# Hunting Pains

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## Summary

It was a sad day when one had to resort to time travel because things were just so *fucked up*. Stiles should know. He went back to undo the whole ‘Beacon Hills is a death trap’ thing but for now he would just settle for knowing *where the fuck he was*. Even the year would be a nice start. Someone? *Anyone*?

Or, the one where Stiles travels back in time, karma comes to bite him in the ass, and he ends up as Kate Argent’s hunter mentor. He didn't take Peter Hale into account either, and he *definitely* didn't sign up for everything that came after.

*His life.*

## Notes
The obligatory time travel story every writer needs to try at least once.

I have been playing with this idea for months and now, after two full days spent in the backseat of a car, I finally managed to write the first chapter while taking a break from the other fics I'm doing. The premise is that things are fucked up, Stiles fucks up and then fuckery happens leading into even more of that.

Yay.

See the end of the work for more notes.
In which Stiles fucks up and nothing goes like planned

It was a sad day when one had to resort to time travel because things were just so *fucked up.*

Stiles should know.

He’s the one fucking doing it.

He grumbled as he stomped through the woods, slightly singed and mad at the world. This, this was just icing on the cake and it wasn’t even a particularly good cake and he would bet everything he had that the icing had gone bad too. First, he had to see everyone he ever loved die in the most painful ways possible. The fact that they died was traumatizing and awful enough to depress even Kira but when you have lived through kanimas, darachs, fucking Nemetons going crazy, a Nogitsune, ugh, and so many other things that were just plain *wrong* and something *still* comes up to top that?

Fuck that.

Stiles was having none of it, no sirreee.

Second, there was the time Stiles started searching for ways to prevent the things from happening (fun times, right?) and, bam, one clumsy moment later while doing a ritual and pouring a unicorn’s heart blood – willingly given and hadn’t that been a bitch to get – just a liiiiiittle bit more than necessary and, bam fucking *bam*, back in the past with a blast and his hair signed and brows smoking, no idea where he was or what time it was. Heck, he could be in the future for all he knew. Wouldn’t that be fun. Although he suspected that wasn’t the case since the forest was still intact and not burning to ashes or anything like that. That had happened a couple of times when the Nemeton had gotten hungrier than usual, and the results had included large clearings in the preserve where nothing grew any longer, all life having been sucked out of the land. During one of those times there also went the rest of the Hale House and Derek with it before the stump was finally satisfied.

For the moment.

Which, of course, didn’t stop it from calling more monsters of the week to terrorise the ever-decreasing number of citizens.

Damn it, Deaton, and your penchant for being cryptic! ‘Be the spark’, yeah, thanks a lot. Forever in debt and all that. Explained a lot, couldn’t live without you. ‘Believing is doing’ and Stiles still couldn’t wish himself dry or for the greasiest burger to ever grease. Useless, except for when in panic or being a second from getting killed, thus, creating more accidents. Or maybe that was just because Deaton didn’t believe in clear instructions and hoarded his fucking books.

Stiles wasn’t bitter, no, not at all.

He did manage to steal a couple of the books before the clinic went kaboom thanks to another hissy fit the Nemeton threw and learnt himself about them runes to anchor his meagre number of spells he had been able to gather through the years. If only the werewolves weren’t into carelessness and running head first into danger so much they probably got off on it, and ruining his hard work, Stiles might not have been the only one left alive.

Anyway, since he had nothing to lose anymore – and wasn’t that depressing – he had planned on going back and preventing the Hale Fire because that seemed to start the madness in the first place. Kind of. Well, the Nemeton was the beacon of Beacon Hills and pretty much awakened the moment Derek killed Paige in the root cellar. Which reminds him, Stiles was still iffy about the details of that.
Just one sacrifice would only jump start an ongoing process and the Hale Fire in turn would put it on the map, so how was the process still there to be started? Huh? Stiles would really like to know because fuck that. He kind of wanted to prevent that too but the Hale Fire was a fixed point in time and easiest to aim for so Stiles hoped for the best. They could purify the Nemeton and hopefully stop it before it levelled the town or the state of California.

Anyway, too long didn’t read, he went back to undo the whole ‘Beacon Hills is a death trap’ thing but for now he would just settle for knowing where the fuck he was. Even the year would be nice. Someone? Anyone?

He was cursing a lot today in the most unimaginative way possible but whatever. It wasn’t his day, so sue him. None of the days were his days anymore, damn it. He would curse the day he dragged Scott to the forest but he rather doubted he would be alive if he hadn’t. Virginity was a social construct but the traditional asshats were too set in their ways to try for other types of ‘innocents’ to sacrifice – which, in their world, was probably more difficult to find so maybe Stiles could leave them the benefit of a doubt and, besides, Stiles was the one without the books so what did he know – and Stiles had been a brilliant example of the nerdy virgin, an image of which he got rid of so fast after the sacrifices had started again.

For the third time.

He didn’t have a death wish no matter how many people claimed otherwise. He was the one with all the backup plans of backup plans! He wasn’t the one running off with his claws and fangs head first into danger without a plan!

Damn it, he really was bitter.


Stiles was rather out of belief at the moment, please come back later, so he kept hoping hope would work just as well.

Scott’s forever optimism and good faith would have come handy here. Sometimes he wondered why it was Stiles who got the spark and not Scott, genetics aside (he was pretty sure his mother had been magic, had always been, but this time it wasn’t just a child’s fancy; he had to get it from somewhere and it certainly hadn’t been from his dad). Scott’s imagination sucked, though, so maybe it would have been useless with him. Black and white didn’t make good tools to make things work since one needed to see the shades of grey and the whole spectre of power to get anywhere.

Stiles promised himself he would start believing in himself and miracles if he really was in the right place and time.

Rainbows and sparkles, here he comes.

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Two hours after his new year resolution (this counted, alright?) he was still stuck in the fucking forest. Evidently, he wasn’t as familiar with the forest as he thought he was. Had it changed so much during the years? Or, maybe, was it even the same forest?

If Stiles had suddenly changed states he would kill someone.

He heard a crack somewhere on his left and his back stiffened. He quickly activated a rune on his arm and faded from the view. He activated another to mess with people’s senses so he couldn’t be smelled either. Now, he just had to be quiet because that rune had been messed up by the explosion
that landed him there. He had other things to worry about than his spellwork, alright? He had managed to live to 21 without creating a single one, which was a miracle on its own, especially since most of what he knew centred on how to run away.

He would really need to start working on his sparky lessons the moment he got out of there. Maybe he could steal Deaton’s library? It wasn’t like he used it for anything but holding it over innocent sparks.

Stiles took a deep breath and stepped into the clearing. There were four people there. Two he immediately recognised as werewolves. They were down on the ground and the male was crouching over the female – at least it looked like she was a, well, she but if she identified as a he, or he as a she, Stiles wasn’t going to judge but he was digressing – in defence. The other two seemed to be hunters. There was an older man, maybe in his thirties or forties, and he was pointing a gun at the werewolves. Yeah, definitely, a hunter he was. The girl was young and blonde but that’s about as much as Stiles cared.

The werewolves looked a bit like Derek and Peter so they were almost certainly Hales which meant that he was still in Beacon Hills. Yay. Also, they were Hales he didn’t know! Double yay, he was in the past. However, that also meant that he probably should care about what was going on. Ugh. He probably couldn’t just ask directions and be on his merry way. No, bad Stiles, you were going to change things so what could one little thing…?

A lot.

Fuck.

Whatever, he was here anyway. He exhaled loudly, alerting the werewolves apparently since they turned their heads just a little bit his way, and dropped his spells.

“Hey there, buddy, I think you are in the wrong place doing some naughty, naughty things!” Stiles called out. Immediately all heads snapped in his direction and the werewolf still standing growled in response. Stiles rolled his eyes.

Cute. Definitely a relative of Derek’s. Nonverbal communication and all that.

“You one of them too?” the gun was now pointing at Stiles’ direction. Ugh, a zealot. Lovely. It was like Gerard all over again.

“Take it easy, old man.” Stiles smirked when the hunter bristled. The girl behind him hid a snort but otherwise looked plain bored. “You’re on the Hale lands, you know that, right? Their territory, their rules, et cetera. Hunting on a peaceful pack’s land goes against the Code, doesn’t it?”

“They were attacking us, this is just self-defence,” the hunter said casually, turning his gun back at the wolves. The male bristled.

“You attacked my cousin, unprovoked!”

“And even if they had attacked unprovoked, you were still on their lands, probably even without permission which is a clear offence of the Code,” Stiles pointed out. He skipped as annoyingly as he possibly could to have a closer look on the female wolf. She looked younger than Stiles had estimated from further away. She was also lying on her side, clutching at her stomach. Black lines were lining to reach for her heart, slowly but surely.

She wasn’t, luckily, in immediate danger. Yet. She did need treatment, though, and soon.
“Alright, so one unprovoked attack, check. Using wolfsbane on a non-feral wolf on the Hale land, check. Using wolfsbane on a Hale on the Hale land, double check. Probably taken liberties on other ends too, you bigots are all the same. Check.” Stiles rose from where he had crouched. He turned back to the hunters. The male wolf was still alert but he didn’t seem to think Stiles was a threat anymore.

Well, that, or that the hunters registered as a bigger one anyway. Stiles was on board either way.

“If you don’t want to face immediate dismissal slash questioning in the Tribunal, I’d suggest you throw us one of those fancy bullets of yours and we’ll be on our merry way. If not, well, it might get a bit sticky for you,” he stated cheerfully.

“The Tribunal?” the girl hunter asked. Stiles tilted his head, and nodded. Now that he thought of it, she looked a bit familiar. There was something about that nose that tickled his. “Why would the Tribunal care about a bunch of weres?”

“Honey,” Stiles drawled, and the girl frowned. Oh, fine. “The Hunter Tribunal is the Tribunal because it does care. I mean, it basically is its job. Care about the rules, and whatnot if not about the werewolves themselves. We don’t want a war upon us, do we? Exposure leads to nasties for both sides.”

Of course, during his time, none had told them about the Tribunal and by the time they had known about it, the hunters in question had come to check on the Nemeton madness and had been either drawn in on it and killed, or had fled and never returned. Those that fled were mostly the annoying ones who then decided that the Nemeton had been the fault of the supernatural, thus starting a purge to ‘cleanse the lands’.

Wait, Stiles hadn’t mentioned that yet? Yeah, there had been a purge. That had taken down Lydia who had gone to negotiate for a ceasefire and caused Stiles to combust in rage. He still had some burn scars on his back from it. That hadn’t been much fun since Stiles hadn’t even known he could do that and, thus, had no way of controlling it. Still didn’t.

Fun times.

Fuck you, Deaton.

The girl pondered on that for a moment, nodded, and then snapped her fingers. The hunter winced and frowned.

“Miss-”

“Your gun, Richard.”

“Listen, Miss-”

The girl’s eyes hardened. “Your. Gun. Richard,” she repeated slowly, as if talking to a child.

The hunter’s – Richard’s, his name was Richard? He did look like a Dick to Stiles – frowned lines deepened. “Your father-”

“-is not here,” she said breezily. “And I am. Are you going to go against my word? Mm? My father only ordered you to show me how to hunt properly. Apparently, you aren’t doing a very good job of it.” The girl’s expression turned into pure steel. “One more time, Richard. Your. Gun.”

Dick looked mutinous but bowed and handed over his gun. The girl emptied it on the grass,
seemingly ignorant of all threats, and threw one of the bullets to Stiles. He fumbled a bit but managed to catch it.

She stepped forward. The werewolf, Stiles had almost forgotten about him, growled again. She looked unimpressed and turned back to Stiles, dismissing the wolf completely. Stiles blinked.

She had balls.

“Will you show me how it’s done?” the girl asked. Dick gasped indignantly behind her.

“Miss, you can’t just ask a stranger-!”

“Richard, be quiet.” She stared at Stiles and cocked her head. “Well?”

Stiles snorted and shrugged. “Knock yourself out.” He wished he could swish out a little flame from his finger but he would probably blow himself up if he did. Sparks still needed a grasp on the basics before they could actually do stuff like the basics. Even having belief didn’t work miracles. Damn it, Deaton. He patted himself down before finding what he was looking for. He opened the bullet and poured out the aconite, burnt it and – before the male wolf could react – pushed the ashes on the female’s wound. She screamed but the black lines retreated before they could be attacked by an angry wolf.

The girl ‘ooh-ed’. “So that’s how it’s done. I always wondered how the weres survived even after they were shot. Nice to know.”

“Glad to be of help,” Stiles snorted. He stretched and turned to the girl. “How about you show me the way out of this fucking forest, and I’ll call us even.”

She smirked. “You lost?”

“On the road of life.”

The girl snorted a laugh. Very unladylike. Stiles thought her mentor – he had to be her mentor, right? Chris mentioned the tradition briefly when he explained the Tribunal and other assorted traditions to the pack once – couldn’t look more scandalised than he already did. “Sure, why not?” she stared at the werewolves who were now both standing. She made a shooing motion and deliberately turned her back on them.

“This way.”

Stiles gave one last look at the Hales and followed the girl. Dick walked behind them, grumbling all the way.

“Richard, I said ‘be quiet’, didn’t I?”

The grumbling stopped.

Stiles snickered.

He liked this girl.

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Stiles took his words back.

He didn’t like this girl one bit!
Sure, she had shown him the way out and even given him a lift – which seemed too generous for a stranger now that Stiles thought of it but he had just so enjoyed the annoyed expression on Dick’s face that he just had to accept the offer – but then she had just taken him to her house where he saw Gerard. Fucking. Argent.

Because the girl was Kate. Fucking. Argent.

He couldn’t kill him because of all the witnesses – there were a dozen or more hunters there, surrounding them – and a massacre of a hunter clan inside the Hale territory would draw too much attention to Beacon Hills and its Nemeton; mainly that there was one. Stiles couldn’t even run away because Dick was making it impossible by standing in his way. Right behind him.

Ugh, his life.

Well, since Kate was a teenager extraordinaire it meant that Stiles was in the past before Derek ever even met Paige. Hooray. It also meant that mobile phones were ancient and he would miss internet and forums and Tumblr for years before they were invented! Or were as accessible as they were in the future.

Which, wait, why couldn’t he invent one of them? Like, the creator of Facebook was rich. Stiles could be rich! It would probably be cheating but, hey, he needed some sort of reward from saving the world.

He might be planning a bit ahead but whatever.

Plans, they were Stiles’ jam.

“What do you have here?” Gerard spoke and Stiles tried his best not to react to his voice. For years, his immediate reaction to the former – present? – Argent patriarch had been ‘kill on sight’. His fingers even twitched and Stiles noticed that it did not go unnoticed. From the corner of his eye he thought he saw someone playing with a gun and he felt eyes fixed on his person.

Hah, what a basic intimidation tactic. His father could do worse.

It was still kind of working and Stiles forced himself to relax. He wasn’t bulletproof, darn it.

“What do you have here?”

“Father, this is-,” Kate turned around and gave Stiles a significant look. He realised he had never bothered to even introduce himself.

Huh. Melissa would have been appalled of his manners.

“Stiles,” he allowed. Little Stiles wouldn’t be using his nickname for years if he was even born yet, and he and the Stilinskis were staying under the radar for even longer, possibly forever, leaving Stiles alone-

Stop it, brain.

Gerard arched his brow. “Stiles?”

“Just Stiles.” He smiled winningly. Gerard continued to look at him unimpressed. Stiles wondered what kind of picture he was creating of himself in his dirty and slightly burnt clothes and a leather jacket he had pilfered from Jackson of all people. Or rather, Lydia had taken it and given it to Stiles to wear and he just had never given it back. Then Jackson had died, and-
“Richard was showing me how to hunt a werewolf but it seems he was remiss of some finer details,” Kate said. Gerard turned to her, and motioned her to continue. Stiles felt something press against his back. Sheesh, someone wasn’t happy, he thought flippantly. He could maybe survive a bullet to the back. If he was lucky. And it didn’t hit anything too important.

He really did hate Kate. He should have offed her and Dick at the woods.

She continued, “For example, hunting on a claimed land. We have a standing treaty with the Hales for the moment, and the weres were non-feral and a part of the pack. He was also attacking unprovoked and with extreme prejudice. I think it is safe to say he wasn’t doing his job well, right?”

Gerard stared at her, his expression unreadable.

“Stiles here happened to arrive just in time to stop Richard from violating the treaty. He also showed me how to treat a wolfsbane bullet wound which, as you know, is part of my training that for some reason I still hadn’t learnt. For a future Argent matriarch, that is a pretty serious flaw,” she ended, twisting her hair between her fingers. Stiles bit his cheek to stop himself from speaking. For some reason, he had never really thought that Kate would have been the Argent matriarch if she hadn’t died. Had she even been it already? He had thought that Victoria had held on the title when she still had been alive and it had then gone to Allison… and then to Chris without any women – or sane Gerard – around.

Gosh, just thinking about Kate leading a hunter community gave him a headache and a half. He also wondered where that sudden knowledge had come from. He knew he had said pretty much the same thing but Kate was talking of it like it was old news and she hadn’t seemed to know anything in the clearing.

The gun against his back twitched ominously.

Alright, nothing of that really mattered. He needed to get away from there.

Pronto.

“Well, I just helped a bit, you know, the good deed of the day and all that,” he gave a smile, hoping it didn’t come out as fake as it really was, “nothing major, so I could just-”

“He also knew about the Tribunal.”

Stiles blinked when he was suddenly the centre of all attention. What?

What?

“Which clan do you belong to?” a man to Gerard’s left asked. Stiles blinked again, taken aback.

“Why?”

The expression could only be called bored. “The Tribunal, as you very well know, is made up of the major hunter clans and those adjacent to them. So. Which clan are you from, and why didn’t you announce yourself to the Argents when you entered their territory?”

Of fucking course Chris didn’t mention that free agents probably didn’t even know the Tribunal fucking existed. Not that it was relevant to them at the time, but it would have been nice to know since Stiles was apparently a hunter now and in the middle of a hunter community pissing contest. Why did all the adults in his life try to make his life that much harder again? Did he do something in his past life to suffer like this?
Although, technically, he just escaped his past life to the past which was now his present life which means all this was his own karma talking and was too complicated to even think about and Stiles very much hated his life right now.

Did he mention he hated Kate yet? Or Gerard. Or Dick, Chris, Deaton, pretty much everyone? Not himself, though, he was awesome. He should have just become a hermit with the fastest wi-fi somewhere remote that still took delivery instead of taking a leaf out of Scott’s book and be self-sacrificing and all that jazz.

His life.

“My only living parent was killed by a supernatural creature and I was saved by a hunter,” Stiles explained, mind whirling. “And I was then given the means of protecting myself against others of such.” It was even true. The Sheriff had been killed by Morrell who had gone mad whilst he had been trying to protect Stiles, the darach wannabe’s true target, who been rescued by a late arriving Chris. He had been given a funeral Stiles hadn’t wanted to ever attend, too many tears and a gun that came with every kind of bullet Chris could find in his collection.


“He died pretty soon after that. I think I was meant to be his successor or something, something about him mourning his dead family and all.”

“Uncommon but could be true,” the woman on Gerard’s right said. She looked old enough to be Stiles’ mother.

“What did he say his name was?” the man on the left asked. Stiles shrugged again.

“He didn’t.”

Technically, Chris never really did introduce himself to Stiles since they both already knew who the other one was, thanks to Scott and Allison.

He glanced around and saw a few of the hunters relax a bit. Kate was looking at him with a disconcerting gleam in her eyes.

“You must be freelancer, then,” the woman said. She took a step forward and held out her hand. Stiles shook it, bemused.

“You could say that.”

“Shannon Caldwell.”

“Stiles.”

“No last name?”

“None I want to advertise.”

That gained him a few raised brows and stiff spines. Stiles blinked, and realised how that could have been taken. He hurried to explain, “I mean, not that I’m a criminal or anything, or that my family was, my father was a sheriff for fuck’s sake and I’m not a rogue either, just-, my father died. And then I was-, letting go off the name was… I mean-”

Kate snorted. Stiles threw her a dirty look. She just grinned, unrepentant.
“It’s cleansing to leave your name behind,” the man said on Gerard’s side. “Some do it by taking on another clan’s name, some to change their ways, some just switch for no reason. You don’t have to justify it.”

Stiles flushed. He hadn’t been this wrongfooted for a while. Nice to know that he was the same spaz still deep down.

“You look a little worn,” Shannon noted. “Have you travelled for long?”

He shrugged. “You could say that,” he repeated his earlier words and hid a wince when she looked at him sharply. “I help where I can. I haven’t had a real home for a while.”

Shannon nodded slowly, savouring his answer. “And if you don’t have a clan, you’re less likely to stay put either which can lead to unnecessary suspicion. We are a little territorial about our borders.”

“What a coincidence, so are wolves!” Stiles piped up. Dick behind him ground his teeth and gained Shannon’s attention. Stiles felt the gun disappear from his back. Note to self, Dick is afraid of the woman. Stiles should probably be too, although, fair to say, he had never really had a rational reaction to fear.

“What did O’Leary do?”

“Pretty much what little missy there said.” Stiles smirked when Kate bristled. “From what I saw, he had two Hales on gun point, one of them shot with a wolfsbane bullet and apparently wanted to finish them both off as a lesson.”

“Interesting,” Shannon mused, her eyes hard. “O’Leary, go with Dawkins. I want to have a word with you later.”

Dick followed the man on Gerard’s left reluctantly and with a dark glower. Stiles couldn’t help but wonder what the hierarchy was there. Gerard was a bit too quiet there, his head just a little too down. He wore mostly a neutral expression on his face but Stiles wasn’t fooled. He had to be over ten years back in time but things couldn’t change that much, right? Or had he accidentally messed up even more and turned up in an alternative dimension where Gerard wasn’t evil? Or was he? Did he just hide it better?

What was going on?

“Katherine,” Shannon frowned at Kate who winced, “O’Leary was the fourth mentor you’ve gone through in less than half a year. No, don’t try to claim innocence. I see your fingerprints all over this incident.”

“He was incompetent. There was no way I was going to learn anything under him!” she protested.

“And yet, you almost created a serious alteration between the Argents and the Hales.”

“Which I wouldn’t have learnt about under him,” Kate said blithely. “And I would have stopped him eventually so they could have escaped or something. Richard was-”

“Kate, to succeed as the Argent matriarch, you have to respect the traditions and the rules. What would your mother say?” Shannon said, expression stern, and the girl slouched down, casting a dark look to the side. Gerard cleared his throat.

“If there’s a problem, I can take over her training. As her father, I watched over her mother’s training of her while I trained Christopher, and I am quite familiar with her methods.”
Shannon pursed her lips. “Elizabeth was very strict about her training. Are you sure you’re up for that?”

Gerard nodded, and smiled. “Kate would in very good hands. You’ve seen how well Christopher is doing in Nevada.”

A frown creased Stiles’ forehead. So, the Argent matriarch, this Elizabeth, had died less than a year before? And Kate was in process of succeeding her? Was Shannon then the interim matriarch? Or was that still Gerard or Victoria? He patted around his pockets absently, taking inventory of what he had. A pen, a lighter, a notebook that hopefully was still intact as it contained most of his notes on runes, his dagger, and, thank the heavens, cash!

He must have grinned like a lunatic, lost in his thoughts, because next time he noticed Kate had slithered next to him. “What are you grinning about?”

“I’m rich!” he said before he could stop it. Kate looked unimpressed. Stiles ignored her, looking on his wad of bills. He had… altogether, some two hundred or so dollars. That would get him a lot if he was careful. He could maybe find a job somewhere, and save some money and then-

“Two hundred and you’re rich? Wow, you were deprived as a child.”

Stiles sniffed, and placed his money back in his pocket. “Not all of us were born with a silver spoon in their mouths.”

“A pity. You could’ve at least sold it.”

He snorted before he could stop it. Kate looked very smug about that.

He really didn’t want to like her.

“It wasn’t very nice of you to take me here without telling me.”

“What was I supposed to do? You were a strange hunter on our territory. Who knows what you were about to do?”

“Just like you and Dick-, I mean Richard.”

“Dick,” she bit her lip. “He was a real dick, oh gosh. Phish posh, Gerard this, Elizabeth that. Straighten your spine, you need to do this and that, be this person and not, ugh! All the mentors are the same. They all have such hard-ons for them. I mean, mom was great but-”

“It’s not easy to distinguish yourself when people want to mould you into a certain model.”

Kate nodded.

He sighed. He understood that a little too well, had seen how poisonous the effect was.

Pain flashed in his mind.

*Allison.*

“Well, if you want to separate yourself from their shadow, then you need to take control of your own training and not sabotage it. Don’t follow anyone’s lead without questioning their orders, search for your own answers, do your own thing. Never follow anyone blind. It only leads to grief.”

Kate blinked. “Is that what happened to you?”
“What? Oh, no,” Stiles shook his head, “My mentor didn’t really do much but train me in skill. I was emancipated and too independent for my own good. If he had tried to mould me into anything, I would have hightailed it immediately. I wouldn’t wish that fate for anyone.”

“Hmm…” Kate hummed, a contemplative look on her face.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“…That didn’t sound like nothing.”

She grinned at him impishly before chirping loud and clear over the discussion behind them, effectively disrupting whatever was going on.

“I want Stiles to be my new mentor.”

Stiles’ jaw dropped.

_What?

“No!” he blurted out when all stares were directed in their direction. He thought he saw a vein on Gerard’s forehead pulse.

“Really, Katherine?” Shannon questioned, brows arched. Kate bristled.

“I will never be my own hunter under father or his men. How will I grow into a hunter like my mother if I’m not offered the same chance?”

“Kate, your mother followed the trad-,” Gerard started but was interrupted by his daughter.

“I’m not saying I won’t! I’m saying I want to have my own opportunity to grow!” Kate insisted. “Mother trained under another clan, away from her family and learning skills she couldn’t have otherwise, but I’ve been offered mentors only from ours. Here we have someone with no ties to anyone! Someone with neutrality, and who doesn’t have any preconceptions about me or my parents, with things I could learn!”

“I have no experience! I’m just 23!” Stiles insisted. And he definitely wasn’t a neutral side here! He would be leaving her in the first ditch there was because of what she did in the future-

But it was the past now.

Could he doom her just because of what she might do somewhere years away?

“With at least five years of experience!” Kate argued back. “With skills to sneak on people more experienced, and even weres! That’s not nothing, that’s something none of my previous mentors were able to do!”

“You snuck up on them?” Shannon questioned. Stiles flushed.

“It was nothing,” he whined. It was magic even if he didn’t want to mention it. Who knew what that might do to his apparent cover story? He was missing some key details here!

“Interesting. The Argents have become a little too rooted here, so travelling might do some good for you and the relations between the clans. Very well, Stiles of no name, from today on you’re a hunter adjacent to the clan Argent, and the mentor of their heir. I wish you well and hope you know to be
careful. It would do no good for you if something happened to your future leader,” Shannon smiled pleasantly. “I, Shannon Caldwell, use my power as one of the Tribunal Twelve and do so declare. Off you go.”

She left with a glowering and arguing Gerard, leaving behind a beaming Kate and a flabbergasted Stiles.

*What the hell just happened?*

He threw up his hands and groaned loudly over Kate’s cheerful laugh and a rather endearing little victory dance.

At least tell him what year it was!
In which Stiles gains an unexpected Yoda and a freeloader

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Stiles sighed.

So.

1997.

Brilliant.

He was a whopping two decades in the past, little Stiles was three years old and the little brat called Kate Argent – and his new protégé apparently – was a fifteen-year-old teenager. Oh, and he was expected to leave with her in tow to the great beyond as per the story he had created himself – accidentally, thank you Chris, he swore to sock him a new one when they met in this timeline – as more of a freelance hunter. Not to forget that he was now also kind of part of the Argent clan which really threw a spanner – no, multiple spanners – in the works. And Gerard hated him already. The feeling was mutual, although with more feeling behind the depth of Stiles’ wistful dreams of the man’s gruesome death.

Although they did exchange their share of commiserating looks which made Stiles doubt his whole existence.

Gerard and Stiles had both tried to argue, together and separate, the decision enforced by the Tribunal – his life – but their ‘concerns’ were dismissed like air. Like, Kate was totally a high schooler, right, so Stiles had complained about how she needed social skills as a future matriarch and what better way to teach her how to navigate through life than high school? The horrors were real! Also, the exams. Shannon had just smiled indulgently at him before telling him that Kate had been home schooled since her mother’s untimely death. She had already been at the top of her class, the witch, and had had a study plan made that included her studying the material independently with an occasional tutoring session and coming back for exams just the same as others. It wasn’t GED, it was something truly else.

Stiles suspected foul play and bribes, probably the same kind that made Gerard their principal around fifteen years in the future.

He had then tried for her family ties, how she needed support in these difficult times, but it had been shot down even faster than his previous complaint. It was a hunter’s life, what did he expect, pampering? She needed experience, not spoiling.

Stiles couldn’t understand that. He had gotten too much experience rooted to one place and more than his share of despair over family, blood or not.

And they were living in the same. fucking. place.

Gerard had shared frightening similarities with a lemon after that. Apparently, that had been one of his main arguments too, trying to entice Shannon’s feminine side or something. Stiles started to doubt the woman even had one. She seemed to thrive in the sick pleasure of throwing him and Gerard down and again.

Unless, of course, that was her feminine side. Now that Stiles thought of it, she seemed overly alike
Victoria Argent. And Lydia.

He couldn’t even voice the rest of his arguments, admittedly getting weaker and weaker and more like the ‘but I don’t wanna’ category, because the witch of a woman had flashed him a sharp smile, given him a check of ten grands she forced Gerard sign in front of his eyes – he wondered what she had threatened the man with to get him to do that – and told him to contact the Argents when he needed more. Training a hunter, especially the matriarch, could get expensive.

Stiles had shut up after that, only pointing out that he didn’t own a car.

The only answer he got were keys thrown in his direction.

Well, at least Stiles got out of the Argent house alive. That was a plus, right? And he wasn’t about to turn down a free car, no way. It was a pretty sweet ride, anyhow. He wondered if that had been Gerard’s too but probably not. He wasn’t that lucky.

So, there he was now, planning a long, long road trip in a café downtown – it was one he didn’t remember ever visiting but it served really good coffee and made mean sandwiches so couldn’t help but wonder why it had been closed – with none other than Kate Argent. At least they had legitimate plans for coming back to Beacon Hills every now and then, so Stiles had time to figure out the Nemeton problem while trying to survive everything else.

Joy.

“I want to visit New York,” she said. “And Vegas, we have to go to Las Vegas! You can sneak me into a casino! And the Canadian border, the Niagara Falls!” She twisted her hair between her fingers and kicked the air with her feet. Her eyes were practically sparkling as she played with the map, staring at the entirety of the United States. Stiles rolled his eyes, looking mournfully at the remains of his sandwich.

Pickles, ugh. The only awful thing in the otherwise best sandwich he had eaten in years.

He tried one anyway – maybe they had done something to make them edible – and made a face. \textit{Nope}.

Abort, abort! Mission compromised!

“And what else does the princess want?” he asked, grimacing, trying to get the taste out of his mouth. Not even the coffee could wash it off. His life was ruined.

Kate bristled. Look at that, the sparkles lit up the flame.

“Don’t call me that.”

“But I’m your mentor!” Stiles mocked, throwing her words at her. He sniffed derisively. “I was practically stronghanded into this, so yes, princess, I’m calling you whatever I want.”

“I am \textit{not} a princess!” the girl hissed.

“Seems like one doth protest too much. ‘I want Stiles to be my mentor!’ A couple of fluttering lashes and sweet words later and, bam, got what you wanted, didn’t you? You must be used to that with, what was it, three, four, five mentors as notches in your belt?”

Kate narrowed her eyes, and her lips twisted. At that moment, she reminded Stiles a little too much of her future self. Cold yet explosive.
Yeah, he would be staging an accident at some point when he could manage not to incriminate himself at the same time. Probably. Jury was still out on that one if he gave enough fucks for that level of subterfuge.

“Maybe some of us want to see something more than just the preserve and Sacramento!” she fumed. “Not that you would know. An orphan with no roots! Life must be great but guess what? You have to deal with it,” Kate spat out, “because, as you said, I ‘stronghanded’ you into this! How does it feel to be bested by a teenager, old man?!”

Stiles looked at her, and snorted. Kate looked like she was deciding whether she was going to storm off or hurt him but neither since Stiles burst into a maniacal laughter before she could.

Kate was pretty much right if only for one little detail.

He had never been past Sacramento either. It was the only place past the Beacon County border he had ever visited. Well, if you didn’t count those weird trips to Mexico but sightseeing it was not and he had pretty much seen only hunters, ruins and sand. Too much sand. He hated sand. It was coarse and rough and it got everywhere!

Ha.

How the fuck was he supposed to look like a seasoned hunter and a world-weary traveller if he knew fuck about anything?!

“What are you laughing about?!” Kate demanded. He shook his head but couldn’t quite kill his snickers. This situation was literally the blind following the blind. They were both going to get killed. He gasped for breath.

Oh, they were going to die and he would be taking Kate with him. At least the Hale Fire would be prevented, probably. No, fuck this, none of this was worth it.

“Okay, little missy, I think we should clear some shit up. Let me clarify this, just once, so I can fuck off into the sunset and you can find yourself another mentor,” he raised his hand to stop Kate from saying anything and, with dramatical wave of hand and an empty coffee cup, said simply, “I, Stiles, am no hunter. Period.”

Kate scowled at him.

“And?”

Stiles opened his mouth, and blinked. Wait what?

“What?” he blurted out. Kate rolled her eyes, temper in control again, and took a sip from her iced tea. The heathen.

“You think I don’t know that? You don’t have the muscles. You don’t move like one of us. You may have fooled others, god, they only saw you stand there in your leather jacket of jackassery,” Stiles couldn’t help but bark a laugh at that because Jackson, “but in the forest, up close, I could see your body isn’t trained, like, at all. My grandfather was in a better shape than you are now before he died of old age.”

Stiles looked offended. “I’m not in that bad shape!” He had had to run for his life so much that at least his legs were trained if not anything else! And with everything, he was quite strong for a human. No one got anywhere with weak noodle arms. He paused. “You knew?! And you still made all that noise to make me your mentor?”
Kate’s expression took a turn from being just annoyed to also being longsuffering. She kind of reminded Stiles of the old Cora, when she had just come to Beacon Hills.

“You are my ticket to get away from here. You think I haven’t trained to be a hunter my whole life? The awaited girl child, destined new matriarch! The moment I learnt how to walk I’ve been whipped into shape and my mom sang me the names of poisons and their uses as lullabies! Did you really think I needed training from someone like you, or worse, a man?”

“Hey, what do you have against men?” Stiles frowned.

“Besides that you are all useless? All my mentors after mom was killed have been men under father’s command and spineless to the nth degree! I am not going to stay here and be ‘trained’ by some weak dipshits who are just following orders and licking the heels of others!”

“And now you’re just throwing my words against me!”

“But that’s why I chose you!”

Stiles frowned. Kate sighed, glancing around them. They had been pretty loud. Thankfully, the café had been pretty empty but they still had garnered themselves some strange and concerned looks.

Stiles hoped it didn’t look like he was an abusive older boyfriend or something.

Shite, he would be the Kate in that scenario! Kate would be Derek! Talk about irony. Shit, digressing again.

“You are not going to stop me from doing what I want or try to mould me into something I’m not. You said it yourself. ‘You wouldn’t wish that fate for anyone.’ It wasn’t a lie, I could’ve spotted it a mile away. You truly believe that. You can take me away from here.”

Kate locked her eyes on his and Stiles found himself unable to look away. The look in them was imploring and surprisingly vulnerable but determined and stubborn, all at the same time.

“I am going to leave this town, with or without your help. But it will be in your best interests to cope with me because, otherwise, the Argents will hunt you down and end you if I just say the word and if I haven’t done so myself.”

Stiles blinked, stunned, before shaking his head and snorting. Again. Okay, maybe not the classic Kate and Derek situation. Kate was Kate no matter what. Did that mean Stiles was Derek? He did have a leather jacket. Arr, growl, I am the Alpha, watch me roar! He couldn’t help his chuckles. Kate narrowed her eyes.

“If you don’t believe me-”

“Trust me, princess, I’m not doubting your words. Alright, I am a little, but fine. I’ll take you on the ride of your life,” he cracked his knuckles and shoved his hand in front of her. She stared at it like it might bite her. He wiggled his fingers and, slowly, she took it in her hand – and how small it was, Stiles marvelled – and shook it.

“We may have started on the wrong foot. Let’s go back to the beginning. Hi, my name’s Stiles. No last name that I care to share. Even the first name’s a nickname but it’s the only name you’ll ever get out of me. I’m no hunter and definitely no mentor material. What I am is a kickass driver and a hot mess and if you’re planning on sticking around, you’re going to get in trouble and I won’t be there to bail you out because I’ll be sitting in the next cell over.”

Kate grinned as if that introduction had been the best thing she had heard in her whole life. “My
name’s Kate Argent. Call me Katherine or princess again and I’ll kick your ass. I’m a hunter, one of the best but no one believes it because no one has ever let me prove it. All I want is leave this hellhole and never come back but that’s not going to happen, so I’ll settle for a couple of years of holiday before I turn eighteen and must to take up the mantle of the Argent matriarch alongside college. This place blows.”

“Don’t I know it,” Stiles chuckled. He smirked, “Little missy.”

Kate’s eyes narrowed.

They left the shop with iced tea all over Stiles’ shirt.

Worth it.

***

Stiles gnawed on his lip thoughtfully. They, he and Kate, were scheduled to leave tomorrow. She had gone to back to her house to pack what things she would be taking with her – and her homework and assignments, gosh, her face when she saw the whole pile had been brilliant —, thus leaving him to wander around Beacon Hills alone. He didn’t even have an escort, even if he was sure he was followed from a certain distance. He had seen this one woman window shop a few too many times for it to be a coincidence. She wasn’t even trying to hide it when Stiles had caught her eyes, she just waved, and continued to look at whatever display had been in the window next to her.

If that was supposed to be a threat, it wasn’t an effective one. The Argents were all nutters if she was the best they had and Kate was the lying liar who lied. I wasn’t even that farfetched if one thought about it.

But, he did go and spend some of the money to get himself a new wardrobe. Even he cringed at the 90’s fashion and stuck to clothes that would become fashionable in a few years and he felt more comfortable wearing. He would gain some weird looks probably, and eyerolls galore, but truthfully, style was the least of his concerns right now. Also, in a couple of years, he would at least be able to say he was a pioneer of fashion and laugh at those trying to be so cool in his footsteps.

Oh gosh, he was the original hipster.

He briefly wondered where the superhero t-shirts were when he realised that, well, the Avengers would come out in fifteen years and there were none. No cool ones at least, or Batman. The despair was real. And in fifteen years – if he was alive, Stiles wasn’t sure if it was worth it – he would be closer to forty. Forty. He would, and was, old enough to be his own dad and it would have been horrifying to see him trying to be cool and wear those shirts and oh gosh he was going to be the weird uncle no one ever liked or thought was crazy.

He was going to become a less murderous (maybe, hopefully) and infinitely less stylish version of Peter. No, worse, he was going to become Finstock.

Stiles let out a strangled noise straight out of a dying cat.

Yeah, he would off Kate at some point, either when she finally hit the crazy train or annoyed him to the point of no longer giving a fuck, and then he would off himself when all was said and done and everything was sunshine and rainbows. Sounds like a solid fucking plan. No one deserved this amount of self-awareness.

No one.
He comfort bought himself a couple of plaid shirts before he wept and also bought clothes that would have made Lydia proud. He had to save himself before he became the next – or was it the original now, oh gosh – Finstock. He would never be able to forgive himself if that ever became true.

Stiles saw the woman following him give him a big thumbs-up when he came out of the store. At least he would look pretty at his funeral. With the money he had just spent on clothes it would be a crime not to.

He sighed and stuffed the bags in the car and pondered where to go next. He wasn’t hungry; it had been essentially destroyed by the realisation of what his future consisted of. He wasn’t even busy yet since his plan was to break into Deaton’s during the night and he didn’t want to alert the man or the pack of what he had planned. His eyes caught sight of a park with an ice cream parlour and, hell, he’d take it.

He deserved something sweet.

Stiles bought himself the biggest cone they had and filled it with chocolate and more chocolate and sprinkles and every other topping they had. He saw the kids at the park watch him in awe when he balanced with the huge cone and grinned. He couldn’t enjoy those new flavours he had once loved but chocolate was always a good choice. And sprinkles.

