly under the Nemeton is was huge and healthy. Now it’s just a tree stump.”

“I’m not sure,” admitted Derek. “But I think it might have been a desperate attempt lock it down after most of my family died in that fire. Only a few Hales were left. Laura and I were too young to know anything about this, and moved away. No one knew Cora had escaped, and Peter was comatose.”

“That makes sense I guess,” said Chris. “But if the hellhound is the Nemeton’s last line of defense, like a supernatural SWAT team, why didn’t he turn up right after the fire?”

“The Nemeton was as good as sealed shut. Deactivated. It wasn’t until the darach started messing with it and we stepped into the ice baths that it was reactivated,” said Stiles. “Parrish turned up right after that, as if sensing that his time was coming.”

Lydia perked up, as if a light had just been turned on. “So basically we need to deactivate it again, right?”

Derek nodded. “Either that or restore it to its former glory. Historically speaking that is the best option, but allowing the Nemeton be restored will make it vulnerable until it’s fully grown. We need a stronger line of defense before that can be attempted.”

“A stronger pack. Is that what you mean?” Scott’s face was unreadable. Still it was pretty obvious he felt Derek’s words as a slap to the face. As critique.

Derek smiled tiredly. “Not necessarily. I’ve not been around for the past year, I don’t know how you’ve fared as an alpha. But I do know that you’ve been dealt a terrible set of cards. Beacon Hills has been essentially defenseless for years, and then things started to snowball. That wasn’t your fault. And you’ve been a werewolf for a short while, an alpha even less. It takes time. It takes practice. I should know. I didn’t do such a great job myself. But I do know this – building a stable pack is next to impossible if all you do is fight for your life. Which is why we need to staunch the bleeding, slap on a band aid and try to stabilize the situation. Otherwise we’ll just spend our lives looking over our shoulders and fend off new threats.”

Scott took a deep breath and nodded slowly. “Sounds like a good plan.” He paused. Fiddled nervously with his phone. No one said anything, sensing the unasked question hanging in the air. One day Scott would be ready to ask for help. To ask Derek for help. When that day came, Stiles would breathe easier knowing that his friend was evolving and growing into the leader he knew he could be.

In the end Lydia broke the silence.

“So, I’m guessing you know how to do that? To turn off the Nemeton again.”

“I think so.” Derek sounded hesitant and kept casting furtive glances around the room like he couldn’t quite believe they were all looking to him. Listening to his advice. “My mother’s memories said the Nemeton always has a gatekeeper. Someone with a deeper connection to it than the guardians. Usually a druid or an emissary. Someone with the power to either lock it or open it.”

“Then we have a problem. Another one,” said Scott glumly. “No one knows were Deaton is. It’s like
he’s vanished into thin air. We might have to resort to his sister if you need an emissary.”

Derek smiled softly, shaking his head. “We don’t need Deaton. The gatekeeper is usually a druid or an emissary, but it’s not a requisite. Besides, Deaton hasn’t been connected to it for a long time. Not since it was cut down after the fire. I suspect he was the one who did it, and an act like that severs the bond permanently. While it was dormant it didn’t really need a gatekeeper anyway. But as soon as it was activated, it reached out. Chose a new one.”

“Of course,” said Lydia, eyes alight. “It makes perfect sense now.”

Stiles squirmed in his seat, cowering slightly under her unwavering stare. Only she didn’t look appalled or scared. She looked confident. Proud.

“Well, someone better spell it out for me, because I’m as lost as they come,” said the Sheriff in a resigned tone.

“Me too,” echoed Scott. “Do we even know who this new gatekeeper is?”

A glance around the room confirmed that everyone else indeed looked confused. Stiles took a deep breath.

“I’m the key,” he said, voice remarkably steady. You could hear a pin drop. Not that anyone dropped a pin. Several jaws dropped, though. Understandably so.

“Excuse me?” His dad looked particularly floored. Stiles noticed his grip on the front desk was so tight his knuckles looked white.

“Valack told me,” he said hurriedly not meeting anyone’s eyes. “I’m the gatekeeper. The one that can unlock and lock the Nemeton. That is why he wanted me. On some level I think I already knew. I keep seeing the Nemeton in my dreams, like it was calling out to me.” He laughed softly. “How I’m supposed to lock it down though is beyond me. I have no clue how to do that.”

“I do.”

Derek clasped a calming hand on Stiles’ shoulder, squeezing firmly. “You’re not going to like it much, though.”

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“This is officially the worst idea in the history of terrible ideas. And I’ve been the mastermind behind a few of them, so I should know!”

Stiles was pacing. And rambling. Both things he tended to do when nervous. Also when he was agitated. Or Excited. Okay, so basically it was his standard working mode, but still. In this case rambling and pacing was perfectly justified. Expected even. He might even get away with a tantrum if he wanted to.

“Ain’t the truth,” muttered his dad somewhere in the back of the room. Stiles tossed a withering glare over his shoulder.
“You’re not helping, dad,” he whined pathetically.

The sheriff threw his hands up in surrender. “Sorry, son. Just a reflex response. Are we sure this is even safe?”

“What has anything in this town been safe?” asked Stiles, voice oozing sarcasm. He was shivering, and not just because he was dreading the task before him. The temperature in the room was also dropping fast.

“I don’t like this. Can’t we try something else? Like Meditation? Hypnotism? A lifelong vow of celibacy? No, scratch the latter,” he added hastily when his dad perked up. “The other stuff though, I’d gladly give them a try. Are you sure this is the only way?”

The question was directed at Derek who, together with Liam and Scott, was busy pouring bags of ice cubes into one of Deaton’s huge metal tubs. Kira was adding leaves of mistletoe and what looked like mint. The whole thing looked like a giant Mojito.

“If there is, I don’t know of any,” replied Derek emptying yet another bag. “Although I’d like to see you try meditation. That is doomed to fail.” He stuck a finger into the icy water. “That should do it, I think. Are you ready?”

Stiles huffed. “No. Not even close. Need I remind you all that the last time I stepped into one of these I was under for 16 hours and things started going downhill fast afterwards? Who’s to say I won’t blast the Nemeton wide open instead of closing it?”

“Always the optimist,” remarked Lydia dryly. She’d just stepped into the room with a stack of towels. “You’ve survived this before, I’m sure you’ll do it again. Besides,” she added coyly, “Derek will make sure you’re safe. Won’t you?”

The last question sounded more like a threat than anything. Stiles arched an eyebrow. Derek looked from Lydia to the floor and back at her, swallowing audibly. “I will,” he promised, cheeks colored by the tiniest bit of pink. Lydia grinned smugly.