He sat on a bench and dug in. So good. If there was something good in the world left, it was chocolate and ice cream and chocolate ice cream.

Stiles was so lost in his world that he didn’t even notice when someone sat next to him. He was, however, forced out of his thoughts when someone poked him in the ribs. He looked at the person and stared.

And stared.

It was the woman who had followed him. And he actually recognised her.

“You must be Stiles!” she chirped, and smiled at him brightly. He gaped, feeling a heart attack coming at any moment now.

“Um, what?” he asked, voice hoarse and his heart beating madly.

“I thought I sensed something strangely familiar but I thought at first that it couldn’t be! My son was having a day off with his father! But then I saw you and I just had to follow you! And there you were, with your moles and everything, and I knew I wasn’t crazy. So, what brought you to the past, love?” Claudia jabbered rapidly and promptly stole his ice cream.

Stiles couldn’t help staring. He was chatting with his dead – or not so dead – mother and she was healthy and glowing and, and-

She was just like he remembered her being before the frontotemporal dementia-

“How did you-?”

“Well, honey, like I said, your moles-”

“No, I mean, how did you-”

“Sense you? Oh! It’s all about your potential, to use magic, I mean” she smiled and gave him his ice cream back. He took it absently, taking a few bites before she stole it again. Apparently they were
sharing it now. Well, his germs were hers to begin with. “You are practically leaking it. Why aren’t you controlling it? It’s a wonder you get anything done! You are probably attracting supernatural like a beacon! Get it? Because we are in Beacon Hills!” Claudia laughed brightly but then frowned. “Who taught you? If it was me then I have to have a few words with myself!”

“No!” he yelped. “I didn’t-, you didn’t-, I mean-”

Claudia hushed him. Stiles fell quiet.

His mother, oh my gosh.

“Start from the beginning-, no wait, don’t, I don’t want to know why I wasn’t there to teach you, I was dead, wasn’t I? Damn it, shit, I was trying to cut my cursing, fuck-,” she cursed and Stiles broke into a hysterical laugh. After a moment, his mother joined in.

“Alright, so I’m dead. I guess I do need to know something to at least ensure little you will be able to get his training after his awakening.”

Stiles blinked, face blank. Claudia groaned.

“Don’t tell me, I wasn’t there for that either?! It’s the highlight of every parent!”

“You died when I was nine,” Stiles said quietly. “You had frontotemporal dementia.”

“I had what?” she pursed her lips. “Well, I need to go get tested. No wonder you know nothing then. My family, we have this thing we call ‘spark’. It’s basically-”

“So, Deaton wasn’t bullshitting that?”

“Deaton? The vet? He knows?”

“You didn’t know he knows?”

“Of course not! We don’t go and introduce ourselves to just anyone!” Claudia huffed.

“Deaton’s a druid.”

“Oh, that might explain it. Wait! Is he an emissary too?” his mother took his astonishment as a confirmation. “You’re kidding! We have a werewolf pack here too? Damn, I mean damn! I thought I knew everything about this little town of ours! Don’t tell me who they are, I want to see if I can find out myself!”

“O- okay,” Stiles blinked rapidly. This definitely wasn’t how he had thought his first day in the past would go. “Um, so you were talking about the spark?”

“What? Oh yes!” Claudia clapped her hands. “It’s the ability to use magic. Or potential, I guess, is more accurate. Spark in itself doesn’t do much but when you add in belief in your skill,” she waved her hand wildly, accidentally dropping the rest of Stiles’ melting ice cream, “that’s what we’re talking about!”

“Deaton practically just gave me mountain ash and told me to be a spark that ignites it,” Stiles said. His mother huffed.

“Well, wasn’t that vague.” Stiles snickered and nodded in assent. Claudia grinned. “He wasn’t wrong, though. We need to believe we can do something. It’s easiest to do magic when we are in a desperate situation because then it just has to work, you know? It’s much harder to do when you try
to believe in yourself in a normal setting. Like, I’m no good at it, really. I only work my magic in the kitchen and when I’m teaching. It adds that little something when I ‘believe’ really hard my students can do something.”

Stiles smiled softly. His mom had been the best teacher there was, and many of her former students had come to pay respects when she had passed.

“What about runes?” he asked.

“You know about them but not everything else? I need to have a word with this vet of yours. Runes are basically just how we anchor our spells, or our belief. A certain symbol to mean we can do something rather than using an elaborate and long word mumbo jumbo that can get us killed,” Claudia reached over and took Stiles’ hand in hers. He made a small sound.

She was real. She was very, very real, and not a figment of his imagination and sugar rush.

“Whatever happened, belief in our potential gets us everywhere,” she smiled. “Believe in yourself, Stiles, and you can do anything.”

It sounded just so much like the mother he remembered that Stiles broke down and cried. He was quickly embraced by the woman he had missed over half his life and he clung to her. She hummed and hushed him, and he just-

He just wept.

Stiles didn’t know how long he sobbed but, eventually, his tears stopped. It had to be a while since no kids were present in the park anymore. Claudia passed him a tissue and he blew his nose. Loudly.

“There, there,” she gave him one last squeeze and moved further away. She still didn’t let go of his hand which Stiles was pathetically grateful about. “I’m not going to ask what happened in the future to make you come back but I trust that it was bad. But you’re here now, and that is okay.”

“I don’t even have an identity here,” Stiles croaked and blew his nose again. Claudia handed him the whole tissue package.

“Then you just fake it till you make it and find someone to hack you into the system! Or something. I heard that’s possible on those fancy ass computers.”

Stiles choked on a laugh. “Just wait. There’ll be laptops there someday.”

“Lap-whatnow? Lap top? Shirts used as skirts? How did we get there?”

Stiles snorted at Claudia’s confused expression. “Laptops. They are these ‘fancy ass computers’ that are small and light enough that you can put them on your lap and type away.”

“That is fancy,” Claudia nodded, “A lot fancier than using a top as a bottom. I can’t wait to see one of those. I’m sorry to cut this a little short, dear, but I need to get going soon. Little you and Noah are coming back from their little trip to the Sacramento in an hour or so and I need to finish dinner.”

“I-, of course. I’m sorry I kept you-,” Stiles said hastily but was interrupted with a rather stern, “Don’t you dare finish that sentence, mister!”

His mouth clacked shut.

“Yes, ma’am.”
“Call me mom, or maybe Claudia. We might get a few weird looks if you called me mom in front of everyone!” she laughed. Stiles frowned, and looked at her more closely. Her hair was still long and kind of bushy, her skin was clean and wrinkle-free and her smile-

Wait.

“How old are you again?” he blurted out. Claudia sniffed.

“Did I raise a hooligan out of you? Where are your manners!”

“I mean, oh my gosh, I’m about your age!” Stiles did a mental calculation. “You’re only two years older than I am! I can’t-, you’re-”

“Hush,” she waved her hand and Stiles fell silent again. It seemed he kept being steamrolled over by his mom a lot. But still.

His mother. 2 years. Holy sh-

“Do you have a phone?”

Stiles shook out of his thoughts. “Not yet. I was thinking of buying one.”

“Then let’s go get you one. I want your number and a promise you’ll keep in touch. While we are at it, you can tell me more about this Deaton of yours. He sounds a bit fishy.” Then Claudia proceeded to drag him away from the park and into the closest electronics store. They gained a lot of dark looks from the people around them, and Stiles belatedly realised that because of the lack of large age gap, it could look like Claudia was cheating on Noah, Beacon Hill’s beloved deputy, with a strange hobo who still had an iced tea stain on his shirt and was wearing an offensive leather jacket.

Well. He was leaving the town tomorrow, so that one he was more than glad to leave on his mother’s shoulders. He rather suspected, though, that she gave no fucks at all.

And that was how Stiles ended up with a new (old, so old, he wanted his touch screen back) cell phone and Claudia’s number – or rather, their landline number, oh gosh, landline – with an order to call anytime he wanted and at least once a month. He also gained a partner in crime to break into Deaton’s office later that night.

All in a day’s work.

***

Stiles yawned. He was tired. It had taken little effort to break into Deaton’s. He didn’t even have any sort of security, for humans anyway, besides a lock and Stiles had been a master at lock picking by the time he was thirteen. He had been adequate before that but the true test had come when he had snuck into the Sheriff’s station just to see if he could.

Spoilers, he did it and he didn’t even get caught.

They didn’t get caught there either, and Stiles left with books he had never seen before and a smile on his face. He absently patted his pocket where his brand-new Nokia was, just waiting to be used to call the only number he had saved there that mattered.

He wasn’t about to call Gerard for anything else than to drain his bank account.

“We are officially crossing the Beacon County line!” Kate screamed in pure delight. Stiles rolled his
eyes and made a show of rubbing his ear. Kate huffed but lowered her voice, thank fuck. “You know what? We need to celebrate this!”

“Like how?” he asked.

“I don’t know but we need to do something!” Kate frowned, and then brightened. “No, I do! See that hitchhiker? We are going to stop and offer him a ride!”

Stiles looked at the side of the road and, indeed, there was a man there with his thumb pointing at the direction they were going. What the heck. Since they were leaving the Hellmouth – a reference he could actually use! Buffy in its natural, original glory! He was going to be the best at predicting what was going to happen in each season, all will be jealous –, they could at the very least take someone else with them.

He slowed down and gave the man a quick onceover. He looked around Stiles’ age, maybe a year or two younger if he wasn’t totally off his game, and quite handsome. Gorgeous, even, and those blue eyes of his tickled something at the back of his mind but he ignored it. He scrolled down the window, parking on the side of the road.

“Where you heading?” he called out. The man jogged to catch up, and Stiles managed to get an even better look at him.

Wow.

He was totally Stiles’ type.

Where had he been all his life?! Wait, in the past, never mind.

“Anywhere but here,” the man answered, voice low and rough, ringing pleasantly in his ears. Stiles quirked his brows, just barely managing not to drool. He would applaud himself later for keeping it cool. Those muscles should be illegal. And that neck. And those arms.

“That’s-, um, pretty vague.”

“My family’s being unbearable and I need a break. Unfortunately, my sister crashed my car two weeks ago, so I can’t exactly use that,” the man said flippantly, flexing his arms just right.

Stiles glanced at Kate who gave him a thumbs-up. Apparently the man passed her assessment. Maybe having a hunter with him wouldn’t be a total disaster, even if it was Kate. Of course, she could just think the man as a soulmate or something but if he turned out to be a murderer, then at least Stiles could say he was murdered by a pretty person with arms, probably ready to crash his windpipe and everything. After he had thrown Kate at him, of course.

“Hop in.” He jerked his head, and the man smiled slowly. Okay, he wasn’t just pretty, he was pretty damn gorgeous and that smirk of his told Stiles he knew exactly what he had just thought. Cocky, too. Maybe that wouldn’t be just his personality.

Yeah, it had been a while since Stiles had gotten laid. Sue him.

The man climbed to the back of the car, dragging a bag with him. It didn’t look like it had much in it – it looked like it was rather hastily packed – but at least it didn’t take much space.

Stiles started the car again, and drove off to join the motorway that would lead them out of California.
Bye bye, hellhole!

“So, family, huh,” Kate said, striking up a conversation right away. Stiles saw the man grin from the mirror.

“The worst.”

She snorted. “Want to bet? You haven’t seen mine yet.”

“Try living in the shadow of your perfect sister and cousins while being the youngest of the generation by a decade or so, and also being closer in age to their children, and see if anyone will take you seriously ever again.”

“Try living as the youngest child but trained to take over the family business over your perfectly capable brother and never being let out alone while being told to become more independent.”

“Being the youngest chafes, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah! Why can’t anyone leave us alone?”

“My thoughts exactly.”

Aaaand they were instantly bonding. Great. The soulmate theory seemed more and more valid every-

“Do you have a name we could use? I’m Kate.”

“You can call me Peter.”

Stiles didn’t know what his reaction was exactly but it had to have been spectacular since the man whipped his head around at breakneck speed to stare at him. Stiles suspected he looked rather wild and his knuckles were white as he gripped the wheel tight but he just offered the man a blasé smile before focusing back on the motorway they had just reached and which had no place to stop anymore.

Peter fucking Hale.

The fuck was his life?!

***

Well.

At least Stiles now knew where he had been his whole life.

Fucking there already.

Chapter End Notes

See me stressing, see me writing, ahaha. I have no idea where half of this chapter came from but I'm pretty happy with it. Claudia just steamrolled over, like, 'I'm going to be here, and you can't stop me!' See where Stiles gets his attitude and leaps of faith from? And the cursing, gosh, it's all genetic.
But now they are off on the road trip of their lives! Let's see where they end up at, haha.
In which there is bonding, things are weird and Peter rocks his V-necks

Chapter Notes

I have a presentation to hold on my thesis topic and research tomorrow <3 It sucks, a lot.
Have a new chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Peter and Kate got along like a house on fire.

*Ha.*

See what he did there? Because Kate-

Alright, Stiles should just get another prescription of Adderall and fast. He would do that the moment he had his identity back – or created – because he did not trust the pills he could have gotten from the streets. He had once tried that in a fit of desperation but Scott had taken one sniff at them and thrown them away, ordering him to never do that again.

Stiles liked to think that he had gotten wiser since.

Current situation discounted, of course.

Even with Kate badgering him to turn to Nevada and Las Vegas, Stiles had ignored her and driven past the intersection. She had pouted for half an hour straight until Peter had had enough of that, or the passing scenery – he still hadn’t told Stiles where he wanted to be dropped off, oh gosh, what if he never wanted to leave Stiles would never be able to get rid of him if he imprinted on him or something and it would be like the creepy garage scene all over again maybe since Peter was not a cute little duckling –, and started telling Kate tales of his college adventures and anecdotes instead. She was mollified but demanded Stiles to swear they would drop by the City of Sin at some point of their travels.

Stiles did, against all his instincts, if only to get her to shut up. He would probably regret it later but his ears rang. Also, his mind was full of nothing but trying to imagine Peter as a frat boy. He wasn’t really able to coincide that with what he knew of him, and Stiles had a wild imagination. It just- it didn’t really seem like him.

Now or before.

Peter was apparently doing pre-law, or had been doing at any rate. *That* he could imagine; it fit him, kind of. He was always quick to attack or defend when needed but he also preferred research to acting without any knowledge on a situation. Peter was currently on the last stretch of his Bachelor’s degree at *Yale,* the fuck, and was expected to go for the next step immediately afterwards but, as he explained Kate, he was tired of working his ass of for a degree that would benefit the family but didn’t really interest him all that much. He had gotten into a row with his sister over it – apparently their parents were dead, wow, what a shocker, was that offensive? It probably was – and ran off during the early hours of morning the next day without telling a soul. He needed a break, he said, from everything and he would not get that at home or at Yale. Peter had been waiting for a car to come by when Stiles and Kate had driven up to him and offered him a ride.
Kate laughed at him being in the middle of nowhere during the early morning hours. Peter just defended himself by saying he had made sure he was outside the county border just in case since Talia’s authority ended there.

Stiles drove in silence as he quickly realised in growing horror that it really didn’t. When the Hales would have realised Peter had left, they had to have come after him and found nothing but the stench of gas and the fleeting scent of Peter’s; that this, in their eyes, would count as kidnapping because *Kate and he were counted as hunters.*

Shiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit.

It didn’t even matter that Peter left on his own and wasn’t even restricted. That ‘county border’ had no effect either, even if Talia couldn’t use her authority as an alpha outside her territory. He was in a car, ‘defenceless’, with a pair of ‘hunters’. That was the only thing that mattered to any wolf pack there was and, from what Stiles had heard, the Hales were pretty influential and had *a lot of allies.*

They had been fucked before they had even passed the county border properly.

Thanks a lot, Peter.

Thanks so fucking much.

And he probably wouldn’t even be able to avoid them because the Argents would get suspicious if he didn’t interact with – or hunt – any supernatural creatures, or excluded werewolves as they were one of the more populous species and easiest to find, and if he would just use the money for a holiday in Mexico for the rest of his life or something which, by the way, seemed more and more attractive every passing minute.

“Yale, huh?” Stiles mused aloud instead, trying to calm his rabbiting heart. Second day in the past and his life was turning into something he couldn’t have imagined even in his wildest dreams. He swore he could feel Peter’s eyes on his back. He checked the mirrors, and yep, there were those blue eyes of his, focused on him. Peter could probably sense how nervous Stiles was. Shit, it was *Peter,* how on earth did he end up with the one Hale that could possibly figure out there was something very much wrong with Stiles being, well, Stiles? And there? *In the past?* Stiles was repeating that too much but hell, he was really in the past and he still couldn’t really believe it. His mother was alive! And *Kate* was a bratty teenager and Peter was sane, he was *sane and in college!*

Gosh, had the hitchhiker been any of the cousins Peter had mentioned or Talia or literally anyone else and Stiles wouldn’t have any problems with it, but no, no dice. It was Peter. It just had to be Peter.

The only werewolf who had intentionally come between Stiles and danger-

Stiles shuddered.

-and lost his life as the consequence.

It was something Stiles could never repay the man for. Gosh, they hadn’t even had a particularly good relationship to begin with! Sure, they snarked and bickered and researched together and tolerated each other but there was far too much history between them to ever, well, become anything closer, like friends instead of just being pseudo-friends or acquaintances or not-really-pack-but-pack-I-guess. With Nemeton fucking up things left and right, and after the whole episode in the Eichen House, the events had shattered whatever humanity Peter had managed to gather together and left him a shell of his former self. Well, a shell of the shell of his former self. In the end, he hadn’t
even cared about being alpha anymore. Too late had Stiles realised it had been Peter’s way of calling for help; how he couldn’t fix himself by himself but needed outside help, and being an alpha was, well, it was one of the easiest methods to gain some ground on that.

It was a miracle he had survived as long as he could, and Stiles could now honestly admit he kind of respected the werewolf for that. It took some serious will to keep on living despite everything he had gone through!

Not to mention, even after he had been recovered from the torture – and it was torture and, okay, Stiles had broken Peter out when he heard what had been done to him, Jesus Christ, Stiles never quite learnt whose bright idea that had been – Derek couldn’t forget Laura’s death, or the trauma of everything that followed on top of the trauma he had accumulated over the years. So, yeah, that side of family was cut off so no healing and balancing pack bond from there, leaving Stiles alone with the almost feral werewolf because after rescuing him, he couldn’t just leave him on his own, alright? Too little too late, maybe, but ugh. And then Cora had started kindling her relationship with her uncle, and things had started to seem good for once but then she had been skewered right in front of Peter’s eyes and all the progress had been lost in a blink of an eye.

The last nail in the metaphorical coffin.

And then the harpies had come, attracted to the shiny object of the day that had been Stiles, apparently, and Peter had gone and jumped into the fray and torn the naked half-bird-half-woman-things apart and then chuckled – chuckled – himself to death in Stiles’ arms. Sometimes he still could see the blood paint his hands.

How was Stiles supposed to be neutral to Peter after experiencing all that?! He was going to slip up so bad at some point, holy shit. It would doom the whole world! Wasn’t that that always happened in science fiction?

Except, well, his mom already knew about that and nothing had happened. Yet.

Although Stiles suspected Peter would pull something out of his ass just to be contrary.

“How’s that working for you? A poncey university like that.”

“Excepting that it’s a miserable place with closed-minded overachievers and that I hate it there?” Stiles saw Peter raise his brows. He shrugged as nonchalantly as he could, trying to shake the images off his mind.

“Sure.”

“Never been better.”

The answer was so full of shit that Stiles couldn’t help snorting. It was a little humourless and more bitter than anything else but it was a start.

Also, did he mention that this Peter was attractive as fuck too? Not that he hadn’t been in the future too, gosh, those arms only got better with age and have you seen that chest, but this Peter? This Peter was closer to Stiles’ age and there were no bad-wrong vibes there. There was no ‘do you want the bite?’ scene to cloud his mind. There was no history, no blood, no deaths, nothing. Well, there was, but it was not this Peter, no matter how he still looked like he still wanted to take a bite out of Stiles or just press those teeth against his nape or something and, truthfully, Stiles might not even have minded that that much.
Gosh, Stiles was so screwed up.

“What would you do then, if not studying law? You seem like the type to enjoy screwing people over.” Like you did on, like, multiple occasions.

Peter’s brows arched even higher. Kate’s did too.

What? Was that too much?

“I don’t know how I’ve managed to give you that sort of picture already…” Peter trailed off. He subtly rounded his shoulders, seemingly to stretch, but Stiles recognised that stance immediately. It was pretty much burnt into his mind. Peter was ready to pounce at the first sign of threat.

Ooooh, it was too much. Shit. Abort, abort-

“It’s just, you know, lawyers? Always going to toss people into jail for the fun of it, and arguing about the stupidest things ever, like if whatever Mr. Smith had for breakfast had anything to do with the case, and-,” Stiles rambled, laughing nervously. They were still on the motorway. If Peter decided to attack them in the middle of it-

Well.

Stiles had actually managed to survive a similar situation before, probably thanks to his spark if his mother was to be trusted and not just because of his luck which should have raised some warning signs before since it was absolutely shitty. Kate would be toast though, and so would Stiles because hunters? When you throw them a bone, relentless, they fucking are, and Stiles needs no Yoda to tell him that.

He had fucking hands-on experience on it, and do you want an essay to go with that? He’ll write you a fucking thesis-

“Oh yeah, your father was a police officer, wasn’t he?” Kate exclaimed, suddenly cheerful again. Her mood changes were making Stiles dizzy. “You must have heard your share of fun stories too!”

Peter relaxed, leaning back against his seat again.

Stiles blinked.

Wh-, ooooooh, the eternal rivalry between the law and order or something.

“Y- yeah!” he laughed. He hoped it didn’t sound too fake. Peter didn’t tense up, so maybe it didn’t. “Sheriff, actually. He hated the district attorney more than anyone else. Always glaring at each other, they were. Had they not been married to other people and happily so, I could have called that UST like no other! Ugh, yuck, no thoughts like that, my gosh, my dad, oh shit-”

Kate frowned. “UST?”

“Oh, unreleased sexual tension. It’s, like, a term. An acronym. To use. For things.”

“For things,” Peter snorted and didn’t even bother hiding his laugh. Stiles decided to suffer it manly in silence, listening in slight awe. It was mocking, sure, but he hadn’t heard him laugh like that in years. It was kind of mind-blowing.

“UST, huh,” Kate mused, flicking her eyes at Stiles, but the movement was gone before Stiles could determine if he hadn’t just imagined it. Her face, however, had the biggest shit-eating grin on it than
Stiles had ever seen. “So, Sheriff’s kid, tell me this. Have you ever been arrested by daddy dearest?”

Stiles scoffed, but glad for the change of subject. “What do you take me for? I was the best child he could have ever asked for!”

“That wasn’t a no,” Peter butted in and, oh gosh, he had that same grin on his face!

“Tell meeee,” Kate whined, trying her best to look earnest and innocent. Stiles huffed a laugh at that, and she pouted. He had Scott for a brother, she had nothing on him. Or Allison. Or Kira, gosh, Kira. Scott, he had learnt to handle, but Kira?

“Nothing happened.”

“That was a lie,” Peter said silkily, hand curling around Stiles’ headrest, far too close for comfort to Stiles’ neck. He seemed rather intent on that, almost like Derek when he was still on his brooding phase in the season one of teenage mutant ninja werewolves and loved to show affection through violence.

Kate turned towards the Peter. “How do you know?”

“Lawyers always do,” came the smooth answer.

Fucking lying liar who lies.

Also, Kate, a werewolf? Hello? How do you not recognise on when he’s literally less than a foot from you? He was seriously starting to doubt that training she had gotten. If she’s serious about being his mentee, then she needs to shape up-


Stiles heart missed a beat. He cursed inwardly.

Peter’s grin grew even wider if that was even possible.

“Kidnap someone, huh…”

Fucking Jackson. Just for that, Stiles would hold onto the leather jacket forever and ever, and rub it over his smug face when he grew out of his diapers.

***

“I don’t think I quite thanked you for picking me up yet.”

Stiles flailed but quickly regained his balance. He turned his head towards Peter who had come out of his motel room, and was now leaning against the railing a few feet away. He was watching him with an amused tilt on his mouth. Stiles hid the book he had been about to study – one of the ones he and his mother had stolen from Deaton – as casually as he could, hugging it against the side Peter couldn’t see it from his vantage point, or at least read what it was about.

“Wow, that actually belongs to your vocabulary?” he blurted out before he could stop it. Peter looked at him strangely for a moment before shaking his head.

“I’m not actually sure what made you think so lowly of me, but yes, ‘thank you’ does belong to my vocabulary actually.”

Stiles flushed, suddenly wrongfooted.
“Sorry,” he said, scratching the back of his head. “You just, you know, remind me of someone I used to know. He was a bit of a bastard and he liked to snark rather than thank, and the basic courtesy didn’t really matter to him much in the end. I didn’t mean to, well-”

“Judge?”

Stiles shrugged. Pretty much, yeah. He was still learning to differentiate the two of them.

Peter flashed him a quick smile. “You can make it up for me. I’ll allow it.”

Stiles’ mouth dropped. Did he hear that correctly? Yeah, he did. He definitely did.

“Allo-, what? Look, I took your pretty little bottom from the curb and dragged it into the state of Arizona. You should be making it up to me!”

“Works for me. Do you want me to make it up for you in your room or mine?”

Something broke in Stiles’ brain. Wait what?

“Wait what?”

Peter actually rolled his eyes at him like he was the slowest person in the world. Stiles took offence at that. “I could see you eyeing me up the whole trip. Don’t pretend you wouldn’t like to have a little bit of this. If I wasn’t myself, I’d like a taste of this, quote, ‘pretty little bottom’. Although, to be honest, nothing about me is ‘little’,” he leered.

Stiles’ flush deepened.

“I didn’t mean, well, I guess, but, like-” Stiles’ eyes wandered as Peter made a sweep over his body. Those arms. And that shirt really didn’t leave much for imagination. And those pants were tight as fuck. They ended up on his face where Stiles could see his trademark smirk.

Oh, fuck him.

“So what if you’re kind of my type,” he pouted. “Doesn’t mean I have to want a piece of you in a backwater motel.”

Peter looked him over. He tsked. Tsked. Twice. Like, what the fuck ever.

“With that attire, you’d probably be happy with the back of a car.”

Jeep actually, but that wasn’t the point.

He missed Roscoe, okay? The SUV just wasn't the same.

“Are you judging my clothing choices?”


Stiles eyed Peter’s low cut shirt – it looked soft – and designer jeans that left little to imagination. He wished he could say the same to him but style had always been Peter’s bitch. Although…

“V-necks? Really, Peter?” he mocked. In answer, Peter flexed his muscles, and Stiles’ eyes dropped to the part of his chest he could see. Immediately afterwards, he cursed, and refused to look at the smug smirk that had to be etched on Peter’s face.
“So… what do you say?” Stiles only now realised that Peter had moved closer to him as he felt a hand caress his cheekbone. He startled, and flailed so much Peter had to take a step back. He actually looked annoyed at that.

“You could repay by, you know, paying for your own motel room?”

Peter shrugged. “I could. Or I could just move in yours.”

Stiles stared at him. Something wasn’t quite right here. The Peter he knew preferred the subtle approach even if he could be blatant when he wanted to be, but this? This was ridiculous, and so unlike him. “Are you trying to get in my pants so I won’t drop you in the middle of nowhere or because you didn’t have the money to pay for a room?”

“Or, I could just like you,” Peter pointed out. That wasn’t a no. Stiles snorted.

“Yeah, pull the other one, it’s got bells on it,” he shook his head. Peter had the gall to look confused. Stiles sighed, waving the hand that wasn’t still awkwardly holding the book.

“Look, we’ve established you’re good-looking, alright? You don’t have to try to rub it against my face. You don’t also have to pay for your upkeep with your body or anything, make yourself step that low. I mean, you must be cut off the family funds since you don’t want them to find you, right?” Peter blinked but haltingly nodded. Stiles allowed a quick smile to grace his features. “It would, of course, be nice if someone was helping to pay for the gas and lodgings but that’s why I have Kate as a tagalong. Her father is paying for me to keep her entertained, so he’s handling the bills I send his way, so to speak.”

“You mean, you aren’t related?”

Stiles opened his mouth, and stopped. “What on earth made you think that?!”

Peter shrugged like his idea wasn’t as stupid as they came, and held his hand up, counting his points one by one. “Two people, not in a relationship, on the road together. You aren’t old enough to be her father, not even close. You don’t act like friends, and while you don’t really, hmm, look alike,” Stiles would bet the nine grands he still had left that he meant to say smell after that pause, “you could have been a cousin or some other distant family. Five-”

“Uh, well, that’s,” Stiles floundered, mind racing and accidentally interrupting Peter, “I guess you could kind of call me a relative of a sort, then? I was recently” – yesterday – “kind of adopted as an honorary member into the family when they found that mine was… non-existent,” he ended lamely.

“You don’t have to explain if you don’t want to,” Peter said although he did look curious to Stiles.

“Thanks, um, yeah. But the point! The point I had was that I understand wanting to get away from things, okay? So, yeah, maybe call your family? Tell them you’re safe and all, maybe in the morning? Even if they seem really annoying now, I bet you guys still care about each other. They have to be worried about you. And then explain how you’re taking some time off, see the whole new world and all?”

This would also score some points for Stiles too!

“And please, don’t try to jump my dick that hard or you’ll hurt yourself! Not that my dick’s that hard for you. I mean, shit, things I never thought I’d say, what the fuck,” Stiles ended up almost eating his last words but fixed that by cheerfully stating, “It’s not like Kate’s father’s wallet will dry out anytime soon! Not that you’re my, you know, kept man as we have so nicely acknowledged. I wasn’t implying-”
Peter smiled and, woah, it was actually genuine. Stiles had to force himself not to rub his eyes because, wow, had he ever seen Peter smile that sincerely before? Apparently not. It made such a difference on his face that Stiles wondered what had made him not share it even as a man barely out of his teens.

“Thank you, Stiles,” he said, and drew Stiles in a-

Hug?

No, this was scenting. This was definitely scenting he was doing. It was what Derek had been doing with Cora, and Scott with most of the pack. Not with Stiles, though, or as much since they already reeked of each other from years of bromance and sharing clothes, so there was no need. They did hug it out a lot but there was no sniffing involved.

Peter let go before Stiles could decide how to react and left, closing the door to his room and leaving Stiles to watch the door in shock.

What was he supposed to think about that?

“Your UST is killing me!” Kate called out, peering from behind her curtains. Stiles startled, dropping his book, and whipped around. He swore he could hear Peter laugh at him.

“You just learned the word, you don’t know how to use it in context!”

“What context do I need? Tension so thick I can barely see through it, check. Sexual content, check. Unreleased? Fucking check, because you’re still outside and he’s inside and no sex is happening to release that tension! Unless you came in your pants.” Kate squinted, tilting her head. Stiles felt vaguely violated as she stared at his crotch. “I can’t see from this light. Come a little closer.”

“I feel violated.”

“Such a delicate flower. Were your little sensibilities hurt? I am so sorry you aren’t getting any tonight. And even when I picked out the prettiest hitchhiker ever!”

Yeah, Stiles definitely heard Peter laugh in his room.

“Whatever you say, princess. I’ll be sure to tell your father all about your promiscuity.”

“And then he’ll send assassins after you for corrupting me.”

Gerard totally would.

Also, corrupting Kate?

“Shouldn’t you be in bed already?” Stiles asked, despairing a little.

Kate grinned impishly, clearly knowing she had won that round and closed the curtains again. Stiles dropped his head. He needed a drink, or at least a decent amount of shuteye.

Well, there went the idea to study those Deaton’s books a little.

Maybe tomorrow night.

Stiles didn’t really hold his breath much on that one.

***
They left the motel early, and hit the nearest gas station for breakfast and to fill up the tank. While drinking his weight in the most awful coffee he had ever had the displeasure to drink – and that included the time Lydia had ‘accidentally’ mixed some of her chemistry chemicals in the water – he also studied the map.

“Are we leaving Arizona?” Kate asked, munching on her sandwich. Stiles shrugged.

“I thought so. I want to go as far from your family as possible, no offence. I’m still not convinced your father won’t send assassins after me anyway.”

Peter tilted his head. “Is there a history there? I thought you said-”

“Yeah, adopted, kind of. Or, you know, a lowly servant to the mighty and powerful. Totally not by choice.”

“I forced him,” Kate said brightly, her hand slowly moving to steal Stiles’ coffee he hadn’t let the girl have. He didn’t need her bouncing off the walls of the car and he was not going to listen to her chatter hours on end. Not that he knew what she was like when on caffeine but he wasn’t taking any risks. “I ran off my private instructors and decided that Stiles is going to be it. So, now while I’m doing my credits on the road, he can take me places!”

Stiles downed the rest of his coffee, and smirked at Kate’s dismayed expression. “She’s a terror, don’t let her ever claim otherwise. She’ll con you to the end of the earth.”

Peter huffed a laugh. “I think I’m safe. Lawyers con people for a living.”

“Is that a challenge?” Kate asked, leaning over the table. Peter flashed his teeth at her. Stiles gaped at the blatantly wolf gesture but Kate just laughed. Was she that ignorant? Or did she just not care?

“I think I can manage.”

“Oh, it’s so on!”

“Not in my car!” Stiles yelped, drawing their attention. “Duke it out anywhere else but not in the car!” he paused, and then rephrased, “Duke it out somewhere where I won’t need to pay for any repairs.”

Kate rolled her eyes at him. Rude. “No fun, isn’t he?”

“Dreadfully dull,” Peter nodded, sighing dramatically. He gestured at his outfit that, again, revealed indecent amount of his chest. “And here I thought I could sweep his feet from under him. Alas, it was not meant to be.”

“He may be a little slow on the uptake,” Kate pointed out, and grinned, “I’m sure you can work it out.”

Peter bowed pretentiously. “Why, thank you for the vote of confidence. I shall endeavour to do my best not to fail your trust.”

“You two do know I can hear you, right?” Stiles asked dryly. He swatted Peter’s hand away that came close enough to possibly steal his muffin. It was his breakfast, dammit.

“What am I going to do? Now he knows all about my nefarious plans!” Peter gasped theatrically. Kate snickered into her hands, eyes glittering with mirth. Stiles sighed, and shook his head.
“Why am I the adult here?” he moaned, and gathered the map up. He’d like to get to Texas or maybe even Oklahoma before sundown.

“You are, wait, are you the eldest here?” Kate blinked, and turned back to Peter. “How old are you?” she interrogated.

“Twenty-one,” he answered easily. She turned triumphantly to Stiles.

“You are the old man here.”

“Twenty-three is not old!” he protested.

“Don’t worry,” Peter said, patting Stiles shoulder consolingly while ducking his head. Again with the scenting, Stiles sighed. “Older men have a certain charm, don’t they?”

Well, you did, Stiles thought, and flushed. “I am not old,” he said petulantly, trying to cover his reddened cheeks by hurrying his steps.

Kate sniggered behind him. He was pretty sure he heard Peter snort too.

Ugh.

He should have just left them to the station and crossed the border. Alone. For that holiday.

They climbed the car and, to his surprise, he found himself as the only person in the front. Peter had automatically climbed in the back, and Kate had followed him in her eagerness to hear more of his stories about college. Stiles quickly started the car before either of them could change their minds and come to the front.

He could now dominate the radio! Also, alone here, up on the top, so nice view here.

Although, yay, the 90’s music. Oh joy. Were Spice Girls a thing yet? He would have loved to blast Wannabe at them at full volume. Google would have come handy. And technology overall. Stiles glanced at his phone which should have belonged in a museum. He felt like crying.

No one understood his pain!

He absently listened to Peter and Kate chatter as he drove. It was… weird, to see the two get along so well. It was like a match made in hell or something. He could already see them taking over the world together, or at least make Stiles’ life hell.

“-and then I told Justin that, no, I was not going to be following his instructions because that would ‘damage my nails’. You should have seen his face! He quit the next day. Apparently two weeks with a ‘spoiled little girl’ was too much. Of course, when he complained to my father, he couldn’t prove anything and was the laughing stock right up until he requested another long-term mission! And that’s how I lost my second mentor.”

“…physical education, I take it?”

“Yep. Funny thing is, everyone knows I have no problems with running through woods and everything. That guy just had been away for a while, and wanted to prove himself so he turned into a macho in front of all, or tried to at least.”

“One of the more annoying frat members was like that. We called him ‘little dick’ behind his back.”

Stiles heard Kate snicker.
“The one before Stiles was called Richard. He named him Dick. Like, he was so frustrating too-”

Stiles frowned. Something felt… off.

He kind of felt like they were followed. Or stalked. Or watched. Or something.

But despite the sparkly bits, he was totally human and had no supernatural senses. He glanced at the mirror but noted that Peter didn’t seem to have noticed anything. Stiles wouldn’t put it past him, if only because the mountain ash and wolfsbane in the trunk had to have been hidden and Stiles had used his runes on it to mess with people’s senses. Maybe the proximity could affect the rest of the car too?

Or he was just acting, that could be it too. Stiles wouldn’t put that past him either, and he would be wise to do that too. Although his scenting had been unsubtle as fuck.

Peter met his eyes, and, wow, that was a smoulder there.

The car suddenly felt very hot.

Stiles suddenly forgot what he had been doing and just focused on the road. He had a very confused making of a crush. Well, at least an attraction. Okay, the attraction was there already. It was weird, it was Peter. Like, the same bad touch creeper Peter who had creeped the hell out of him for years.

The same Peter who made advances at him last night and made Stiles gain his morals back if only for a second.

The same Peter who died for him.

The same Peter who was now twenty years younger and hot and nothing like his future self except he was, he was exactly the same but not broken and very much no longer a shell of something like… this.

It was all very confusing, and Stiles needed to get a handle on himself and sort himself out.

Fuck.

“-and then I lifted him up, and I swear, the stench was horrid. I wanted to curl into a ball and never come out again.”

“He couldn’t have been that bad!”

“Have you ever smelt a mix stale beer, vomit and the strongest perfume layered thrice over after not showering for three days? That’s what it smelt like.”

“That still sounds like you’re overexaggerating.”

“Listen here, Katie-”

“Who is a Katie?!”

“Some people’s noses are just more sensitive-”

“Not that sensitive!”

“You do know he’s a werewolf, right?”
Silence fell upon the car.

No one spoke. No one even *breathed*.

Stiles frowned, checking what was wrong with the two. Kate was staring at Stiles, and then Peter with a shell-shocked expression while Peter had a similar look while he was staring solely at Stiles. He tried to recall what could have happened to make them, wait, did he just-

Well, shit.

At least that answered him some of the questions he had of Kate’s education and Peter’s formerly weirdly relaxed air around them.

And that’s when the wendigo attacked.

Chapter End Notes

In Peter's defence, Stiles was being a confused duck. He just wanted some of that bod, and he definitely wasn't selling himself. While making himself indispensable - or at least desired - companion was a consideration, Peter's a healthy, young werewolf who doesn't have to worry about STDs, and Stiles is hot even while wearing plaid. Pretty much win-win for Peter. He was very flattered by how Stiles was thinking of his best, though, which is why he didn't push it anymore (and it raised Stiles' points from being just a random fuck to, well, possibly something else, even if Stiles didn't actually mean for that to happen, hahaha).

;D

By the way, I low-key love Kate. I think I'm going to enjoy writing her the most. Maybe.
In which there’s fire, things are surprisingly good and Stiles starts a diary

Chapter Notes

Um, can I say ‘overwhelmed’? Thanks all for the support, my heart still hasn't recovered :)

I hope you'll enjoy this chapter too :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“SHIT!” Stiles yelled as the wendigo hit the car and they almost swerved off the road. His heart was pounding and his blood was probably turning into pure adrenaline which was a bad, bad thing because hell yes for staying alive but hell no for making him more prone to accidents and hadn’t he had enough of those already? A heart attack was definitely on its way, hello, it’s red light, stay away, you’re unwanted, bye bye. A quick look at the mirror showed him how Kate was shielding herself from a possible attack – the wendigo almost broke the glass on her side – and Peter’s eyes were shining-

Gold?

Stiles blinked rapidly, mind blank for a second, and he had to take another look. Gold. Peter’s eyes were gold. Holy shit.

That if anything proved that his life had turned into the Twilight Zone.

Although it did raise an interesting question of whether Peter’s eyes were gold before or after Laura and now is not the time, brain!

Stiles tried to keep the car on the road but it was hard when the wendigo kept trying to run them off road. Thank fuck for safety belts. Never drive without them, kids.

“Kate!” he yelled. She peeked from behind her arms. “Where are your weapons?!”

Peter’s faint ‘what’ was drowned under Kate’s, “In the trunk! Where else??”

“Do you have anything on you?!”

“Well, a couple of daggers will do nothing for something like whatever that is!”

“It’s a wendigo!”

Peter cursed very loudly. Stiles vehemently agreed on the sentiment. Kate didn’t seem that happy about it either if her expression meant anything.

“How do we kill it?!” Peter demanded, his hands turning into claws right in front of Kate’s face. Her eyes almost bulged out of their sockets.

“We need fire!” Stiles told them, eyeing the way the wendigo kept up with them, and just about missed them when it – he? she? who cares, it was trying to kill them! – tried to push the car over, clawing at the paint. A plan was slowly coming together in his mind. He took a few deep breaths
before steeling himself. His heart rate slowed with each inhale and exhale until it was like nothing had ever happened and they weren’t chased by a creature with needle sharp teeth and taste for their flesh.

“Peter!” he snapped. The werewolf stiffened and his golden eyes flashed, meeting Stiles’. “I need you to keep it busy until Kate can get her gun. Kate!” the girl’s eyes sharpened, and she nodded shortly. “No shooting anything else but the wendigo. Got it?”

“Yes, sir!”

Stiles faltered for a fraction of a second before collecting himself. “We can hash out everything later when we know there is a later!”

“What are you doing?” Peter asked, readying himself to jump off the car at a moment’s notice. Stiles smiled grimly.

“Hold tight.”

Just then the wendigo jumped again, and Stiles braked so hard that, had none of them had their belts on, they would have been sent through the front glass. The wendigo flew over them, having used too much force on its jump to be able to stop mid-air, and then Peter was free and out, running to meet the cannibalistic creature.

Kate scrambled outside and popped up the trunk, immediately sighting her gun in the middle of all their crap. She had just enough time to load it when she paled, and-

“Stiles! There’s another one!”

Stiles, who had just managed to jump off the front seat without braining himself, flew around.

“What?!”

There was.

And it was running straight at them with the highest speed Stiles had ever seen a person or a creature, supernatural or not, run.

“Shit,” he cursed. “Shitshitshitshitshit-”

“Now’s not the time!” Peter yelled, dodging another swipe and trying to gain an upper hand. He was already bloody, but his wounds kept healing faster than the wendigo’s did. He wasn’t getting tired, yet, but Stiles knew from experience that wendigos’ stamina lasted a lot longer than even werewolves’.

“Kate!” the girl was pale as a ghost, and her hands were shaking a little. It was during that moment that Stiles truly realised how young she really was. Kate was fifteen – a little, sheltered girl, thrust into a world she had been trained for but not trained enough to even recognise a fucking werewolf when one was sitting right next to her. It made Stiles suddenly angry. She was prepared, sure, but she wasn’t prepared.

“Katherine Argent!” Kate snapped and stood at attention. Stiles drew a deep breath, and then continued, “Keep it away from you! You have a gun, it has only its claws! If it gets too close, blast it away again! Trust in your aim and let it fly free!”

Kate flicked her eyes at him for barely a moment before she visibly steeled herself and nodded. Her hands were no longer trembling and she took aim under Stiles’ eyes.
She fired.

She missed but not by a lot, and the wendigo had to stop on its tracks. The noise it let out was inhuman and hurt Stiles’ ears but Kate didn’t let it bother her. Her mouth was drawn in a tight line, concentration entirely on the creature.

She didn’t miss the second time, even if the bullets only seemed to slow it down.

Stiles spared one last look at Peter – still managing but it was clear that he was losing blood – and he rushed to the passenger’s side where he had put the gas ganister he had bought from the station that morning. He would have thrown it onto the backseat if both Peter and Kate hadn’t claimed those seats. Not relevant. He dragged it out, and made a split-second decision to turn back towards Kate.

Peter was strong. Stiles could trust him to last.

Kate was a little girl compared to either of them. Stiles would bet all his money, no, this fucking gas ganister, which he at the moment treasured far more than Gerard’s bank account, that Peter had been dealing with territory disputes already. Derek had once mentioned, after both Cora and Peter had died in the future, drunk off his ass that Peter had been their pack’s enforcer, and had held the title unofficially – and later officially – since he was a teenager and got into more trouble than his and Talia’s parents knew how to handle.

So.

Yes.

Stiles trusted Peter to be able to handle himself, even this younger, golden-eyed version of him.

He climbed to the hood of the car, and watched as the wendigo slowly but surely managed to trap Kate. She looked close to panicking. He opened the ganister.

Stiles took aim. He drew in a deep breath and-

He threw it.

It had to work.

The creature let out a screech as it was doused in gas. Stiles blinked, taken aback by how successful that had been. The hole hadn’t been big enough to have completely doused the creature and the angle had been weird, but he did it.

Wow.

He was pulled from his thoughts when Kate shot the wendigo until her gun clicked ominously, and she drew a hitched breath. She looked around wildly, seeing that her way to the ammunition was blocked by the creature that seemed ready to tear into her and leave nothing behind.

“Kate!” her head snapped to Stiles. His lighter was lit. “Run!”

She did.

And the creature blew up in flames.

The noises drew the attention of the wendigo still left. The screech it gave out was lower but filled with hate. It left Peter alone, bloody and bruised and holding his side, and focused its attention on-
Stiles.

It was looking straight at Stiles whose arm was still in the position of having just thrown a lit lighter and who was looking at it with a deer-in-the-headlights kind of expression, swaying on top of the car. It screamed for revenge and threw itself on Stiles faster than he could react and-

He fell on the ground, hard, barely managing not to hit his head on the concrete. He could hear Peter and Kate call his name but he could only focus on keeping the creature above him from cutting him in half. Everything seemed to slow down. Stiles’ eyes met the wendigo’s and he looked into those soulless eyes that looked like they couldn’t see a thing but didn’t even need to see much because its hearing was so much greater than anything else it had, possibly even its claws, and that had been a big trouble during the nights in the preserve and-

Stiles took in a shaky breath. All he could taste was the rotten, stinking smell that was coming from the wendigo’s open mouth. It screeched, and its saliva washed over Stiles face and he puked a little inside his mouth.

The world seemed to stop.

He felt its claws dig into his arms but Stiles, he clenched his eyes shut and-

**Pushed.**

He gasped when he was suddenly freed, and barely a moment later dragged up. He opened his eyes, meeting Peter’s frantic ones. He felt dizzy, and he really, really didn’t want to lose his breakfast. That muffin had been *badass* for a gas station muffin. It deserved better than that.

Stiles slowly turned his head around, and watched as the second wendigo was just-

Lying there, ten feet from Stiles and burnt to a crisp like it had been the one Stiles had lit up earlier which was, by the way, still burning and broadcasting its pain by shrieks that should be hurting his ears but weren’t, he wasn’t registering any noises, and he was pretty sure Peter was trying to talk to him but he just couldn’t hear.

The one which had attacked Stiles was, however, just a husk, dried, as if left to cook in a desert for days, weeks, *years*-

He gasped, his breath dragging in some sweet air, still tainted by smoke and the smell of burning flesh. Suddenly, the world started to move again and a cacophony of everything around them attacked his ear drums at the same time, and he wobbled. He would have crashed on the ground had it not been Peter’s tight grip on him.

“I want a flamethrower,” Kate said, her expression awed as she watched their makeshift bonfire, tonight only, flavour of wendigo burning to death. Stiles sagged against Peter, tired as fuck and despairing of everything.

And then he vomited all over his shoes.

***

“So… you two are hunters,” Peter said carefully, watching over the two of them like they were alien specimen just waiting to be studied. They were all sitting in a diner, after having buried the wendigo corpses and driven off in their need to be as far away from a wendigo-infested area as possible. They did *not* need a repeat performance. Stiles made a face.
“She’s a hunter. I’m just a boring, old human.”

Peter’s eyes flashed at that.

“Hey! Don’t blame it all on me! And that’s not what you said to my father! Or Shannon,” Kate protested, poking at Stiles’ side. He rolled his eyes, still weak from the fight. Peter had taken over the car when it became clear that Stiles just wasn’t in any condition to drive himself. He had lain on the backseat pretty much the whole drive to the diner, with Kate and Peter sitting in the front, exchanging stilted words and awkward silences. Peter even had to help him up, although Stiles had insisted on walking to the building himself. He managed, surprisingly, even if all his energy had been spent and he had just slumped over the nearest booth there was.

It was a surprise they hadn’t been thrown out immediately, considering the smell and their bloody and torn clothes that could only belong to possible serial killers.

“Did you even listen to what I was spouting? Did I ever confirm I was a hunter? Or did you all just assume so because I answered like you expected me to?” he challenged because he had worked too damn hard to create a story that would fool even werewolf if the need arose, accidental as it might have been. It had to be instinct by now.

Well. Werewolves excepting Peter now. Why was Peter always the exception?

Kate opened her mouth but stopped, closing it instead. She scowled, clearly trying to remember every last detail she could about Stiles’ introduction to the Argents.

“You… didn’t,” she said haltingly, before nodding. She grinned widely and couldn’t she just stick to one mood?

“You never actually didn’t!”

“Is that good?” Peter asked, tilting his head and staring at Kate like she was a particularly interesting force of nature. She let out a short laugh.

“I don’t know!” she giggled, slapping Stiles’ shoulder. He winced. He was still sensitive from whatever he had done. “But that’s fucking brilliant! I don’t think anyone’s done that to my father’s face, like, ever!”

“Language,” Stiles said but it made Kate just laugh even harder, which, fair. Stiles didn’t have the cleanest of mouths either so, yeah, he understood the irony. “But they just assumed! Like, I was trained a little by a hunter but I was never inducted into any clans or forced to follow traditions. If anything, I was told things so I could avoid being killed like my father.”

“That’s fascinating,” Peter noted, eyes gleaming. Stiles shrugged. Years ago, after Allison had died and others being supernatural and shit, Chris had taken Stiles under his wing and taught him how to survive in their world from another human’s perspective. Lydia had been given a similar crash course but she still had had her enhanced banshee screams and all so it wasn’t the same. At the time, Stiles had only had vague words from Deaton – who was still alive – and a baseball bat. And after the Tribunal had come, Chris had also given the remaining pack that Hunter Traditions 101 just so they could be able to avoid traps set by the hunters more set in their ways. Like the Tribunal.

Shit load of good it did for them, and it wasn’t even the whole course! Exhibit A, the day before yesterday. Though, to be honest, Chris died before he could finish with the more obscure things, so maybe Stiles can forgive him for that. He might have even forgotten about those. It wasn’t like there were any more Argents to continue the line anyway by that time and who on earth would have thought about time travel? Except Stiles. But even he hadn’t thought it as a serious possibility yet.
Their lunch arrived but Stiles didn’t feel like eating, even if the fries smelt heavenly. He still had to get his energy back and he was hungry, sure, but the smell of Peter’s burger was making him nauseous. Stiles had actually ordered a salad – what the fuck – for himself and a diner salad? Not a particularly good choice but he couldn’t deal with the greasy, little burnt meat they mostly offered. Kate, on the other hand, was happily digging into her pancakes. At least there was that, and she wasn’t feasting on the flesh of her enemies. So to speak. Or rejoicing with beef after the barbequing of-

He gagged.

Stop with that thought!

“I did pick the perfect mentor, then!” Kate mused flippantly as she munched on her lunch. “All these years, I’ve run through whatever mom and father’s men wanted. It’s not like I need more of that. I could just kick back and kick ass!”

“Don’t get overconfident,” Stiles warned, deciding to start on the cucumbers. “You froze before the wendigos today. Twice. Had you been hunting by yourself or, heaven forbid, lead a group, you would have been their dinner along with whoever was with you.”

She sniffed. “Whatever. I wouldn’t have if I’d been expecting it!”

“But you weren’t,” he pointed out, playing with his tomatoes. “And as a hunter, that’s the first-class mistake. Always expect the unexpected. Back to the school with you, and all that.”

“You aren’t even a hunter!”

“But it even seems like I know more about being one than you do,” Stiles said. Kate opened her mouth to protest but he cut in before she could, “Think about it. You may have been trained to shoot every weapon there is and handle all kinds of blades. So? That only makes you a weapon expert, not a hunter. Have you ever even been on a successful hunt before? Tracking down a feral werewolf? Fleshing it out with a vampire? Haggling with a fairy? Dealing with codeless hunters?”

“Well, no, but I wasn’t-” her words died out, and her expression darkened. Stiles nodded.

“Yeah, you weren’t given an opportunity. I know. Sorry. But I have, even if I’m not a hunter myself. So, maybe we can benefit from each other? You save my ass, I tell you everything I know?”

“Although you seemed to be saving our backsides pretty well today,” Peter said, drawing the attention of both Kate and Stiles. “How did you do it?”

“Do what?” Kate asked. Peter quirked his brows.

“You didn’t notice?”

“I watched the wendigo attacking me burn. I wasn’t about to let it surprise me a second time.”

“Good call, I guess. Well, to recap, Stiles here was being pressed down by the other one – it escaped from me when its companion was lit up-”

“I saw that much-”

“But, even without any weapon, he pushed it away and burnt it to a crisp in a matter of seconds.” Peter’s continued over Kate, and his mouth curved. Stiles bit his tongue. “He definitely isn’t just a ‘boring, old human’, or how did you call it again, Stiles?”
Well. Shit.

Bluff called.

Raise?

Fuck it.

Fold.

“I’m a spark,” he announced. Peter’s eyes flashed again, and Stiles could see the intrigue in them. Kate, however, just frowned.

“What’s a spark?”

Stiles finished off his salad, tongue pulsing a little in pain. Couldn’t someone soothe it for him? Wait, no, abort. He didn’t say that aloud, right? No, he didn’t. No one was volunteering or giving him odd looks. Phew. “Didn’t your mother tell you anything about these creatures you are hunting or supposed to interact with?” Kate looked down at her half-finished pancakes.

“She was going to. She was going to let me have the family bestiary after our first successful hunt. It was how she had been trained, so… We were on it when she-”

Well. Shit.

“That explains a lot,” he blurted, and winced. Kate flinched. Crap. “I mean, that sucks, obviously. Sorry, I have a chronic foot-in-the-mouth syndrome as you may have noticed already. If not, well, here’s a freebie. My mom died when I was nine. So,’he grimaced but shook it off. No, she’s alive, she’s still alive here, his father too, even if they are not really his parents, not this time, they were little Stiles’ and he would not deprive him of his parents. Stiles already has his turn, anyway, unfair as it might have been. “But that also explains why you wouldn’t know about these things. Or, well, not really. Shouldn’t your father have explained these things too?”

Kate gave him a look.

“Right, mother supervising training, then stupid mentors, insert me and no daddy dearest, got it. Well, I can finish what your mother started?” he knocked her shoulder awkwardly with his. “We did have a successful hunt, right? Sort of?”

“I don’t think it counts,” she gave him a shallow smile, so he counted it as a victory anyhow. “Starting with sparks?”

Stiles faltered. Where should he even-?

“There’s not a lot known about sparks,” Peter said, leaning forward. Yeah, that was definitely burning curiosity in his eyes. “I’m interested hearing about this too.”

Stiles contemplated it for a moment before deciding to tell them the truth. “To be completely honest, I’m not entirely sure what it all entails either. Like, I got it from my mom – I know that much – but, like I said, she died when I was a child. The only advice I ever got was to literally ‘be the spark’ and to ‘believe in yourself’ from this one really shady guy. So. I’m kind of winging it at the moment. I’ve got a few books but I haven’t had time to go through them.” He paused. “My… mentor, kind of, not the shady guy, told me that being a spark isn’t really a big deal but that it’s more like just having the potential to use magic? And the more you believe in it, the more mojo it has? Maybe. Apparently. It’s a work in progress.”
Peter and Kate stared at him.

“That sounds incredibly sketchy,” Kate announced, shaking her head in disbelief. Peter nodded.

“You were scammed by someone, clearly.”

Stiles huffed indignantly before giving up and barking a slightly bitter laugh. Talk about his life.

“Maybe. But at least I can detect a werewolf and a hunter before they are right next to me, something of which you cannot claim the same, and that’s even without magic.”

Kate bristled while Peter just rolled his eyes.

“It’s not my fault I wasn’t taught—”

“Then you should’ve searched for the answers yourself. Ignorance is not an excuse,” Peter said, cutting in her tirade before it could even start. He continued, “I lived in my family’s library until I exhausted all I could before I was even your age.” Kate sent him a dark look, stabbing her cooling pancakes with force enough to make the plate clatter.

“Well, some people just don’t live where the books are kept.”

“You don’t have a library in Beacon Hills?” Stiles asked, surprised. Kate shook her head.

“No. Because hunters move a lot, there is only one huge library that encompasses all the knowledge we, all the clans, have gathered and I’ve only been there once or twice. Our clan does have its own bestiary but it is held by the matriarch or the interim leader, who is my father in my case. And shouldn’t you know this, o’ ‘hunter expert’?”

“Remember, taught by someone who didn’t induct me into any clan. Not really relevant information.”

Although that explained a lot why Chris rarely had any information to share, apart from what he knew from his experience.

“You… must be an Argent, then,” Peter said carefully. Kate bit her lip but nodded.

“Is that a problem?”

“No, we have a treaty with your clan. The future matriarch, huh. Hearing all this, doesn’t seem to be working well for you or your clan.”

“Oh really? Didn’t know that! Why, thank you!”

“My pleasure.”

“Well, you didn’t realise what we, sorry, I was either,” she huffed. Peter scowled.

“Don’t remind me. Your kind usually reek of wolfsbane and mountain ash miles away.”

“That… may be my fault,” Stiles said, and winced when Peter’s eyes flipped over to him. “I know a couple of runes and one of them messes up with people’s, especially the supernatural’s, senses, particularly with the sense of smell. I put a few in the trunk which may explain it.”

“That could be it,” Peter allowed, smirk growing again. He stretched and his shirt rode up a little. “Listen to your mentor, Katie dear, I am just as superior as ever.”
“Ha ha,” Kate clapped slowly, “Says the one running away from his family. Sorry, pack. What a good little beta.”

Peter flashed his eyes at her but she only rolled hers, finishing her pancakes. He actually pouted. Stiles hid his snort into his milkshake but Peter seemed to hear it anyway if his exaggerated look of betrayal was anything to go by.

The conversation paused as waitress came to ask if they needed anything, and left when none of them ordered anything. Or, Kate wanted a coffee, but Stiles declined on her behalf. The woman left, hiding her giggles on her way back to the counter.

Did they really not mind all the blood?

“Well, this answers two things,” the werewolf said, a smirk playing on his lips.

“Which are?” Kate asked, pouting over not getting her way.

“I don’t have to kill and hide your bodies and, more importantly, I can still endeavour to get Stiles to fall in bed with me.”

Stiles choked on his milkshake.

“Never had sex with someone with magic before,” he mused. “I wonder what interesting kinks that would solve.”

Stiles made a noise not unlike a dying whale.

Kate burst out laughing.

Fuck his life.

But at least they didn’t kill each other. That was a plus… right?

He watched with dread as Kate and Peter seemed to switch back from the awkwardness to bonding and sharing tidbits would inevitably spell trouble later on. Still, Stiles couldn’t help but marvel how well the whole revelation went. He, apparently, didn’t have to worry about a thing? A welcome if not a strange twist. Peter was a lot less suspicious than he was in the future – or he was just going along with it all for the moment but he could hear their heartbeats so, yeah, no lies here, unless he thought Stiles had lied about his experience as a spark which he hadn’t but, oh, shut up brain, just enjoy the peace while it lasts – and Kate, well, what kind of training was teaching a hunter to hunt before telling them about the things they were supposed to hunt? Was it perhaps a specialised method for future leaders, maybe?

If Stiles thought about it, it was a pretty smart approach too, if the situation allowed it. That meant that a future matriarch could question things herself, without any big misconceptions ingrained in her as a child. She didn’t seem to be that close to Gerard at this point either, so had her mother – what was her name again? – known about his more extremist opinions and kept distance…? Did he have them yet, anyhow? Or was that, too, a quirk of the hunters as a group? Or was it an Argent thing?

It would explain Allison, however, and why she had been clueless before the cluster fuck that was Beacon Hills even if Chris had been a little reluctant to ever introduce her to the life of a hunter. In her case, well… it clearly had been a mistake to let the events unfold as they did. Traditions sometimes did that, the fucking people over bit.

There were too many questions. Chris hadn’t even gone through these so Stiles had no idea what to
think about. Traditions and etiquette, sure, but these things? Not a priority, no one was going to train a future matriarch anyway. He needed information. He needed to get into that library Kate mentioned at some point.

But maybe not now.

Stiles sighed, tired as hell.

He would kill for some ice cream.

He flagged down the waitress and bought the biggest bowl they had. He even paid for Kate and Peter’s when they whined in sync – scary – for not getting any.

Well. Gerard paid.

Sucker.

***

“So, you are alright with us? Travelling with an Argent and a spark?” Stiles asked when he found Peter sitting outside their motel for the night. They didn’t manage to cross the Texas border tonight, even if they did get close enough to reach it the next morning.

“Well, I did want a change,” Peter mused, golden eyes briefly flashing at him. They actually suited him, Stiles thought. The cold blue had always seemed a little unnatural on him, a little unhinged. He remembered being told that they were a sign of guilt and trauma, rather than a sign of killing – although killing an innocent often seemed to trigger the change in colour. Peter didn’t seem the type to feel too hung-up on killing anyone so anything that did make his eyes change would have had an enormous effect on his psyche. Stiles would probably never learn what that bit was but perhaps that was a good thing too-

“But you are fine with it?”

Peter sighed in exasperation. “Yes, Stiles. An adolescent hunter and a spark don’t really scare me. Besides, I could tell you two were being truthful, so even if you did, it would be a moot point by now.”

Stiles blinked. “How? I mean, I have messed with people’s hearing before but I’m not an expert. Yet.”

“It is possible to control one’s heartbeat, yes, but not through magical means,” Peter interrupted, and then explained. He crossed his arms behind his neck, looking up at Stiles. Those arms. “Like I said earlier, nothing much is known about sparks but there is enough evidence that neither you nor druids are capable of such things, with runes or rituals or whatever means you have. You can either hide your heartbeat completely or not at all. There is no in-between.”

“Oh.” Stiles was quiet for a moment. “Didn’t know that. I mean, I have messed with people’s hearing before but I’m not an expert. Yet.”

“How is that? I would have thought any kind of magical talent would have been nurtured by anyone who discovered it.”

“Yeah, no. There was too much going on by the time I presented and it just wasn’t.” Stiles fell quiet. Thinking about the junior year hurt. The Nogitsune… “I don’t want to talk about it. It’s too messed up to even think of. I don’t even know where to start.”
Peter watched him for a moment. There was something calm in that look, and Stiles felt himself relax under the gaze. Maybe it was the quiet familiarity. He sat down next to him and stared at the sky. There were stars. He hadn’t been able to see much of them because, at one point, clouds had begun to surround Beacon Hills and never really left again.

They were beautiful.

“Have you thought about starting a journal?”

Stiles frowned, turning back to Peter. “A what? Where did that come from?”

“A journal. Writing things down can help with getting your mind under control again, especially if you don’t feel like talking. My father was the same. Every day he would write down something so he wouldn’t forget, or so he could stare at the words until the world made sense to him again,” a wistful smile briefly appeared on his face, “I used to sneak looks at them. They could be something simple like ‘Talia’s hair was in a braid again. She was getting ready for a fight. Not a coincidence?’ or ‘Miriam was laughing,’ or things like that. Then they could be about pack matters or serious things. Never in any real order, just a jumbled mess that made sense only to him.”

Stiles listened, fascinated. He had never gotten to hear about the Hales who had died in the fire. Derek never wanted to talk about them, even while drunk he wouldn’t speak of those who had been lost, and Cora didn’t remember much anything before the fire. And Peter…

No one had wanted to raise questions that might have triggered his bouts of insanity.

“I- I hadn’t thought of that,” he said when it became clear that Peter wasn’t going to elaborate more. Awkwardly, he patted Peter’s shoulder. “Thanks.”

“Anytime.”

And it seemed like he meant it, Stiles marvelled.

They didn’t speak for the rest of the evening until they retreated to sleep off the day.

***

Stiles stared at the book in front of him. When they had stopped by the town close by to get some breakfast, Stiles had also visited a bookstore and bought himself a plain journal with red covers and a few pens. He was sitting in the passenger seat again, still not well enough to drive, and Kate had turned the backseat into her personal study corner. Peter was driving, the only instructions being to ‘keep going east, north is alright too, just not west, let’s not go back to west’. Their car was a little banged up but it still worked, so Stiles wasn’t about to spend his cash on making the paint look pristine again. It would probably get clawed again, sooner or later.

The red in his lap was mocking him.

Stiles sent a quick look at Peter but it was like the werewolf had no care in the world. A small smile was playing on his lips and he hummed along with some 90’s punk – wait, was that Green Day? Stiles felt his own corners twitch too.

He turned back to the book. His hands trembled slightly when he opened it, and he slid his finger down the page which had a yellowish tint to it, like it was made from old paper and not new. It was part of the reason the journal had caught his attention.

He just… wasn’t made for anything new anymore.
Not really.

The red – like his favourite hoodie, like the blood spilt, like the guilt, and his fragile humanity in their band of misfits – had called for him but it was the yellowish paper – they all matured too fast, became adults too young, old souls in the bodies of the youth – that made him actually buy it.

If he was about to write down his life and thoughts, it might as well be on something that reminded him of the life he had lived, no matter how painful, because there were good things too. Many of them, in fact. He would miss his pack for the rest of his life.

He would never belong to another one – couldn’t even if he wanted to, which he didn’t --, not even the Hales if they ever offered.

Stiles clicked the pen and dipped it to meet the paper.

*It started with a body in the woods. Maybe even before that but it all started with-*

He didn’t notice the smile directed his way. Peter lifted his eyes and met Kate’s through the mirror. They shared a grin. They drove in a companionable silence, the only noises being the scribbles Stiles and Kate made and the radio Peter kept fiddling with.

And so started the road trip of a hunter, a spark and a werewolf.

It does sound like a bad joke, doesn’t it?

Does it matter?

Life’s a bad joke anyway.

A small smile made its way to Stiles’ face as he doodled a crooked jaw on one of the corners.

And he just happened to like the shittiest best.

Chapter End Notes

See, no cliffhangers! No promises that those won't happen again. Bad habits, we all have 'em.
In which there are trolls and tolls and lessons abound

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait! I was away last weekend, and decided to spend some of that time to plan for the future chapters! Before that I knew where I wanted to go but now I actually have an idea how I could carry it all out, haha.

Anyway, thanks all, you're fab! Loved the reception this story has had :) Also, enjoy the new chapter!

Two weeks.

They had been travelling two weeks and no one had died.

Well. Except for the wendigos. And the witch that had gone mad – Stiles didn’t know the story behind that, just that she couldn’t be reasoned with and had a bad case of murder clouding her mind – and was haunting the graveyard. And the ghouls that she had managed to raise. She was actually having a tea party with them, kind of, if they counted entrails as pastries and blood as tea and that analogy didn’t really make sense.

Nevertheless, it was disgusting, and Stiles had actually been happy to see Kate cut the ghouls down while Peter snapped the witch’s neck. Stiles? He had been inspecting the hoard the witch had acquired, gathering up the ingredients she had collected and the books she or the ghouls hadn’t managed to destroy yet.

He had been given some glowers by Kate for not contributing but, hey, freeloaders can’t complain. Even if it was her father who handled the bill, kind of, well, he did. But it was still Stiles who had the cash! He would have to ask for a credit card at some point, probably. Having seven grands in his pocket was making him paranoid and it definitely wasn’t safe. What if he signed himself or someone burned their stuff? They would have to beg for scraps! Or call the Argents. Specifically Gerard.

To be honest, Stiles might prefer the scraps.

Maybe he could get Peter to hunt down a deer for them? Or make Kate do it. As practice, of course.

In any case, two weeks! No one had died! All three of them fine! Stiles was able to drive again!

Yay!

Even if Peter had taken the wheel more often than not. Something about him feeling like contributing. Probably more like he wanted to have some semblance of control even if he was welcome to leave anytime he wanted. It wasn't like he was their captive or anything. Well, Stiles wasn’t complaining, no sirreee, and he wasn't encouraging him to go either. He had gotten used to him already, the bastard, and it had given Stiles more time to read through Deaton’s books and grit his teeth and scream himself hoarse in frustration. Kate had given him a few weird looks but she had also growled over calculus and her English books so it wasn’t like she didn’t understand his problem.

The books, well…
They made zero sense.

Or, no, that was wrong. They made perfect sense. Probably. To someone.

Just not to Stiles.

While playing the passenger, he had also written down most of the important things he wanted to remember about his past-future, such as what had happened, vaguely and coded, naturally – he had suspicions that Peter was trying to read it behind his back somehow, perhaps even managing it even though Stiles tried to hide it to his best and sleep with it under his pillow. He was sneaky like that. It was a little ridiculous but also justified and necessary when they were really out to get you. Peter was even more curious than Stiles remembered.

Or he just didn’t care to hide it. Like he could just ask and snoop around without getting too many angry glares or suspicious looks. Which, well…

Made sense.

And also made Stiles a little bit sad.

Point! He had a point. And that was that he also wrote down the ritual he had used to get to the past and it made no sense.

Not the ritual itself, it actually made just as much sense as Stiles remembered. Wait, no, it never was quite crystal clear because time travel, oh gosh, he needed Adderall. But what really didn’t make sense was that it didn’t work properly because Stiles? Stiles made the calculations again. And it should have worked, just as planned, despite the accident with the unicorn heart blood.

He had recalled the steps he had taken, the research he had done in a mad frenzy to stop it all from happening, the thorough cleaning and purifying of his equipment, the chanting, the ingredients, everything. He had read every piece of the theory he could find until he could recite it all from memory. He had calculated everything three times in the car just to make sure he hadn’t been wrong the first time when he had made the same calculations ten times just in case. The unicorn blood was just the kick starter that stabilised the mess that was everything else, correctly counted and executed, just so it wouldn’t blow in his face and so the amount shouldn’t have mattered.

Which, obviously, meant that the explosion still happened and here he was now.

And Stiles was at a loss.

He had made the calculations as they had driven into Missouri, and his curses had actually caused Peter to drive to the side and ask him if he was alright. Like, Peter, one Peter Hale, the Peter Hale, had stopped the car, just to ask him if he was alright.

Stiles did not compute.

At least he hadn’t asked him whether he wanted someone dead but it had probably been the next thing on the list. Stiles feared what his answer might have been to that. Peter had also started to give meaningful looks at his little red journal after that which was actually why Stiles had started to really make an effort not to leave it lying around anywhere. What also made it even more bizarre was that Kate had demanded that same day that he should eat half of her dessert because she didn’t like it.

She fucking loved apple pie.

Those two were just-, ugh. Stiles shook his head, closing his books and looking out of the window.
They had bonded like no one ever had. He couldn’t really believe it. His mind was still full of images and knowledge of what could be for them, and what had been for him, and he had troubles separating them at times. Rationally, he knew he had been in the past less than three weeks – it wasn’t a lot of time to get used to the way things were, even when one was as adaptable as Stiles was – and he knew he could forgive himself for taking it all in at his own pace. He was going to be there for the rest of his life, even if the trip hadn’t been one way already. There just wasn’t anything to go back to, not anymore. One did not survive a wannabe (still) localised apocalypse just to return there to die.

He also acknowledged that they were different people and, truthfully, he didn’t mix them up with their past-future versions. It helped that the last time he had seen them, they both had been over thirty, even forty, and messy with blood stains and tainted by who-knows-what, dark and gloomy and mad in their own ways, so they really didn’t resemble their present counterparts who were none of those things.

Logically, he knew all that. But it still didn’t make it easier to know that, hey, by the way, did you know that you both could grow up to become serial killers? That you could, someday, kill without remorse, care little about your own blood, dive straight into insanity and never look back?

Stiles hated it, mostly because it wasn’t fair to Peter and Kate.

Kate was a teenager who was nothing like the seductive, remorseless huntress he had once known. She was more like Allison but tougher, more sarcastic and snarky and less like a Disney princess with an interesting streak of cruelty that actually reminded Stiles of Erica now that he thought about it. She wasn’t malleable, per se, but she took into account other people’s ideas and followed directions when needed, mostly when they were on a hunt or during a fight. Stiles had been pleasantly surprised about that during the wendigo incident, even if the obedience was temporary and didn’t translate into anything else. That was just Kate and he couldn’t really fault her for being herself.

And really, he actually, reluctantly, liked the brat.

Peter, too, he and Stiles were becoming fast friends. Not as fast as Peter and Kate – what the fuck ever, he still wasn’t over the match – but they were. They shared their taste in literature and could argue over Hemingway and Fitzgerald for hours, and Peter’s supernatural knowledge was vast even at 21. Stiles had always known he was a little – or a lot – morally ambiguous but so was Peter, and their worldviews matched well. Kate’s too, for that matter. All three of them were a bunch of weirdos in need of a good compass. It was just too bad that Stiles’ was still a three-year-old who lived somewhere, Stiles wasn’t sure where, happily with his mother and father, having not yet moved to Beacon Hills. But yeah, Peter. They had their differences too, definitely, but they actually complemented each other; different from how Scott and Stiles had worked – oh, did Stiles miss his brother – but still. He couldn’t really explain it. They were fast becoming this really well-oiled machine and it was a little scary.

So, yeah, Stiles felt guilty at sometimes taking his distance because he couldn’t handle the knowledge of how well those two could fuck everything up for them all. He couldn’t help it. And it wasn’t fair to them, or to Stiles either for that matter. He was sure that the two had picked up on it too because whenever Stiles fell into the rabbit hole, Peter would grab Kate with an excuse of a sort and bolt away. Stiles briefly wondered what Peter could sense from him during those moments but dismissed the thought quickly.

He wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

What he knew, though, was that he would get used to the situation eventually. It was just how Stiles
rolled, evidenced by how easily he had accepted that supernatural was now his life when Scott had been bitten. Someday, he would look at them and perhaps, hopefully, realise that all his fears were unwarranted. Maybe everything would turn out well. But it was also a hard thing to ignore that he had prepared himself to prevent the immediate Hale Fire which had included several plans on killing one Kate Argent who now sat in the backseat working on whatever assignment she had to do before they returned to Beacon Hills for the exams. Might have been history this time. Ironically. There was so much history there that Stiles was part of but Kate and Peter were not. And rationally, he knew better.

But he just couldn’t let go.

And he wasn’t sure if he ever truly could because forgetting all he had gone through? Impossible. And he didn’t know if he even wanted that. No, he knew he didn’t want that, despite the pain that lingered. Get used to it all, yes, but the rest, no.

But he also knew it was unfair.

Life was too hard.

Lower the difficulty.

Please.

Stiles didn’t see the concerned side-eye Peter gave him. He didn’t see much anything. He closed his eyes and fell asleep, tired of anything and everything, unconsciously clutching close the little red journal that held inside everything he had once held dear to him.

Some days, deep within his heart, hidden so thoroughly that the thoughts rarely had opportunity to surface, he wished he had died with his pack.

***

Stiles woke up with a start. A concrete start because the car screeched into a halt and he only had his safety belt to thank he wasn’t meeting the hood of the car very intimately. Like, way too soon for them, sorry dear, but I am still hung up on my previous partner. Rest in peace, Roscoe, I will miss you forever and ever, my one true love.

He blearily looked up and turned his head around. They were somewhere in the countryside, with trees around and in the middle of a bridge with weird rocks surrounding them. The fuck? It was all very nondescript and could pretty much be anywhere. He wondered what state they were in anyway. Were they still in Missouri? Had they crossed over somewhere? He was getting a little hungry. Did they have any snacks left or had Kate eaten them all and blamed it on Peter? Or the other way around. It was all very blame-y here.

Stiles turned to Peter but he was only staring right in front of them. He didn’t seem scared, just a little bit alarmed and perhaps- resigned? He glanced at Kate and she was hanging on the backseat and watching something from the back window. Stiles turned forward.

His eyes widened momentarily before hiding his face into his hands.

Of course.

Of fucking course.

Bridge trolls. They weren’t surrounded by rocks but fucking trolls. He was literally being trolled.
“What do we do?” Kate asked, more curious than anything. She sounded rather fascinated, actually. “What do they want?”

“Trolls, the kind that live under bridges, usually take tolls from travellers,” Peter answered neutrally. He flexed his fingers where he was gripping on the steering wheel.

“They would demand tolls from regular people who know nothing about supernatural?” she blinked, mystified. “Isn’t that dangerous for them?”

“They have enhanced senses for those who are supernatural or supernaturally inclined,” Stiles mumbled from behind his hands. He wanted to die. “And they seem to know when to come out and when not to, who to toll and who to not. Who can afford it and who don’t. Well, probably not the latter, but it’s like they have a sensor for that kind of thing. No one exactly know how, if it is troll magic or just something that could be taught.”

“They never reveal their secrets,” Peter added. Kate stared at the trolls boxing their car. “And they are very territorial which is why they come out for whenever a supernatural crossed their grounds. Humans don’t interest them, they are no threat, but other supernatural? A whole another story. Probably why hunters rarely have any trouble with them.”

“Interesting,” she said, and kicked the door open. Stiles snapped his head up, horrified.

“Kate, don’t-!”

“Hey, what do you want from us?” she called, leaning against her door. Stiles groaned loudly. Peter gave him a quick pat before also exiting the vehicle.

“Why me?” Stiles asked from no one and slumped against his seat. He was exhausted. He hadn’t been sleeping well the past few nights, nightmares troubling him now that he was no longer in a fight or flight more. It was probably his PTSD talking and knocking on his door. He just wanted some good night sleep, goddammit.

“Toll be paid, treasure be had,” the troll in front of the car said, presumably their leader. It wasn’t the largest of them but just as strange with its grey and crumbling skin and the few hairs that grew on its body. Trolls were never the prettiest of creatures. Their skin was hard like stones and legends said that trolls who were killed turned into rocks. They were one of the most peaceful creatures, though, if one didn’t anger them. Hoarders, the lot of them. Stiles suspected they were some sort of evolutionary relatives of dwarves or what inspired the tales of them. He had never seen a hair of any so he couldn’t swear by that and he had only heard of stories and legends of mountain dwarves.

“But we don’t have anything,” Peter said, smiling charmingly. “Truly. We are not from here, and the only thing worthy of anything is our car. You wouldn’t take out car now, would you?”

“Werewolf you, on our land. Continue you want, toll you pay,” the troll rumbled.

“But he’s speaking the truth,” Kate pointed out, stepping forward. She spread her arms but Stiles knew she had blades and her gun hidden beneath her clothes. After the wendigo, none of them went anywhere without a weapon or two at hand. Well, Stiles and Kate didn’t. Peter was a weapon on his own which he lorded over them since he didn’t have to worry about getting caught by metal detectors.

“Toll, toll, toll,” one of the trolls chanted but it came from somewhere behind them so he didn’t know which one of them spoke.
“Don’t you have anything else to say?” she continued, grinning aggravatingly. Stiles watched, horrified, as she tried to, oh gosh, she wasn’t trying to draw them into fight, right? Right?! “I mean, it’s not like we have anything to pretty you up, it’s an impossible task to begin with.”

Not everything could be solved by violence!

The troll seemed to frown at them which only meant that the stony skin moved a little over where its brows probably were. Stiles clambered out as fast as he could and grabbed Kate, pulling her against him and pressing a hand over her mouth. She looked at him incredulously.

“Troll, trollly, um, troll, my man, what do you see worthy of the troll, uh, toll?” he asked, giving Kate a quick glare, trying to express on her to keep quiet. She made a face at him.

“Steep, steep, werewolf and spark, oh, spark, steep, price most high,” the leader said, offering a stony grin.

“That explains so much,” Peter remarked. “Would you mind giving us a figure, maybe?”

As much as Stiles wanted to facepalm, he had to agree with Peter. Could they be anymore vague?

“Something precious, yes, something dear. Teach not come back Marruk’s bridge,” the troll – Marruk? – said.

“We don’t really have anything but the clothes on our backs,” Peter said, and sighed. He shook his head. “We just want to pass. Or you can let us turn around and we can go elsewhere. We don’t have anything precious for your toll.”