Stiles struggled out his flannel shirt, possibly tearing a button or two in the process. He dropped it to the floor like a dirty rag. Which was basically what it was anyway. His encounter with the Dread Doctors and Gerard/Valack had not been kind to it.

“Deaton made us bring some sort of token the last time. Something to remind us of our parents since we were trying to save them. Should I like bring a twig from the Nemeton or something? Or a key? Would that be like symbolic?”

Derek looked at him like he’d grown two heads. “I don’t see how that could help any,” he replied slowly, one brow arched. He looked as if he wasn’t quite sure whether Stiles was joking or not. He got that a lot. He lifted a hand in surrender and went back to cursing his life while pacing nervously back and forth. Out of the corner of his eyes he could see his dad pinching the bridge of his nose, probably in frustration. Or worry. Or both.

“What about a tether?” Stiles stopped abruptly and spun around, arms wind-milling. “Deaton said we needed a tether. Something to bring us back. Lydia, you did it last time. Shouldn’t you like, repeat the performance? Hold my hand, pray for my soul, that kind of thing.”

Lydia pursed her lips, looking pensive. “But it didn’t work. We couldn’t bring you back the last time. Nothing worked. In the end you woke of your own accord.”

“Isn’t anyone else freaking out over the prospect of a 16 hour dip?” asked Liam, slightly hysterical.
“16 hours! That’s insane!”

“I have to say I agree.” Stiles’ dad had crossed his arms, a sure fire sign he was about to step into his most scary persona – the dual dad/sheriff mode. “How can I be sure this will be safe? I get that it’s important to stop this thing – this beast, but Stiles is all I have. I can’t lose him!”

“You won’t,” said Derek, voice firm, stopping directly in front of the sheriff. “I give you my word. Besides, it isn’t necessary to keep him under for that long. When we put Isaac in the bath, we just pushed him into a state where he could access his subconscious, and his memories. What we want is to get you to access the connection that we know is there.”

“It’s still going to be freezing cold,” whined Stiles, eyeing the tub with ill-concealed trepidation.

“I’m sure someone will cuddle you warm after,” cooed Lydia with a wink. Stiles almost swallowed his tongue. Derek did a great job of ignoring them both. He turned towards the others.

“The Dread Doctors are connected to the telluric currents. Chances are they will notice and realize what we’re trying to do. We should be prepared for an attack.”

The sheriff grabbed his shotgun without comment. Chris did the same.

“I think Deaton has all the ingredients to make Molotov cocktails,” said Lydia briskly. She turned to Liam. “You’re hereby recruited to help me make them.” He looked caught between fear, curiosity and pride. “Also, we should call Parrish.”

“No need. I’m here.”

“Good,” smiled Lydia warmly. “Although, if your hellhound vibes are tingling enough to show up here I suppose that is a sign that they know something is brewing.”

Parrish shrugged self-consciously. “Eh, I don’t know about that. I set an alarm. I guess I was worried.”

Stiles hadn’t seen Lydia that flustered since their escape from Eichen House. Kira was positively cooing in the background. “In that case, you can assist us in the making of self-igniting bombs,” she said smartly. “Bombs are supposed to be your thing, isn’t it?”

Parrish and Liam followed her out of the room without question.

“The faster we do this, the better,” said Derek, gesturing for Stiles to step into the bath.

“I have a bad feeling about this.” Stiles removed his socks with jerky moves. Derek smiled and held out a hand. Stiles grabbed gratefully.

“I’ve got you,” whispered Derek, squeezing his hand.

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The cold was excruciating. It felt like knives cutting into his skin, like his head would explode. He struggled. Kicked, clawed, grasped and twisted. But it was in vain. Three werewolves pinned him down and soon enough he felt his mind slowly calming down. It was almost as if he was disappearing into himself. At first his eyes were wide open, staring up at the distorted faces above
him, nothing but shapes and colors through the blocks of ice and leaves. It felt as if someone was slowly pulling him backwards, down a long corridor, until all he could see in the distance was a tiny pinprick of light. Then he blinked and everything was dark.

He woke with a scream.

Pain. Unbearable, mind-numbing pain radiating from one point and out into every single nerve-ending in his body. It took him minutes to get his breathing under control. Even longer to gather the strength to lift his upper body up enough to confirm what he already knew.

His foot was stuck in a bear trap. Muffled sobs spilled out of his mouth as he stared in horror at the mangled leg, bloody and deformed. Obviously broken. One small movement sent waves of agony washing over him.

Out of the corner of his eye Stiles registered movement. He knew where he was. The only source of light was the round plexus glass windows in the ceiling.

Eichen House.

“Stiles,” wheezed a cold voice. He shivered. He knew that voice. All too well. It had been his constant companion for those nightmarish days when the fly had possessed him and used him like a marionette.

“Stiles.”

He shook his head, ignoring the pain. “You’re not real,” he muttered, half delirious. “You’re gone. This is a trick. This is all in my head.”

“Stiles.” The figure emerged slowly from the shadows, bloody teeth, bandages. Slithered closer, head bowed, shoulders hunched. “Remember my riddle, Stiles? Everyone has it, but no one can lose it? What am I?”

“Shut up.”

“Everyone has it, but no one can lose it. What is it, Stiles?”

“Fuck you, is what it is.” Stiles gritted his teeth, ignoring the bandaged monster and instead focused on his foot. He needed to get out of this trap. Needed to get out of his own head and his established patterns of self-doubt and insecurities. This was his past haunting him. And he needed to break free.

The steel trap’s pointy teeth was dug deep into the flesh of his leg. He tried to sit up, to reach it. Possibly to wrench it open. But it was futile. Too painful. Stiles cursed loudly, the words echoing off the walls. Echo House. The name really was fitting.

“Answer my riddle, Stiles,” hissed the creature loitering by the wall, scratching it. Probably forming the kanji for 'self'.

“You can shove your riddles where the sun don’t shine,” he muttered, trying another approach by pulling his leg towards his hands. It didn’t help much. A chain stopped his movement long before he could reach it. But it did provide him with a better look at it. And the padlock connected to it.

Yes! Locks he could do. Locks were easy!

“Answer the riddle or pay the prize.” The voice was hissing into his ear now. So close, he could virtually feel its breath, sickly and stale. Stiles shut his eyes, reached inside and believed. A soft pop
and the pain in his leg disappeared. The same did the room around him and he plunged into darkness once again.

Stiles woke with a jolt, mouth wide open in a silent scream. He was clammy and warm. He struggled out of the covers twisted around him, noticing absentmindedly that his t-shirt was soaked through with sweat.

He was in his room. It was night, or early morning. It was hard to say. His heart was beating fast. Goosebumps ran down his spine, up his arms. He felt like prey. Like someone was watching him, hunting him – ready to pounce at a moment’s notice.

A quick glance around the room didn’t reveal any immediate threats. The desk overflowing and cluttered. His floor littered with paper, books and clothes. The same posters and pictures on the wall. His murder board filled with red strings and clues.

And yet something was amiss.

Then he noticed it. A thin ray of bright light making its way into the otherwise shadowy room. Its contrast was so intense Stiles was amazed he hadn’t noticed immediately. It was as if it was pulsating. Flickering, waving him closer. Daring him to investigate. Drawing him in.

Without conscious thought Stiles swung his legs out of the bed. Despite his bare feet he hardly even noticed the chill that blew in making the papers closest to the ray flutter. This time there was no Lydia in his bed to caution him and try to hold him back. No bandaged ghost to whisper riddles.

Before he knew it he stood in front of the ajar door, mind screaming that this was a trap, a trick. And yet he yanked it open and stepped through.

The light was so bright it took Stiles a few moments to adjust his vision. He remembered this place. A huge white room, stretching on as far as the eye could see. This time there were no bath tubs. No nothing. No Scott or Allison. Nothing except for the Nemeton.

The huge tree stump stood out like a sour thumb in the otherwise minimalist room. Something tugged at his heart, invisible strings pulling him forward. At first Stiles walked tentatively. Slowly. Gradually his steps quickened. In no time he was running, breath heaving, and blood pumping. He ran, ran, ran until exhaustion drained him. He stopped, doubled over and panting. The Nemeton still as far away as the moment he’d entered.

It made no sense. Stiles turned around, expecting to see signs that he’d run miles. Instead he almost collided with a wall. The door he’d stepped through was gone. Essentially he was trapped.

Panic was blooming. Stiles’ hands went to his hair, tugging desperately. He needed to think! This was essentially his own mind, so why was he messing with himself like this?

“I’m losing my mind,” he muttered desperately. “This is insanity, this is –“

He’d turned around again and stopped mid-sentence. The Nemeton was now within touching distance. Also, there was someone sitting on top of it, feet crossed. The upper leg bounced lightly. She was leaning back, arms supporting her weight, head cocked, smiling.
Allison.

“Hey Stiles.”

Her voice cut into his heart, making it bleed guilt. Shadows danced on her skin. “I’ve been waiting for you.” She held out her hand. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

We?

Another figure straightened up behind Allison. A hand reached out, clasped hers firmly. Scott. He smiled warmly in all his uneven-jawed glory, then stepped on top of the Nemeton, gently lowering himself to sit behind her, cradling her to his chest.

Stiles took a step back and promptly collided with the wall. Allison and Scott’s clasped hand reached out towards him, beckoning him forward. He shook his head in a futile attempt to erase the images before him. It was oddly calming, like echoes of a simpler past. And yet at the same time disturbingly wrong.

It was then he noticed it. The roots of the Nemeton, disappearing into the floor, were turning black. It seemed to be coming from below, gradually rising. It looked like black veins. The kind werewolves got when draining your pain. It looked wrong. Like poison.

“Come join us, Stiles.” Allison patted the place next to her, dimpling adorably. “Don’t you remember how it all started with us? That night in the Preserve, when Scott was bitten. We were all there. Pulled towards the Nemeton. We were there for a reason, Stiles. We’re bound to it now. Which means we deserve to be its masters.”

She paused, looking from Stiles to Scott and back again. “With your help this power will be our power.”

He knew it was wrong. Everything about the display in front of him was wrong. It was Scott and Allison and yet it wasn’t. They felt off. Fake. Like wax figures, too perfect. Too polished. And yet Stiles found himself taking a step closer.

“I should lock the door,” he whispered, voice trembling. “I should close the door and lock it down.”

Allison shook her head, mouth going even wider in a saccharine smile. “No, Stiles. You belong with us. Can’t you feel the pull? Our sacrifice made this possible. We should reap the benefits. We’re a trinity, a triskele destined to wield great power.”

Stiles forced his eyes shut, blocking out the images. He clasped his hands in front of his ears trying to block out the siren’s song that was Allison’s calling. He stood like that for an eternity, like a lone tree in an open field caught in a terrible cyclone, fighting to stay put and not give up. But his roots were no match for such power.

When he finally opened his eyes his knees almost bumped into the tree root. Scott and Allison’s hands just inches away from his own. He wasn’t even aware he was reaching out.

It was ridiculous to think that he could stop it anyway. Their enemies were too formidable. But with the power hidden behind the Nemeton at their disposal, they would stand a fighting chance. It was the only logical move.

And yet it wasn’t right. Stiles knew that with every fiber of his being, but the pull was too great. His will dwindling fast. It was accept or die. He knew that. And he was too weak to choose a hero’s death. Stiles Stilinski had never been a hero anyway. Not even close. A sarcastic idiot, hyperactive
and inquisitive. Clumsy, impulsive and riddled by insecurities. But never a hero.

A firm hand on shoulder stopped his motion mid-air.

“You sell yourself too short.”

Derek.

Stiles whirled around and came face to face with Derek. The room was back to being an endless expanse in every direction, bright white. Somewhere in the far distance a door stood open.

“Don’t listen to him, Stiles.”

It was Scott. “He’s trying to trick you. You’ll never be strong enough or good enough without us. Without this power.”

Stiles whimpered. Scott and Allison now stood wrapped around each other on top of the tree, the black shadows gradually engulfing them from below. They were being swallowed by it, consumed.

The hand on his shoulder tightened reassuringly. “You don’t belong with them, Stiles. You came here to lock it. To stop this from escaping.”

“I can’t.” Stiles’ voice shook, tears streaming down his cheeks. “I don’t know how. And it’s pulling me in, Derek. I want to stay. I can’t go back. I need to stay with them. I can never go back.”

A warm hand found his, laced their fingers. Squeezed.

“You can. I’ll help you. I’ll guide you back.”

“Don’t!” Allison’s voice had lost its sugary edge. It now sounded hard and demanding. Desperate. “You’re making a mistake! No one turns their back on power! NO ONE!”

“Don’t look back,” whispered Derek, gently pushing Stiles towards the door. “You can do it.”