The troll – Marruk, Stiles was just going to call it Marruk in his head – glowered. “Toll or no treat, you on our land, have no permission, toll, toll.”

“I think you mean ‘treaty’,” Kate said, pulling Stiles’ hand from her mouth. She straightened. “Do you count me in on the deal?”

Marruk squinted at her. “Human, you mere human, you no important, no threat. No toll.”

Kate seemed insulted.

“But we aren’t a threat either!” Stiles groaned, pressing the heel of his hand to his eye, rubbing it. What a headache this was becoming.

“We are just passing, and we can already promise never to come back.”

The troll started to look irritated. What a surprise. “Toll! No leave, no toll!” It was startled when a knife suddenly stabbed the ground before it and it took a step back. Suddenly, it seemed like the trolls had grown in size, loud rumbles coming from around them. Stiles cursed inwardly.

“Huntress, yes, big toll now, bigger now, you threaten us, you leave with your life not,” Marruk grumbled.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Stiles cursed out loud. Kate didn’t even have the sense to look afraid or ashamed but, rather, she looked ready for a fight. The trolls were made from stone, fuck, how did she think her bullets or daggers would penetrate their skin? Because that’s what he’d like to know.

Peter stepped forward, his hands up placatingly. “Now, let’s take a deep breath and discuss things calmly. She is young and she doesn’t understand the customs and world yet,” he said smoothly. “A
youngling she is, a bare pebble. She will grow in wisdom with years but she has yet to gain any.”

“Hey!” Kate protested but Stiles muffled them immediately. His grip on her was tight and Kate seemed to give up the fight before it even started, questioning look in her eyes. Stiles tore his own from hers. Now was not the time.

“Toll,” Marruk warningly said, taking the knife its fellow troll gave it. It crushed it onehandedly. Kate’s eyes widened and she seemed to finally realise her mistake.

Too little, too late.

“The huntress is a no threat still but a treaty between myself and the spark, yes?” Peter said, crouching a little to be at an eyelevel with the troll. Smart, deferring to them a little. Stiles watched without blinking, painfully aware that they were surrounded and there were at least three troll behind them.

“Huntress, throw knife.”

“She did and she will hear about it for a long time. And you destroyed the knife. It was valuable, you know. That could easily cover her toll.”

Marruk rumbled a little and the other trolls rumbled back. Slowly, it nodded.

“Huntress toll, done. Stupid human, stupid toll. You werewolf and spark, different toll. Big toll.”

“Big toll,” Peter nodded. “May I go to the back with my companions? We’d like to look at our things and decide what is worthy of the toll.”

Marruk nodded. “Steep.”

“Steep,” Peter agreed, motioning for Stiles – and in a lesser sense Kate – to follow him. The trolls gave them space but stayed close, keeping their eyes on them so they would not run. Like they even could. All their stuff was there, and Stiles wasn’t about to do a runner if he could avoid it.

“Do we have anything?” Peter lowered his voice as he opened the trunk.

“Anything that would count for our lives, you mean?” Stiles asked, and shook his head. “Fuck if I know. I don’t know their standards. The only other time I’ve met a troll it was lost and there were no bridges nearby and it only cared about getting home.”

“I thought you said they were peaceful?” Kate piped up, having gotten Stiles’ hold over her mouth loosened. Peter snorted.

“They are, until they are threatened. You know, like a knife was thrown in their direction…”

“I was just-”

“We can discuss that later,” Stiles interrupted, giving Kate a hard look. She snapped her mouth shut and mulishly looked away, glaring at the nearby trolls instead. Stiles turned back to the trunk. “I do know they care shit about weapons.”

“And there goes half the things we have,” Peter sighed. “They would have been so easy to replace too.”

“Yeah, comparatively.”
“Probably also why they care little about them.”

“True.”

“What about the books? Do you need all of them?” Peter asked, poking around the small pile. He didn’t look happy to consider giving them away – Stiles had established that Peter was a book collector of a sort – but Stiles just shook his head.

“If I thought they’d be interested, I’d give you the go ahead. I doubt they are though.”

Peter gave a cursory sweep too before sighing. “You’re probably right.”

“So we have nothing,” Stiles groaned.

“We have nothing,” Peter agreed. He didn’t sound anymore happy about it than Stiles was. “I doubt your runes would help us out? Or your spark?”

Stiles grimaced. “No.” He didn’t like to admit he had no better control over it than since he started on those books. And the trolls would definitely start noticing if there suddenly was nothing to notice about or if Stiles was trying to scribble runes over things. They were quiet for a moment when Peter perked up. “What about-” he fell quiet again. “Or maybe not.”

“What? Just say it, Peter.”

The werewolf pursed his mouth in distaste. “What about a favour?”

Stiles’ eyes widened and he groaned. “Are you serious? We would owe them? That’s, like, the worst thing we could do!”

“Do you have any other ideas?” Peter snapped back. Stiles groaned again.

“No,” he whined, and then sighed loudly. “Maybe we could have gotten away with-”

Peter’s eyes flickered on Kate. “Maybe.”

“Ugh. One for each or one for both?”

“One for both. We don’t want to owe them two, just thinking about it makes me sick. Let me handle it.”

Stiles waved his hand. “Go ahead. I just want to get out of there as fast as we can. If you can get us out of here with just one favour, I’ll owe you one.” Peter sent him a contemplative look before he grinned and nodded. He sauntered back to front and sat down to haggle with the troll in charge. Stiles, on the other hand, pushed Kate back inside the car with clear orders to stay put. The girl pouted and started to protest, again, but Stiles just slammed the door shut and wished from the bottom of his heart that she would just stay inside quietly. Kate immediately tried to open it but it wouldn’t budge. She furrowed her brows and seemingly yelled something but Stiles could hear nothing.

Ha.

Maybe the spark was worth something after all.

If only it was reliable enough or he knew the kinks of how it worked because he still couldn't wish for the perfection of the curly fries. Or to get them out of there asap.
He turned around and watched Peter counter whatever Merruk was saying, both speaking rapidly and the air was almost electric with agitation. Stiles wondered how much of that was acting on Peter’s side but whatever he was doing, it didn’t seem to be working. Merruk was starting to look more and more satisfied with itself while Peter seemed annoyed. Finally, they agreed on something and Peter stormed to the driver’s side.

“We are leaving. Now.”

Stiles nodded and quickly jumped in. He ignored Kate and they barely waited for the trolls to make way before pushing through and disappearing from the accursed bridge’s sight. They drove in silence for a while before Peter looked from the rear-view mirror, seeing no one there, and parked them on the side of the road, a few miles from the nearest town. Suddenly, his face split into a self-satisfied smirk.

“One favour, and we have a veto on it.”

Stiles gaped. It was truly a gape-worthy thing. “What?” he asked weakly. Peter sent him a brilliant look and, Stiles had to admit, he was a little dazzled.

“I convinced them that we were part of this supernatural hunting group, a famous one, and the reason we have an inexperienced hunter with us is because we are training her. All of which is true in a sense, even if the famous part was a little embellishment on top.”

“But… we are not a hunting team,” Stiles said slowly. Peter smirked.

“During the last two weeks, we have killed wendigos, a witch, ghouls and now met and survived trolls. Can you call it anything else?”

“But it wasn’t on purpose!”

Peter shrugged. “So?”

Stiles opened his mouth and paused. His jaw clicked shut and he slumped on his seat. “This is my life now.” The Supernatural was his life but instead of two brothers and an angel, there was a spark, a werewolf and a huntress. Great.

He’d better be Dean.

“We need a name,” Peter mused. “A famous group always needs a name. Kate, do you have any suggestions?” he turned around and blinked. His expression turned into pure amusement and his eyes sparkled. “Are you spelt silent?”

Stiles spun around and, truly, Kate was yelling at them with no sound coming from her vocal cords. He stared at her dumbfounded. “Did I do that?”

Her glare turned into pure murder. Peter nodded wisely. “I will bet all I have that you did.”

Stiles wondered if he wanted to take the spell off anyway. She looked pretty mad. He glanced at Peter but the man gave him a look. Yeah, it was probably better to take off now rather than later. Who knows what she would do? Stiles pondered for a moment how he would even do it – and would it work since he didn’t really want to do it? – and then raised his hand, bit his lip and snapped his fingers, wishing for the best and that his ear drums wouldn’t pop.

Kate was silent. The whole car was silent. He opened the eyes he hadn’t realised he had closed and then was met with a barrage of accusations and curse words.
“Why would you do that, you numb wit?! What if they had attacked, what then? You are useless, you need me around, and what the hell was that, taking away my voice, locking me inside, I was handling it, you should have just let me handle it.”

“And then what, get us killed?” Peter cut her off, arching his brows. His expression was sarcasm incarnated. “It would have been wonderful, dear. A perfect solution, why didn’t we think of that?”

She glared at him. “I wouldn’t have done that! We could have-”

“Taken them?” Stiles asked. He shook his head. “Didn’t you see? We were outnumbered. At best we could have run away and left everything behind. Sure, we have cash, but not that much. How would we have explained that to your father?”

“No, I-”

“Or maybe you want to return back home already,” Peter said silkily. Stiles’ eyes snapped to him but Peter only had eyes for Kate. “Perhaps this trip is starting to get on your nerves. Would daddy make everything better for little Katie?”

At that moment, he sounded exactly like the Beacon Hills’ Supernatural Drama season one version of Peter, the alpha edition to be exact. Stiles shivered.

Kate only looked angrier. “Now, listen here! I was here first, we picked you up! Maybe you want to go back to your den of little weres! Did you ever think of that? Maybe you’re the unwanted here! You-”

Stiles groaned but they ignored him. He had forgotten since they had gotten along so well but, well. They were carved from the same stone basically. Of fucking course hitting each other’s buttons would be easy as fuck for them.

“I just saved your life, you ungrateful girl!”

“Oh yeah? Can you prove it?”

“You are sitting right here!”

“Well, guess what, that proves nothing! Maybe if I had been given a chance to prove myself, then maybe I could have done that!”

“I seriously doubt that. Didn’t you see what that troll did to your little butter knife?”

“What would a were understand? Not all of us have-”

“Okay, that’s enough!” Stiles yelled and cut them both off. He pointed at both of them. “We are out of danger but it doesn’t mean we need to unload all that pressure on each other, alright? Also, Kate, a little thing,” He stared her down. “Or, two things. One, you don’t run the show. As per the deal, I am the leader even if my credentials are questionable. Alright? That means no more soloing without permission.”

“But we-!”

“We killed the others, yes, but only because they attacked us. This could have been – and was, thanks to Peter – worked through peacefully which almost didn’t happen because you were trying to prove something. So, no next time, alright?” Stiles took a deep breath but his eyes didn’t waver. “It may be different from what you know but I am the more experienced one on the relations with the
supernatural. Violence isn’t the answer for everything.”

“But that’s what I was, what mother…” Kate’s voice died. She looked a little lost. Stiles’ heart clenched.

“I know,” he continued gently, “But that was because she didn’t have time for the rest. She prepared you for the world so, in case things went wrong, you would still survive. And you did. But this isn’t the same. You have us,” Stiles gestured at himself and Peter, automatically counting the werewolf in. The man in question looked a little surprised at the ready admittance to the count, despite having been with them for two weeks already. Weirdo. “So you aren’t alone. You can trust us to have your back. Okay?”

Kate stared at him for a long moment but then nodded. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Stiles nodded. They were quiet for a moment and Stiles suddenly felt like something had slotted together, something that had been on the verge of either tipping in their favour or not. He couldn’t figure out what, though, but it felt significant.

“Anyway!” he continued, deeming the matter to be thought of later. “The other thing is actually an order.”

“Wait what?” Kate questioned before Stiles pointed straight at her.

“Stop using the word ‘were’!” he said, dramatically waving his hand but his tone was serious. “That’s really degrading for werewolves. We are using the term ‘werewolf’, sure, but that is because they are like us, just with something extra. Well, they are humans and wolves, not just one or the other. They are both! Hunters started to use the term to call them ‘were-humans’, like they were something below them. I know you’ve grown in the society but it would definitely raise your points in the eyes of, well, all supernatural if you started either calling them werewolves or just wolves. Which is, by the way, the preferred informal version. That works too.”

Kate tilted her head at that, scowling. “I haven’t heard anything about that kind of division before.”

“Most haven’t,” Peter said smoothly, tone deceptively mild. “If only because we don’t advertise it. Hunters rarely care about being polite, even the ones who follow the Code. Stiles, our little spark, you have kept something from us, haven’t you?”

“Like what?” Kate asked, staring at Stiles. Stiles himself frowned slightly. Wasn’t that just common sense…?

“It might be in some circles,” Peter acknowledged and Stiles realised he had spoken aloud. “But only in those circles. Rather, in wolf circles. It rather sounds to me like Stiles has been part of a pack before,” he said silkily. Stiles and Kate both turned to look at him although Peter had only eyes for Stiles. The look in them was dark and intrigued and, shite, there was no getting him to leave now, was there?

“A pack? Really?” Kate asked, turning back to Stiles. He groaned.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“But you admit it. You are part of a pack,” she insisted. “That’s weird, I thought they wouldn’t take in hunters. Or humans.”

“There are humans in a pack. It isn’t a guarantee that werewolves give birth to werewolves. We are, after all, both humans and wolves at our core,” Peter said. He looked at Stiles searchingly. “But I
don’t think you are entirely correct in your statement, Kate.”

“But you just said-”

“I was. Once,” Stiles interrupted, and he felt a wave of grief encompass him. He saw Peter startle and smiled bitterly. “But not anymore.”

“How? I mean-”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he said, tone final, and he turned back, looking ahead of their road. “We should continue. It’s going to rain soon.”

With a quick glance at the sky, Peter obeyed after sending one last look at Kate, probably promising to talk to her later. Stiles didn’t care. It was no wonder this had come as a surprise to them both. After all…

It had been so long for him to have been with his pack that even the strongest scents had faded until it seemed like they had been just strangers passing him by. He stared out of the window and they only drove five minutes before heavy rain washed over them.

Fitting.

It looked exactly like his mood.

Funny how both the weather and his mood could do a sudden 180.

He heard the lightning rumble somewhere ahead and he was reminded of-

And he wished-

They drove in silence and when they arrived to a motel, Stiles got them their rooms, locked himself inside his, and didn’t come out until next morning.

He didn’t really sleep that night either.

***

Stiles yawned. What an awful night. It was like yesterday had poked holes through all his mental shields and it was the junior year all over again, minus the Nogitsune possession. Thank all higher powers for that, he didn’t think he would survive another one.

He doubted there was anyone to pull him back from that this time either.

He rubbed his eyes and blearily sat on the stairs leading up to the second floor his room was located at. The sun still hadn’t risen but he just couldn’t stay in his room anymore – he had started feel slightly claustrophobic there. He rested his head between his knees and just focused on breathing. He didn’t know how long he sat there – maybe a minute, probably not an hour – when someone walked up the stairs and sat next to him. The person was radiating warmth which was the only reason he knew it was Peter. Werewolves and their heat regulation, man.

“Kate is getting us breakfast from the station.”

Ugh. More station food. Stiles was starting to become so fed up with all the greasiness. He wished he had a healthy oven and stove and he would make miracles happen, he swore.

“If only.”
He spoke aloud again, didn’t he?

“You did.”

Well, shit. Spelt everything good for today, didn’t it?

“That’s debatable.” They sat in silence for a moment before Peter sighed deep. He made some sort of movement but didn’t touch Stiles, almost as if he was afraid it wouldn’t be welcomed.

“I explained to Kate that your pack was probably… gone,” he said, surprisingly delicate, and Stiles felt the words trickle ice on his back. He had thought about it, had recognised the fact that he was all alone in the world but-

He had never had the words spoken out loud.

It hurt. It hurt so much.

“She has a lot to learn about tact and the pack bonds but I told her to leave it alone. It’s not something that should be discussed before you are ready.”

Stiles bit his lip, and tried to keep still, but there were slight tremors going through his body.

“I don’t know how you are feeling and, quite frankly, I am surprised you’re still here. I know that if something like that happened to me, I’d almost certainly want to kill myself. Losing everything would be- bad,” Peter said, shifting, and Stiles felt him lean against him lightly. He felt himself slump against Peter’s comforting weight. “Despite our disagreements and my needing space, pack is still pack. And whatever hunters or others may say, humans feel the bonds too. Not as acutely, but they do. Grief is universal.”

Stiles felt his eyes leak. He raised his hand to wipe them but it fell to his lap like it had no strength left.

“Just, you know, take your time. The world will wait.”

*And we are here while you heal,* was left unsaid but Stiles heard the words anyway.

They stayed like that for a while. At some point, he heard steps and the beckoning smell of breakfast and someone collapsed against his other side, smelling a lightly of lavender. Kate. He cleared his throat.

“When did you have time to digest a self-help book?” he croaked, and Kate snorted beside him. Peter just huffed but it sounded more amused than offended.

“I beg your pardon, there was no ‘digesting’ going on. I happen to be a perfectly functional human being and know how these things work.”

“He was up late talking to this one grandma who was staying here with her grandkids,” Kate whispered loudly. “There may have been some words of wisdom changing owners.”

Peter sniffed and he retorted something back but Stiles didn’t hear what. He just felt warm. There was something wiggling in the corner of his mind, within the space that had been empty and cold for so long, but he ignored it because he didn’t have the willpower to examine it just yet. He just enjoyed the moment.

Something was thrust into his hands. He finally opened his eyes to see a sandwich – what kind, he
couldn’t tell from the packaging. His stomach gurgled, apparently giving no fucks, just informing him that he could either eat the sandwich or his stomach would eat him.

There was no contest, really.

They ate the breakfast there on the stairs and watched the sun come up with all the shades of gold, pink and red, shining down on them, warming the chilly autumnal morning.

It was beautiful.
**In which one step forward becomes two steps backwards and a life is saved**

Chapter Notes

I rewrote the beginning of this chapter three times. Then I just tried to finish it and it ended up being 6,5k. My *life*.

I hope you still like it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes


Stiles gnawed on his bottom lip.


Come on, come on, come on-

Bee-

The call connected.

“Oh thank all the higher powers that exist, karma and the powers of hell, thank you, please, I need to talk to you,” Stiles blurted out, hanging onto his phone like a lifeline and – while not a literal one – it was the only thing keeping him sane at the moment.

The past few days had been hard; not a nightmare, no, but hard. He hadn’t slept well the past couple of nights. No, actually, he hadn’t really slept at all since he had been forced to admit that his pack was dead and the words had been spoken aloud – which, what the fuck, he had known it, he had buried them all, at least those who had something left to bury or he had burnt their remains, scattered ashes and remains in the air or unmarked graves because who knew what people drunk on the Nemeton might have done with them so he had known they were dead, and brain, you disgusting mush inside your bony cage, why were you doing this to him – and brought into light. Even with Peter and Kate being, well, great about it, wasn’t it weird, it had to be weird, it was weird, right, but he hadn’t been able to reconcile with the fact that his mind was forever empty where there was supposed to be the ever-present warmth of Scott, Lydia’s cool wisdom, Kira’s bright optimism-

He was still ignoring the insistent knocking inside the back of his mind, demanding to be let in. The corner belonged to his pack, his *family*, and if he let them in, if he acknowledged the presence – presences? – what would happen to it, would it become a clean slate, wash away the scars? No, he didn’t want that, he’d rather be alone and remember, he didn’t want anyone there, not Peter, not Kate, hell, he had only known these versions of them for three weeks or so, it wasn’t enough, he needed time, he needed space, it wasn’t natural right, he needed someone to talk to him, someone who could, just maybe, understand what he was going through-

No one answered.

“Hello? You there? Claudia? It’s me, you know, Stiles?” Please, be there, he needed to hear her voice, to know she was really alive and that he hadn’t imagined her too, not like he had seen Allison’s ghost the night before, like he had seen Erica’s corpse where Kate had been lying in the
back of the car, bleeding, eyes cold, gone- “Claudia? Mo-”

“Your name is Stiles?”

Stiles froze. The voice was high and young, too young to be his mom and it was a male voice anyway, recognisable despite its child-like quality. He let out a sound not unlike a dying whale, gosh, it just had to happen, shit.

“Y- yeah. Is, um, is Claud-”

“My name is Stiles!”

Jesus Christ, he was talking to himself. No, this was a next level version of that, shi-, shoot. Mini-me was still three, no, four? Three?

“Good thing, wonderful name, mine is too-”

“But mom said it’s u, um, un, uh-”

“Unique?”

“Yeah! But you have my name! Why you have my name? You can’t have my name, it’s mine, my name, mine!” Little Stiles demanded, as it he was accusing Stiles of something horrible, like killing his puppy or something. Which he didn’t actually have, so.

“It, uh, I just have?” Stiles tried, mind whirling around. Shit, he’d just wanted to talk to his mom, not get into an, uh, argument with his younger counterpart. “Listen, it was nice to meet you, another Stiles! Stiles two? Stiles times two! We are two of a kind, two peas in a pod, fun times around, mischief managed,” barely, “but I’d really like to talk to your mo-”

“If you, you, are Stiles, too? I can’t be Stiles too!” Little Stiles wailed, interrupting him. Stiles winced at the volume. “Stiles’ unique! Like me! Mom said so! Mom said so! You lie! You-” the phone was suddenly quieter as if someone had removed it from the vicinity of the child – oh gosh, it had been him, had that been him, had he been like that when he was itty bitty? – and he could hear a woman’s voice gently scolding him, um, little Stiles. There was some stomping before he heard the woman speak to the phone, to him.

“Stiles? This you?”

Oh, thank heavens, it was her. He hadn’t imagined her after all.

“Yeah,” he croaked, voice thick with emotions. He had feelings, gross, why couldn’t he just be emotionally constipated like Derek? He had lost everything just like he had, why could he become a cool ice wolfman instead of an emotional wreck? Was it the Stilinski charm?

“Oh, honey,” Claudia said, and Stiles was suddenly filled with warmth. He remembered having that tone of voice directed at him and it had never made him feel less than loved. “What is it?”

“They are dead,” he said, sobbed, finally letting go. “They are all dead, and I couldn’t save them, not Scott, not Lydia, I wasn’t enough, it was my fault-”

“Dear, no, it was not, you didn’t kill them-”

“But they are dead, and I have magic, who the fuck has magic, I do, I could have saved them, I should have tried harder-”
“Stiles, sweetie, calm down. Breathe with me. Count your breaths with your fingers. Are you looking at them? Look at them. Now, breath in. One-”

Stiles let out an ugly sob and counted with her.

One.

Two.

Three, four, five.

Six, seven, eight, nine.

Ten.

Ten fingers. Ten breaths. Ten. It was all real but he was there, she was there, his family was there, they weren’t who they once were but back to the basics, their core was still safe-

“Yes, that’s right, dear. They are there. I just met little miss Lydia Martin yesterday, you know. How? I went out with Stiles! She was acting like a very mature little lady, so pretty in her pink dress and ballet shoes, and she giggled to prettily when Stiles ran around her, pretending to be an aeroplane. I actually made plans with Natalie for a play date. Little you may have a tea party in his future!”

If it was with Lydia, his past self from years ago might have pissed himself from excitement despite being a teenager. Now, though? It was just sad and hilarious, both together.

“Now, tell good ol’ Claudia, what’s pressing on your mind?” she asked, voice demanding, but it didn’t feel like a command. Stiles knew he could refuse and she wouldn’t press. She was just letting him know that she was listening, rather insisting on it.

It was just what he needed.

“Peter, he, he guessed I was once part of a pack, a werewolf pack,” he rasped. He cleared his throat, taking a gulp from his water bottle, and leaned against the wall. He checked the time. Christ, it was barely eight in the morning. On a Saturday. Which meant it was probably seven in California.

“Sorry, it’s so early, you must’ve been asleep-”

“Nonsense, Stiles was already watching the cartoons and I was in the kitchen. Noah is still in bed, though. Now, Peter? You are travelling with someone else than Kate?”

“Yeah, Peter, he’s, ah, he’s a werewolf.”

“A hunter, a werewolf, and a spark walked into a bar,” Claudia giggled, seemingly like she couldn’t help it. A ghost of a smile flickered on Stiles’ face at the sound.

“Yeah yeah, laugh it up,” Stiles dragged a hand through his hair. “He just, I guess he realised by how I acted, or how I spoke, or both, that I was part of one. And then I just said I wasn’t anymore and Peter realised why that was and-”

He felt tired. He felt years older than he actually was. He was merely twenty-three but he had seen and done more than most people did in their lifetime twice over. And now he was talking to his mom who wasn’t really his mom, more like a woman he didn’t actually know, no matter how charmingly similar she was to, well, his mom.
“Oh, Stiles,” she just said, and her tone was so sympathetic Stiles kind of wanted to hang up. He had never dealt well with pity. Did she pity her? Was that why she had insisted on making herself so available? No, it was his mom, she had never been like that-

“And it’s not like I can even talk about it!” he huffed, and grit his teeth. It wasn’t her fault, he shouldn’t be snappy with those not at fault. “If I do, I’ll give him clues about where I’m from and Peter, yeah, Peter’s the guy who must know everything, who needs to have an upper hand or else he won’t feel safe. It’s impossible for him not to be in control and if, if-”

“And then he will look for you and find nothing?”

Stiles deflated like a tired, old balloon without the dying whistle noise. “Yeah. And then the questions double.”

Claudia hummed. He could imagine her tangling the cord with her fingers. “Are you sure it would be a bad thing?”

“Wh- What kind of question is that?” Stiles asked, flabbergasted. “Of course it would!”

“Why?”

Stiles paused. Why, indeed. Because Peter was manipulative, in dire need of control, wary and hateful of everyth-, no. That was the Peter from the past-future. This Peter? This Peter was wary, yes, and manipulative and a suave bastard. His skills were almost as refined now than they had been in the future. But this Peter didn’t treat the world as if it had fucked him twice over because it hadn’t.

And why was that such a revelation when he had recognised the fact already?

“But it would be bad for him to know,” he said, scrambling to answer after a minute of silence. “Because, I mean-”

“Because you knew him in the future, right?”

Stiles closed his eyes and took a deep breath. While his dad was the deputy, his mother wasn’t a slouch either, intuitive in her own special way.

“…Yeah.”

“And because you knew him from there, you think he wouldn’t be able to handle the truth?”

“Well, he would, but-”

“You are not sure how he would react,” she interrupted his half-hearted attempt at explaining. Stiles opened and closed his mouth in a perfect impression of a fish. Behold the skilful performance. Give him the academic award. The silence dragged on until Claudia took it as an affirmative. “That’s understandable, dear, but I’m sure you’ve realised how they aren’t the same people. Yes, I am adding Kate to that count because you knew her from before too, didn’t you? Otherwise you would’ve talked to her before calling me in this state. While I don’t know what’s going to happen, excluding my inevitable death, and I don’t even know what they are like as people, but Stiles, you’re the one who’s travelling with them. You’re the one who is trusting your back with them.

“Doesn’t that tell you something?”

The nudging at the back of his head intensified for barely a moment before Stiles shut it down by banging the mental door close with a few more metaphorical locks. He was, he was trusting both
Kate and Peter to have his back.

He trusted them.

The trusted the two could-be mass murderers with his back and not to poison him or kill him in his sleep and it hadn’t even been three weeks since he started travelling with them both.

He lifted his hand. It was shaking.

“You don’t have to tell them any details. If they trust you as you do them, then they won’t ask. They will wait for you to deal with it. If therapy was an option, I would’ve sent you on their door immediately but this is the kind of PTSD you can’t share with many, so, Stiles, just call me when you need to vent, alright?”

Stiles nodded wordlessly but he felt the sentiment was shared anyway.

“Now, how about you tell me a little of your pack? You don’t have to mention them by name if you don’t want to. I just think you might need to talk of them, don’t you? Maybe start with Scott and Lydia? Sorry, I just, I would love to know these people you call family, these people who will become my surrogate children.”

And he did, choked as his voice was.

He told her of how Scott was so kind and happy, how bright and smart Lydia was, how he had gotten his brother bitten, how there had been a family burnt which had caused a chain of tragedy – she had given a gasp on hearing it and he knew she would check if any house fires had happened yet but he didn’t care, he had the arsonist with him anyway and he didn’t think this Kate, not at the moment anyway, was liable to do any such deed – and, and-

“Stiles. Breathe.”

And he did. He ended up choking on how he had thrown the Molotov cocktail and had participated in killing the first person in his long career of killing things. How he had killed Peter, even if he didn’t mention him by name.

Peter, who had died three times and two of those had been because of Stiles.

This Peter, who was attentive and sassy and manipulative and dangerous but still had the potential to be so very kind?

His breathing was controlled again but his heart was beating like mad with guilt.

“Is Stiles, you know, mini-me going to be alright?” he changed the subject, he needed to change it, his pack, gosh, his pack, they were dead. And he had killed them. “He seemed, well-”

“He’s a strong little thing, he won’t remember a thing after a while,” Claudia dismissed his worry, laughing cheerily. It didn’t seem fake but he knew he could still hear the worry in her tone. Another flash of guilt. This wasn’t something a young woman like her should be worrying about, especially for someone who wasn’t really her son, just a strange amalgamation of the little boy still trailing after her. “He’s just a little sensitive about his name even if I can’t understand why. Mieczysław is such a nice name! You probably don’t remember it, right? Why you started calling yourself by the family name?” Stiles didn’t even have a chance to answer before she steamrolled over him. “See? Don’t worry. It’ll blow over like everything. Kids are like that.”

“O- okay.” Yeah, that sounded right. Probably. His mother always knew best, anyway, especially
things about Stiles. It had been a thing his dad had lamented for years, after all, how they had had a boy but then he had turned up to be such a mommy’s boy – and proud of it, taking interest in running around wildly rather than doing sports or fishing. He did take after his dad too, no question about it, but there just had been that special bond between him and his mother, he had been told. Or was he, they, romanticizing it? They had lost her so early.

“Oh, I think I hear Noah. My gosh, it’s almost eight. I don’t really want to stop you here but are you going to be fine, little one?”

Little one. He hadn’t been called that for so long.

“Yeah. I, yeah.” He didn’t fancy delving again into the past, not yet. Even handling the start of the story had been hard but-

“If you have anything, you’re welcome to call me anytime!”

“Yeah, um. Thanks, m-, Claudia.”

She’s not your mom, his mind whispered, not this version of her anyway.

“Have a nice day! Wait, Stiles, have you been listening this whole time-”

He heard a clack and then nothing. He stared at his phone. Had his mom always been like that? So understanding, knowing what he needed? Probably. Stiles couldn’t remember. His earliest memories of her had been from around these times but they had been so scattered and his most concise ones were from when the frontotemporal dementia had already been affecting her behaviour until, well.

He leaning against his pillows. He had no doubt that Kate and Peter were up and awake already, probably waiting for him to come out. It was, after all, almost nine in the morning and they usually were on the road by this time. He didn’t think they would ambush him right outside his door but a couple of steps away was a fair game. He deactivated the only rune he had been able to garner to himself again, drawing into his skin with a permanent marker since the other means of doing so were still out of reach. It was the one disrupting hearing, the one he had lost in the explosion which had landed him here. Now he had whopping three runes in use and written down in his signed little black book, still empty of any new magic but the advice his mom had given him on sparks. Fuck, how was he going so slow on that front too?

He sighed, and shook his head. Just as he was about to stand up a thought flashed in his mind and he froze.

Stiles. Little Stiles. Listening in. Three years, not yet four. No Scott. No Lydia, not yet. There was, there was someone there, maybe, but-

He slumped against his bed again and groaned.

Little Stiles only had his mother and his father at this point. He had heard stories that, until Scott, he had been scarily possessive of them both because they really were all he had – which later, naturally, had translated into being possessive of Scott until he had realised that, hey, he might not disappear from his sight if he turned around. And then his mom and Scott’s dad had happened and they had both turned possessive of each other, clinging harder than life, until junior high when they had fallen out of even the ordinary circles straight into the rejects.

And he had been listening in on Claudia’s phone call because of course he was. He had been monitoring his dad’s calls even in high school which had gotten him into this supernatural mess the first place. Well, if he hadn’t, he would have been a prime candidate for the Nemeton then too
without the little extra of knowing what to avoid, so he might have ended up dead like many other teens. But this meant that little Stiles had heard his mom call someone else by his name, name that was a family name and thus no one else should use it, have it, since it was one of a kind too. He had also heard her call someone else her ‘little one’, a nickname that definitely belonged to no one else.

Shit, little Stiles definitely thought someone was stealing away his mother and what made it worse was that the one doing so was a grown-up version of himself even if he didn’t know it. No, wait, she had even mentioned she was going to die in front of a three-year-old Stiles.

Stiles banged his head against the bedding and muffled a scream.

Of course, only he could manage to mess up his own life even when it wasn’t really about himself, just because he was so high on the possibility of having his mom again, learning to know her the way he never had, having someone to listen to him-

Of fucking course.

He should have just stayed away from them all.

From Kate, from Peter, from Claudia – oh gosh, he never should’ve called her –, from everyone. He was just bound to mess up everything. He had dragged Scott to the woods and had gotten him bitten and later it all got him killed. Because of him, Lydia had been bitten too, and all the others too. He had been the ‘smart one’, the one who would figure things about, the one who had fucked them all up. Even Peter-

He needed to get away. He needed to get away right now.

Fumbling, he snatched his bag – never unpacked, not anymore, not when there was no home, not for him – and rushed to the door, intent on finding his car, anyone’s car, he’d even hotwire one if he needed, oh gosh, he needed to get away get away this wasn’t going to end well if he was there too-

He’d kill them all, even this nicer version of Kate and the sane Peter-

Stiles opened the door, only to face with Peter whose fist was raised in a knock. He quirked his brows.

“Is everything alright?” A knowing, slightly predatory look entered those cool blue eyes flashing gold when he clearly, so very clearly, scented the air. “Going somewhere?”

Stiles stared at him before his shoulders slumped and he started shaking, laughing hysterically.

And, of course, Peter would never let him get away with anything, even without knowing a thing. He never did, not until he drew his last breath. Because of Stiles.

Peter only continued to watch, mystified, as Stiles laughed with tears in his eyes.

Fuck his life.

Fuck his life.

***

Stiles admitted he wasn’t acting very rationally. Since his breakdown – and he could admit it, it was a total breakdown, he had laughed like a mad man and cried and locked himself inside his room after
evading Peter’s attempt at touching him and not coming out until the next day. He never paid for the extra night so he had no idea if Peter or Kate – probably Peter, let’s face it – had done something but he was rather grateful for it anyway, even if the only reason he emerged the next day had been because his stomach had growled louder than Derek had ever done and that meant it was loud-

Derek.

An image of him bloody and pale flashed across his mind and he closed his eyes, biting his lip until it bled. Shit. He nursed the cut, sucking the blood, toying with it. He hadn’t spoken a word to either Kate or Peter since then, and now he was just lying there on the backseat after Kate gave up her kingdom of one for the front seat.

They were giving him looks, some of those really meaningful ones that screamed worry and intrigue and wasn’t it funny that he had Kate Argent and Peter Hale at his beck and call? Well, not literally but they were watching over him like he was going to explode at any moment. It might even be an accurate description, who knew. Stiles didn’t. He hadn’t counted on having a mental breakdown in a backwater motel somewhere. He wasn’t even sure what state they were in right now.

Shit, he had really done it now. Remember, remember, fifth of November, just tell him what he wanted, this sounded familiar, oh, so tell me what you want, what you really really want-

“I, for one, would like to know how you locked us out.”

Stiles snapped from his thoughts, realising he had actually hummed under his breath like a crazy person. “What?” he asked, voice weirdly raspy, and he coughed to clear his throat. Kate gave him a long look.

“You locked us out,” she said, repeating Peter’s words. “Like, total lockdown. We couldn’t get the door to open, no one could hear anything from the inside, and forcing our way in wasn’t possible even with Peter’s beta shift which, by the way, was super cool. Even if it was a little weird. The eyebrows, where did they go?” she snorted and shook her head. “If he hadn’t managed to charm the manager, she would’ve called the police on us even if, by the way he was acting, he might have charmed his way out that too.”

He had done that? He hadn’t heard anything!

Peter looked smug in the mirror smoothing over his hair, and raised his eyes to meet Stiles’. He cocked his head. Stiles turned away quickly, avoiding all eye contact.

“I think it might be his spark acting,” Peter said, turning towards-, oh, north. Sign said something -ville, but that didn’t really narrow the place down. “It seems like the core of it is belief and wishing from the bottom of the heart. Seems plausible since the wendigo incident held similar premise.”

“It did?”

“Well, Stiles here didn’t have any weapons and the wendigo did get charred worse than the one actually on fire… Yes, I’m pretty sure of that.”

Shame warmed the back of his neck. He couldn’t even control himself.

“Magic… It’s really something, isn’t it?” Kate sounded intrigued, as if she had never thought about it before. “Not everyone is, well, like the witch? I mean, Stiles isn’t, but-”

“It depends on the user,” Peter said, rolling his shoulders, tone taking on a lecturing vibe. “There are different kinds of magic users, most common ones being druids and witches, but there are different
types of magic too. Werewolves descend from magic too, you know."

“Because of the shapeshifting?”

“Exactly. There are legends—”

Stiles watched the ceiling but didn’t see anything. If that was true – and it did ring right somehow, even if he didn’t really remember much since yesterday morning – that meant that he really wanted to be there, didn’t it? Because this morning Kate had just dragged him out when he had opened his door, babbled about something that flew right over his head, and stuck him in the back of the car with slightly cold waffles soaked in syrup. By the time he had righted himself, she had been in the front and Peter had driven out of the parking lot.

And he had made no attempt, conscious or not, to get away.

His heart lurched. Even if he was the threat to all of them, kind of, really, he hadn’t tried to get away. It would have been the smart thing to do too. He wasn’t figuring out the Nemeton, he wasn’t being productive. He wasn’t doing anything to resolve the Beacon Hills problem.

He thought about sneaking away in the dead of the night but it, it didn’t feel right.

He didn’t want to leave.

He didn’t fear the threat of Argents. He didn’t fear what the Tribunal might do to him. He didn’t fear, well, anything. He had already seen the first steps of the apocalypse. Nothing scared him anymore.

Except…

He was already attached. He was bad luck. He was the worst murderer he knew.

And he would be their death, Kate and Peter’s, just like he was everyone else’s.

But he still didn’t want to leave.

He should.

But-

The air turned static and Stiles flew up, his hair standing from the electricity. Someone was using magic, sending what was akin to a flare. Someone was calling for help, possibly from a supernatural threat.

Perhaps there was something good he could do before he eventually messed things up again.

“Stop the car!” he barked. Kate and Peter looked at him like he had gone crazy.

“What?” Kate asked but Stiles had eyes only on Peter. The werewolf stared back from the mirror.

“I said,” Stiles licked his lips. The blood flow had stopped. “Stop the car.”

Peter waited for a moment for an explanation which wasn’t coming. He looked at Stiles and he couldn’t imagine what he was seeing. Slowly, almost mechanically, he drove to the side of the road and parked and, immediately, Stiles was out of the car, rushing to meet whatever there was to meet within the treeline.

A forest, naturally. Why did everything happen in a forest?
The feeling of urgency hadn’t faded and, soon, he felt another burst of magic. This time it was so close he could almost taste it. It was a strange sensation. The only times he had been able to feel magic like this was with the Nogitsune, and then when the Nemeton-

But it wasn’t like he had ever really even known other magic users. The magical threats on Beacon Hills weren’t into broadcasting themselves, Deaton had died before Stiles had managed to do anything but a few tricks with the mountain ash and Morrell…

The less said about her the better.

There. On his left.

What he found was something he had never encountered before, hidden in a strange nook that was almost unnaturally dark. In front of him a woman – around his age, probably younger – with brown hair tied in a ponytail was dodging attacks made by a figure in a black cloak with a hood pulled on its face. It reminded Stiles of the Dementors from Harry Potter but it wasn’t exactly the same.

He patted his pockets, then his belt, but could find no weapons. Shit, his jacket was in the car, everything else too, probably. Shit.

He picked a rock and threw it at the creature, hitting it on the head.

Ha, headshot.

“Leave her alone!” he yelled. The woman flicked her eyes on him, relief washing over her, and the creature turned around as if feeling the air, sensing a treat that would satiate its hunger.

It’s hood – there was no face there, oh gosh – landed on Stiles and he could swear if it did have a face, it would be grinning.

It attacked.

Stiles scrambled to get away from it and it barely missed. Stiles felt cold emaciating from it, felt a chill tingling down his back, but he just scrambled to stand next to the woman, quickly looking her over. He felt strangely tired all of a sudden.

“Are you okay?!” he yelled, and they dodged another swoop from the creature.

Swooping is bad.

“Yes!” she said, even if she looked dirty and tired.

“What is it?!”

“A wraith of some sort,” she said, grabbing Stiles and pulling him to safety when he tripped on what seemed to be thin air. The creature hissed, voice grating on Stiles’ ears. “It eats magic!”

“What?!” he yelled. She looked apologetic for having called for magical help via magical means. She had called for a buffet for the fucking creature!

“I’m sorry! I didn’t know what else to do!” she mumbled words Stiles couldn’t hear and clapped her hands a few times, completing what looked like a shortened version of a ritual. A flash of something was thrown at the creature but it only absorbed it. She cringed.

Stiles cursed. And then Peter was there, rushing forward and tackling the robed creature. It went down with a screech but it seemed that Peter had trouble keeping it still. But, wait a minute-
“If it’s a wraith, how is it corporeal?”

“Before you arrived, it managed to suck out half of my reserves,” she admitted. “The more it eats, the more corporeal it gets.”

Well, that explained the sudden tiredness.

“How do we kill it?!” Peter shouted, the creature almost slipping by him. Stiles felt lost. How did they? He had no idea! It was a creature he had never seen before! The Dementors were killed – or at least were defended against – by Patronuses, so if they went by that logic, it would mean that they could be defeated by using-

“Light!” Stiles and the girl yelled at the same time and startled each other. Pop culture, saving him since day one.

“Light?” Stiles heard Kate say somewhere within the darkness. “I’ll show you light!”

And then the whole clearing was filled with it when she dropped what was probably a flash bomb, blinding them all. The wraith let out a high screech before it crumbled to dust and air, and made Peter sneeze a few times in a row. The moment it did the nook also brightened – this time naturally – and Stiles was honestly disoriented from all of it.

He sat down, legs giving from under him, and panted.

Oh shit.

Oooooh shit.

His vision was spotted worse than a Dalmatian and that kind of made no sense.

The girl sat down next to him, looking just as tired as him, or even more so. They exchanged a small victorious smile.

“Are you alright?” he asked. She bobbed her head, laughing incredulously, as if she couldn’t believe she was still alive.

“Never better!” she said and smiled. “Thank you.”

“Peter and Kate did most of the work,” he nodded towards the hunter and the werewolf. They turned towards the two still standing but were met with unreadable looks.

“Are we done here?” Kate asked. Her tone was slightly disdainful for some reason. Without waiting for an answer, she turned on her feet and left, tracing their steps. Stiles looked at Peter in askance but he only shook his head and left, following after Kate.

“Well.” “Um.”

Stiles and the girl shared a sheepish look.

“You need a ride?” Stiles asked.

“Yes please,” the girl said. They stood up and started walking away from what could have been their end.

“I’m Stiles,” he introduced himself. “And the other two were Peter and Kate.”
“Friends?”

No, well, yes, or, um-

He had no idea how to answer that. It wasn’t like there was a label there he could put on them. What *were* they, truly? Friends? Acquaintances? Mentor and mentee? Pa-

“We are travelling together,” he said lamely. It felt like a cop-out but-

He heard a crack and a crash from somewhere ahead of them.

The girl nodded, and smiled again. “Nice to meet you. My name’s Julia. Julia Baccari.”

“Nice to meet you, Julia.”

At least he had managed to do something good with his life, he thought absently as they passed a fallen tree.

He could have sworn there had been none when he had run this way earlier.

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The drive to the edge of the city – they were in Illinois apparently – was long and quiet. Julia was trying to start a conversation with them all, thanking again them for saving her life but to no use. Peter and Kate both ignored every attempt she made. Stiles felt a bit bad for her and asked about her magic to which she replied she was a druid and then they were off.

On arriving to their motel of the night, Kate disappeared the moment they got their keys without a backward look. Stiles opened his mouth to say something but she rounded the corner before he could. Julia accepted hers, taking the room closest to Stiles. She insisted on paying for all their rooms as a thank you, leaving after telling him she was going to come by a little later to continue their discussion. He accepted, if only because he had learnt so much more during the brief hours with her than he ever had with Deaton. Stiles fully expected Peter to leave him too but no, the werewolf followed him to his room despite his own being on the other side of the motel.

He closed the door behind them and turned to Stiles, looking tall and emitting a mood so bad it couldn’t be hidden.

“I’ve been… trying to be delicate,” he said, choosing his words carefully. “But this trick you pulled today? It was straight out of the ‘never do that’ category you’ve tried to instil on Kate. Stupid and reckless.”

Stiles bristled. How dare he? Peter saw it and flashed his teeth in response.

“Oh, sweetheart, I dare. You ran off without a single weapon and the only reason you or the girl managed to live to see another day was because Kate and I arrived when we did.”

“Peter-”

“Oh, but we saved a life!” Peter mocked, faking a swoon. He straightened immediately after, expression falling into neutrality Stiles couldn’t interpret. “That’s what you were going to say, wasn’t it? That it didn’t matter because all turned well?” He scoffed. “That’s what Kate said too but you only gave her a lecture.”

“Hypocrite.”
Stiles felt like someone had punched him. He gaped, unable to say a thing in his defence.

Probably because there were no words he could use to do that. He hadn’t meant to, he-

“But you didn’t think, did you? You thought it wouldn’t matter. It wouldn’t matter because, what?” Peter tilted his head. “Because if everything failed, it wouldn’t matter and you would be able to join your pack?” His mouth twitched cruelly. “I’m sorry but I refuse to help anyone’s suicide.”

Stiles couldn’t breathe. “Wh-, I didn’t? I wasn’t trying to-”

He wasn’t, right? Right?

“You wouldn’t tell us what’s wrong!” Peter snapped, eyes flashing. Stiles stood still. “Didn’t we establish already that we were travelling together? That we would stand for each other, if not with words then with deeds?”

“Why?” Stiles asked, stupefied. Peter barked a bitter laugh. It wasn’t a pretty sound.

“I don’t know!” he yelled and waved his hand in a wide arch, ending with pointing at Stiles almost accusingly. “You are not pack but still I feel less and less connected to my own, something insisting that there is a better one closer, something that would accept me for who I was even without the blood ties. Three weeks! Three weeks with people I’ve never known before, and my instincts are overruling the pack bonds I’ve cultivated since birth! One of them is a hunter, the other one is a spark, both of who have their own brands of insanity! For what? To see the other one completely oblivious of what might be happening, and the other one denying them outright!”

“Wh-, it’s not like you are, I mean-!” Stiles sputtered but Peter only looked at him with a mix of condescending pity and ire.

“Go on, end the sentence. I’m waiting.”

Stiles’ mouth clacked shut with a sound that almost echoed around the room. Peter nodded.

“That’s what I thought.”

He turned his back on Stiles and walked away, opening the door. Stiles watched him go with an uncomfortable feeling in his chest. Just as he was almost out, Peter stopped, although he didn’t turn around.

“And here I thought I might have found-, no. I guess it doesn’t matter. It’s not like you even trust us. Trust me.”

With a burst of speed, he was gone, and Stiles felt like all his limbs and his heart had been turned to lead. He sat down heavily on his bed. Wasn’t that what he wanted? For them to be safe, to leave him alone when he was too weak to separate from them himself?

Why, then, did it hurt so much?

Julia bobbed down next to him, worrying her lip uncertainly.

“Did I miss something?” Did I do something, he could hear her asking silently.

Stiles didn’t know. He really, really didn’t.

After all, it appeared that he still had managed screwed everything up. Again.
Yeah, not much humour this time. We are getting there, though, but apparently things get worse before they get better. Go figure. Stiles has some serious issues - mostly survivor's guilt - he needs to work out. At first he was in a constant fight-or-flight state, driven by his need to right things, so it didn't manifest but now? Things are actually looking up (by this, I mean he's starting to heal a little) and he's the only one left to enjoy it. Yeah.

(I wasn't planning on this getting so deep but it happened. Woops. My bad.)

Also, did you think the group was finished? That it would only be Stiles, Peter and Kate for the rest of the story? Wrong! I am going to enjoy the heck out of the next couple of chapters, just so you know. Oh, Julia. Gonna tag her next chapter!
In which Peter and Kate steal the author’s heart and discussions of matters most arcane happen

Chapter Notes

I had a different title reserved for this chapter when I started writing it, reflecting on what was going to happen... But then Peter and Kate stomped over everything and Julia started poking holes at things. I don't actually mind it that much anymore. I did resent it a little earlier but now? Be who you wanna be, B-A-R-B-I-E~

No? Alright, then...

(By the way, you're all amazing <3)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter growled as he stalked the motel corridor. He hadn’t meant to snap at Stiles. Not like that, anyway. He had planned to take up his… transgression and discuss it. Like an adult. But no, his temper had to come between everything.

Even though it was full moon in a few days, it wasn’t like he could blame it either. He had been in full control of his shift since before he entered his teens – a fact which had made Talia jealous since she only managed to take full control of it when she turned fifteen. Of course, she then proceeded to one up him and complete the shift into a full wolf which was a rarity amongst all werewolves.

Their cousins had been in her awe. So had their uncles and aunts, even their father, the alpha.

Not his mother, though. His mother had just patted her on the head before coming back to Peter and playing tag with him when no one else would.

He knew it smarted Talia that he had their mother’s attention but he was also annoyed that he was never good enough for their father, not even with the way he trained and acted like the best enforced he could. It all balanced out. They were alright, in the end. Competitive, clearly, but they cared.

Until their parents died and Talia became a control freak.

Since Peter was actually closer in age to Laura than Talia, she somehow decided he was a child too despite being almost of age and ready to brave the world. It was like it no longer mattered that he had been trained as her left hand, that he was her left hand in deeds if not name. Their arguments had been fiery and his temper had soured under her micromanagement. Gritting his teeth had become familiar whenever he was home, the reason he had gone to Yale instead of staying in-state. From unofficial enforcer to a child again, it smarted. He knew it was partly because she didn’t want to lose another member of their family – and he was her only brother, just like she was his only sister – but it had gotten too much.

And even Yale hadn’t been far enough from her and her influence.

He loved his family – there was no question of that – but enough was enough. He could handle Laura’s little temper tantrums, Derek’s naivety and Cora’s habit of biting everything she could get her teeth into – particularly Peter’s ankles whenever he was home – but the constant dismissal of his
worth? Leave him without anything to own, to cling on?

He had run away.

He wasn’t proud of the fact. Some of the more traditional packs would have taken it as a betrayal and cast him out as an omega but he knew Talia would never do that. Even when she had lost her temper at him while he was trying to rush off with his car – which, incidentally, was the reason his car had been in the shop and thus unavailable – he knew she would never do that. Not even when he had taken a gap year without telling her, only revealing it when he didn’t leave for the year and even that weeks late. Perhaps she thought that without his car he wouldn’t run off any longer, would take up the responsibility she wasn’t ready to grant him.

It was like she didn’t know him at all.

He understood trying to protect the pack.

He didn’t accept trying to suffocate his will to live.

He left before he did something drastic.

It was a stroke of luck Stiles and Kate drove past him when they did. He had been waiting for someone to stop for an hour already, walking steadily away from Beacon Hills. He also knew that if he had been waiting for another hour, Talia might have caught him. Cora was always an early riser and enjoyed toddling after him and his ankles, waking him up before he wanted to be. It was all a game to her and, truthfully, Peter didn’t really mind. She was a cute kid, probably his favourite from the bunch although they were all great – and awful – in their own way. But, without him there, she was bound to start crying or go bother Talia about it, alerting her that something wasn’t right.

He was grateful they stopped. He was happy to actually find people who were normal, or at least didn’t care about his wealth – or the lack there of for the moment – or his looks. Oh, he had seen Stiles’ eyes wander a little but there was some sort of incredulity that didn’t come with the lust and sex that usually followed him. He had, after all, refused his proposition rather adamantly and decided to worry about him trying to sell his body for a night in a cheap motel.

As if.

Stiles clearly underestimated his own attractiveness. The brown messy hair, the eyes bordering amber, the beauty marks dotting the pale skin, all were traits that Peter found attractive in a person superficially. His built was also easy on the eye and the hands were something to die for. Yes, Peter was definitely eyeing him up and he wasn’t ashamed of admitting it.

However, Stiles had denied him with kindness and Peter-

Well.

He let it go. He didn’t have many friends since, despite what others might believe and what he led them to believe, he wasn’t much of a party person and college, even pre-law, was often just that. One huge drinking game. Oh, he dabbled and played the part but he would rather sit under the sky, have a beer or two – possibly wine – and just have a talk. Even with the lack of alcohol, Stiles was offering that. So was Kate, despite her rather critical flaw of being a hunter.

Peter was slowly, steadily gaining people he could count as friends. Besides, flaws or no, one does not simply barbecue a few wendigos without becoming closer, without reaching an, ah, understanding.
A werewolf, a hunter and a spark indeed.

All of it under three weeks.

It had taken three weeks for him to realise that the insisted pull Talia had tried to use on him had faded enough for him to be able to ignore it without actively trying; the same bond that she had continuously tugged on and which the distance between Yale and Beacon Hills hadn’t lessened a bit. Three weeks it had taken for him to feel the two little tendrils trying to grow into something. They felt different. Fire and confidence with brittle edges for Kate, unrealised and bright despite its flaws, steady where others might falter; the calm before storms and wild electricity that had been painted with something unprecedented for Stiles, everchanging but reliable, will stronger than anyone else’s.

One was oblivious to them, the other denied them.

The pull to both sides was driving him slowly crazy. He had only realised the war inside him when Stiles had spoken of his dead pack – or, spoken wasn’t the right word. Still, Peter had been able to sense the grief that came with the mention, grief so strong Peter knew it was real. And it had only made the pull stronger, so strong the air had almost been stolen from his lungs.

And then there was the attraction he had been battling. The first real friend he was, perhaps, making and he getting far too attached. He was getting needy, and he wasn’t particularly fond of that.

Scenting had brought him some relief but it had also made the denied bonds feel like the sound that came from someone trying to play a violin the first time; screeching and screaming for someone to stop.

There were other things too to consider, some more important than others, and Peter had been cautiously poking at the hornet’s nest but then there was the stupid trick Stiles dared to perform today-

Peter stopped when he walked into someone. He blinked out of his funk, realising he had walked around the motel probably a few times if his footprints were to be believed, and looked into Kate’s eyes. Her brows were raised with a silent question.

He sighed.

“He’s with the druid.”

Kate pursed her lips. Peter could sense a touch of discontentment from her with the way her anger spiked.

“I know. I don’t like it either,” his mouth curled. Kate handed him a coke, probably from the vending machine. He opened it and took a sip. Definitely. It was a little stale.

“Who is she anyway?” she muttered darkly and they watched the cars passing them by.

Peter shrugged. “I’ve never heard of her but that’s no surprise. It’s not like the supernatural world knows everyone and everything.”

“Because it’s so diverse, yeah?”

“Yes. And some are more isolationist than others.”

“Sometimes I wish the hunter community was like that,” she sighed and shook her drink hard. She opened it and watched as it burst out in a shower of artificial flavours. “They are all so damn interested in pushing their noses in other people’s matters.”
She sounded hostile and her gaze darkened. Peter hummed.

“Personal experience?”

“Yeah. The reason I’m with Stiles.”

Peter raised his brows in surprise. “Didn’t you ‘volunteer’ him?”

Kate nodded. “I did. I told you all about the previous mentors, yeah?” She didn’t wait for Peter’s answer before continuing. “Well, they were all arranged by my father because of Shannon – you know, Shannon Caldwell? no? right –, she’s a member of the Tribune and a friend of my mother’s. He wanted to start training me himself when mother died but Shannon swooped in and told him to find someone else. He was still busy trying to manage the clan after mother’s sudden death,” she grimaced.

Peter waited for her to continue, and offered her his drink. She took it and chucked it an unfortunate passer-by. He threw her a menacing look but faltered after seeing Peter and continuing on his way. A fleeting smile passed on Kate’s face.

“It was a mess, I admit. There was no one there to take up the mantle because all thought she would last until I came of age and would last until I was at least hitting my thirties before seemingly retiring, at least from being the head of family. I don’t think she was ever going to stop hunting, though. She lived it. It was her life’s work and her passion. I think the only reason she married my father was to continue the line. She would’ve been happy to just, you know, hunt if she hadn’t been born to the mainline.

“In any case, he did assign me to others but they were all horrible. I’m not sure why he thought they were good or if there were only them available but I wasn’t going to let myself suffer under their hands. I was chafing. And he was always such a distant figure in my life, you know? I’m not sure if he wanted to be there or not but mother was just insisting on training me and the ‘tradition’,,” she spat out, “dictated that it meant for less people to influence my thoughts. Which meant training and training and more training. I wonder if I ever got a present that wasn’t a book on weapons or a weapon itself.”

“Is there a point to all this?” Peter asked, nudging her along. She snorted but didn’t take it as an insult.

“When Stiles arrived, it was like magic, almost like he was sent just for me,” she admitted, pulling her hair loose. She shook her head and the curls bounced in the wind. “He cared. Not right away, he was just mad and resigned and confused and resented me. But there was this grudging sort of thing that felt like ‘we could maybe understand each other’. You know?”

Peter reflected on the words for a moment, tasting them. “I do.”

And he really did.

He had sensed those exact shades of emotions coming off of Stiles the first days they travelled together. They had lessened to a degree but they still surfaced once in a while – mostly when Stiles fell into those deep, dark thoughts of his.

“Right? I mean, I think I could’ve gone far under father. He’s a skilled hunter on his own right. Mother would never have married someone who wasn’t and his kill count is magnificent,” she said, admiring tone shading her voice. Peter curled his lip but curbed down his expression before Kate could notice. He had heard of Gerard Argent. His kill count was high, there was no doubt about that.
He just wasn’t sure if he was as actively following the Code as the Argents boasted. The rumours he had heard were more often than not just plain nasty.

“But Stiles? I don’t think I’ve ever thought of my mother’s teachings and methods as something, well, unrefined, I guess, or that there was something wrong with the language I use,” she admitted. “I mean, everyone I know uses ‘were’ to describe shapeshifters. Is it really such an insult?”

“It’s not an insult, per se,” Peter said. He motioned Kate to turn her back on him and she did. He marvelled that for a moment – a predator turning her back on another predator – and held his hand out for her hairband. He started braiding her hair. “Just a cultural difference but some take it harder than others. Deep inside, we are both – a human and a wolf but they are fused. It can be romanticized that we have this being called ‘inner wolf’ when in reality there are just extra strong senses or animal-like instincts added with supernatural elements; humans with ‘just with something extra’ if I borrow Stiles’ words. Werewolf is a more accurate term because we are human but we are wolves too, and about the shortened version of it, being called a wolf is better than being called defective, isn’t it?”

Kate mused it for a moment before she shook her head. Peter tapped her lightly and she ceased her movements. He continued his braiding.

“I don’t think I understand,” she said finally. “Mostly I- I don’t understand why I don’t understand. Wouldn’t these things be the first things to teach? Before handling a child a weapon? Tell them the whys before the hows?”

Peter shrugged. Hunters never really made sense to him.

“I mean, it makes sense they would give us, or the girl children, the future leaders, the choice on what to believe but does that mean that there is that large a bias there?” she wondered. “What if the whole community is affected? Wouldn’t it affect the trainer too? I read this one article about subliminal messages. Wouldn’t this situation fall under it?”

Peter bit his tongue not to answer. Oh, the tales he could tell her about the hunting community. Maybe one day. He did, however, ask her if she- “really want to be a hunter?”

“Yes,” she said promptly, but continued more haltingly, “I mean, I didn’t always. Not when I was young. I just wanted to play, you know? Not train. But then, I knew we were really doing it to keep those who can’t protect them safe. We hunt those who hunt us.” She paused and then mumbled quietly, “But that wasn’t what Dick was doing that day…”

Peter tied her hair and flicked it at her. She batted him in revenge.

“You like him, don’t you? Stiles?” she asked, turning back to him. Peter shrugged.

“Sure.”

“You like-like him,” Kate insisted. Peter twitched and looked at her, unamused.

“‘Like-like?’”

She grinned gleefully, apparently seeing something in his face. “Someone has a crush!”

He rolled his eyes. “Good grief.”

Kate sobered almost immediately. “Don’t you think the druid’s being too close to him?”
“Stiles is a big boy. He can handle himself.”

“I’m not talking about that. Of course he can. But… you saw him too, what he was like these past few days. What if, what if he’s trying to do something reckless again? What if she takes advantage of him?”

Peter twitched again and refused to look at her. “Like I said, Stiles-”

“Peter.”

He sighed. “I don’t know what you want from me.”

“I want you to admit you like him.”

“Fine, Kate. Yes, I like him. I might even be willing to explore that further than just bedding him and leaving without a note. That doesn’t mean I want to do something about it,” he looked at her seriously. “He’s still clearly dealing with the loss of his pack. That kind of loss… if it doesn’t kill you, it changes you. I don’t know the particulars but whatever happened, it was bad. And he’s not ready for something like that.”

Kate frowned. “But wasn’t he-”

“Interested? When we met?” She nodded. “He was. There was – is – an attraction there. But there is something else there too, under it, over it, surrounding it. He’s not looking for love, Kate. I’m not sure what he is but that isn’t it. He’s not even looking for a fuck. I should know, I did offer.”

The girl giggled and he shook his head. Teenagers. “Really. If I’m honest – and isn’t that a marvel on its own – it almost seemed like a mistake. Compared to him then and him now, the overcompensating attraction he gave was just that, overcompensating for something. Almost as if he was hiding whatever funk he is in now underneath it until it was no longer possible.”

And didn’t that ring true.

“Besides, it’s not like the druid is going to come with us. We are going to part ways tomorrow and then it’ll just be us three,” he said. He tried for unaffected tone but he knew some of his satisfaction leaked through. Kate smiled at him knowingly.

“I think someone’s a little jealous.”

Jealous? Maybe. But not for the reasons Kate thought.

Despite Stiles ignoring and building walls around himself, locking the growing pack bonds away, they were still there. They were a weird little pack, the three of them.

And the druid – Julia – was not. She was an intruder.

“We could drive her away,” Kate suggested. The idea intrigued Peter. It tasted like victory, a battle won without a fight, protecting the pack from perceived threat.

It was only natural he wanted her gone.

“She’s gone tomorrow,” he echoed his earlier words. This was the druid’s attempt at thanking them and Stiles wouldn’t like it if they attacked her now that he had tried so hard to keep her alive. Kate knocked their shoulders together before standing up and walking away, her braid swinging as she went.
Peter closed his eyes, trained his ears but heard nothing amiss. He enjoyed the wind.

The thin fiery bond tied to him felt a little less brittle.

He would apologise to Stiles too. He wasn’t really fair. He knew Stiles wasn’t either but he knew that they both knew that they were in the wrong. They just needed to have a talk to clean the air. He would let him take it easy today so Stiles wouldn’t feel threatened and they would talk.

Tomorrow.

***

“Julia’s coming with us,” Stiles said, switching from foot to foot, cursing how uncertain he was feeling. He had felt numb yesterday after Peter left and it had honestly felt awful. He hadn’t been able to move or think, he had just been sitting on the edge of his bed and that had been it. Julia had sat with him, awkwardly silent at first before she had started talking about her childhood best friend – a werewolf – who had asked her to be her emissary when she would gain her alpha status but how the current alpha – her friend’s great aunt – wanted some proof of her skills before she could cement her position, like it was done in the olden days. How Julia had then packed her things and left, leaving a note explaining the situation to her friend.

‘She wouldn’t understand,’ Julia had said, shaking her head. ‘She thinks of me as this naïve, weak little slip of a girl, just because I was a little sickly when I was a kid and she had to carry me everywhere. But I’ll show her! I can be worthy of being her emissary!’

She had then admitted she didn’t know how she would do it. She didn’t really have a plan, except of the certainty of how she would do it. She talked and talked until Stiles – he felt old, so very old, hearing her tale of searching for her American dream and how he had once been so very similar – had asked her if she wanted to come with them in the meantime. They did have space in the car.

Julia had been elated but then deflated, asking if it was really alright. The others didn’t seem too fond of her.

Stiles had said that he would talk to them.

And now that he was, he wasn’t sure how he was going to get them to agree. Peter’s smile had turned a little stony after his words, blurted out before even wishing them a good morning – thanks a lot, mouth, you’re running again – and Kate had looked at him and then at Julia in the distance, then at Peter, at Julia, and back at him before throwing her hands up and stalking to the car, obviously upset.

“Please?” he said weakly. He felt really awkward. He wanted to apologise for his actions but how could he, when he couldn’t explain how and why it had happened? What was he supposed to do? Would Peter even accept his words? Would he think that he was a nutter, not worth his attention? It felt a little strange to be worried about Peter’s acceptance but he was, he so was, he didn’t really get it but, if Peter wasn’t going to throw him away, if Stiles could just-, but he needed people-

That was the crux of everything, wasn’t it?

Stiles couldn’t handle being alone. Not again. He was pretty sure his sanity was actually depending on it. He would take all scraps Peter and Kate – there was a voice inside his head, it sounded a little like Derek, a lot like Lydia, asking if he was sure – were willing to give him.

Just, please.
“Don’t leave him alone.”

“She’s looking to prove herself and I, well, I think we have space in our car,” Stiles continued when Peter said nothing, only continued to look at him with those blue, blue eyes.

“It’s your car,” Peter said, finally, and he opened his mouth once, twice, but nothing else came out. For some reason, he seemed like he was at a loss of words and Stiles didn’t know why. It wasn’t like he had been at fault yesterday, no. It had been Stiles, only him, thinking of only his own conscience and trying to clean it from being so bloody without a care of anyone else.

Peter had been right about him, so right. Maybe even when they had known each other for less than they did now.

Do you want the bite?

You’re lying.

He was. He always was, avoiding the truth, deceiving others; he no longer knew what truth tasted like. Stiles would bet all he had that it tasted like freedom.

“Am I allowed to come with?” Stiles startled when he heard Julia’s voice from beside him. The girl – woman? Shit, he didn’t even know how old she was, was this a good idea again, no it is, she’s fine, not everyone is out to get to him, them – looked unsure, combing through her brown hair in a gesture of anxiety.

“You are,” Stiles said, smiling down on her. She returned the gesture and her eyes slipped to look at their resident werewolf. She licked her lips, questioning look directed at Peter.

“He’s the ‘boss,’” Peter merely said after a brief silence and turned around to jog to the driver’s side. Julia looked a little lost but Stiles tugged her along, directing her to the backseat which was left free.

Kate had taken the front again and refused to meet their eyes. Stiles felt a small pang in his chest and he shook his head to clear it out.

She was Katherine Argent, a huntress extraordinaire even at fifteen.

It wasn’t like Stiles was seeking her approval either.

“Where are we going?” Julia asked, trying to fill the silence that permeated the car. Neither Kate nor Peter answered her and Stiles found it strange neither of them had even spoken to each other. He had seen them exchange bizarre looks, some of them flickering over at him and Julia, but no words had been exchanged.

“Where the wind directs us,” Stiles said and shrugged. Julia looked at him, puzzled. “We don’t have a route to follow, not really. Just somewhere to get away from Beacon Hills.”

“Beacon Hills? Isn’t that in California?”

Peter tensed slightly in the front but Stiles just nodded. “Yeah. You’ve heard about it?”

“Yes. Ms. Steele, my friend’s alpha, once told us of the Hales. They are a respectable old pack, she said. I don’t think they have an alliance but-”

“They don’t; they do have each other’s numbers, so to speak. Everyone has heard of Georgia Steele. An iron lady of her time, reputation wrought with enforced peace,” Peter said, never turning his eyes from the road. Julia cringed.
“She’s not that bad,” she insisted. “Ms. Steele is just a little… old-fashioned.”

“More like fashioned with everything red.”

“You are a Hale then?” Julia blurted and cringed again.

Stiles was the one who answered her question, partly because Peter didn’t seem so forthcoming on the detail, partly because he found her attempt at changing the subject a little… pitiful. “He is but things are a little bit complicated on Beacon Hills front for all of us. We are… taking a vacation from the crazy, you could say.”

Inwardly, he snorted. As if crazy ever let them run off to the sunset, whether in Beacon Hills or somewhere else; Derek’s brief stints away had proved that.

Julia nodded as if understanding. “So am I. Could we leave east coast out of the count too, then? At least South Carolina? Maybe North too? That’s where the Steeles are located,” she added. Stiles shrugged.

“Why not? We are moving north anyway.”

She brightened and thanked them loudly, expression turning a little awkward when she realised her eagerness. Kate snorted in the front, eyes flicking on them through the mirror but she turned her head away the instant Stiles’ met her gaze. Peter also relaxed a little, his grip on the steering wheel no longer white.

“I’ve been meaning to ask, are you a druid too, Stiles?” Julia asked him. She was eyeing the books he held in from of him, trying to make out any sort of sense from them. He shook his head.

“No, I’m not.”

Julia looked confused as her eyes looked through his little collection. “But… those books. And you have magic?”

“Yeah but I’m no druid. I’m a spark,” Stiles explained, and then gestured at the books. “I’m trying to learn a little more about magic but it’s slow going. Literally nothing on sparks has been written down so I’ve had to content myself with these-”

“A spark?” Julia squeaked. “You’re a spark?” Her eyes widened as she took him in as if she had never seen him before. Then, fast as lightning, she snatched all the books she could manage and dragged them away from him. “No, no, no! Don’t read them, don’t touch them, no!” she slapped his arm as if to scold him and then gasped when she realised what she had done. “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to- but no, don’t read anything anymore!” She paused, stared him down, and added gravely, “No.”

Stiles felt totally lost. What the hell had just happened?

“But how am I…? I learnt runes through them, I can learn other things too!”

Julia gaped at him. “You learnt runes?”

“Yes?”

“Well, I guess runes could work with spark magic but only if, no,” she shook her head, dumped the books and grabbed the rest from Stiles’ unresisting hands. “No.”
His hands twitched when they no longer had anything to hold.

Stiles saw from the corner of his eye how Peter and Kate were staring at them, confusion written all over their faces, and he agreed with the sentiment.

“What the fuck?”

Julia flushed red, embarrassment flooding to her face.

“Sparks are… different, from druids,” she said finally and raised her head, resolutely looking at Stiles’ eyes. “You really don’t know about it?”

Stiles threw his hands up, hitting the roof and cursing over the hurt. “No, how many times do I have to admit it? I know shit about anything! The only things I’ve ever been told is that it’s about belief and the druid ‘helping’ me out – and I use the word generously! – told me to ‘be the spark’. That helped so much. Not. He didn’t let me even read any of his books!”

Julia contemplated it for a moment, and then nodded seriously, as if deciding she wouldn’t get away with not answering. “He was right, you know. To not let you have any.”

Stiles’ mouth clicked shut and his eyes bulged out. “What?!” he snapped.

How on earth was that supposed to be helpful in any way? And he was supposed to believe Deaton had done his best to help them – help Stiles – in his cryptic way, I tell you shit, way?

Julia wet her lips. “I mean, kind of,” she said, shrinking under Stiles’ full attention. “Druidic magic is… very rigid and straight lines. What we do is not something quick and fast but needs to be prepared beforehand often for longer periods. Rituals are a good example of that. Most of what we do are producing rituals and remedies and preparing ingredients for later use. You’ve heard of mountain ash, yes? It’s all very by-the-book.”

“But you attacked the wraith with a spell!”

“Well, yes, but I had it prepared beforehand.” Julia dragged a sleeve of hers up until Stiles could see her upper arm where remains of what looked like a mixture of ink and something else still lingered. “See? This is what runes are for us. Some of us tattoo them on our skin permanently but if a rune gets slashed, it’s as good as dead if it isn’t in a well-protected spot that can still be reached so most don’t make the effort.”

Stiles stared at the remains. “They are one use only if not tattooed?”

“Basically, yes.”

“But… mine stay. Without even being inked on the skin.”

Unless a fucking explosion wipes it away.

Julia smoothed down her sleeve again. “I think it’s because you were never taught how they were supposed to work.”

Stiles blinked. “What?”

“I mean, runes are produced by mixing specific ingredients – sometimes with ink – to draw them where you want them to and anchoring a spell for a quick use and then maintaining it. Otherwise you have to do the whole ritual to make it work.”
“That’s not very practical,” Stiles said, and then winced. Way to judge a book by its covers. Julia gave him a small smile.

“It can be. Because druidic magic is so constant, we are able to harness the nature’s energies in a way no one else can. Witches mainly brew their magic and necromancers’ power lies with the dead. Their repertoire is often very limited. Druids’, while focused on nature, isn’t. Have you seen volcanoes, felt earthquakes?” she waved her hands in excitement. “We are able to use their power if we just prepare well enough and have the control to do so. That’s why our training is so rigid. Control. In theory, our potential is limitless! I’ve heard that someone thought time travelling could be possible but that theory has never been proven,” Julia mused aloud. Stiles’ heart jumped a little.

“So you just… learned before you knew better,” she ended with a shrug. The whole car was silent as they took in her words. Julia ducked her head, sheepish but pleased grin appearing on her face like she was glad to have been able to contribute to the party somehow, or to share her passion.

Or lecture, that was definitely a lecture.

She’ll make a good mother someday. Or a teacher.

She’d get along with Claudia, wouldn’t she?

Dodging dodgy rules… seems to run in the family, Stiles thought darkly amused, rubbing his arm at the point where his lonely three runes were written on his skin under his shirt. It also explained why the ritual he made backfired. He probably should be glad he ended up here and not somewhere further down the line or even in the future.

Or as dead. That was always the possibility. Despite what Peter had said, Stiles had no intent on dying before he was finished with what he had come to do and even then not by his own hand. Could it have been that his desperate wish for the ritual to work had somehow directed it? That he had actually made a druidic ritual work? It was entirely possible. Like Julia said, he had never been taught the rules. Should he actually be glad that Deaton never actually taught him anything? Was it intentional? Or maybe-

Suddenly, an idea flashed through his mind and he paled. Julia looked at him curiously.

“What if… can you make runes for other people? Who don’t have magic?”

“Heavens, no!” she said, shaking her head emphatically. “They have nothing to sustain them.”

“What about werewolves?” Stiles insisted. His heart was pounding. Julia shook her head again.

“Their magic is too tied to their being, to the magic of shapeshifting, for it to have an effect. Even with spark magic I think it might be nigh impossible. I mean, you would have to be focusing on them working almost constantly. When they’re on your skin, they kind of hum, don’t they?” Stiles made a small sound of agreement. The few he did have, they resonated with his spark – his magic. “That’s because they’re in contact with your magic so they’re powered up all the time. Living people just aren’t made for that sort of thing. You’d need to have constant contact with them or they needed to
stay in your reach, depending on how good your control was. Nature is a different thing altogether even if the world is just as alive as us; that’s what wards are for. But living, breathing creatures of all sort have their own energies which fluctuate all the time and makes outward influence extremely hard. They aren’t like trees or earth which are such large and calm entities – or maybe calm isn’t the right word, perhaps constant?” Julia pondered, tapping her chin.

“So you would use runes for inanimate objects?” Peter asked. Julia twisted around so quickly Stiles expected her neck to crack.

“Yes!” she chirped. “It’s the most common use. Enchanting weapons and such. Shortening rituals for yourself, doing the same for others but only if you can touch them yourself, to keep their energies balanced-”

“…You are very knowledgeable on things arcane,” Peter commented almost reluctantly. Julia brightened even more.

“It’s what I do best!” she trilled and laughed a little sheepishly. “It wasn’t enough for my friend’s pack, unfortunately. To become their emissary, I need to actually prove I can handle the role past, um, past the theory exam.”

Peter nodded mutely, eyes flashing with something unreadable, before he turned back to the road. Julia deflated a little at the quick dismissal.

Stiles mind was racing.

His spark, it wasn’t meant for this. Runes were mostly for druids. Runes weren’t meant for others than yourself and inanimate objects. He had drawn them on his friends, on werewolves. Their inner magic disrupted whatever he had done the moment they left his line of sight. It was the fights and shapeshifting itself that destroyed his carefully crafted spells.

He couldn’t have protected them. No, he did protect them but only with all he got.

It wasn’t enough but it wasn’t his fault.

It wasn’t because of him that Isaac had died. Isaac, the sarcastic scarf-loving son of a douche. The one Stiles had pelted with runes, practiced his skills on, because he hadn’t wanted to lose anyone else after Peter. And Cora. And Jackson and Danny.

At least Isaac’s death wasn’t his fault.

And because of the earlier tries had all failed, he had wanted so bad for them to work but they didn’t because no one had told him how they worked and he didn’t have enough information and he couldn’t believe in his runes because they were supposed to work but they didn’t and how they worked weren’t the way they should’ve because the books were written in what looked like a code written in plain English and he hadn’t known what to believe and-

We need to believe we can do something. It’s easiest to do magic when we are in a desperate situation because then it just has to work, you know? It’s much harder to do when you try to believe in yourself in a normal setting…

Claudia’s words echoed inside his mind. Just a little, Stiles felt his heart lighten and the spot where all the abruptly cut of bonds once hung felt a little less empty. The place, that place, where Isaac had once been, was slowly scabbing over, leaving a scar behind, slowly, yes, but it was no longer bleeding, no, it wasn’t bleeding, and it didn’t make sense but it all made sense in a very convoluted manner but what Stiles was certain was that that one death wasn’t his fault and Isaac didn’t have to
forgive him and he didn’t have to, he didn’t have to feel guilty about him because Isaac had run out of his sight, ran when he had just practiced his rune drawing on another person, and it had been Isaac’s decision, based on his instincts, and Stiles couldn’t be accounted for decisions made by others.

When he hadn’t known for better.

When things had been fine and then weren’t because it had been just an ordinary day when-

The cards had been stacked against them from the beginning and everything had been chaos and nothing had made sense and things had just been so hopeless-

It made sense. It made sense.

It was- it was-

**Freeing.**

And after what felt like years, Stiles smiled.

***

“You can’t be serious!” Kate huffed after having dragged Peter away from the diner where Stiles and Julia were crouching over Stiles’ little black book. They were both scribbling on it, nudging each other and pointing at things. Theorising. Peter had seen it around before but hadn’t paid it too much attention. It apparently contained Stiles’ notes on magic. He would have to confiscate it at some point.

He idly also wondered where his red journal was.

That one, he had promised himself he wouldn’t touch. Not without permission. He was sure, however, that he would be allowed to. And that would be almost as sweet victory as-

“How about what?” he asked, straightening his shirt from where Kate had wrinkled it. Kate frowned. Oh, that wouldn’t do. She would get lines before she even hit twenty!

He promised himself he would get her some anti-aging creams the moment he felt secure enough to use his credit card, the moment he felt Talia wouldn’t be able to reach him. Even though he hadn’t used it once yet and let Stiles use his money – Peter was all for the Argents paying for his keeping – he hadn’t been about to leave himself without a failsafe when he had left.

“How about letting her stay!” she hissed, glancing at the doors of the building. Peter rolled his eyes.

“Have I ever said of any such thing?”

“I can see it from you,” Kate insisted. “You are warming up to her!”

Peter laughed. “Me? Warming up to a druid? Kate, you silly little girl, I don’t particularly care about druids. My pack’s emissary has always annoyed me but he is loyal to Talia, whatever that’s worth. Druids are never going to be people I am overly fond of.”

“But you aren’t talking about her,” she accused, quickly seeing what he hadn’t mentioned. Smart girl, she was, if not stubborn as a mule when she got an idea stuck in her head. “You are talking about druids. You’re warming up to her despite her being a druid!”

Peter scoffed.
“Don’t lie to me!”

“I don’t like her,” Peter admitted freely. “There, you happy now?”

Kate crossed her arms. Indeed, she did resemble a mule right now.

“I don’t like her,” he repeated, and then added, “Yes, I am a little jealous. She arrived just yesterday and gained his trust faster than either of us have. But for whatever reason, she made him feel better. I’m certain of it now, he feels guilty of being the only one left. He’s not just grieving, he’s suffering from survivor’s guilt and I am mad at myself for not having recognised the severity of it before.”

“But-!”

“So no, Kate. Despite my… misgivings, I am willing to give her a chance.” Peter’s expression turned grim and his eyes flashed. “Just one, though, and if she steps out of line just a little… Well. I am sure Ms. Steele won’t be missing her.”

Her reputation was a little cut-throat.