Allison’s screams and curses grew more desperate, but with each step it became slightly less overwhelming. Inch by inch the pull let up, and the voices grew faint. When they finally stood by the door, Stiles stopped, looking at Derek. Waiting for his instructions. For his help.

He smiled gently, ushering Stiles forward.

“You have to take the final steps alone. You need to make the decision to return and lock the door. You’re the gatekeeper, Stiles. I can only keep you company, advice and urge. I cannot force.”

The hard part was over. With a deep breath Stiles stepped through the door, never looking back. He shut it firmly.

He was back in his room. It was still dark, but the ray of blinding light was gone. He backed towards the bed, never taking his eyes off the door, half expecting to see Allison and Scott burst through at any moment. Nothing happened.

The covers rustled behind him, but Stiles didn’t need to turn around to know that Derek was there. He reached out, found his hand and squeezed it. Derek squeezed back.

“It’s time,” he whispered, breath ghosting Stiles’ neck. He shivered, but for once it was not fear, but
relief. Anticipation.

Then Stiles reached inside, shut his eyes and locked the door.

***

Stiles broke the surface of the ice water in a spray of ice cubes, gasping for breath. At first he was disoriented. Not to mention panicked. It felt as if he couldn’t get enough air and certainly not fast enough. He ended up hyperventilating, arms flailing in an effort to find something solid to hold on to.

Strong arms lifted him out, and next he’s wrapped in layers and layers of towels and blankets. Strong arms engulfed him. Someone was patting his back, his arms, and his hair. The latter was his dad. Stiles recognized the soothing circles and melted into it, exhausted and utterly spent.

“I’ve got you, son,” murmured his dad, voice wobbly and emotional. “Don’t you ever scare me like that again, do you hear me! I can’t lose you too!”

“I’ll never so much as dip a toe in a tub,” promised Stiles through clattering teeth. “I’ll never take a bath ever again.”

“Now, let’s not get hasty. An unwashed Stilinski might be classified as a bio-hazard.” He could feel his dad grinning against his neck. It was the patented Stilinski way. To defuse emotional situations with terrible humor, buckets of sarcasm and strings of puns. He’d learned from the best.

“How long was I under?”

“Too long for your old man’s taste,” said his dad, wrapping Stiles in yet another blanket.

“You’re deflecting. That’s not a good sign.” He leveled him with his most serious stare. “Tell me.”

“A little over an hour.”

“Lydia!”

She simply rolled her eyes and crossed her arms, clearly not intimidated by the town sheriff. “Better just tell him now and be done with it. Otherwise he’ll just harp on about it till our ears bleed. Personally I have enough buzzing going on in the first place.”

“AN HOUR!” Stiles balked. That was not what they’d discussed! They’d been going for the Isaac variety where Stiles would be held under until he’d calmed down. Clearly something had gone wrong.

Lydia sighed deeply, her normal haughtiness long forgotten. “We knew immediately that something wasn’t right. But we couldn’t reach you. You didn’t respond. Simply closed off completely with the odd spasm and whimper. Your pulse was so slow we feared it might be fatal. So Derek went in to get you.”

What - . What?

Stiles whirled around, finally locating Derek who was still kneeling on the floor by the head of the tub, arms on the edge, head resting on top of them. He looked exhausted.
“What did you do?” he asked softly, shaking off his dad and leaving a trail of blankets and towels in his wake as he made his way over. Derek slowly lifted his head, meeting his eyes dead on. It felt like a jolt to the heart. He didn’t say anything though.

“What did you do?” repeated Stiles, almost inaudibly. Yet he knew Derek had heard. Slowly he lifted one of his hands. The claws were out.

“I returned the favor.”

Stiles’ fingers flew to his neck where he found four little marks. They felt warm to the touch.

“You came for me?”

Derek nodded.

“You saw?”

Another nod. “It wasn’t real. She’s not really alive, Stiles. And Scott wouldn’t do that. It was just tempting you. A desperate attempt to stop you from locking it.”

Stiles’ reply died in a spray of glass and electric sparks as most of the overhead fluorescent lights started flickering and then exploded.

“What the fuck?” yelled Stiles. He’d thrown himself to the floor, a split second later a big mass had dived on top of him, shielding him from the worst of it.

“I guess the Doctors knows what you did,” replied Lydia shrilly. The sheriff was covering her, both crouched down by the examination table. “We’re on a telluric current, which I suspect they use for moving around. It shouldn’t take them long to get here.”

“Which means we should probably leave,” said Derek hauling Stiles to his feet. “We might have sealed off the Nemeton which they clearly want and use to their advantage. But the currents are still active. If we want to stand a chance, we should find some place not directly on top of any of the ley lines.”

“Hey! Fuckers!”

Kate. Stiles had forgotten all about her. She was still trapped inside the mountain ash barrier out in the reception. She did not sound happy.

“Shut it,” growled Derek. “You just sit put. We’re taking you to Eichen House as soon as this is over.”

She glared at him from behind a curtain of matted hair, eyes flashing a startling color of green. “Fine,” she snarled, showing a bit of fang. “Lock me up, throw away the key. I don’t care. I’m tired of running anyway. But before you do, I want to help. I want to help take down the fuckers that did that to my niece.”

Lydia snorted. “Fat chance, missy. You’ve proven yourself about as trustworthy as heartless mercenaries. No offence, but we’ve got enough on our plate. We don’t need to be worrying about you stabbing us in the back.”

“I loved Allison like she was my own,” cried Kate, voice breaking. “I just want justice for her. I was used like a pawn in a game I didn’t know the scope of, and she became collateral damage. I can’t make that right, I get that. But I can help get even.”
Stiles turned to Derek, eyebrow raised in a silent question. His face was unreadable. After a long silence he shrugged lightly and took a step back. He’d give his blessing. It was basically up to Stiles.

With a wave of his hand the mountain ash parted like Moses parted the sea.

“One toe out of line, and I swear you’ll never see the light of day again. I’m getting good at locks.”

Kate stepped cautiously out of the circle, hands up. “I’ll be good.”

“And we need to get going.” Lydia sounded impatient and slightly panicked. The flickering of the lights had intensified. “So where are we going?”

“I know just the place!” Scott burst through the doors, Liam hot on his heels, obviously having heard the entire conversation while patrolling. Good thing, werewolf hearing.

“The old abandoned mall.”

***

Stiles hadn’t been here since he was 14. It had been the peak of Scott and his skateboard phase and abandoned buildings were their favorite haunts. The sheriff had caught them time and again, both here and at the abandoned water distribution plant. They’d finally given up the hobby when Scott had broken his collar bone and Stiles’ skateboard had broken cleanly in two. He didn’t know if it was fate or just sheer coincident that had them back here now, but at least it gave them a slight advantage. They knew all the nooks and crannies in this place.