Kate narrowed her eyes. “You may be willing to let someone come into our midst but I am not. This was supposed to be my trip. I may have asked Stiles to pick you up but I gave no such permission for her.”

Peter quirked his brows and rolled his eyes.

“Your entitlement is showing again, Kate.”

She huffed and whirled around muttering as she went. Peter shook his head.

The last thing she swore was to make sure Julia’s life would be hell from this moment onwards.

And Peter?

To be honest, he kind of looked forward to it. He might not lift a hand against the druid but, well-

This was actually a lot more fun and he could watch it all with a clear conscience.

Not that his conscience had ever kept him from having a good night’s sleep.

He followed Kate to see her glaring at Julia who was pointing something on her arm and Stiles watching it with a concentrated frown. Peter leaned against a booth by the door, eyes lazily watching over the spark, tasting the air for how the darkness surrounding him had settled – just a little, but with the cloud of misery around him, it was a noticeable ray of hope.

Tomorrow may not have come today but it would.

Peter would make sure of it.

He settled down, ordered a cup of coffee and waited for the fireworks to happen.

Chapter End Notes

Part of Julia's exposition - and it really is an exposition, isn't it? - was to clear things up
for me too and I decided to leave it in the chapter to maybe clear your heads too. In this 'verse, there are many different types of magic and magic users. I'm not sure how deeply I'm going to go down the line but here's a small sample anyway on the differences. Druids work with nature, witches brew things and focus on manipulating inner energies, necromancers deal with the dead and dying, magicians (which were not mentioned but are there somewhere) are party trickster kind of magic users, etc... and then there are sparks whose potential is actually off the charts because if they believe in something or want something from the bottom of their hearts without a single doubt, they can do pretty much anything. But even that is quite unstable (because it is so rare for someone to be completely doubtless except in life or death situations) so while they can become sort of jacks of all trades but masters of none (which is actually a talent on its own), their bursts of magic and extreme good luck makes them sparks. Even though Stiles doesn't seem too lucky, he is alive unlike the rest of the pack. And is now on his way to build a new life, isn't he?

So. Yeah. I hope it makes sense?

Hope you enjoyed! :D
In which the Code is the proper code of conduct (part 1)

Chapter Notes

So. It's been a while. I had a lot going on, like getting a job (got a summer job which started last week already? I guess March is the new June. If only... Snow snow, melt away!) and trying to write my thesis at the same time. It's surprisingly hard to keep up with writing fiction at the same time! This is actually the first half of the chapter but since it's already climbing over 10k at the moment, I'm cutting it in half and letting you have the first part a bit "early". Fear not, this only means that the wait for the part 2 isn't going to be as long, heh.

Anyway, here it is :) Enjoy!

The next week was painful.

Stiles watched almost like an outsider as the time flowed, quietly marking a month from his desperate attempt at reaching the past. He was further away from Beacon Hills than ever – the group had been stuck in Michigan for the past few days – and it still hurt. Even when he wasn’t surrounded by the familiarity of the streets he grew up in, the people he knew as a child, it was everywhere. It was in the cool air which was starting to get crispy with the winter air, in the large body of water called a lake crossing the border, in the landscape that brought newness into his sight with every intake.

It was in the feeling of being a foreigner, a tourist, in the country he was born in.

Not everything hurt, though. Inside his mind, the place reserved for those dear to him, was a tender spot which was slowly but surely healing. The little spot calling itself Isaac, hidden next to the still throbbing scars made by Erica and Boyd. Those two, even though he cared about their fate, he didn’t feel too guilty about. He had been the human in that basement, a message for Scott. He had been aching when they ran away, scared for their lives. He had been trying his best – too young to be of much help yet, still too weak to handle the pressure – but what could he have done for the evil that came when others stronger than him barely scraped by, just like him?

He blamed Gerard, he blamed the alphas, he blamed the selfishness of the world.

In a wonder of self-discovery, he realised he didn’t blame himself.

The beta trio could finally be at peace in his mind. He could feel – or at least imagine the feel – of Erica and Boyd opening their arms wide, welcoming Isaac into the afterlife, healing his hurt and showing him the peace he had never been able to find in Beacon Hills or half a world away in France.

Together, the three pieces of the bonds ripped apart tied themselves together and created a corner Stiles could wander in, touch in wonder, and feel the serenity that hadn’t been there before. A corner where no shadows reached. He realised how he had been keeping the memories of the Erica and Boyd alive by making himself feel guilty for their fate, forcing himself to take responsibility when it wasn’t for him to own.
The three were together again, and that was more than perfect.

He could cross three lines, three names, from his list of things and people to make up for.

And it felt good.

Even if he was still guilty for the rest, it was nice to know he hadn’t destroyed all of those lives he had once – and still did – held in higher regard than his own. What was funny was that he knew Lydia would hit him for thinking that, Scott would give him that sad look of his, Derek would, well, he would probably understand.

Privately, Stiles wondered how much of his guilt came from self-hatred.

But he couldn’t bring himself to examine it further.

Not now; not yet.

Cautiously, he pressed a mental hand against the locked door not far from where the slowly healing spot was. He felt the hungry twists and turns that waited in the dark, ready to pounce the moment he opened it. Or, maybe not. Maybe they would come in just as cautiously, as a gentle reminder of what he had lost, waiting for him to make the first move. Or maybe-

No.

He was scared of them.

He was so very scared of them.

And he knew he wasn’t ready.

He took a step back, and another and another and many others, until the door was again hidden by the broken ends of the bonds he was still clutching on like a lifeline.

He left.

He never noticed how a few of them were reaching towards each other and him, glowing softly in the dark and drinking from the light shed into the mindscape by Isaac, Erica and Boyd.

And one of them, a bond willingly cut to save a life, was reaching towards the door where its other part was patiently impatient and waiting.

***

“Are you sure they will be alright?” Stiles asked, eyeing Peter doubtfully. They were walking down the city centre, patrolling to find the elusive skinwalker that had betrayed her kin. The one sent to hunt her had with her dying breath begged Stiles and the others to find and destroy her kin killer before she could cause more harm. Despite Peter’s aggravated sigh and Kate’s dark looks, Stiles had agreed. At least Julia had been more than happy with his decision. You just couldn’t leave these things alone. If you did, they often escalated, and suddenly there were two kinds of Beacon Hills around.

And who knows, maybe this skinwalker would become one of the shady ones they had almost lost Kira to in Mexico. These things always seemed to find themselves drawn to the hell that was their lovely little hometown.

So, they were now stuck in Michigan, trying to find the kin killer. So far, she had eluded them. They
had managed to find her trail a few times, sometimes even seen her disappear around the corner, but she had always managed to escape them.

So, yeah. Patrolling.

Peter sent him his most charming smile. It did nothing to reassure Stiles.

On the contrary, he became even more worried.

“I’m sure,” Peter said, shrugging nonchalantly. “Just relax. Kate won’t bite. Much.”

“She’s been trying to kill her since day one!”

“You’re exaggerating.”

Stiles snorted. “I’m really not.”

And he really wasn’t. Well, maybe not since day one but at least from day two. Since Stiles had announced that they were taking Julia with them, Kate had started acting strangely. It had started with little things, like forgetting to order food for Julia or misplacing her weapons, until it had escalated into things like narrowly missing her head while practicing throwing knives when Stiles knew very well that she had a perfect aim. After one too many ‘accidents’ Stiles had swooped in and taken Kate to the side to get to the bottom of her actions. Hadn’t that also blown on his face magnificently, he thought. Kate had started to scream at him and for the life of him he couldn’t figure out the reason for her anger. It had ended with them yelling at each other until nothing had made sense. There were words about how there was a snake amongst them, that there were people wronged and who the fuck knew what the duck was going on.

They hadn’t spoken since. Not because Stiles hadn’t made the effort but because Kate had stubbornly refused to reciprocate. She was still talking to Peter but she was treating Stiles like air. Surprisingly she was even talking to Julia more, even if talking might be a generous way to call it since her remarks consisted of snide language and nothing else.

Stiles had no idea what to do.

He was confused and hurt. It didn’t seem like Kate was going to leave or anything but her actions were not made in good taste. She was still staying close, maybe even keeping closer look on Stiles and Peter than before, like she expected something to attack them.

Attack them.

Julia?

Stiles blinked. She expected Julia to attack them?

“And we have a winner,” Peter said, light mockery painting his voice. Stiles scowled.

“But it makes no sense.”

“It makes perfect sense.”

Stiles’ frown deepened. “No, it does not. Julia’s no threat.”

“Are you sure about that?” Peter asked him, and their eyes met and Stiles was startled at how close they were. He became suddenly aware of how close they were walking. Their arms were brushing against each other on every synchronised step and Stiles could almost taste the minty breath of
Peter’s. He felt a flush creeping from under his shirt and turned his gaze ahead again, breaking their eye contact.

It did nothing to erase the knowledge that Peter was just a hair away.

He didn’t move away. Neither did Peter.

He was still there.

A small smile involuntarily escaped to Stiles’ face.

“To be honest, I doubt she’s a real threat either,” Peter said after a while. Yet, despite his words, his tone was careful. “Not to us, physically at least. We have her beat in most aspects. But she’s not exactly innocent either. She’s part of the Steeles, or at least adjacent to the pack, and their reputation isn’t exactly sterling. Georgia has a massive territory which she grew out of her ancestral land. No one knows exactly for how much but the rumours hint that it’s at least triple the size it once was. And she has learnt well how to defend it. At best our little Julia has been condoning what the Steeles have done, at worst she has participated herself.”

“She’s just nineteen,” Stiles said weakly.

“And?”

’And’ indeed. Stiles himself had killed long before he had hit his nineteenth year. Hell, he had been barely seventeen when the Nogitsune…

“Is that why Kate’s doing it? Trying to chase her away?”

Peter barked a short laugh. Stiles couldn’t help but admire how the laugh lines fitted his face. “Heavens, no. No, it’s much more personal to her.”

Stiles knocked their shoulders together. “Don’t be so cryptic!”

“Don’t be so slow,” Peter grinned. Stiles rolled his eyes.

“Very mature.”

“It’s part of my charm.”

“You mean your vices.”

“You’re still here.”

Stiles’ eyes softened. That smile tugged his lips again. “So I am.”

So he was. So he would be.

And he didn’t really mind.

“There’s an ice cream shop over there,” Peter said suddenly. He snatched Stiles’ hand in his own and dragged him towards the building. Stiles had to speed up to be able to keep up with Peter, flailing and almost hitting another passer-by.

“But it’s November!” Stiles half-heartedly protested.

“It’s never too late for ice cream,” came a solemn reply, and-
Well.

He was right on that front.

“Double chocolate for me,” Stiles announced as they stepped inside. Peter shrugged.

“You’re paying.”

“Cheapskate.”

“It’s not your money.”

“It is now.”

“Does that mean that you don’t want-”

“No, it just means that I will be collecting from you later – with interest, I might add.”

Peter’s lips curved into a smirk that sent shivers down Stiles’ spine.

“I’ll be waiting.”

Stiles flushed and turned his back on him, unable to look into his eyes anymore. He ordered for them both, choosing the darkest flavours like Peter’s soul for him and ordering the pinkest and sparkliest toppings on it.

The werewolf in question didn’t even seem to mind. Stiles wondered what that said about his soul and snickered. He was jostled for his efforts but the look on Peter’s face was more playful than affronted. They left the store with their ice creams in tow, enjoying the cold in the cool autumn breeze, yet Stiles had never felt warmer in his life.

He didn’t quite notice that his hand was still held tightly in Peter’s, his grip just as tight as the werewolf’s.

Peter did.

But he never said a thing.

“They’ll still be fine, right?”

“Just enjoy your treat, Stiles.”

***

I don’t like her, Kate thought darkly, watching Julia from the corner of her eye as they walked on the sidewalk. I don’t like her at all.

Which really was the case.

Kind of.

Julia was… she was. She was naïve. She was annoyingly chipper. She was seeing the glass filled to the brim all the time when it was barely half full. She talked to Stiles about magic, and argued English literature with Peter. She was smart and always had little bits and bats of information and she was resourceful and brilliant and she was driving Kate up the walls.
The worst of it all?

Julia was still there, and Kate couldn’t find it in herself to hate her.

And she despised her for that.

Kate wanted to kill herself. Figuratively because she wasn’t that gone. Or maybe kill Julia? No, she wasn’t that gone either. She had, admittedly, played a few – or a dozen – pranks on her and gained Stiles’ ire over them. For what? Throwing a knife just a little too closely for comfort? But it was the perfect shot and no one even got hurt! Even Julia had laughed and congratulated her on her aim after getting her bearings back – was she an idiot? did she not get that Kate was trying to chase her away, not endear herself to her! – but no, Stiles thought it had gone too far when it was really him who had gone off the rails!

Who was he to let a stranger, a possible snake, into their midst! Who knew what that wraith had done to the druid’s psyche before they got there? What if she was an all-around bad egg just waiting to explode? Peter had told her of the Steele pack which made Kate almost think that some of her former mentors might’ve had a point in their hunt before they can hunt us arguments when they were whispering to themselves without knowing she was within the hearing distance.

It wasn’t the Code of her mother’s but sometimes she thought it was more than justified. Or, well, she had. She didn’t anymore, not really, if only because she knew her former mentors would’ve put Peter in the same slot – maybe even Stiles – without caring about them as people at all and they were people. They were Kate’s people.

Which was why, if no one else was going to, she was going to keep her walls up because she was not letting just any hussy there to mess things up. They had had it so good with just the three of them. There was Kate, their resident hunting expert no matter what Stiles had claimed to be when they first met. He wasn’t a hunter no matter what people might think. Kate was. She had been trained to be one, to be the matriarch and the greatest warrior of the Argent line, and she was brilliant at what she did. She was confident in her skill and why shouldn’t she be? Her mother, the Argent matriarch, had thought her ready to begin hunting officially. If she hadn’t died, well...

Kate wouldn’t have been forced to stay in Beacon Hills for half a year of pure torture.

She knew she wasn’t being fair but while she had cared for her mother – still did, really – they hadn’t been particularly close despite being in close contact for most of the day. Her mother had been her role model, her drill sergeant; there was no softness in her to spare even for her only daughter and heir. She had gotten none from her father either, but she didn’t know whether it was by choice or not since her training had often left her little time to do her homework and the most she had seen him had been on the few family dinners they had. The only one who has shown her unconditional love had been her brother. She remembered the few nights he had been able to sneak into her room to read her a bedtime story even when she had been too old for them, or when he had stayed with her when she had been too ill to move.

And then he had moved for college and it all had ended.

For some reason, Chris – unlike Kate – hadn’t been particularly popular amongst the Argents. Oh, their clansmen whispered her brother’s praises when he walked past them but behind his back they would glare and spit. Not all of them, no, but with Kate having spent most of her time away from them she couldn’t see where the division was. She had also never understood why Gerard had seemed more and more disappointed with Chris as the years went by. By all standards, her brother had been an accomplished hunter and a pride for their family.
But it had never been enough; not for their father, not for their mother.

Kate didn’t blame him for wanting to get out. She only wished he could’ve taken her with him.

She shook her head. The past was in the past and she was not one to wallow in its pits. Her eyes were for the future, the one she and Peter and Stiles had been building for themselves. She recognised the potential. They could be something great together. The thoughts of that wiggled inside her mind, these instincts and flashes that screamed the knowledge of their – dare she say it – bonds?

Kate threw a glare at Julia’s direction.

She was the reason for the mess of this past week.

She was a threat, even if Stiles or even Peter refused to see it.

She saw it.

_Hunt before we can be hunted._

Her steps faltered before she stopped. She couldn’t see forward, not anymore.

Was that really what she thought?

We hunt those who hunt us. We hunt before they hunt us.

Her mother. Her father.

Who was in the right?

I want Stiles, she thought, and startled herself. When had she grown so depended on his approval? Why? He didn’t demand it. He didn’t _want_ it. He wasn’t even her mentor, not really. He wasn’t a hunter. He knew less than Kate did on their affairs.

So why…?

“-te? Kate!”

Something snapped in front of her and she took a sudden step back, eyes wild. Julia stood there, her hand raised and fingers spread.

“Are you alright?” Julia asked. Kate was silent. She wanted to hate her.

Why couldn’t she?

“No,” she said. She took a step forward. Julia blinked, confused. Kate took another step, and another, and another, until she was forcing Julia to backpedal until she no longer could. Unease filled the girl’s features and Kate felt something twinge inside her.

She’s the snake, she needs to be gone.

But she doesn’t hurt anyone by her presence.

_I don’t want to be left alone again._

“You. Why did you have to come?!” Kate hissed, finger jabbing at Julia’s chest. “We were doing
fine before you came, and now? Now Stiles won’t talk to me and Peter thinks I’m going nuts!”

Julia blinked rapidly, head tilting in confusion before a figurative light bulb lit above her head.

“You mean- I did this? On purpose?” she asked, disbelief colouring her voice.

“I knew it!”

“What? No! I didn’t mean like-” Julia shook her head. “You mean all those pranks you pulled on me weren’t really pranks at all? Were you trying to make me leave your group? Why?”

“You ask me why? You don’t belong with us. You’re a stranger and who knows if your magic mojo talk is even true! What if you’re trying to pull us into a trap!” Kate accused.

“But- I didn’t even know you were there before you saved me!”

“You sent that blast only Stiles could sense!”

“It was meant to attract anyone who had magic!”

“Against a creature who ate them!”

“What else was I supposed to do?!”

“You’re going to use us and throw us away like yesterday’s trash!”

“I- what?”

“And then, then where are going to be, huh? Six feet under! Just because we picked up a druid from the side of the road! I am not going to-”

“You’re not making any sense!” Julia yelled desperately. “I have done nothing to deserve your ire!”

“I know!” Kate screamed. She slapped a hand over her mouth, suddenly avoiding Julia’s eyes. They both fell silent.

“You know?” Julia asked quietly. Kate took a step back. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. She wasn’t supposed to know, she was supposed to drive her away and then there would only be the three of them again and-

“Kate, you do know that I am not going to steal your family from you… right?”

Family.

Stiles and Peter?

Family?

Kate drew in a laboured breath and turned around, unwittingly showing her back against the threat she had called until no one, not even her, believed her words. She felt a hand touch her shoulder lightly but she moved away from it.

“Kate?” she heard Julia call her name but didn’t turn to her. She counted her breaths. “I am not trying to replace you. I promise.”

She suddenly felt very small, like she was a child again, trailing after her mother and doing her best
to please her. She had never learnt to read the look in her eyes. She was, Kate was-

She was betraying her memory. She was supposed to be the strong and magnificent leader to the Argents and she was, what, replacing them already? After a mere month?

Had all her mother taught her been a waste of time and effort?

“Kate?”

“Shut up!” she yelled, turning to face the accursed druid again. Why? Why did she have to come and make Kate realise her flaws, her shortcomings? She could’ve gone with the way things had been, had fun for couple of years away from Beacon Hills, learn all she could, and then returned, taken the mantle of the matriarch and remembered these years fondly. It had been the plan. It had been a great plan!

“I hate you,” she said. Her voice broke.

She didn’t mean it.

She still couldn’t mean it.

And this time – this time – it seemed that Julia had clued in on the fact too.

The world was truly unfair.

“Well, well, what do we have here?” someone said, and Kate turned around, seeing a group of what looked like armed men walking towards them leisurely. “A Steely treat, am I right? Finally we caught up to you. And look, she has a friend!”

Hunters.

They were hunters.

And they were after-

Julia?

Kate looked at the girl from the corner of her eyes, only to see her pale before her gaze. She steeled her back and looked resolutely at the men, despite a weird crawl going down her back.

Even with her failings, even with her mind in turmoil, she had still been trained to become the next Argent matriarch by the best hunter she had ever known. She knew tradition, she knew diplomacy, she knew of what meant to be a hunter and the responsibility that came with it. Kate drew a deep breath.

*We hunt those who hunt us.*

She took a step forward.

***

They hadn’t found anything. Stiles yawned, and stretched.

It had been relaxing to just walk around with Peter despite the circumstances. He hadn’t known he had missed this, just enjoying himself without worries. Well, there were the nagging anxieties and they weren’t even in the back of his mind but acting like an army of angry cats hissing and clawing
their displeasure.

Stiles had always been a dog person. Get it? Because wolves-

Oh, he could feel the disapproval over dog jokes even now. A sort of reluctant smile founds its way on his lips. But it was nice, anyway. Just walking without - much - purpose, talking nonsense, just being. Even if he kind of felt he didn’t really deserve it but-

But.

“Do you miss your family?” Stiles asked, blinking, surprising even himself by his abruptness. Peter gave him a look before focusing on the view on front of them. They watched the people move on with their lives. The nineties fashion and hairdos were still burning Stiles’ eyes but he was getting used to them. The cars looked antiqued, though, and they weren’t as streamlined as Stiles remembered them being. His jeep – or what had been his jeep – was actually a really high end product right now. Maybe. At least it fit the view. Why were the cars in the future all in those few colours painted? Grey, black, red, dark blue? That was very boring.

“I do,” Peter said, and then shrugged. “But not as much as I probably should. My family and I, we are carved from different trees. Well, maybe not all of us, but most of them don’t really fit the puzzle I belong to. However, I haven’t been away for that long; I’ve spent longer periods away from them while in Yale.”

“But you were still in contact with them,” Stiles pointed out. Peter shrugged again.

“Maybe. But mostly with Talia.”

Ah.

“What about your cousins? Nephew, nieces?” Aunts, uncles, pack?

“Derek would talk to me every once in a while, Cora would babble too. But the rest? I can’t really say I miss them too much,” Peter said. He turned his eyes on Stiles. “Do you?”

Stiles drew in a breath.

“Isn’t it obvious?” he asked, evaded, but his voice didn’t waver. Unconsciously he lifted his hand, gently touching his throat. Peter’s eyes followed his movement sharply.

“Do you?” he repeated.

Stiles swallowed. He spent a few seconds gathering his courage. “I-”

But he didn’t get to answer because Peter whirled around, fixing his eyes on somewhere amongst the crowd. He took a hold of Stiles and dragged him to the alley near them. Stiles fell silent, hands on his runes, fingers twitching towards his dagger, ready to hide them – protect them – if needed.

They waited with baited breath before they saw a woman turn around the corner to meet them. She had skin darker than either of them and black hair tied back. She was young, Stiles noticed, maybe twenty if that, with a feral look on her face that screamed competent hunter.

“Where’s Julia?” she demanded, and Stiles’ hackles were immediately raised.

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because she’s in danger and you have her scent on you. Ergo, you must know where she is,” the
woman glared at them balefully.

“She’s not in danger,” Peter said, hands raised placatingly. “In fact, she’s with-”

“She could be with an army but she’d still be in danger and, frankly, I don’t care,” she spat out. She ignored Peter and turned to Stiles who could feel how the werewolf bristled next to him, moving closer in case she tried to target Stiles. “Hunters are going after her because of her ties to my pack. I’m here to bring her home before that happens.”

Stiles blinked before his gaze narrowed. “Hunters? Codeless hunters?”

If there were something that Stiles hated more than himself, it was hunters without a Code, hunters who killed indiscriminately. They were the ones who started it all for him, for the Hales. His nails dug into the palms of his hands before he forcibly relaxed his hands, whipped out his phone, and called Kate, anxiously waiting for her to answer.

The woman snorted, as if asking if there were any other hunters, before nodding briskly. “They managed to stay ahead of me and it’s possible they found her already. I need to know where she is.”

“Why do you need us?” Peter asked, eyes narrowed in suspicion. The woman looked increasingly frustrated, glaring down at them despite her shorter stature.

“I can’t sense her because she’s hiding her magic but your druid here’s practically leaking it,” she inclined her head towards Stiles. “I thought you were her at first but she wouldn’t be so obvious. My Julia’s a smart one,” a proud smile briefly flashed on her face before it turned to stone again. “Where. Is. She?”

“Just one little-”

“Peter.”

Stiles didn’t know what his tone said but Peter fell silent at his side, head turning towards him, showing he was listening. Stiles felt grateful at the immediate support. He touched Peter’s shoulder fleetingly, before focusing on the woman. “She was going to the warehouse district with one of us. We parted our ways in search of a skinwalker who killed her kin.” He lifted his phone. “They aren’t answering.”

Three unanswered calls.

“Of course she is,” she huffed, shaking her head in what looked like fondness and exasperation. “Of course she fucking is, that Julia.” She turned around, although not enough to turn her back on them. “Where’s the district?”

“I’ll show you the way.” Peter’s tone was dark but there was the yield Stiles was grateful for, and the worry staining it. He knew they were both thinking of Kate – Kate, who could be collateral if things escalated and the hunters did find them first. “Stiles, get on my back. You can’t possibly keep up with two werewolves.”

Stiles flailed a bit before complying. The moment Peter had a grip on him, he burst out of the alley, the woman following them half a step behind.

“What’s your name anyway?” Stiles asked loudly, trying to distract himself from his worry but his mind was whirling. Peter jostled him a little and Stiles tightened his grip on him briefly in apology. He had almost forgotten how fast werewolves could move when they wanted to.
And how safe it made him feel.

“Steele. Kali Steele,” the woman, Kali, answered. She didn’t even ask what their names were; either she didn’t care, or she knew them already. Stiles was inclined to believe it was the first one.

“Julia’s best friend, right?” Stiles asked. He watched another brief smile appear and disappear.

“She and her big mouth,” she only said, neither confirming nor denying, focusing on the tall buildings they were quickly approaching. The people and the centre had been left behind in a blur. Both of the werewolves stepped up their pace when they entered the district they had last heard the girls of their group being.

Stiles’ mouth was pressed in a thin line.

Kate was better be in a good condition when they found her because he would raise hell if a hair had been hurt on her pretty little head.

Chapter End Notes

It's a cliffy but it's a minor one! Right? Right?
In which the Code is the proper code of conduct (part 2)

Chapter Notes

It wasn't as long wait, now was it? Let's hope the next one won't be either! Thank you all for the loveliest comments, kudos, and all and making me feel so warm and happy :D

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What do you want with my companion?” Kate asked, the tone of her voice brisk and authoritative. She lifted her chin in the way her mother had taught her, subtly squared her shoulders, yet remained a picture of calm.

*Never show your fear, never make the first move. If they think you weak, use it as an asset.*

She hadn’t really seen how those things had mattered when she had been younger, or even during the months after her mother’s passing. She had thought confidence had been the way to go. Attack quick and true, destroy those who are in your way. Because, to Kate, her mother’s words had been against how she acted. Always at the throat of those who didn’t believe in her, strengthening her position since it was weak, so weak compared to her father; disliked by most while he was the charismatic one. She was calm and cold, cutting people down before they could express their words, just like she cut down Kate’s efforts at being normal, one of the fish going with the flow.

“Little girl,” the man said aggravatingly, a smug look on his face. Kate felt her temper rise. “What you hide behind your back is a *druid.*”

Yet had her mother ever made the first move? Kate had thought she had but, perhaps, she hadn’t. Perhaps she had reacted to those who had voiced their discontent first, perhaps she had been a different leader from Gerard who advanced without taking prisoners, silent when he spoke out, careful with her decisions when he favoured quicksilver judgement and fast actions, yet always – always – just as confident in her skill and will.

Kate had always known her mother to be strong but perhaps her strength had lied in a different direction than she had known.

She took a deep breath, quiet and careful, unnoticeable to those looking down on her. “And what does that mean to you?”

She hadn’t understood before. She had acted like a fool in the few skirmishes they had had with the supernatural. Stiles had called her out. She hadn’t taken it to heart, not really, not everything. But the more she thought of them, the more Stiles’ words resonated with what her mother had demanded of her.

*Protection over aggression.*

*We hunt those who hunt us.*

*We wait until they make the first mistake.*
Julia hadn’t made hers, not yet.

“What does-?” the man laughed. “She’s a Steele bitch, a magic user on their leash. What do you think she has done? What that means?”

Yet even those words left a bad taste to her mouth. They didn’t really reflect the ideals behind the Code. Who were they protecting? The weak, the human? But not all supernatural were strong, just like not all humans were weak. They had their enemies that were stronger than they were, all of them. That’s why there were hunters to counter the supernatural – but weren’t the supernatural also counteracting the hunters?

Was the battle front – the one they were soldiers to – so very cold? Would one of them be forced to fall before the other? Kate thought hunters and supernatural both sought peace but what was peace to them?

“You’re a hunter, aren’t you?” the hunter leaned towards Kate, towering over her. He leered, eyeing her up. “You’re hiding quite the weapons under your clothes.” She didn’t raise her head nor bared her throat, just steeled her spine and looked up from under her brows, an action she found uncannily canine. It amused her, using the tactics those before her seemed to count as evil.

It didn’t amuse the men, however, at least not the way it did her.

“Not much of a one,” another man behind the spokesman piped up with an ugly laugh. “Seems like another bitch under the druid’s thrall. The knives are probably just shiny.”

“A pity. She seems like she’s in shape. Maybe we could’ve trained her a bit, eh?”

Kate grit her teeth as the men brayed before her. The implications were clear. She felt a light touch at her back but she didn’t react.

“What has she done to you?” she asked, surprisingly calm while the storm was brewing inside her. She wanted, no, she needed to hear what was their reasoning for this.

The man shrugged, smug.

“Nothing.”

Kate blinked. Had she heard incorrectly?

“What?”

“Man, let’s just take her,” one of them complained. “We need the in.”

“That we do.” The man grinned. Kate could see a hole where one of his front teeth was meant to be. “Step aside, little miss huntress, so you don’t hurt your pretty little face.”

The pressure on her back, whereas it had been light as a feather before, gained strength – yet, it was also shaking. Kate watched as the man reached over with his hand, presumably to touch her ‘pretty little face’ but she gave him a grin that reeked self-confidence in a particularly concentrated form which was almost serpentine in its threat. She had seen it on Peter’s face on the occasion when he had wanted to aggravate his opponents, when he had spoken about his pack and particularly his alpha.

She grinned, and bared her teeth.
The man withdrew his hand as if spooked. His expression turned into anger when he realised how his authority had been stomped by a girl half his size and age.

“Take her down with the witch!” the man yelled and charged forward with his fists, trying to grab at whatever he could – Kate’s clothes, hair, face. She watched him come with a strange calm flowing through her veins and bid her time. He came closer and closer and ever closer before he-

She sidestepped, tugging Julia with her, and shoved the man down, accelerating his speed with the force of his own attack. She knocked him on the head with the precision her mother had drilled in her and watched as he lost consciousness in mere seconds.

Kate turned to face the rest of the men, counting five on their feet. Their expressions were stunned but that quickly turned into grim determination. She stared at them, head held high and hands almost absently reaching for her knives. The metal glinted in the sunlight. One of the hunters clapped, mocking her.

Their eyes watched her but they watched something behind her back even more. Julia. They still underestimated Kate.

That worked fine with her.

She grinned again. They attacked.

A fair fight it was not, but Kate didn’t let it bother her. She waited and met them on her ground, kicked the feet from under one, and punched another on his junk. She never claimed she’d fight fair either. She danced when they tried to get her, using their bodies as a shield so the one who had stayed further away, gun drawn, couldn’t make a target out of her. From the corner of her eyes she could see him curse and change his aim, and change it again.

Someone managed to yank her from her braid but she kicked back and swirled around, stabbing a knife through his thigh. He let out a pain-filled grunt but with Kate twisting her knife, he had to retreat with a roll away. Unfortunately, he took her knife with him and the rest of hers – all four of them – were in places a bit more difficult to reach for with two men double-teaming her; she just didn’t have time to grab them. She dodged them, danced around them, before she heard the gun go off. She felt the air swoosh as the bullet missed her by a hair. She managed disarm one of the men attacking her with a twist on his wrist, possibly breaking it if the audible crunch was of any indication, gaining his dagger – shorter than hers – but she was still the underdog. The man was quickly replaced by another and Kate was beginning to tire with all the extra manoeuvres she had had to do to dodge them. She had just managed to knock one out, hurt two enough that they were weakened, but there were still three more to go. There was no way for her to win this alone.

It was a good thing she wasn’t alone.

The ground shook beneath them, and Kate had difficulties finding her balance for a moment when she saw roots burst through the pavement, freezing the men to their places as the roots curled around their feet tight, climbing ever higher. The one with the gun even had his arm bound too, fingers forced from the trigger.

Kate gaped at the show of power. Her eyes blew wide, and watching the way the nature meddled with the urban landscape was sort of… beautiful. She looked over to where Julia was standing, her arms thrown before her, painted runes glowing on her arms. They were a bit shoddy as if she had done them as quickly as possible. A small bottle of… something lay broken on the ground, rest of the contents painting the concrete with dark liquid.
Julia flashed a grin at her and Kate couldn’t help sharing it.

It was pretty badass.

They were both pretty badass, even if she said so herself.

She glanced at her weapons, noting hers was chipped and the one she had stolen felt wrong, and dropped them. She didn’t remain unarmed, though, surging to grab the gun out of the armed hunter’s grip. The expression on his face was murderous.

A groan alerted her of the first man waking up, and she quickly pointed the gun at him. Her arms were steady even if her breathing was still uneven from the fight. He wasn’t bound by the roots, his previous unconsciousness apparently not marking him as a threat. Julia’s expression turned wary but she didn’t seem able to reach for more roots, her ritual having already answered her needs and she couldn’t modify it without letting the hunters go to start one anew.

The man glared at them and readied himself to jump on them, eyeing Julia in a threatening manner. Kate readied her gun and-

A dark blur raced past them to tackle the man on the floor and she watched as the man turned into a bloody mess before her. Shocked, she couldn’t help lowering her gun. She heard noises behind her too and twirled around, only to see Julia had let go of her spell in her shock, calling the blur something like a ‘Kali’ or ‘Kaylee’ or something, and then the hunters were gearing to attack them again. Kate held her gun up again, aiming-

Suddenly, Peter was there. He rammed into two of the hunters and took them down, leaving only two standing. Kate grinned but it dimmed slightly when she couldn’t see Stiles anywhere. She shook the thought from her head and shot one of the hunters on his leg and he went down with a grunt. The dark blur – up close, she could identify it as a her – jumped into the fray, nails bloody and eyes glowing. A werewolf, she absently noted. She almost didn’t notice but at the last moment she saw one of the hunters throw himself at her and she couldn’t take aim anymore and-

He fell like a bag of rocks with a knife on his back, dead.

She stared at the body, raising her eyes slowly. The air seemed to blur a bit before Stiles materialised in front of her, one of the runes on his arms glowing before the light faded away.

“Kate,” Stiles breathed out. She looked at him and didn’t know if she had ever felt so unsure before in her life and she couldn’t even realise why that was exactly because it was Stiles, Stiles didn’t judge, but she had also treated him so-

“Stiles,” she said. Even her voice was a little brittle and she made an aborted move to touch him but held herself back at the last moment. It didn’t matter. He practically flew to her and pulled her into his arms, hugging her for his dear life. She immediately answered with wrapping her arms around him just as tightly.

“I was so worried about you,” he said, voice muffled against her golden locks, loosened from her braid. “You’re alright.

“Oh, thank all higher powers, you’re alright.”

Kate closed her eyes and felt them sting. She was suddenly warm and relaxed, the noises of the fight still filling the air, but they no longer concerned her.

She was alright, wasn’t she?
She might not be the most experienced hunter, not yet. She might have a lot to learn, a lot of Code to reassess and find herself – hunting wasn’t as clear cut as she once had thought. Still, she felt like she had time to find that, find what her upbringing and her destiny meant for her.

Because she had her people around her, a family just for her, and that was enough.

That was more than enough.

Because she was alright.

***

Stiles sat on the ground with his head resting on his knees. He felt like his heart had only barely started to slow down after the afternoon’s excitement. He had barely let Kate out of his sight and the only reason he had was that she had demanded she needed a shower and while his brotherly concern was nice and all, a shower was still off-limits.

She had then slammed the door in his face, leaving him standing there all flabbergasted.

Brother? Him?

He was her brother?

What about Chris? What about her family? When had this mentoring gig turned into being her brother? Still-

It felt right. It felt so right it frightened him and made him want to stick his head in the ground because that pounding on the locked door was growing louder and louder yet again and-

“Breathe,” a voice commanded, and Stiles breathed. Listening to the encouragements, he inhaled and exhaled slower and slower until the panic was subdued. He raised his eyes to meet Peter’s, and gave him a sheepish smile. The werewolf rolled his eyes and flopped to sit next to him. Well. “Flopped” might have been wrong to say since he moved with grace Stiles could never possess but he still sat next to him so-

“She’s fine,” Peter said. Stiles found himself nodding along.

She was.

It had been a relief to see her seemingly alright but also harrowing because the two girls had been fighting six hunters more or less twice their size. His chest had been swollen with pride but Kali had gone ballistic at having seen the one hunter left untangled readying himself to have a go at Julia and attacked with vengeance. Peter had quickly let Stiles down from his back so he could go after her without hindrance. Stiles, in turn, had decided to swipe at his runes to make himself invisible for the humans, just in case. It had come helpful when one of the hunters had decided to take down Kate and that thing right there?

Unforgivable.

He had aimed a perfect stab, just the way Chris had showed him, and done his ‘mentor’ proud. The expression on Kate’s face had been heart-breaking and strangely closed-off, afraid to make contact, but Stiles hadn’t even recognised those emotions until after he had clung to her, relieved that she was alright. Her clothes were a bit tattered and there were cuts on her body that didn’t belong there, her braid had been messy, and dirt had been more present than not, but she had been just as fine – just as Kate – as she ever had.
And Stiles had never been so glad for that fact.

And then the skirmish had ceased and Julia and Kali had started fighting and their screaming had gotten louder by the minute and something triggered a hazy memory in the back of his mind and Stiles’ relief had turned into muted horror when he realised that— that—

Kali.

As in the alpha pack Kali.

Was right there.

Which meant that Julia – the sweet, helpful Julia who had the patience of a saint – was Kali’s Julia. Julia Baccari. J and B. Who was, or would become, Jennifer Blake. The fucking darach who had managed to almost kill them all pretty successfully, more successfully than perhaps any threat before that—

He had been so out of it that he just kind of accepted it without a fight because—

Well.

He had managed to attract Kate and Peter, the Beacon Hills’ villains one and two in that clusterfuck which started it all; it’s no wonder he managed to gain another questionable notch on his belt. Gotta catch ‘em all, right? He just wished it was Pokémon and not insane – or pre-insane – bad guys of his life he was collecting.

Team Instinct for the win, he thought dryly.

If he had realised Julia’s identity when they had met, he probably would’ve killed her just then and there, or let her die, more like it. Might have regretted it later, but Blake had been the closest call for his dad, really, and there was nothing he would do to his family, nothing at all – especially now that they were more vulnerable than ever, had more to lose than before – even if it meant killing a threat before it managed to grow into its skin, mature beyond gangly adolescence. But now that he knew that Blake was not Julia?

They were similar yet not the same. Just like—

Especially now that Kate had stumbled towards the two screaming women – with Stiles as he was not letting her go, no sirreee, although she didn’t let go of him either, so it wasn’t just him being particularly clingy – and—

“So you’re coming back with me!” Kali had yelled, and Stiles had stiffened at the way she stood, a little crouched, a lot mad. The blood on her still shifted nails and blue eyes were hard as diamonds. Julia, though she looked a bit cowed, didn’t back down either.

“I have the permission from Alpha Steele!” she insisted. “You don’t have a say in it!”

“I’ll talk to my aunt; she will make an exception!” Kali’s voice had a degree of authority on it that Stiles would’ve found impressive – if it weren’t Kali. Now, though, it made his skin crawl. Peter, who had found his way next to them after having secured the two hunters still alive, had looked at him strangely. Stiles briefly wondered what sort of waves he was emitting but decided he didn’t care. He was keener on seeing if the two – if Kali, his mind whispered, only Kali, just Kali? yet was she the Kali he knew either? – were a threat—

“No!” Julia had said. “It’s my decision! It may’ve been Alpha Steele’s first, but it’s mine too! I want
to see the world, use what I know, to become an emissary worthy of you! I can’t- Kali, I can’t do that if you take care of every little thing for me!”

“But Julia-”

“I’m not the girl you saved as a kid! I’m not the sickly little girl who couldn’t do anything or go anywhere on her own, not anymore! I’m an adult, and I can make my own decisions! And I want to make it for you, Kali,” Julia begged. “Please, let me do it for you.”

“You don’t have to prove yourself to me! You’re the only one I want to-”

“Then let me do it for myself!” Julia burst out. Kali fell silent, the blue in her eyes dying and turning back to the less impressive dark brown.

“You know, she can do it,” Kate said. Kali’s head snapped to her, and she snarled. Stiles tightened his grip on Kate and his runes started glowing, answering to the power hiding beneath his skin. His entire focus was on Kali.

_Erica, Boyd_

“She’s not so weak,” Kate continued. Kali narrowed her eyes at her.

“I know she’s not!”

“But you’re not acting like it,” Peter noted. Stiles could hear the smirk in his voice. Kali threw him a glare.

“What are you, a werewolf, following a _hunter_?”

Kate, to Stiles’ surprise, wasn’t ruffled. Instead, she tilted her head and stared at her. She then turned to look at the hunter bodies behind them, as if seeing them the first time. She looked like she had realised something, something great and powerful.

“She has her moments,” Peter commented languidly. “Yet following her? No, that’s not something I claim to do.”

“Then what are you, if not a guard dog to humans?”

Peter raised his brows, the self-satisfied look only deepening. He didn’t answer, merely tilting his head as if calling her out. Kali looked infuriated.

“I _said_—”

“I heard what you said,” Peter interrupted her. Stiles watched her inch forward as if readying to assert her dominance. He let out a sound, didn’t really know what sort of, but it stopped the werewolf on her tracks. Peter traced a hand over Stiles’ arm. “But you’re merely a beta of a pack, the alpha’s heir or not. I don’t answer to you.”

“I know who you are, Peter Hale,” Kali said, seemingly calmer again, throwing careful looks at the trio, no, it was a quartet, Julia was standing with them, had backed to stand with them— “And your pack is looking for you. What would they say, what would your _sister_ say, if they heard you were prancing around with _hunters_? That’s a taboo if there ever was one.”

Stiles knew it was a direct hit but to his credit Peter didn’t even flinch. “That is between _my_ pack and myself.”
“And that is not the problem here,” Kate said drawing attention to herself again, “The problem is that you’re disrespecting a member of your pack.”

Kali’s temper visibly flared. “I never—”

“No? But you implied Julia wouldn’t be able to handle herself, that she was weak and wouldn’t be able to survive without you.”

“Who would want an emissary who was weak? Wouldn’t the pack be a laughing stock of all? A sign of the great Steeles crumbling?” Peter taunted.

“Hunter trash,” Kali hissed. Stiles couldn’t guess which of them she meant but it was enough for him. His veins burned cold with something he couldn’t name.

“Don’t call them that,” he said, strangely detached. Kali seemed to falter under his glare, and he stated, like a fact, “They’re worth hundreds of you.”

Kali watched him warily before nodding slightly. It was a small concession but enough.

“Please, Kali, let me do this,” Julia pleaded, drawing her attention back to her, even if Kali still kept Stiles in her sight. Julia spread her hands, unintentionally showing her collection of runes, some smudged, some straight-lined, her peaceful gesture almost an act of aggression. “I will never cease needing you but I also need to learn for myself. I need to know who I am, what I can do, so I can be the best emissary for the Steeles, for you. You know they don’t really care for me, not right now; they don’t believe in my potential the way you do. But even you don’t see me as someone worthy of being your advisor, as your druid,” Julia paused, unsure. She almost withered under their attention but she stood straight, drawing strength from the people standing by her side.

Where, Stiles noted again, he, Peter and Kate were; where Kali decidedly was not.

“But I think you could! See my whole potential beyond my knowledge of theory. I can apply myself!” she said admiringly. “Just the other day I was discussing a whole branch of magic I hadn’t even thought of before with Stiles! I’ve been able to talk about the obscurer werewolf traditions with Peter! And today, I actually managed to be useful in a fight!” she looked at Kate, happiness shining in her eyes. The hunter flushed.

“Please Kali,” Julia repeated when she turned back to her alpha-to-be. “Please, let me learn!”

The werewolf in question faltered, indecisive, but shook her head and hardened her eyes. “You’re coming back with me. One lucky chance doesn’t mean a thing. I will not let you kill yourself—”

“Kali!”

“-We can find another druid if you need someone else there but this is it, Julia.”

“But—”

“I said no, Julia!” Kali snapped. Julia quickly fell silent, wrongfooted and miserable. Defeated.

“Then we’ll come with you,” Kate said quickly, turning to Stiles. In fact, they all turned to look at him. “We’ll convince you all of Julia’s potential. Right?”

Julia lifted her head, hope shining in her eyes. Stiles swallowed.

“Right,” he echoed.
And that was that.

Into the vipers' nest it was.

Now they were waiting for the morning, about to throw their all into finding the skinwalker – who still eluded them – before going to the east coast, delay making Kali grit her teeth, something she agreed only with a constipated look on her face. Julia had locked herself in her room when they got back to their motel of the week (get it? because they were after the monster of- sorry, he’ll stop), Kali knocking on her door loudly to stop being so stupid. Kate had gone to that shower after forcing Stiles to leave her alone. The two remaining hunters were tied in one of the motel rooms and had that been a bitch to hide, bitch not to let Kali kill them and a bitch to think of what to do with them.

But Kate was fine, wasn’t she?

“She is doing pretty well, isn’t she?” he said almost absently, lost in his thoughts.

“She is.”

“I mean, I know she is. I do. She is a strong, independent hunter who takes no shit and needs no man but-” and she has the potential to grow into this truly terrifying woman but-

“She is still just a teenager,” Peter agreed. “They make stupid mistakes because they don’t have the tools to handle themselves the same as people with more life experience.”

And they could just offer her that room to grow into whoever she wanted to be, not who she was moulded to be. And Stiles, he was growing quite confident that the person Kate had the potential to be was not the same type of terrifying he had seen in his past. Because now, more than ever, Stiles had started to see that as what it was. His past.

Not his future.

It was no longer the same, and things wouldn’t be the same, if only because Stiles had stepped into the past which was now present and apparently messed up the timeline so bad in his attempts to not do so.

He couldn’t say he was sorry.

“Usually.”

“There are exceptions to every rule.”

“Isn’t that the truth…”

Maybe he was doing some good here after all. They sat in silence, hearing Kali’s now muffled voice as she was still arguing with Julia, having been let in after the manager had come to complain about the noise. Julia, who truly was not the darach Stiles had known. Had she really been this Julia before Kali almost murdered her? If not, then what had changed her from this to what she had become? What had even driven Kali to do that, to someone she apparently considered so dear to her? Or was that merely a wish to control her? There were so many questions there. Stiles just didn’t know enough-

“You were ready to attack her, you know.”

Stiles turned to look at Peter. “Attack who?”
“Kali. You were practically glowing with power.” Peter stared at him, head tilting as he squinted at Stiles. “But only after the fight was over, while she was confronting Julia. Why?”

Stiles frowned at that, nursing his lower lip as he descended into his thoughts. He had to admit it didn’t make sense. Or, he knew why he was wary of Kali. The future alpha had been a direct threat to them all, even the cause of death for two people Stiles had known. Julia had been too; no, Blake had, Blake had almost killed his dad. Not Julia. With that line of thought, Kali hadn’t killed Erica and Boyd either. And yes, he acknowledged it. Maybe that’s why he also hadn’t been that put off by the idea of Julia being Blake or Kali being Kali, in an extremely violent sense at least, because they were not.

He had learnt his lesson with Kate and Peter, thank you very much.

But unlike the trio in his party, Kali was more like the Kali he knew than the rest were of their future selves. Arrogant, impatient, aggressive. Dangerous. He could see her becoming a threat again in a whole different way than the others. But-

Why hadn’t he recognised her?

Well, she had shoes, for one, Stiles snickered to himself. There were no overgrown claw-like nails on her feet this time around. He dug into his mind, trying his best to go over his memories, see where they led him to. He found only dust and echoes. He patted his jacket, pulling out his little red book with a frown. He opened it, flipping the pages until he found what he had written down about the alpha pack and-

There was little mention of anyone except Blake and Deucalion. He had mentioned the pack had had five members and that two of them had been twins but- but, the memories he had- the memories of his pre-poss-

Maybe-

He snapped his book shut, eyes misty.

“Stiles?”

Of course.

It always came down to that, didn’t it?

He closed his eyes for a brief moment before turning to stare at the cloudy sky.

“She- Kali that is, she reminded me of someone who once had been a threat to me and all who I held dear to me. To my pack.” He saw from the corner of his eye how Peter stiffened before relaxing, nodding for him to go on.

“They were all alphas. A pack of them, really.”

“I’ve never heard of something like that.”

“You wouldn’t have. They don’t walk the same ground as us.” Not yet, at least.

“You killed them?” Peter sounded a bit sceptical, and for a reason too. Alphas were powerful, and for bunch of people he had never heard of to kill a pack of them? It was a ludicrous thing to claim. Stiles shook his head.
“No. Some of them died, but we didn’t leave unscathed either. Two of us- they-”

Peter nodded, and Stiles swallowed, grateful that he didn’t have to say it out loud.

“She reminded me of them, of the people who caused my people harm.”

“But why only then?”

“I didn’t connect her to the alpha because- I-” Stiles was quiet, clutching at the book in his hands. He swallowed again, feeling a bile down his throat. “Probably because I was possessed, once.”

Peter didn’t hesitate in pulling Stiles closer to him, and he went willingly. The wounds he had gained from the nogitsune hadn’t ever completely closed, probably because he had never really had the time to completely go through the guilt of having been the cause of death for so many, even if it had been indirect.

“I was possessed and- and I- it seems to have messed up my memories some. Made them hazy. Made them less… accessible, I guess.”

It certainly helped him understand why he hadn’t been able to connect the dots between Julia the druid and Kali the werewolf until the evidence had been practically thrown in his face. He didn’t have the same reaction to Kate and Peter because – for good and bad – they had been part of his life post-nogitsune too. But Kali and- the twins. That last alpha, with the muscles, who was he again? No, he had no idea what their names were. He knew what they looked like, sort of, but he didn’t know. Had buried their memories, lost them in his battle to stay sane. What had been even stranger, perhaps, was that he hadn’t realised the holes his red notebook had when he had written his timeline down. Now, he could see now glaring holes of the events pre-possession. He knew that Blake had killed his childhood friend – whose name he didn’t remember. She had killed his chemistry teacher – whose name he didn’t remember. Hell, he had remembered there having been a darach there but he hadn’t remembered her name until now.

It had all been a little disconnected, the darach and the alpha pack.

All because Stiles hadn’t had the strength to delve into the horrors, had decided to bury them instead, in his quest to survive.

You didn’t allow yourself to heal, Derek’s voice echoed in his mind, you didn’t feel worthy of it.

If only he were here; he would understand better than anyone else, Stiles thought bitterly.

But that’s why he was there, wasn’t it? So he wouldn’t ever understand.

“It’s still messing with my head,” he whispered. It was possible that, had Erica and Boyd not been pack, he would have forgotten about them too, their names been lost in unwritten history.

“You’re not really from here, are you Stiles?” Peter asked. Stiles blinked, tilting his head up to look at Peter from where he was pressed against him. He met blue eyes, a little sad, a little broken, but full of a warmth that wasn’t burnt out of him yet.

“No,” he said, admitted, to the quiet evening around them. “I’m really not.”

Peter smiled down at him then, honest and surprisingly kind. Slow and gentle, he lifted the red book from Stiles’ lap and tucked it back to the pocket it had been in within Stiles’ jacket. For good measure, he gave it a light pat before pulling Stiles close again.
“I will figure it out, you know.”

Stiles closed his eyes. The words were a hidden promise which shouldn’t sound so wonderful as they did.

“I do.”

“Do you miss your family, Stiles?”

He smiled, small and bitter, no tears left to shed.

“I do.”

In his mind, he pressed his hand against his mental door and opened one of the locks on it. There were still many more there, far too many for it to be forced open if he didn’t want it to. It might have been his imagination but he felt as if someone was pressing a hand against his from the other side. It felt warm, the door, no longer as scary.

He pressed against it just as he pressed against Peter, this time smiling genuinely.

“But I’m not alone anymore.”

He heard a door open and close, and felt another pair of arms hugging him from behind, a fresh scent of lavender filling his nose.

Yeah, none of them were alone anymore.

And they were fine, weren’t they?

They were all just fine.

Together.

***

“Do you- is that-?”

“Yes.”

“She’s looking at us.”

“Think she knows it was us…?”

“She’s assessing, so yes. Overconfident. Kate, weapons?”

“Two knives.” A pause. “A gun.”

“Great. Stiles?”

“On it.” A beat. Another. “Peter?”

“I’ll distract her. Kate?”

“I’ll have her on lock down.”

“Right. I’ll leave and you-”
“Got it.”

A hand pressed against another. A figure stood, walking away from the rest.

Two turned invisible.

The last one was ambushed.

The skinwalker really didn’t stand a chance.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is going to be fun <3
Despite Stiles, Kate and Peter catching and killing the skinwalker, it still took them two weeks to get from Michigan to South Carolina. Not because of the distance – no, that would have taken them a day if they hurried or a maximum of three days at a more leisure pace – but because they seemed to get caught up in everything. First there was an incubus going insane and charming half the town without meaning to. That was taken care of by Peter’s expert knowledge on sex demons – Stiles didn’t want to know – and the witch’s books they had stolen, but it still took them two days to get through the crazed population and into the cellar the poor boy had barricaded himself into. He had apparently come in age and had no idea what was happening to him. Well, to look on the positive sides, he really grew into himself and got rid of the awkward teenage phase faster than usual which he was grateful for after they got his allure under control.

He still swore he never wanted to attract another person again unless they cared about his personality more than his looks, which, all power to him.

Anyway, that was two days and they got off quite easy. The rest of the trip…

Well…

Let’s just say that the world now had one culled vampire population in West Virginia and a war between two gnome clans had been avoided. They had looked so much like garden gnomes with their little caps and beards that Stiles felt that someone with terrible humour had started doing the ceramic gnomes out of spite. Or maybe the gnomes had paid someone to do that so that they could infiltrate gardens without people’s knowledge and take over the world. That would- actually, that would be a good plan, a brilliant plan! No one would suspect them! No one expects the Spanish(-descended) Gnominquisition!

Yeah, that subscription of Adderall would sound ace right now. He really needed to get on with getting that identification.

Did anyone have coffee?
“We’ll get you a cup,” Peter promised, a smirk curling on his lips. Stiles sighed, running his hand through his hair.

“I was talking out loud again, wasn’t I?”

“You were. An identity short, huh?”

Stiles shrugged, and said flippantly, “Not really from here.”

Peter eyed him, arching his brows, before turning back to the road. He switched on the light and turned left. Stiles made a face. Another roadside greasy heaven. He looked down at his stomach. He would get soft at this pace.

“You’re still fine,” Kate said, leaning over his seat. She was sharing the back with disgruntled Kali and exasperated Julia, taking advantage that Julia was sitting between them so she could snipe at Kali without physical retaliation. Not that she seemed afraid of that either since she didn’t stop when they got out of the car either. A few times it seemed as if the future alpha was going to lose her temper but seeing that she was in the minority, well… She wasn’t stupid. The power hadn’t gone over her head. Yet.

Stiles wondered when that would happen. If it would?

He frowned and sucked on his lower lip in thought. He definitely didn’t want this Julia to share the past Julia’s fate. Blake had been driven to the point of insanity, though by what Stiles wasn’t particularly sure. Sure, she was almost killed by Kali but there had to be something there too, because this Kali didn’t seem liable to do such a deed; on the contrary, she had been trying to encase Julia into figurative bubble wrap this entire trip. Probably concrete too, had there been any. In any case, Stiles didn’t want to see Julia turn into Blake again, and not just to possibly save his family and pack from much grief – but to save some of that innocence that still lingered in her, innocence that had been tainted in all the rest of them. She was a breath of positiveness and optimism in the middle of realists and pessimists.

“Why are we stopping?” Kali demanded. They had just passed the South Carolina border, and she was getting antsier and antsier to get to her pack. Peter had been getting antsier too, though in a less eager sense and more ‘fuck my life’- sense. Stiles could sympathise.

What would it feel like to step into the territory controlled by a pack full of Kali clones?

Although he did suspect it had more to do with the fact that they knew Peter wasn’t travelling with the Hales’ permission and could potentially reveal his location to his very angry sister. Which would be bad. Because reasons. Which were, you know, that technically Stiles and Kate had kidnapped him, if only because why else would two people identified as hunters would travel with a werewolf?

Geez, Stiles just knew that whenever fate caught up with them, it would be a nightmare. They would die and it would be bloody and nasty. Or, they might not die because the tales he had heard about Talia – mostly rumours told by various villains – spoke of her as this very benevolent yet strong leader.

So, yes, a quick death.

That’s what Stiles was banking on.

Yay.

“Because we’re hungry, that’s why,” Peter said, parking the car with a rattle. He smirked at Kali’s
impatient expression. “You’re travelling with three humans, beta Steele. They need nourishment just as we do, even more so.”

“Well, maybe not more because have you not seen how much you wolves eat? In comparison, we need less fuel that you do!” Stiles pointed out. Kate snickered.

“Have you seen how much curly fries go into your body?” Peter asked. Stiles shrugged.

“Curly fries, dude. You don’t count them.”

“Don’t call me dude.”

“Man, you’re hard to please… dude.”

Peter made a disgusted sound and jumped out of the car. As the others made their way out too, ignoring Kali’s annoyed mumbles, he looked around to see if anyone was watching – no one was – and popped up the trunk. It was getting really crowded there, especially since they’d taken all the guns and equipment from the codeless hunters. He swiped a passport from there, and flicked it open.

“Identity theft might improve your life, wouldn’t you say?”

“What, do I look like-” Stiles peered at the identification, his eyes narrow as he critically went over the picture “Samwell Dawkins. Huh. More fit than his namesake, he is. Do you think I could pull of that shade of blond?”

“You’d look very fetching.”

“Blond? Stiles? Eww, put it away!” Kate complained, exaggerated disgust colouring her tone. Julia giggled before she covered her mouth, looking mortified. Kate gave her a thumbs-up. “It’d be a crime against fashion and all good taste. Try the other one! Uh, the one whose name was… Ma-Mun-”

Peter flipped through a few before giving Stiles the one Kate had meant. A beefy skater stared at him from the picture.

“Magnus Manfriend?” Kate cackled at Stiles disbelief. He shot her an annoyed look. “Do I look like an idiot? Better yet, do you think I look like an idiot?” He stared at the photo. “Did he realise just how much a douche his name sounded or how he looked in this passport?”

“Well,” Peter snickered. “It is fashion.”

“Oh fuck me, the 90s are going to kill me,” Stiles moaned. Kate laughed while Julia giggled behind her hands – did she think no one would see her? – and Peter closed the trunk after finding the backpack which hid Stiles’ cash in it. They were actually handling the money well. Or, not really, they had been halfway down with Gerard’s money – hunting was expensive – but they’d managed to gain a grand or two from the hunters. Also, their credit cards. Two of them were useless but the third one had paid for their dinner and lodgings in that vampire-infested city. Only the best for them when motels were more than likely to offer them quick death.

Stiles wasn’t above using assholes’ money to pay for his lifestyle. That shower and the caviar had been great. Especially the curly fries dipped in the caviar, no matter the disgusted looks he had gained from Peter. Julia had gathered her courage to try at his insistence and had actually said they were pretty good. Though now that he thought of it, she hadn’t asked for seconds.

Oh well. More for him, it had been. He wasn’t – or hadn’t – complained.
Suckers don’t understand culture and culinary art.

As their orders came up, Stiles stared at his salad with a sad sigh. This was no art but the only thing he could handle. He was so fed up with greasy food he couldn’t believe and from the way Kate was following his example, she was as well. Peter was avoiding bacon as much as he could and Julia had chosen pancakes. Kali was the only one to take on the greasy heaven that they were staying at but, to be honest, she hadn’t been travelling as much as the rest of them.

Stiles made a promise to himself that when they left the state, he would make an effort for them to eat better. When they had started this trip, he hadn’t expected them to actually make it this far and hadn’t thought of the consequences of eating mostly fast food for months. For a teenager that sounded heavenly – no, it didn’t really. For most teenagers that sounded like heaven – better – but it was a nightmare for Stiles, really.

“I am going to invest in a hot plate or something or we are searching for restaurants and stacking on nuts and other dried goods so we can manage before we actually find those restaurants or…” he mumbled to himself, stabbing his salad as if it had managed to personally offend him. Kate and Julia nodded their heads enthusiastically. Peter sighed as if that sounded like an unachievable dream while Kali just scoffed.

“You don’t have to worry about that, Julia, since you’ll be back home. If there’s something you want to eat, you can have it.”

Julia frowned and opened her mouth to say something before deciding otherwise. She looked a little resigned and forlorn and started poking her pancakes. Kate scowled.

“Why do you insist on that? You’ve seen how well she’s been doing! And without you too!”

Kali gave her a nasty glare. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Oh yeah? And why is that?”

“You are a hunter; you could never understand the intricacies that are pack bonds!”

“Actually, she could and can,” Peter said offhandedly, biting down on his sausage. He grimaced a little at the taste but chewed on it nonetheless.

“I could?” Kate asked, leaning closer. Her eyes were bright and curious, and it made Stiles smile. She looked young and inquisitive right then, no prejudices in sight.

“Yes. I have been wondering if that was why you were acting like you were towards Julia.”

Julia blinked owlishly, and Stiles winced.

“Stiles?” Kate turned to him, and he sighed.

Yeah, that’s… yeah. Probably true.

“Humans can feel pack bonds, as you know,” he said, gesturing slightly at himself. She nodded, the look in her eyes gentling a little. “It is a little-known fact but if there is someone supernatural in a group, a werewolf for example, that some parts of the bonds created start to manifest. If you are supernatural yourself, you can often feel the bonds manifest but even people purely human – without any paranormal inclinations, I might add – can feel that,” he explained.

“It’s because all creatures have a little bit of magic in them,” Julia added. “The magic of life; being
alive is the most powerful force of them all.”

“Not enough to matter,” Kali huffed. Stiles rolled his eyes.

“I have known people without a drop of supernatural in their lines to feel the bonds. It comes with little things, like feeling uneasy about something or someone, knowing something isn’t right, particularly when those concern the pack around you.”

“But… what is a pack?” Kate asked. “Because that’s what hunters call werewolf packs.”

“And that is the most common explanation, the family packs,” Peter said. “Like the Hales or the Steeles, they centre around a lineage and consist mostly of werewolves and perhaps one or two others supernaturally-inclined. But a pack can be something else too. Just as Stiles said, all manners of people can form a pack but there might be other names you use for them: coven, group, family… a family of choice, if you will,” he glanced at Stiles who met his eyes but turned his gaze towards Kate again. She was listening like a hawk.

“Why did I act so strange towards Julia then?”

“Probably because the pack bonds were acting up. We have a werewolf and a magic user here, and we had started growing something akin to a friendship towards one another, perchance something even stronger. And then, suddenly, we have a fourth person joining our little group. There was an unknown threat inside the pack,” Peter shrugged. “You wanted it gone.”

Kate pondered that for a moment before nodding. She tilted her head to look at Julia.

“Sorry about that.”

Julia smiled and nodded, easily forgiving her. Kate’s eyes widened and she touched her temple. Julia’s grin grew.

“…Can you physically feel them? The pack bonds?”

Peter shrugged again. “If they are strong enough… and no one’s blocking them.”

Stiles looked down at his half-eaten salad, feeling a little warm. There was no accusation in Peter’s tone but… it somehow made him feel even worse. Weak. Not brave enough to open that accursed door blocking what he knew was Peter and Kate— and—

“The strongest packs are family units,” Kali said, scoffing at the idea of a mishmash of a pack. “Traditional packs thrive while the rest always die within a generation. The trust and bonds can’t be replicated.”

“You vote for conservatives, don’t you,” Peter stated dryly. It wasn’t even a question. Kali scowled with a confused quirk of brows, knowing she was insulted but not sure how, while Stiles blanched.

Forget, forget, the future hadn’t happened yet. Maybe it even wouldn’t.

He could always hope.

“That’s not necessarily true,” Peter continued, and stretched. His plate was empty before him. “Packs, units, groups… they fluctuate. The change feeds the power, makes it stronger because of the different strengths offered.”

Kali scoffed. “Generational shifts—”
“-Are not the same thing,” Peter interrupted. “I may be from a family pack but that doesn’t mean I don’t recognise what others could have. Don’t you know why the Tribune is so feared? They may be humans but they are humans of different talents, of different clans. They may not be a supernatural pack but they work in unity akin to one. Or, that’s how it should be in theory.”

“How dare you compare *hunters* to *us*?”

“Peter’s right, you know,” Stiles said. Kate made a small noise, listening to the debate. Kali rolled her eyes.

“Please, this idealistic bullshit is just that: bullshit. None but wolves can ever feel what a true pack is!”

“I lived that bullshit,” he said, and continued before he could second guess himself but he wanted, no, needed to press on with this. If not for himself, then for Julia, who was looking more and more awkward and timid under Kali’s derision. Goddamn, the wolf didn’t even realise she was alienating her ‘best friend’ with her assault on outsiders in a pack. Although, looking by her expression, this was nothing new to Julia which made Stiles irrationally angry. Had she been hearing this all her life?

“What Peter and Kate already know but you don’t is that I was once part of a very non-traditional pack. However, even they don’t know how unusual ours was.” Stiles licked his lips. He thought of it for a quick second, before he pushed on. “We had bitten wolves to born, a wolf who resurrected himself, a wolf who gave up his alpha powers to save another, we had a druid, we had a spark…”

We had a kitsune, we had a banshee, we had a former kanima-

“We had a true alpha.”

We had trust; we had a leader who was born of that trust, of that need.

“Now that’s just a children’s fable!” Kali huffed. Stiles shook his head.

“Listen to my heartbeat,” he said, pressing a hand against his chest. “We. Had. A. True. Alpha.”

Kali and Peter’s eyes both widened and Julia looked fascinated. Kate, however, frowned.

“What’s a true alpha?”

“It’s an alpha who comes to his power on his own,” Peter said, intrigue colouring his voice. “Not like when an alpha passes their power to another but creating a completely new line on their own. It’s not unheard of but it is indeed rare. No one truly knows if it is ignited by an alpha spark which had formerly died out or caused by naturally-forming pack bonds. What is known, though, is that it often happens without shedding a drop of blood.”

“I’m not bragging but that was our pack.”

He was totally bragging.

“How has no one heard of you, huh? A true alpha, of course you’d be known!” Kali sneered. “Or did you all fail as a pack, die off like yours often do?”

“Kali!” Julia hissed. Stiles didn’t even flinch. He stared at the werewolf, eyeing her up.

“They are dead,” he admitted at last, and Julia gasped quietly. She sent another admonishing look at
her friend but Kali’s smirk widened. “But that doesn’t mean anything but that the circumstances were against us. Do you know why? No, you don’t. But against the same threats we persevered through, family packs such as yours perished. Why? Because we adapted.

“We adapted and worked our way through all of that until we no longer couldn’t because the whole world turned against us.”

*It was the apocalypse, it was the-*

“And even if we did not speak of our pack but merely of werewolf only, what about Satomi Ito’s pack?” Stiles asked. “Hers is created by wolves asking to join, not a familial hierarchy.”

“The Ito pack is not a proper pack,” Kali insisted. Peter shook his head.

“Maybe. But only by those who can’t see beyond their noses. The Ito pack is one of the most influential packs because of their variety of ties to others. Would your alpha want to have a go against theirs?” he asked smugly. Kali glared at him but tellingly said nothing. Peter nodded, accepting the involuntary concession for what it was. “And it already countered your argument. The Ito pack is on their third generation, surpassing your limit of ‘less than one’.”

Kali abruptly stood up and stomped away towards their car, muttering to herself about insufferable traitors. Peter leaned against his chair, relaxing for the first time since they had sat down now that the other wolf was out of sight and possibly hearing range too.

“You know a lot about these things,” Julia admired. Her features had softened from their pinched look although she still sent concerned and guilty looks towards the direction Kali had disappeared to. Peter flashed her a roguish grin.

“Darling, that was to be my job.”

“Was to be?”

“Well, Kali was correct in her accusation that my, ah, leave wasn’t particularly approved by my alpha,” he shrugged. “My sister didn’t particularly care for it.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Then how can you- no, wait. It was the point of this whole discussion,” Julia said, and shook her head. “Never mind.”

“Because we are his new pack, right?” Kate asked, eyes sharp. Stiles could see the clogs turn like a well-oiled machine inside her head. “There’s a reason a wolf doesn’t walk away from his or her pack, even when they don’t fit too well, why omegas are hard to impossible to control.”

“Great job, Kate,” Peter nodded, flashing her a smile. She flushed a little, a pleased little grin making its way to her lips. “That is indeed it. Omegas have often experienced the breaking of the pack bonds. It’s natural for them to break, particularly when death happens, but to have your whole pack die?” Peter flickered his eyes on Stiles’ still form for barely a moment. “It is a wonder if you don’t lose your mind. It’s partly why hunters have so many prejudices. Packs often keep to themselves, and many stray wolves – and trust me, you can spot the difference between an omega to a beta away from their pack – are slowly losing their minds if they haven’t already. It is not a stretch to think that after repeated encounters of such… lost souls, the rest would be the same, just hiding it better.”
“But that’s stupid,” Kate said bluntly. Peter barked a laugh, and Stiles snickered, spreading his hands.

“You said it, not us.”

“I mean, from what you said, it’s good that there are hunters,” she said, crossing her arms. “But we’re not meant to generalise people into boxes. Just because someone might be druid, doesn’t mean they’ll be a good person – sorry, Julia – or the same with a hunter or a wolf. We are just that, people, with flaws and everything.”

“But that’s just it,” Stiles said, leaning against his arms. “We’re not just people to them. Anything not conforming to the ‘natural order’, decided by a certain marginal group of people, are to be eradicated. Well, maybe not going as far-”

“I’d go that far,” Peter interrupted. “I’ve seen it happen with hunters but some packs too.” He nodded towards the doors to the diner, and Julia winced. She looked like she wanted to say something but didn’t know what. “It’s not just a problem with one group but most who feel threatened or marginalised, especially with the Tribune breathing down everyone’s necks.”

“Were you going to be the pack’s liaison, Peter?” Julia asked timidly. Peter shrugged. “Maybe. I was going to be the enforcer but maybe, if things had gone a little different… I think they’re going to try to groom my nephew or niece into one but... Anyway, if you have one marginal group towering over others, it’s going to raise hell, no matter how human they are. It was a good idea, the less powerful to control the paranormal, but when the power goes over their heads…”

“Tumble down, they come,” Stiles nodded. “Vive la résistance!”

They sat down in silence for a moment, watching out the window as cars passed by them.

“But that’s no good,” Kate insisted thoughtfully. “We need a government. We need someone to watch over us all…”

“Someone, a leader, to trust…” Julia muttered. She rose abruptly, hand clapping over her mouth, before she left the diner. Stiles presumed it was to go after Kali. He wondered if she could still see a future in a pack lead by her. He missed Scott. True, he wasn’t the best leader there was but that’s why they had the pack. Scott was the moral compass most of them lacked and needed. It wasn’t the best, and it was often a little wonky, but Scott was as human as – or even more human than – any other person. But he had a kind nature and a wish for peace which was more than many can claim. It was that unfailing want for all wars to end which made him a worthy leader for the soldiers fed up with the horror story of their lives.

They had had their difficulties but they had come stronger together because of them.

“We are your pack, aren’t we?” Kate asked, poking Peter’s hand. A lazy half-smile spread over his features but he didn’t answer. There was certain electricity in the air, though, something acknowledged but unsung.

Let us in, they called. Let us in.

“We should go,” Stiles said, pulling out his wallet to dish out the cash and a healthy tip. “And face the music.”

Let us in.
Not yet, he thought as he walked past the doors. I can’t, not yet.

Let us in.

Not yet.

Hypocrite.

Stiles winced.

He knew.

***

They arrived during the evening. Stiles watched as they drove to a stop next to a large apartment building at the edge of Colombia. It was both a little removed from the buzz of the city life to have privacy with impressive ‘backyard’ for ‘outdoor activities’ but also close enough to warrant the safety of anonymity. It was a fortress disguised as an everyday building you’d forget the moment you passed it. The way the glass windows did not reflect the light just the right way made Stiles realise that the glass was bulletproof. He started noting all the little things about how the door hinges were just a little more reinforced, how the front yard was just a little too clean.

It was the kind of building no one would look twice at because the whole neighbourhood was made from similar buildings; some Stiles suspected were just as reinforced as this one was but most probably weren’t. Hidden in humanity.

It was clever… but it was also a shrewd call.

“There is a reason the Hale House is in the middle of the preserve,” Peter said lowly, and Stiles nodded grimly.

“Let’s get you situated back home, Julia,” Kali said. She had been jumpier the closer they got to Colombia but Julia had grown evermore withdrawn. When they had found the two behind the diner, they had been having a full-blown argument, again. Stiles hadn’t even been able to make out what the screaming match had been about, so shrill had been their voices, but Julia had shut down afterwards and none of them had managed to get her to say a thing. She had only grown steadily paler under her dark locks until merely two pale pink blobs coloured her cheeks.

“Are you alright?” Kate asked. Julia didn’t answer. She just stood up, grabbing her stuff, and walked after Kali as she led them towards the building.

“Do you really want to follow them?” Peter asked lowly, his posture hunched. His eyes were flickering around, and Stiles knew he was stretching his senses enough so he could get a grasp on their surroundings. With the way he never stood up to his height made Stiles believe he wasn’t entirely successful.

“Do we have a choice?” he asked. Kate looked at them from her door, and Stiles let his eyes linger on her ankles where he knew she had her knives strapped in. She narrowed her eyes and nodded, slipping in and coming out quickly, seemingly holding a coke.

Stiles knew she had added a few more to her arsenal, just in case.

He brushed against his sleeve where his meagre number of runes rested.

Peter rolled his shoulders.
Stiles locked the doors and together they walked where Kali and Julia were waiting for them.

“My aunt is waiting for us in the lounge,” Kali said before she whipped around, marching to the left. The doors clicked shut behind them ominously. Inside, the apartment building looked like a regular apartment building; the corridors were filled with doors although there were no names on them, just numbers. Stiles didn’t remember seeing post boxes outside either and couldn’t help wondering how the post system worked within the pack… village. Because this was a village and not a house.

He didn’t see anyone but he knew they weren’t alone. He didn’t let himself relax. Neither did Peter or Kate.

They turned to another corridor and Peter tilted his head a bit, listening. He mimicked an opening motion. Stiles nodded. They were being followed.

“We’re here.”

Kali’s voice echoed a little in the space between them. She flung the doors open, and walked in with long sharp steps. Julia followed her a bit further behind and the back of her neck seemed slightly shiny. She looked ill.

And this was the pack she had wanted to learn so much for, the pack she wanted to become an emissary to?

And then the Steele pack alpha was staring down at them, and Stiles heard the doors close again behind them, just as ominously as before, leaving them alone with the alpha sitting on her throne in a barely furnished dark room.

He did not like this.

He did not like this at all.

“Why would you bring her back, Kali?” Georgia Steele asked, her tone bored. She took a drag of the cigarette between her fingers and blew the smoke out. The way it was permeating in the air and stuck in the furniture, Stiles knew this was a years-long chain she was smoking. “She left, and even on her own volition.”

Kali bristled.

“It was because she didn’t understand her place in the pack.”

Georgia arched her brows a little, her mouth curling. She wasn’t a big figure either, crouched a little on her chair.

Yet, she had a presence to her which he hadn’t ever felt in an alpha before. If all the alphas were like Georgia Steele…

“Really.”

It wasn’t a question.

It was short and deceptively gentle… but it wasn’t a question.

It was a reprimand.

Kali answered it anyway.
“Yes, really. You know she’s a human, she can’t handle it! Just when I found her, she was-”

“She was handling it just fine,” Kate said. Stiles pulled her back a little, and gave her a warning look. She looked up at him, stared for a second, before turning back. Stiles lifted his eyes too, and caught the hypnotic green gaze directed at him.

“How’s it? Handling it! She had hunters after herself the moment she left the pack borders!”

“Did you really?” Georgia asked, head tilted to Julia’s general direction but didn’t deem her a look, still staring at Stiles unblinkingly. Julia had lost even the little spots of colours on her cheeks. Her head hung down, and her hands were twisting and turning on her lap.

“She’ll get herself killed if she goes without a pack with her!”

Georgia continued her scrutiny. She held Stiles’ eyes for a whole minute and, all the while, he felt like someone was judging his self-worth. He didn’t sag when she looked away again, if only because he was so stiff it was impossible to relax afterwards. She only gave a cursory sweep over Julia, dismissing her outright. For Kate, she gave a longer look and she huffed, amused, at the way she stiffened her spine automatically. But the longest one she reserved for Peter, and it was him she never completely left out of her sight.

“I think she has a… splendid pack she’s travelling with now. Why would she need any of the Steeles when she has… that. Them.”

Flat. Her tone was flat and dismissal, like she gave the most fucks she was going to give and that was that. It was over. A done deal.

Stiles felt the corner of his mouth twitch as he slowly relaxed his jaw. Next to him, Kate straightened her pose even more.

“This… these ragtags? Alpha, are you…?! We are talking about my Julia-!”

“Kali.”

Kali snapped her jaws shut with an audible click. Georgia shook her head.

“I don’t feel the bond with the girl,” she said. Julia winced but she didn’t look surprised. “I never have.”

“…What?” Kali said slowly. Her eyes narrowed. Georgia leaned against the armrest of her chair.

“I have never felt the pack bond with the girl,” Georgia repeated. “And I never will.”

“But-!”

“Kali.”

“But that’s wrong!” Kali insisted. “She’s been pack for years, even before you named me your heir!”

“What, just because you decided a sickly, almost dead girl was pack? That it would be enough?” Georgia chuckled. It was not a happy sound.

“We have our emissary, and she knows exactly what her place is. We have no need for anyone else, and neither has anyone else… but you, Kali. Just you.”

Georgia rose from her seat and stepped into the light. Suddenly, Stiles could see the scars which had
left lines against her skin. Not many can leave their marks on an alpha, especially one of her calibre.

They were marks of triumph against impossible odds.

This was not good.

“But I forgive you for that. You are young, so you will soon learn from your mistakes. And you have brought us the missing Hale.”

Stiles looked back surreptitiously, and became acutely aware why Kate had stiffened next to him moments prior.

The shadows moved.

They were surrounded.

“Good work,” Georgia said. And then she smiled.

“Capture them.”

Chapter End Notes

...Sorry. The next update won't be behind a two months wait, that I can promise! Since I have already written some of it. But, uh. A bad habit. Sorry. Again.

Also, thank you so much for the support from last chapter <3 it really raised my spirits during these dark times.
It was pure chaos.

It was pure chaos but barely for a moment.

There were six werewolves against the three of them. Kali had pulled Julia away, holding her away from the battleground, but it was all Stiles could see before his focus was forced onto the wolves before him. Number-wise, they could have done it. They had gone against worse odds… Yet now they were no match for them, not really.

It took two minutes for them to go down, and lasting that was a fucking miracle. Why?

This was home ground for the Steele pack and there were two humans and a wolf against six super-fucking-wolves. Not even Kate’s weapons made a dent in their attacks, not Stiles’ years of experience nor Peter’s cunning attacks. The home advantage and the sudden ambush were too much.

Stiles fell hard on his knees when he was pushed. They would not be the only bruises he got today, he knew that much, having been thrown to the ground twice already. He looked up, glowering. Georgia was still standing on the spot she had been a few minutes earlier. She had not moved an inch. Overconfident bitch. Her hair was almost glowing in the pale light and it made her scars seem silvery. There was a lukewarm expression on her face which made Stiles feel more than uncomfortable.

Fine, maybe she had reasons to be that confident.

Kate collapsed next to him. Both of their hands were tied and most – all? – of their weapons were confiscated. He just hoped they hadn’t found everything on Kate because they sure had on him.

Peter was standing a few feet from them, two wolves watching over him, holding him still. He didn’t look injured but his clothes were ruined and there were trails of blood on his skin. His eyes glowed a cold gold.

Georgia examined them for a moment before she nodded, pleased.

She turned her back on them and, for the first time, gave a cursory look over Julia.

“We had a deal, Julia,” Georgia said, her tone almost pleasant.

“What happened to keeping it?”

Julia bowed her head but her eyes were trapped in the unforgiving green. She shuddered under Alpha Steele’s undivided attention.
“What deal?” Kali asked. Georgia and Julia ignored her, locked in their conflict. Stiles could see her grip tighten around Julia. “What deal??” she repeated loudly.