They’d divided the tasks at hand between them as best as they knew how. Parrish was on beast duty since apparently that was the main reason why’d he’d been drawn here in the first place. Stiles did not envy him. They could offer little in the vein of advice, other than to trust his instincts. He didn’t look all that confident, which was understandable. He’d know what he was for about a split second and knew even less about what he could and couldn’t do. Testing those boundaries during battle was not ideal. Yet Lydia seemed to have a way with him. Stiles had no idea what she’d said, but Parrish had arrived much calmer and collected than before they got in the car.

Chris and the sheriff were assigned Valack as their prime target. Although they had no way of knowing for sure, he at least appeared to be more or less mortal. Though with a former third eye, who knew what tricks he had up his sleeve. The shot to his shoulder had injured him, which they took as a good sign he could be stopped. They’d had taken positions at the best vantage points on either side of the open area they’d chosen as the battleground.

Which left the Dread Doctors, who neither Stiles nor Derek had much luck with earlier that day. Stiles had done some minor damage to their air supply with his bat. That seemed to be their Achilles heel and Liam, Scott and Kira were all instructed to go after that first. Lydia for her part had brought a truly impressive crate of Molotov cocktails. They were praying the doctors weren’t’ fire proof like Parrish.

“I kind of wish we had some of those emitters,” muttered Stiles, shivering slightly. A cool air blew through the building bringing with it a foreboding sense of doom.

“Wouldn’t do you any good, kid,” muttered Kate. She was already in full were-jaguar mode, claws out and sniffing the air as if she hoped to catch a whiff of time travelling doctors. Stiles was pretty
sure they were odorless, but let her keep it up without commenting. “We don’t know what frequency
to block anyway. Otherwise this would be a whole lot easier.”

Stiles somehow doubted this would be easy no matter the arsenal of weapons and trinkets at their
disposal.

The time to dwell on these matters came to an abrupt stop. Without warning Parrish let out a spine-
chilling snarl. Next the open area was lit up in hues of dancing flames.

“It’s here. The Beast!”

A roar shook the walls. Somewhere to their left they could hear glass breaking. The first thing they
noticed was the clouds of fine dust that started to spill over the edge of the remnants of the upper
story railing, heralding its arrival.

Stiles pivoted taking in the sight. Liam, Kira, Scott, Kate and Derek were all positioned facing the
possible entry ways. Stiles could hear the faint swish of Kira’s katana as she twirled it in practiced
movements.

The beast materialized at the top of the escalators. Shadowy and yet oddly translucent. Its blue eyes
stood out in stark contrast to the rest of it. The eyes and its teeth were the only features that appeared
perfectly solid. The mouth opened wide and another roar echoed through the building, making it
sound larger than it already was.

As it began to descend the escalator, the doctors flickered into existence at the base of the staircase,
once again like the first wave of expendable soldiers paving way for the real threat.

No one waited for a sign or a command. Instead everyone burst into action simultaneously. From
their vantage points Chris and his dad began sending a rain of bullets at the doctors. Most bounced
off their masks and armors. They had expected as much, but it was worth a try. They didn’t waste
any more bullets, and instead let Lydia’s Molotov’s fly.

The doctors moved in odd jerky manners, flittering in and out of sight, almost like holograms. They
dodged the Molotovs as expertly as the agents in the Matrix dodged bullets. If he hadn’t physically
battled them earlier that same night, Stiles would’ve suspected they were pixelated mirages. He knew
better.

Someone – Liam by the look of things – came out of nowhere, sliding along the floor, feet first. He
barreled into one of them from behind, tackling him to the floor in a crash of metal and limbs. A claw
nicked the air supply and a garbled sound like that of a choking animal pierced the night.

“NOW!” yelled Liam, and next a series of Molotovs rained down from above. For a split second
everything was quiet. Then the air exploded – literally, in a horrendous mixture of flames and cries.

“NOOOO!”

Valack!

He was here. And he was not happy. He’d managed to stay hidden, trailing after the beast who’d
reached the end of the escalator by now and stood hunched forward eyeing Parrish. Valack looked
ashen and incredulous as he watched one of the doctors squirm and spasm on the floor in obvious
agony. Stiles took that as a good sign.

One down. Too many for comfort to go.
Spurred on by this success, Molotovs continued to pour down on the two remaining doctors. Liam and Kate ran around them in circles, feinting left and right in an effort to find a chance at tripping one of them up again. Kira entered the scene, katana held high.

“Take out Valack! He’s by the escalator!” yelled Stiles, turning his attention back towards the beast. Parrish was advancing, his skin pulsating with heat and fire, a hue of flames surrounding his entire body. He looked impressive. And yet he was like a midget compared to the towering beast. A beast that despite being cut off from the powerful Nemeton, still looked as foreboding and unbeatable as before.

The only difference was that it seemed more translucent. Less solid.

Without warning Parrish barreled into it. The collision shook the building. Sparks of flame sprayed out in all directions. Next Parrish flew through the air, like a ball of flame, and crashed painfully into a wall. Tiles shattered, plaster rained down on top of a limp looking hellhound. His skin still burned, but the flames were dimmer.

“Jordan!” cried Lydia sounding oddly panicked. Stiles turned his attention back towards the beast. Parrish was alive, otherwise Lydia would be screaming so loud their ears would bleed.

With a gasp he took a step back, colliding into Derek.

“Holy crap!” he whispered feeling his body go cold in fear. They’d already gotten a glimpse of this earlier today, but somehow seeing it again now was even worse. And more real.

The shadows around the beast had receded. Now it was just a whirl of black smoke nipping at the legs of a beautiful girl.

Allison.

Somehow she’d never looked more radiant, more alive. At the same time she looked oddly wrong. Waxy. The only connection to the beast was the eyes. They were still solid blue, glowing in the dim light.

“Allison!”

Scott stumbled forward, half crawling, and half running. His voice raw and anguished. “Allison!” he repeated, desperation rolling off him in waves.

The Allison shaped figure shuddered slightly at the mention of her name. Almost as if she was slipping out of a trance. Her eyes closed, and when they opened the blue orbs were gone. In place was her usual soft brown, staring in confusion around the room.

“Scott?” she whispered tentatively. Scott let out a strangled sob and collapsed a few feet from the dancing shadows.

“Scott, don’t!” cried Stiles, moving forwards on autopilot. “It’s a trick. Allison is dead. We talked about this. Don’t be fooled”.

“Scott? What is he talking about?” Allison looked around in confusion. “Dad? Aunt Kate? Lydia, is that you?”

Scott crawled towards. Stiles could here footsteps thundering closer. Probably Chris and Kate. Hopefully they would help reign Scott in.
“Scott?” Allison’s voice was getting sweeter, more seductive. “Take my hand, Scott. I’ve missed you.”

Scott seemed transfixed. Stiles watched in horror as he lifted his hand slowly, reaching for hers.

“Scott, don’t!”

It was Kira. Stiles heard the clatter of the katana as she dropped it in desperation to get Scott to see reason.

“She’s right. That is not Allison.” Chris was approaching slowly, shotgun raised, barrel pointed at the echo of his daughter.

“Dad? Dad why are you doing this?” Shadow Allison’s eyes were misty, tears running silently down her cheeks. Yet there was something about the curl of her mouth that had Stiles’ senses in high alert. Scott didn’t seem to have any such reservations.

“Scott,” warned Chris again. Scott answered by turning around, face shifted and roaring. “STAY BACK!” he snarled. “No one hurts her!”

“What are you doing?” Kira stood white as sheet, paralyzed with fear. “Please stop, it’s dangerous. I don’t want to lose you.”

Her pleads fell on deaf ears.

A mad cackle startled them all.

“Ah you fools. I’ll give you credit for trying to stop our plan, but as you can see it’s futile.”

Valack appeared from behind Allison. They could see his face flitter in and out of sight behind the dancing shadows. From this angle throwing either fire bombs of shooting would run the risk of hitting Scott or any of the people trying to reason with him in the process. Valack had chosen his position wisely.

“You can’t reach him now! Look at his eyes, he’s under the spell. He’s drawn to her. He won’t stop now.” He cast a nasty sneer in Stiles’ direction.

“You might have closed off the Nemeton, Mr. Stilinski. Well done. But there are still ways to open it. One of them is for you to open it again, willingly. If so, we can spare the life of your precious alpha. Alternatively, we claim Scott, fuse him with the beast. With the power of chimera Allison, his alpha spark and the memories of La Bete it will be a force strong enough to eradicate your hellhound and leave the Nemeton for our taking. Your mind is strong, Stiles. But not strong enough to withstand that. Mark my word, it will kill you.”

While Valack was talking Scott had inched even closer. The shadows around Allison was nipping at his hands. Kira, Chris and Stiles all advanced, but Scott whirled around, claws out. Kira yelped and fell backwards, a stripe of red across her arm. Scott had clawed her.

“Scott, take my hand,” urged Shadow Allison.

He did.

The room exploded in cries of “no”, whirls of shadows and wind. The moment their fingers touched the shadows roared up, engulfing them both in a swirl of black smoke. Stiles stood paralyzed with shock and fear. What on earth was happening?
One moment it was just black smoke, the next he could see the outlines of two people, holding on to each other, then they were gone. Next the outline of the beast flickered into being, almost solid, blue eyes and somehow even larger and scarier looking than before.

A wind blew through the room, like a cyclone, almost whipping the shadows into shape. Next to it Valack stood cackling, arms out wide, head thrown back.

Kira was screaming, kicking, clawing to get free, probably to try and get Scott out. Stiles feared it would only make the beast stronger. They’d all been tampered with by the doctors, injected like the chimeras. If one chimera could create such a monstrous beast, the thought of what numerous chimeras combined could achieve was not even fathomable. Derek, Liam and Chris was doing their best to hold Kira back.

“The fusion is almost complete!” crowed Valack. Stiles closed his eyes, took a deep breath and tried to resign himself to meet the inevitable. Death.

Just as suddenly as it started, the wind died down. The silence that followed was resounding. Complete. Stiles was scared to open his eyes, terrified of what might greet him. A garbled sound penetrated the air and curiosity won out.

It was Valack.

His body frozen, face the perfect mask of shock and pain. Slowly he lower his eyes and then Stiles noticed it too. Something sharp and pointy was sticking out of his stomach, dangerously close to his heart, providing he even had one. The steel was covered in red, glistering blood. In slow motion, Valack fell forwards, crashing to the floor with a dull thud. A pool of blood streamed out onto the dusty floor.

Behind him stood an ashen-faced Mason, gripping Kira’s katana. For the longest time no one said a word. Just stared. Gawked. Eventually Mason glanced down at the body at his feet, then up again, eyes wide as saucers.

“Intense,” he muttered before collapsing to his knees, letting the katana clatter to the floor. Liam rushed forward, eyes flashing yellow.

“You fool, why didn’t you stay home like I told you to? You could’ve died!”

“Sorry,” muttered Mason, still staring at his own handiwork and not looking particularly sorry at all. Well, thought Stiles in resignation. The corruption of Mason was complete. There really was no going back after this.

“Scott!”

Kira’s wobbly voice brought the attention back to the shadow beast. Valack might be down, the same with the doctors, but they still had this to contend with. Parrish was back on his feet, advancing and bringing with him a wave of warmth and heat.

“No I won’t,” he said confidently.

Parrish simply shook his head, flames dancing. “You’ll kill him!”

In a whirl of embers he lunged forward, fist first. A spray of cinders cascaded through the air when he collided with the shadows. For a split second the smoke turned to fire, then it died down slowly until all that was left were specks of dust that fell to the ground like black snow, revealing two bodies, curled around each other.
“Scott!” cried Kira again, lunging forward, plastering herself to his back. Scott whimpered like an animal dying, refusing to let go of the body next to him.

“She’s gone,” he sobbed, fist clenched in her jacket. “She’s gone.”

“She’s been gone for a long time,” said Chris, voice brimming with barely restricted emotion. “It’s time to let go, Scott. Once and for all.”

It took several minutes and a lot of coaxing, but eventually he did as requested, collapsing into Kira like a man starved for affection. She welcomed him eagerly. Stiles was in awe of her strength. It took courage and faith to witness something like that, and not give up. Scott was incredibly lucky. He only hoped he realized that too. If he didn’t he would hammer it into him.

As if sensing that Stiles was thinking about it, Scott lifted his head, their eyes meeting. For a split second it looked as if his eyes were entirely dark. Like shadows swirled, almost like a veil. Then he blinked and it was gone. Stiles breathed a sigh of relief. It was probably just a trick of the light.

Right?

He didn’t have much time to dwell on it. A set of strong arms whirled him around and then he was engulfed in his dad’s strong embrace. They stood like that for a long time, Stiles sobbing in relief, the sheriff muttering about moving to Idaho.

Eventually his dad slipped into Sheriff Mode and began doling out orders and directing the cleanup. Too exhausted to even think, Stiles simply slumped to the floor, leaning heavily against a wall, watching through lidded eyes as Kate broke down completely by Allison’s body. She might be a murderous psychopath most of the time, but even she had a heart. It gave Stiles hope in a way he hadn’t felt in a long time.

A shadow fell over him, blocking out all the mayhem. Stiles instantly felt grateful. Derek sat down in front of him, and without bothering to ask, simply took his hand, squeezing it reassuringly.

“No pain drain,” mumbled Stiles. Derek answered by lacing their fingers.

“Okay. So you’re not hurt?” Stiles snorted.

“Of course I am. But oddly enough the pain feels good. Reminds me that I’m alive. Didn’t really think I’d survive this day to be honest.”

Derek nodded, face unreadable. One day Stiles would crack the last of the code. This was not that day. Besides, he’d realized he kind of liked the mystery of it.

“So what do you need?” asked Derek. Such an innocent question. Stiles took a deep breath, hesitant between complete honesty and a boldfaced lie.

“I need to sleep for a year. I need deferrals on about a dozen school assignments. I need new breaks for the Jeep. I need to make sure everyone is okay. I need to kick Theo’s ass.” He inhaled slowly, letting the air out through his mouth, heart hammering away like a scared rabbit.

“And I kind of need you.”

He didn’t dare look at Derek. Instead, he stared at his fingers, still entwined in Derek’s.

“Okay.”
Stiles’ heart skipped too many beats for it to be entirely healthy. What did that even mean?

“Okay?” he said slowly, voice high-pitched and wavering.

“Okay,” replied Derek, his face alight with a blinding smile. “We can do something about all of those things. And I think we’ll start with sleep. Alright?”

“Alright,” muttered Stiles, heart singing. He happily let Derek manhandle him into the nook of his arm. His heartbeat was soothing and calming against his ear, and before he even knew it, Stiles was asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Just an epilogue to go!
“I thought I might find you here.”

Stiles wasn’t startled. He’d know he was coming. Had felt it the last ten minutes, the sensation growing stronger with each second. It was like a mild electric current, pleasant and reassuring, buzzing in his skin.

“Hey,” he said softly, patting the space next to him, encouraging Derek to sit down. Derek smiled, but shook his head slightly.

“Not sure I want to do that. Isn’t that like hallowed ground or something? Can a mere werewolf like me even enter without permission?”

“Are you implying I’m the king of the Nemeton?” Stiles arched an eyebrow, waggled them tauntingly. “If so, I like how you think. And shouldn’t you kneel before me?” The innuendo was not lost on him and he wasn’t even a little bit sorry. Derek had said okay, promising all sorts of things. Then he’d let him fall asleep. They hadn’t broached the subject since.

Derek snorted, cheeks perhaps the tiniest of pink. “The idea partly terrifies me, but yeah. Something like that.”

Stiles answered by moving over slightly, making more room. Derek accepted the wordless invitation and climbed on top. Stiles hummed in contentment. This felt even more right.

“Your dad is worried. You’ve been gone for a long time.”

“Sorry.” Stiles shrugged slightly. “I didn’t think to leave a note. And I forgot my phone. I woke up in the middle of the night, and I just couldn’t go back to sleep.” He paused, then continued. “I haven’t seen you since you let me fall asleep. I guess I was kind of wiped, huh? Anyway, I tossed and turned for ages, going over everything. It’s like my mind is in hyper drive and I can’t shut it down.”

“How is that different from any other day?” Derek’s tone was teasing. Stiles nudged him in the side.

“Haha, funny. Wolf’s got jokes, albeit terribly lame ones. Don’t quit your day job to pursue standup comedy. No wait – you don’t have a day job.”

Derek didn’t comment. Instead he just started at Stiles from the corner of his eye, one eyebrow lifted in a wordless comment of “stop deflecting.” Stiles sighed deeply.

“I can’t explain it really. It was like this pull guiding me here. My restlessness needed some sort of release. Somehow I just knew this was the place to go.”

He’d been sitting on top of the Nemeton for hours probably. Normally he couldn’t sit still long enough to form a coherent thought, and yet now, here, he felt oddly serene. Like he’d found a missing piece. His place in the circle of things. He’d always felt oddly afloat, slightly out of sync with the world around him. But now, here, Stiles felt right.
“Everything okay then?” Derek’s voice was light, but there was a solemn undertone to it. It was still early days, and like all the other times they’d come face to face with danger, it was hard to believe it was really over.

They kept expecting the other shoe to drop at any moment. But for the last three days all had been good. Or not good, exactly. But at least perfectly dread doctor and beast free. Which was a win in itself.

“Yeah, the Nemeton is stable. The telluric currents are flowing nicely. No doors ajar, no extra power leaking out. I’d know it if there was. I have no clue how I know this, I just do.”

“I believe you,” said Derek, his arm bumping lightly into Stiles’. He’d been content before, the light buzz reassuring and safe. This touch released something different altogether. Something primal and strong. Yet entirely unconnected to the tree.

Okay.

Derek had said okay when Stiles said he needed him. He kind of wanted to know what he’d meant by that. And if that in any way or shape was even close to what Stiles had meant. In the aftermath of the Clash at the Mall, there really hadn’t been all that much time to do so.

There had been nothing left of the beast and the doctors, save a fine dust of soot. Lydia had gathered everything and sealed it safely inside containers made of mountain ash. Together she and Stiles had brought it to the Nemeton and buried it deep in the ground in the root cellar underneath. Stiles had locked the trap door so securely he was unsure if he’d be able to open it again even if he wanted to.

They had left the task of getting rid of Valack’s body to Kate. She’d taken the remains into an abandoned store in the mall, and judging by the snarls and sounds of flesh tearing, there was little left of him when she was done. Chris had walked in, face grim and returned half an hour later with a tear-streaked and defeated Kate. She hadn’t even put up a fight when she was transported to Eichen House.

Stiles didn’t know what had become of what was left of Valack. Parrish’ hellhound mode had suddenly flared to life and marched in to get him. Lydia had trailed after, but she’d said nothing of what transpired after they left. Stiles wasn’t sure he even wanted to know.

Which left Scott.

In short he’d been a mess. Stiles’ dad had been forced to call Melissa and together they and Kira had finally managed to get him to his feet and out of the mall. Suffice to say he’d taken it much harder than the first time Allison died, but then again Stiles suspected he hadn’t taken the proper time to mourn and deal with it back then to begin with. According to Liam, Chris had spent a lot of time at the McCall house the last few days. Hopefully together they could both get through this and move on.

Allison’s body was stored away at Deaton’s. There would be another ceremony tomorrow night, a private one, before she would once again be laid to rest. Hopefully for good this time. As terrible as losing her had been, watching her used like this had been worse. They had decided to bury her in the Preserve. Lydia had taken on the task of arranging everything, including a mountain ash casket. Stiles would be sealing the grave.

In quiet moments, usually when he couldn’t sleep, Stiles still remembered the black smoky eyes he’d seen on Scott. It niggled at him, taunted him, and itched like a scab. The rational side of him said it was nothing. Yet his gut instinct told a different story. He knew it was something he couldn’t let go,
not until he knew for sure. And for once he wouldn’t ignore it or let it fester inside. This time he’d ask for help. This time, he’d confide in Derek.

But not now. It could wait. Not long, though. But long enough to say goodbye to Allison. To get their bearings. They also had to find out what would happen now that the Dread doctors were gone. Would what they’d done to them still affect them? Or would it weed out over time, like poison, gradually leave their bodies? This was all questions unanswered. Questions they hoped Deaton might be able to help with, if they could manage to locate him.

One thing Stiles felt certain of. Whatever the doctors had done to him, it had the same effect as Peter biting Lydia. It set something inside him in motion. This connection to the Nemeton, to the currents, felt so real, so organic now that he’d fully embraced it, he couldn’t really fathom a life without it.

“You’re awfully quiet,” said Derek. “I feel like this should worry me.”

Stiles smiled, shaking his head slightly. “Just thinking,” he replied. Derek snorted.

“That I gathered. You’re always thinking. Sometimes louder than others.” He bowed his head, shielding his eyes from Stiles’ view. “I’ve been thinking too,” he continued almost inaudibly. “I’ve been thinking about those pictures on your phone.”

Stiles pursed his lips, feeling dread wash over him. Trust it to come back to those. It was still messing with his head thinking that the Derek he’d talked to for almost a year wasn’t really Derek. Or it was. Since it was a clone, an identical copy of Derek, it was Derek, just not the original Derek. It was all very confusing. On one side he felt like he’d betrayed him by not realizing that it wasn’t him. On the other side he couldn’t really see how they should’ve figured it out.

He’d talked to Malia again the day before, trying to explain what had been going on, and she’d been especially perplexed about the part of a double set of Dereks. After cursing and apologizing for not being there to help (she’d come a long way in the span of a year), Malia had grown oddly quiet.

“That might explain why he disappeared so suddenly,” she’d said cryptically. “Derek I mean,” she’d explained. “Braeden told me he was helping her track down the Desert Wolf. They stayed at a motel somewhere near the Mexican border, and the next morning when she came to his room, he had vanished. Derek was just gone, but all his belongings were still there, the same with his car. Maybe that was the moment Kira found the real Derek? Like there can’t be two of them running around at once, so the copy was erased.”

It was a whacky theory, but that didn’t mean it was wrong. It also meant that they’d most likely never know. But as long as the pictures stayed saved on Stiles’ phone and people kept bringing them up, this would forever haunt him.

Derek must have sensed that Stiles’ had stiffened, because he grabbed hold of his hand, lacing their fingers again, something that was beginning to be almost a habit.

“I’ve been thinking,” began Derek, his thumb drawing lacy circles on Stiles’. “I’ve been thinking that I’d like the chance to make new ones. With you.”

Stiles was possibly having a meltdown.

“What?” he asked lamely.

“You have all these memories, Stiles. I know you think they’re fake and that you feel bad for missing that. You shouldn’t. It might not have been this version of me, but it was me none the less.”
“Have you talked to Cora?” asked Stiles, suddenly reminded of Derek’s sister. She’d been in so many of the photos, had spent a good amount of time with him as well. This would surely throw her for a loop almost as much as it did Stiles.

Derek nodded. “Yeah. I called her yesterday. At first I got a long-winded diatribe about how I suck as a brother for spending weeks with her and then never calling again.” Stiles laughed softly. That sounded like Cora alright.

“How did she take it?” He held his breath, curious beyond belief how she’d take the news. Derek shrugged lightly, eyes flitting in that way he usually did when he was uncomfortable. “She was shocked at first. Then she felt awful for not realizing.” Stiles could relate. “After a while though,” continued Derek, ears going red, “she – eh, she said… She said she’d enjoyed getting to know me, and that she’d gladly do it again.”

“So would I.”

Derek’s smile was so blinding, Stiles felt he might get sunburn if exposed for too long. And yet there was no other place he’d rather be.

“That’s good.” He laughed softly. Almost giddily. “Like I was saying, I’d like to make new memories with you. If given the chance, I’d gladly send silly pictures to you.” He drew a deep breath, and turned his head to look directly at Stiles’. “Or better yet, take silly pictures with you.”

Stiles choked on a sob, clutching Derek’s hand.

“Is that a yes to making new memories?” asked Derek teasingly. Stiles nodded, not trusting his voice even for a moment.

“Can we kiss now?”

Stiles burst out laughing. That was the last thing he’d expected Derek to say. And yet it was nothing he wanted more. “Please,” he whispered, and then their lips met in a kiss that was anything but perfect, noses bumping and teeth clashing slightly. And yet it was the best thing in the world.

They said that when one door closes another one opens. In Beacon Hills that usually didn’t apply. This time however it did. Stiles had closed one door, and now he was enthusiastically plunging headfirst through this new one, with Derek.

A click broke through the sounds of soft kisses and bird song.

“Did you?” Stiles pried away his lips from Derek, casting a glance at – he had! “Did you just take a picture?”

Derek smiled and kissed Stiles’ nose. “I did. We’re making new memories.”

Stiles was so deliriously happy he didn’t even mind that Derek had sent it to all their friends on Snapchat. The conversation with his dad later that evening he could’ve done without, but it was well worth it, embarrassing as it was.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaaaaaaaand that’s it! Thank you so much for sticking with this alternative take on
season 5B. I hope you've enjoyed it. I had a blast writing it, even if it did turn out much longer and more complicated than I originally planned. I know I have left some threads in the air, such as possible repercussions for Scott after clashing with the beast. I have no concrete plans of continuing this as of now, but who knows. EDIT: There's now a sequel!

Let me know what you thought :) Also, I'm on tumblr if you want to come say hi. There I'm darachmoon.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!