“Quiet, Kali.”

“I said-!”

“Know your place.”

Kali froze. Stiles shivered. It felt almost as if the temperature of the room dropped. The timber of Georgia Steele’s voice echoed around the room and immediately all the Steele pack wolves bowed their heads, necks slightly tilted in submission.

After a brief moment, so did Kali.

Stiles would bet all his money that the alpha’s eyes were no longer green but red as blood.

Georgia stared Kali down for a long second but then switched back to Julia whose head was still down, as were her eyes now, avoiding contact. She was quivering a little under the pressure.

“You were supposed to disappear from Kali’s life, for a year minimum. Was that too much to ask?”

Stiles blinked, taken aback.

What?

“I- I tried!” Julia protested quietly. Something suspiciously shiny fell down her cheeks. “I was trying to learn as much as I could but- but I couldn’t stop Kali, I couldn’t hide my tracks well enough, I’m sorry,”

“Quiet.”

Julia fell silent with a clack of her teeth.

“I did promise you a place in Kali’s pack, in case you managed to do as we arranged. I am not heartless.” Julia unwittingly met Georgia’s gaze. The alpha smiled benevolently.

“But you broke our deal. Surely you understand why I cannot be held accountable on it anymore, don’t you?”

Julia’s whole demeanour stiffened before her posture dropped again in what looked like defeat.

“I understand.”

“Well I don’t!” Kali shouted, breaking from under whatever spell Georgia had woven over her. She let Julia go and took a step further but then one of the wolves guarding Stiles and Kate left them to stand between the Steele alpha and her heir.

Kali looked furious. She was seething.

“Thank you, Andrew,” Georgia said, and the werewolf in question preened under her praise. He also squared his shoulders and spread his stance. Kali watched him carefully before she relaxed her muscles and dropped her hands to her sides.

Her head was held high though, and the other wolf tilted his head the barest of bits.
The hierarchy was clear. Kali was the undisputed heir but it was Georgia everyone was following.

Stiles filed that away. He coughed a little, drawing Kate’s sharp attention. He flicked his eyes on the scene and she turned back, hawk eyes on the threat before them.

Georgia finally moved from her position and strode forward until she stood before Peter who was still held immobile by two of her beefy boys. Or girls. They were sort of slender but Stiles couldn’t for the death of him see if those pecs under the tank tops – why was it always tank tops? – were just pecs or-

Not. Relevant.

“You left the supernatural world in quite an uproar, didn’t you, little Hale?”

Peter’s eyes flashed a little but otherwise he didn’t show any signs of aggression. The smile on Georgia’s lips was as cold as her eyes.

“How haven’t you become omega yet, Hale?”

“Unlike you, my sister does not severe pack bonds the moment someone disobeys,” Peter bit out.

“People on the west coast… Such new money,” Georgia sighed. She examined him, almost lazily looked him over. She tapped her chin. “Traditionally handsome but quite lacking in bulk. Your shifted form was quite swift but you were lacking in strength.”

Kate snorted beside Stiles and Stiles had to agree. Peter, lacking in strength? He wondered what the Steele standard was but, honestly, if it was anything these brutes indicated…

“Is there a point to that? You are speaking as if this should be news to me.”

“Manners, Hale.” Georgia flicked her finger on his nose and Peter’s head moved an inch back. “Perhaps your mother never taught them to you but on the east coast we like to be civilised.”

“And ambushing us is polite?”

“Whatever do you mean?” Georgia shook her head, amusement oozing from her stance. “You clearly assaulted my pack with your hunters, attempting to use Kali’s childhood friend as a shield. Your sister will be so pleased that I have finally caught her wayward brother.” She tapped her jaw again. “I do have a list I need to consult so I can reap the benefits.”

“So that’s your game.”

“What did you imagine I wanted? Kill you? Marry you to my pack? Moon and heavens, what a barbaric thought. I haven’t been an alpha for fifty years because I was an idiot.” She looked at him critically. “Although perhaps a stronger alliance with the west coasters might be in my favour. They are awfully fickle but they have some clout. Your sister particularly has a surprising reach on her, be it because of her famous ‘full shift’ or not. Do you think she would agree to it?” she mused, teeth flashing.

“She would have just as much to win as I do. After all, she would get rid of the most troublesome pack member she has, Hale by blood or not, and get more than her money’s worth out of the treaty.”

Stiles felt the anger bubble in his veins. This was enough.

“My sister, whatever you think she is, is not stupid. She’s heard of your reputation and it doesn’t
align well with hers,” Peter said. His voice was calm but Stiles physically felt the kick in the balls those words were. He knew the doubts Peter had on his place in the pack, the fear of being replaced by someone more easily manageable; someone who would be content to enforce the alpha’s will without question, someone whose reputation did not precede him as the spare born far too late – someone who was of use to the pack.

He twisted and cracked his neck. One of the wolves guarding them shifted a little but dismissed Stiles like last week’s leftovers. Good for them. He twisted his wrists a little. Now he needed to find just the right angle-

“Doesn’t matter now, does it? You get sent home, begging for mercy, while I reap the rewards. There are quite a few who have kept an eye out for you but you voluntarily walked past my porch. I didn’t even have to do a thing. How kind of you.”

Stiles tilted his head a little. Kate and he were guarded by two of the werewolves but their attention was more on Kate than him. She had managed to put more of a fight than he had, or at least flashier. From the corner of his eye he could barely spot the last wolf left uncounted guarding the doors, just in case. He took a deep breath and focused inwards.

He quickly swiped his runes and activated them, a soft glow spreading on his skin.

He disappeared from everyone’s senses.

Immediately he dove away from them, watching the chain of events which unfolded. All werewolves in the room stiffened when a scent which had permeated the room with the rest vanished. Kate and his guards let out surprised noises, and Georgia spun around, her eyes narrowed and hands spread as if ready to extract her claws if necessary.

She only found a pile of ropes, Kate and the rest of the guards.

Still, Stiles had eyes only for Peter. His eyes had widened barely for a moment before his features hid his reaction from everyone else. He shifted a little in his place but Stiles could read relief in his eyes. Stiles stood on the side, careful, watchful.

Waiting.

“What is the meaning of this?” Georgia demanded. Her eyes glowed a dark red as she tried to see what was causing the commotion. Stiles didn’t want to risk it so he didn’t move closer to the Steele alpha. Instead, he crept away towards the back where there was no one else. Georgia’s eyes picked out the empty spot where Stiles has just stood next to Kate quick as lightning. The skin around her eyes tightened.

“Kali.”

The werewolf in question stiffened. Georgia’s tone was mild, so very mild, but the edge of it could be felt from across the room.

“You let a magic user into my house?”

“What? I mean yes, but he was a druid like Julia,” she said as if that would explain him as a nonthreat. Hadn’t she seen Julia fight? Druids were badass.

“A druid?”

“Yes! He was always talking about druidic theory or something with Julia and-”
“A druid can vanish right before your eyes?” Georgia pinned Kali with her red gaze. “You disappoint me, Kali.”

Kali’s expression darkened but she seemed to hold her tongue this time, and didn’t argue even if she looked like she wanted to.

“Guard the doors!” Georgia snapped, her voice reverberating around the room. “The leaks of his magic are still present even if he has managed to fool our senses! I will not have a human, a magic user, walk freely in these halls!” With something that reminded Stiles of a salute, the wolf guarding her rushed to the doors. Two werewolves, one door. You could almost make a joke out of that. Still, honestly…

Fuck those leaks.

First his mom, then Kali and now Georgia. He had to start doing something about it. Why hadn’t he?

Oh yeah, he had tried but it was hard. The theory he and Julia had dished out didn’t seem to match his condition at all. He wondered if-

Stiles saw slight movement from the corner of his eye. Julia stood there, a little on the side, her hands fisted tightly. Her mouth was set in a thin line, so thin her lips were almost bloodless.

“What is he?” the Steele alpha turned back to Peter who merely arched his brows.

“And why would I tell you?” he replied. “You haven’t been exactly hospitable.”

“Careful! Or she’ll put you in a hospital.” Kate grinned. Peter’s expression turned longsuffering.

“Kate. No.”

“What? It was the perfect timing!”

“No.”

“You take the fun out of everything. You’re becoming Stiles.”

Stiles opened his mouth to answer but just managed not to. Although since he had made them unable to hear him, would they have heard his comment?

Nope, he was not testing it.

Fuck you, why was he trying to rescue them again? Or rescue Kate. Ugh, when did he become the adult again? He understood Derek so much better now.

He inched left, slow and careful.

“Enough!” Georgia barked. She had her neck stretched in what looked like an uncomfortable angle, alert and waiting. She lifted her hand, gently touching Peter’s cheek with her claws. They fell lower until they rested on his neck, near his arteries.

Stiles had to stop for a moment to draw in a shaky breath before he continued on his ‘mission’.

“Now, do tell me what you know of him.”

“Or else?” Peter snorted, defiant smirk curling on his lips. “Your threats mean nothing to me.”
The alpha’s lips thinned. Peter leaned forward, lightly pressing against the claws.

“You’ve already implied you need me alive and well.”

“That is true,” Georgia agreed. Her hand didn’t move. The expression on her face was almost pleasant despite the odd position. A cruel glint entered her eyes. “But that cannot be said for the girl.”

There was only one person she could’ve meant.

Kate.

Before Stiles could even think ‘fuck this’ and blast his cover, a sharp ‘no’ echoed around the room. Vines spread from the ground, breaking the floor made of cement and wood, and surrounded Kate so the wolves watching her could no longer touch her even if they tried.

All attention was suddenly on Julia who had her arm stretched, runes glowing on them. She looked a little surprised herself, afraid even, but her arm didn’t waver.

Kali was by her side immediately, and forcibly lowered it. The vines surrounding Kate didn’t disappear. Neither did the damning lightworks. “Stop them,” Kali hissed. “Stop them! You’re making things worse!”

“No,” Julia said. She sounded both scared and defiant. “It’s- no. Not her.”

Stiles grinned and he crouched down.

Found them.

“Is this the reward of letting you live as a child?” Georgia asked, tilting her head, but otherwise didn’t move from her position. Instead she took in the room with slightly narrowed eyes and tight wrinkles around her mouth. “Having the opportunity to eat off my table? Having a connection to my pack?”

“I- I-” Julia stuttered. She swallowed hard. Then, with a voice that wavered but had a clear hint of steel tinting it, she asked, “The way you never felt a connection to me?”

The burst of fury which swept across the room made Stiles’ skin crawl. He hurried his steps.

Focus, focus-

Don’t get lost in her presence again.

Kali winced and curled a little in herself. Next to her, Julia’s tattoos seemed to glow ever brighter.

“I see.” Georgia’s eyes flared red like blood. The snarl on her face showed a hint of steel. “Then I have no choice.” Her voice gained a level of authority which only the most experienced warriors ever had.

“Kill her, Kali.”

Several things happened in quick succession.

Stiles reached Kate with the weapons he had retrieved from the other side of the room and thrusted them into her hands - when had she freed them as well? - making through the threatening vines with ease the Steele wolves didn’t share.
Kali let out a whimpering snarl and her claws dug into her hands, blood flowing to the floor from the open wounds which couldn’t close.

Kate burst through the vines, surprising the closest werewolf and taking him down with a few beautiful and well-placed slashes from her wolfsbane-laced knives. The wolf howled his surprise until it turned into a painful groan.

Julia raised her hands again and with a swipe over her stomach, the vines followed Kate to secure the wolf she left behind just in case.

Georgia Steele let out a bellow and the doors burst open and what seemed like an army of werewolves ran in, shifted and dangerous, into the fray.

It was chaos.

It was pure unaltered chaos.

And then Stiles saw it.

The rage in Georgia’s eyes, the bloodlust. The way she shifted, graceful yet somehow reminding Stiles of Peter in his alpha form when it all began.

There was blood trickling down Peter’s neck from where she was clutching it. Stiles saw the way he was clawing at her but barely making a dent when her healing took care of any wounds he managed to inflict on her.

And Stiles saw white.

Never again.

The doors inside his head burst open.

Not again; he wouldn’t let it happen again.

Piercing screams from the past reached his ears, pain-filled but never begging. Howling in their grief but bright and triumphant.

Never.

He stood there and the whole world went silent for him. His runes started glowing while he remained motionless, and for a moment he was visible, bright and beautiful in his anger. He willed his magic to steal the sight from his opponents, block the keen sense of smell they had and let them hear only silence just as he did. Whereas he had before focused the runes inward, this time they spiralled outward away from his own centre without a thought, only obeying his purest desire.

He knew it would work. There was no doubt of it in his mind.

The Steele pack suddenly froze. The huge hulking beta who had cornered Kate suddenly let out a very confused noise while taking a clumsy swipe in front of him. Kate, already nimbler than he ever could hope to be, dodged it and cut at the back of his ankles, forcing him immobile while he was waiting for the wounds to heal.

Peter took advantage of the sudden stillness of Georgia and broke away from her grip, taking out the wolves guarding him who had stumbled in their steps in confusion in his efforts to make the distance between himself and the alpha as great as possible.
And Julia, lovely Julia, who had cold sweat dotting her cheeks and forehead, stood up straight and held Kali at her mercy. Her expression was twisted sorrowfully while Kali looked in her direction shocked, disbelief visible even in the blindness of her browns.

Stiles took a step forward.

And another.

The unseeing red of Georgia’s settled on him, twisted and wild; hateful. The sea of wolves parted before him, sensing the danger that was Stiles with the instincts they still had left, the magic he was bursting with. Stiles stopped when he was just outside of the alpha’s reach. He felt when Peter, Kate and Julia stood up half a step behind him.

Stiles lifted his eyes the barest minimum and met Georgia’s which, even blind, were staring straight at him. His magic responded to him eagerly and he knew he was resonating bright with it. The focus returned her eyes and with the way she tilted her head and wrinkled her nose just a little Stiles knew her hearing and sense of smell had returned as well.

The same, however, could not be said about the rest of the Steele pack. They were still lost without their senses and slowly Julia’s vines were making their way and trapping them all within their grip.

“I could kill you before you could beg for mercy,” Georgia said. Her voice was deceptively calm but Stiles knew she was fuming inside. She still hadn’t shifted back, a clear sign of aggression – or fear. Stiles wondered if that wasn’t one of the reasons she hadn’t accepted Julia or anyone but her wolves as her pack. She had accused Kali of ignorance but Stiles couldn’t help but wonder if she hadn’t let something cloud her mind as well.

He didn’t care. She could go to hell for all he cared.

“You could,” Stiles admitted. He didn’t move. “But you can’t.”

The paradoxical statement held a truth Stiles knew was hard to accept for her, akin to a blow to her pride. She had power Stiles would never be able to gain and a presence that could hide her betas within it, a skill which Stiles had never witnessed in use. He recalled Deaton once mentioning it was possible, Chris confirming it, but the strength of character it required was insane. Georgia had a strong pack behind her and the loyalty of dozens – maybe even close to the three digits, Stiles wouldn’t even question it if that was true.

But all that power was naught, he knew. He had the upper hand. He and the three people silently supporting him and watching over his back.

After all, a packless alpha is merely a red-eyed omega waiting to be put down.

“So I see,” she said. “A spark. Kali let a spark into my house.”

“You tried to hurt people I care about.”

Georgia studied him, slowly moving from his eyes to toes to back again.

The green was present when she met his gaze again.

“A stolen beta, an unwanted druid and an adolescent hunter. What company you keep.”

“Let us leave and no one will be hurt.”
“More than they already were,” a quip came from behind them.

“Kate,” Peter warned exasperated. Kate huffed. Julia giggled nervously.

Stiles felt a burst of warmth spread through him from all the affection he had for them. Geez, these people... Another wave of fondness answered him, pressing against him from all sides, and he could feel all three of them in it. It created a blanket which surrounded them, made him feel safe and sound even in the viper’s nest.

He-

“Your pack won’t last.”

Stiles tuned back in to listen to Georgia who had a small smile spread on her face. It screamed condescension. Her eyes, though, were cold and calculating; assessing. “You have no alpha, and no magic can replicate that. You will fail and you will die.”

“And here I was hoping we could have just shaken hands and said sayonara, let’s do this again never.”

“Fool.” Georgia shook her head. “You don’t understand. What you are doing is unnatural. A pack cannot consist of a mismatch of outcasts. It’s supposed to be a family. Your imagined bonds will drive you to the corner and you will be picked off, one by one.”

A flash from the past flickered through Stiles’ mind and he could almost hear what had felt like endless screams from Lydia, the grief-filled roars from Scott and-

“We just have to agree to disagree,” he said calmly, despite the roaring in his mind, his veins.

That would never happen again.

The haughty, all-knowing look didn’t disappear from the alpha’s face; rather, it deepened and spread and Stiles knew – he knew – that if the news of their demise ever reached her ears, she would laugh long and hard. He would bet that the moment they left, she would send out a word to make their life that much more difficult.

“You have outstayed your welcome,” she merely said. “Take the druid with you. She has no place here.”

A dark blip of something that felt like a flinch met Stiles’ heightened senses but it disappeared in the collective brightness that was- that was their-

Oh shit.

Stiles forced his heart rate to slow and exhaled quietly. He carefully emptied his mind. He would examine that revelation later.

“Well, in that case!” He clapped his hands together and gave her the fakest smile he could muster. “This was not fun and let’s forget this ever happened!” He deliberately turned his back to her, seeing Peter tensing now that he was facing him again. He also saw the way Kate tightened her hold on her weapons and the abnormal stillness of Julia’s vines covering the whole floor. Despite all that, he just walked forward, head held high with all the carelessness he could project.

The others fell in step with him.
They were passing Kali when Julia wavered.

“Stiles?”

He paused in his steps. “Yes?”

“Could I- I mean, I wanted- maybe…” Julia’s voice died out. Stiles waited. She looked at the lost and slightly panicked expression on Kali’s face, the way she could no longer move from her spot with the vines covering her, and Stiles could sense the heartrending loss she was experiencing. Julia was undoing years of her life in what had to be the quickest divorce ever.

“Please, let me say goodbye,” Julia said. Her eyes were locked on Kali’s wobbling form, the way she was still trying to escape and search for something. They all knew what that something was.

He closed his eyes and examined the bundle within him, the knowledge he had the entire Steele pack under his control. He willed Kali free, the same way he had returned Georgia her senses. He could feel the alpha’s stare on his back, painting a target on him.

Kali gasped, eyes wide and briefly overwhelmed by everything around her. She blinked rapidly until her gaze finally fell on Julia. She looked like she was trying to grasp something which was no longer there.

She looked even more lost than before, more lost than Julia did.

“I can’t- Julia, I can’t feel you.”

Julia just smiled sadly. There was real pain on Kali’s face.

“Please don’t leave me,” she begged. Kali winced as if something had struck her but she stubbornly didn’t look away from Julia. “Please!” she pleaded again.

Julia opened her mouth, and then closed it. She looked unsure to what to say when faced with the one person who had been with her almost her whole life, the only one who had. It would have been easier for her to leave and never come back but- that was not her, Stiles knew that, and he felt her need for closure.

“Please…” Kali said again, desperate. She tried to struggle out of the vines but what had been loosened now tightened again when- “I love you.”

Something in Julia coiled tight at Kali’s words. She stood straighter and took a quick step back, a step towards Stiles and Kate and Peter and a step away from Kali. The wolf in question looked like someone had hit her with a hammer soaked in wolfsbane.

“I love you too,” Julia said but she continued retreating until she hit Peter. Kali snarled and flashed her eyes, glaring at him for touching Julia.

Julia’s expression hardened, just as her resolve did.

“Goodbye, Kali.”

“No, Julia- Julia!” Kali called as the druid turned her back on her, continuing towards the doors.

“You know I would never hurt you!”

Julia faltered but for just a second and then, with a sorrowful smile, she said, “I know.”
Stiles saw the desperation settling into Kali’s bones. “Please.”

“Not on purpose you wouldn’t,” Julia continued. She licked her lips but pushed on as if she needed to say these words out loud or she would never have peace again. “But your actions, almost all of them… They did hurt me. They do hurt me. And I can’t live with that pain anymore. I got used to it, I thought it normal, but it isn’t Kali. And I can’t- I can’t devote my life to you. Not anymore. I thought I could but- I can’t.”

“But… I love you.” Kali sounded lost. Stiles almost felt for her if not for the dark flashes he could feel from Julia.

“It’s not love you feel, Kali…” she said, sad and resigned. “It’s called possession.”

Kate grasped her hand and tugged her along, leaving Kali yelling after them. Stiles brushed them as they walked past and the gratitude sent his way almost made him stumble.

“Do remove this curse you put on my pack before you leave, spark.”

Stiles grinned nastily, and pushed with all the protective instincts he had, spreading that little bundle around before tying it into a knot, leaving it mockingly hanging in the air metaphorically.

“It will end when it will end.”

Georgia’s aura spread again, pulsing with a compulsion. Her betas whined, instincts driving them to obey but having no sense to how.

“Now, spark.”

“Run!” Stiles yelled, almost cheerfully, and burst through the doors. The corridor was filled with open doors but there were no obstacles between them and the main doors. Julia led the dash and her vines followed her, deeming the entrance an enemy, and breaking through the glass. The doors swung open as Kate shoved at them and then they were in their car, speeding past the curious onlookers, and watching as-

No one stood at the yard watching them go.

Stiles turned to Peter who was yet again on the driver’s seat.

“You do know she is going to contact your sister if she isn’t already, and probably make up some epic tales?”

“With her imagination? I doubt it,” Peter said, going 30 miles past the speed limit. Julia was no longer glowing, the distance and her not being in contact with the ground breaking her focus. She was covered in sweat, though, and panting quietly from exhaustion.

Stiles had to admit he was impressed; she hadn’t passed out yet from the massive spellcasting she had done, the emotional strain she had felt.

A small smile appeared on Julia’s face and she leaned against Kate.

“But it’s not like what she says matters,” Peter continued. He checked the mirrors and Stiles followed in suit. No one was suspiciously following them – or following them per se. Peter turned right from the next intersection, turning their direction towards the state border. Stiles approved. The sooner they would get out of Carolina – both of them – the better. “Georgia Steele is sharp and intelligent, as is my sister when she doesn’t let her instincts rule her. She knows she has nothing to gain from
aggravating a fellow alpha. Besides, she must have realised Talia no longer has any control over my actions.”

Stiles frowned. “But she is your alpha.”

“Former alpha,” Peter corrected. Stiles felt a nudge somewhere inside his head. His eyes widened.

“Did I- oh fuck- you too- I didn’t- I can-”

“If you try to take it back, you’ll just leave me an omega.”

Stiles’ babbling stopped like he hit a wall. “I didn’t- I wouldn’t!”

Peter glanced at him, and Stiles- he-

“You know you’re important, don’t you?” he blurted out. Peter blinked. “I mean, your sister’s loss, our gain. We just- I just- You’re cut off from your blood. Because of me. And I’m sorry for that.”

“I think you’re taking far too much credit, Stiles,” Peter said. He met Stiles’ unsure gaze. “Whether or not you meant to do it, it was a long way coming. My sister and I haven’t seen eye to eye for a long time. It’s the truth, simple as that. And I think we all had something to do with it; something which finally burst through the tides.”

Stiles looked back and saw Kate and Julia listening to them intently. Kate nodded, her expression severe.

“I wanted to understand,” she announced, loud and clear. “I had these impossible sounding things affecting my behaviour. Pack bonds? The fuck? These were not covered in the hunter manual!” she huffed. Julia giggled next to her. Even Stiles felt his lips tug a little.

“I didn’t get it. I still don’t get it. First everything was like usual, maybe a little intense and there was this weird tingly thing but then, bam, full blown clarity and I could feel things and- and it’s nothing like I was taught,” she frowned. She looked like she wanted to say something more but shook her head instead.

“It feels wrong.”

Stiles felt something, almost like a flinch, make its way into the bond.

“I, uh-” Kate hastily floundered.

“It feels wrong because it feels too right,” Julia said quietly. She still held that small smile on her face, looking peaceful even if Stiles could feel the undercurrent of grief clouding her mind. “The only tie I’ve ever had was to Kali. It was strong, so strong, but frayed and rigid and brittle… and in the end, so easy to break.” She sighed.

“And it was never warm.”

Unlike this, went unsaid but they all heard it.

“My sister’s children might take this the hardest,” Peter said pensively. “My nephew and youngest niece especially. My sister will, too. Undoubtedly, she’ll mean trouble in the future. Will probably double the efforts in finding me, us. Before, I knew I was an inconvenience, a challenge to her authority. But now? You don’t just break away from a pack bond, no matter how distant you’ve gotten… how much better you have it with a found family rather than blood. The Hales are tolerant
and progressive but this…

“This is an insult to an alpha, no matter how liberal.”

Stiles was listening to them quietly, hearing them list their reasons one by one. Explicit or implicit, they all had the simplest need to belong. To have someone understand them; to be able to protect those that did.

He understood. He understood so well but-

“It hurts,” he said, surprising himself for voicing what he thought and what the others surely felt, even if they didn’t say it. “I’ve been part of a pack before. Hell, I was one of the people who found it in the first place. They died. All of them, one by one. You don’t just come back from that unscathed. I still feel every single one of those bonds, I feel their absence, that pain. I…”

What could he even say? That he was scared of forgetting his family? That he was afraid of building a new one since he wouldn’t be able to survive it twice? That he had now, apparently, forged a bond as deep as he had with Scott and Lydia and everyone but with the villains, the bond clinger-ons? But-

Peter was a strong, steady presence with sharp edges and acerbic tongue, hiding his wounds until he could heal.

Kate was a bright flame which could no longer be extinguished, able to hurt but also protect.

Julia was a weary soul, young and old, experienced too much for her years.

Stiles was a person lost in time and unable to make sense of it all in his mind, unable to let go.

They were all works-in-progress, something jaded-

“You’re hurti

“ing,” Kate said. Her scowl deepened. “It feels wrong. I don’t like it.”

And-

That was what she meant.

Stiles let out a surprised laugh and something calm washed over him. It was bright and burning but it was also serene and peaceful.

He caught Peter smiling at his direction. He couldn't help flashing him one of his own.

“Is it always this intense?” Julia asked. “It almost feels like you can feel everything.”

“You don’t know?” Kate questioned. Julia shook her head slightly.

“No, I- no. I don’t.”

She didn’t know. She didn’t know.

Stiles doesn’t like what that implies.

“It can be,” he said, as the only resident expert. Peter, having been born pack, didn’t have first-hand experience in the matter either. “When my alpha turned, well, alpha, it was… an experience.”

He remembered the night. He was away, having crash
mountain ash… it woke him up.

He was connected to his best friend on a level he wasn’t before. They had always been close and then they were sort of pack but it had opened doors they hadn’t known were there.

“It’s only for a little while when the bond is too new to have settled yet,” he said, deep in thought. “After a while, hours, days, even weeks, it moves towards the background and the waves of feelings disappears. You have more privacy because you no longer broadcast. I think… it might be so that the rest of… the rest of the pack,” there, he said it and, oh, his heartbeat picked up a little, “Knows where you fit. At least that’s what Kira said it felt like when she joined us. For us, we just gained a little something more… but she gained everything at once. It’s a little disorienting, in a good way, she said. But establishing a pack… it goes away after a while.”

Which was the only reason Theo managed to-

They got better. They learned that even with the bond in the background, communication was needed.

“On a side note, it seems that the ‘bonds as background’ mindset is default when you’re born in a pack. Perhaps there is this little period where the bond establishes but you’re too young to know it’s happening. I did feel the change in bonds when my sister’s children and their cousins were born but it was… muted.” Peter smiled sardonically. “Although I cannot say for sure if it was because of me or the pack overall.”

“Oh. So this will help people to find their place in the pack,” Kate mused. “It’s actually pretty smart for something so instinct-driven.”

She looked almost like she wanted to take notes. Stiles didn’t know whether to be proud or scared. She reminded him a little bit of Lydia just then.

Julia nodded pensively. “I knew pack bonds were more than I had personally experienced but… They always seemed sort of cutthroat maybe? And less open with, well, with the Steeles. Kali, she was always complaining about ‘the noise’.”

“It’s only noise if you don’t understand it,” Stiles and Peter said aloud and looked at each other startled, the sync taking them by surprise. Julia and Kate snickered.

“Well, at least we have time to let it settle until we reach Beacon Hills,” Kate thought out loud.

The car came to an abrupt halt and it was lucky the road they were currently on wasn’t busy. They did get a few furious yells from passers-by and middle fingers.

“Beacon Hills?” Peter asked calmly. His feelings had flattened the moment Kate had barely finished her sentence.

“I- yes,” Kate said, taken aback. “I have my exams. The exams Gerard and my high school insist I take. In Beacon Hills,” she added, as if that wasn’t clear already.

“Shit, I forgot!” Stiles moaned. Fuck, that’s true. They were supposed to go back for December. And then there was the cleansing of the Nemeton to which he didn’t have any new ideas on how to proceed. His mind was all over the place. Would Julia perhaps know? He was just glad they were far enough in the past that nothing critical would happen in a while. Unless it was. Or had. Because the only things he remembered as a kid from this time was his family.

He had assumed nothing had happened because things had been peaceful and no one in the future
had indicated anything serious had happened then but what if he was wrong? What if he had missed something?

“We just got away from one crazy to go straight to another. I have no desire to meet my sister this soon,” Peter said flatly. His presence was still muted but it spiked a little with something that was clearly tinted with apprehension.

“Is she so bad?” Julia asked. “I mean, you said and I assumed but-”

“She’s a good alpha for her pack. But like I said, she’s going to be livid with me and I have enough survival instincts to know I want to be far away when the time for confrontation will come. Preferably through a phone call. Far in the future so she has mellowed down.”

“I didn’t take you for a coward,” Kate taunted. It was said a little meanly but she didn’t feel cold.

Peter snorted. “And that’s why you called your father Gerard.”

Kate startled, surprised. After a moment, she conceded and nodded.

“Alphas are scary,” Julia said quietly.

“Fuck yes,” Peter and Kate chorused. Then, as if by mutual decision, they all turned to look at Stiles.

“Are we going, leader dear?”

Stiles felt like a deer in the headlights but this deference… wasn’t much of a surprise, honestly. He had acted as the de facto leader of their group for a while. Since the start? Even Georgia-

It wasn’t supposed to be a revelation that he was their pack’s ‘alpha’ in some capacity but it was, a little. He was the failed emissary of Scott’s pack – or whatever advisory position it was when the advisor was a little morally unhinged and cared fuck about balance – and the human that lived when everyone else did not.

He had the worst qualifications to lead anyone.

…But did any of them really need a leader?

Kate was independent as fuck. She needed no man telling her how to handle anything. What she needed, and had, was a mentor who would not force their ideals on her and let her form her own conclusions.

Stiles could offer that.

Julia, she needed a supportive network who wouldn’t shun her for being who she was. She was selfless, Stiles had noticed, but she seemed more eager to please than being herself. The darach he had known had been as selfish as they had come but this Julia, she honestly needed some of that. Not the crazy part, dear lord, but learning to ask – even take – what she wanted. She had already started by removing herself from the Steeles.

Stiles could offer that.

And Peter…

He needed someone to see his worth.

Stiles did. And Peter knew that.
None of them truly needed leading. They needed a family, and Stiles was the one who had unwittingly offered them one. Stiles knew that rationally but accepting it was hard. He had already had a family. He had sworn he wouldn’t get another, that he wouldn’t get attached… the most he had expected from the past had been to fix things and perhaps fade away, unnoticed and forgotten.

His subconscious had clearly disagreed.

Stiles sighed.

“We are going to Beacon Hills,” he said finally. “But we are forming a plan. The Hales are not going to be able to sense Peter anymore – he’s no longer part of their pack but ours.”


Ours.

The way it sounded-

“But they are still able to smell him and quite probably can sense when we enter their territory. Kate is going to do her exams as fast as she can, so you better start cramming. We want to be out of Beacon Hills as soon as possible. No need to aggravate them further than necessary.”

“Roger.” Kate saluted mockingly but her tone was serious.

“I don’t know if or how I could shield Peter with my magic but- especially if we are not touching 24/7-”

“I wouldn’t mind-”

“So I need your expertise, Julia,” Stiles finished, sending a warning look at Peter. He merely grinned unrepentantly in return.

“I- yes. I think, with specific runes and spells we can render him undetectable. But since he’s a werewolf… maybe…” Julia chewed her lip in thought and bursts of excitement and disappointment started pulsing through their bond.

Stiles stared for a moment but she was lost. “…We’ll work on that. And then there’s the problem with the Argents.”

“Avoid. Ignore?” Peter suggested. Kate snorted and snickered, seemingly agreeing on the sentiment, while Stiles rolled his eyes. He gestured at Kate.

“This here is a prime Argent princess-”

“Don’t call me princess!”

“-who can’t possibly stay outside the compound. That’s the argument you know Gerard is going for, Kate. And Peter, she is pack. Ergo, we stay in the Argent compound.”

“…”

“Fuck.”

“How do you expect them to allow a werewolf inside the ever-present mountain ash line?”

Stiles sighed. “We’ll work on that.”
He straightened his back.

“Alright. Start driving.”

***

That night, safely tucked away in a motel far away from Colombia, Stiles closed his eyes and for the first time that day he entered the corner of his mind which had been cold and devoid of warmth for so long but was not anymore. He was scared.

He didn’t know what he was going to find.

He had put off thinking about it – well, he had thought about it but he hadn’t thought about it if it made sense – until he knew he was alone. They had decided to get rooms together tonight. Julia and Kate were sharing as were Peter and Stiles. It had just felt so wrong going separate ways. It had felt better, safer – something broke inside Stiles and he felt his magic return to him; he laughed, long and hard.

But later, Stiles had gone to get some snacks from the vending machine, or at least so he had claimed, while Peter had hogged the shower after complaining about the state of it.

Stiles suspected they all felt the apprehension that held him hostage since Peter didn’t question his need to be ‘alone’ nor did the girls’ door open when he walked past it.

He appreciated it.

He felt guilty for appreciating it.

He had locked the door but it had been torn open by forces Stiles hadn’t counted. Every little thing he had gone through with these people had come together and none of the barriers he had put up were enough to stop the onslaught of what was them, their- their pack.

Not even when his own subconscious had fought against him.

And then- when it all had blown apart and everything he knew had been overhauled to a massive degree-

Nothing changed.

Well, it was wrong to say nothing changed because clearly that was plainly untrue. But the only things that did were little things which, while they mattered, did not alter the universe as Stiles thought they might.

Kate was still Kate but more attentive to the change in the mood.

Julia was still Julia but she could express herself better since she knew she could.

Peter was still Peter but he was freer than ever before while simultaneously being bound the tightest he’s ever been.

And Stiles, he was still Stiles.

Why was that?

The Stiles he was – is – was built with his pack. His former pack? A flash of guilt cleaved through him and he gasped aloud. He leaned against the vending machine, head banging against it. His
whole identity was built around those people. He did this for *them*, not for himself, not for these people he now shared similar bonds with.

It felt like a betrayal.

No, it felt like it should feel like a betrayal but it didn’t. It felt natural, like something that was long coming. And it was, he had acknowledged it. He had just thought he might have had enough time to avoid opening the door to others before he could-

But the door was open now.

It had let in Peter, Kate and Julia. Their presence was glowing in the same space the frayed edges of his pack bonds lay.

The door was open now, and Stiles didn’t know if he truly wanted it to be. And he felt guilty for thinking that but also guilty that there was a reason he was thinking that.

Slowly, he sat down and leaned against the machine. He could feel the pulsing worry from the bonds. He could feel Kate’s uneasiness, Julia’s fragility and Peter’s alertness. He knew they were all waiting for what he would do.

They all knew that he was the weakest link, the one most against this sense of rightness, but also the one they all chose to defer to. Spokesperson. Mentor. Alpha. Spark.

They were waiting if he would reject them, cut them and their bonds off… if he would, instead, choose to close the door again and leave them in the darkness – perhaps forever.

He gathered his courage. He licked his lips.

Stiles closed his eyes.

He was suddenly standing in his mind. He could see the door hanging wide open, letting in all this chaos. The locks were hanging on its hinges, useless and broken, but no other signs of battle were to be seen.

“An inside job,” he whispered to himself.

And it was already taking over.

Where there was once darkness, now glowed a soft light, illuminating the space like it hadn’t been for so long. And Stiles could see everything so very clearly.

He could see Erica, Boyd and Isaac curled together but no longer coiled tight but relaxed – almost as if in deep sleep and not in the embrace of death.

He could see Liam laugh with Mason and Hayden and Corey, bounding around with hope that was never truly lost and falling into holes endlessly.

He could see Kira read a book backwards, Allison in her fierce glory and Lydia looking over them like the queen she was.

He could see Danny and Jackson practice lacrosse just like in high school.

He could see Derek and Cora sit quietly together and watch everyone going on with their business.

He could see the parental units – his dad, Melissa, Chris – have a glass of wine and relax without
anyone threatening the day.

They were all there. Smiling. Laughing.

Happy.

Stiles’ heart ached.

In unison they all turned to him, watched him, waited. A hand reached for him and he wanted to take it, he wanted to so much, he almost did, and then-

And then they were gone. Howling, screaming, yelling in despair and suddenly everything was quiet. No one was left standing, not even Stiles, no, he was on the ground as well – someone had to dig their graves. Or rather, burn their bodies so no one could disturb their rest.

Someone touched him. He looked up.

Scott stood there, his brown eyes just the way he remembered – the way he wanted to remember. So kind and soft, strong and fierce, and so very perfect in his imperfection, human and werewolf sides finally aligned.

He was saying something but Stiles couldn’t hear it. His lips were moving but he couldn’t read them – not that he knew that anyway but they were inside his mind, he should be able to manipulate something. It was like there was a barrier between them, separating them, making them unable to-

Scott looked increasingly frustrated. He motioned something behind Stiles, opened his mouth like he wanted to shout and then dissolved before him, far too soon.

They all left him far too soon. Everything was gone now.

…Except the light.

It was still there.

Stiles avoided looking at the frayed ends of his bonds to the McCall pack. He couldn’t look at them, not anymore. Did he even have the right to do so? What did Scott even want from him anymore? Why had his mind taken his form? He had betrayed them all by surviving, by changing his allegiance to others. He was no longer the Stiles they had known. He had changed, but for better or worse? He didn’t know.

Instead, he watched the three brightly alive bonds. They were there, nearby the door, tangled together. One was a little longer than the others, sort of looking like it was knitted together. One was pulsing with everything coloured every scent earthy. One was in the middle of changing its colour. But what was even more remarkable about them was that they were clean. None of them had a mar in them, none were forcibly cut.

And they were all reaching towards Stiles. No, they had reached him, tying themselves around his arms, his legs, his full body; his mind, his heart.

The door was open. They had come in, settled in.

They had him.

Nothing had fallen down. They were alive. Nothing had changed.

But Stiles wasn’t sure if he could believe in that those facts would never change.
And he couldn’t help but wonder if he wasn’t his own worst enemy after all.

He hugged the bonds close and let himself be embraced as he surrendered. He was engulfed in the joy he had thought he had lost, the closeness he had toed around but never reached for.

Stiles ignored the doubt in his mind, the tears in his eyes, and clung closer.

He was warm.

***

There was a spot in Stiles mind.

No, there were multiple ones but they were all tied together like a puzzle made to fit but didn’t but still did. So there was a spot.

In his turmoil, Stiles hadn’t noticed. Or rather, he’d noticed but he hadn’t been able to process it, and he had left his mind without glancing back, guilt pouring from every cell he had.

That is often the case when one sees what it wants to see, afraid to see what they should.

And in that spot stood an alpha – the only alpha Stiles had or would ever follow.

A flare of red and a flash of a crooked jaw were the only things visible of him not that it mattered – who was there to even see him? Like a ghost, he moved. He touched the bundle of bonds which were slightly glowing – isaboericaydac – and they pulsed back. He walked around, hugging them close, caressed them lightly; some were more damaged and some were less, some needed attention and some needed space.

Yet there was something they all had in common, but in the light which had flown in from the door, it had been impossible see.

The alpha touched them and they answered him back.

The alpha turned around and watched. And watched. And watched.

And then he faded away.

Chapter End Notes

This is not a cliffhanger. I think. I hope? In any case, next chapter, we are going back to Beacon Hills <3

Also, I was asked a couple of times what the title meant, so I'll explain it here. Basically, it meant that the Steele pack wouldn't be willing/able to change their minds and their beliefs just because an itty bitty spark and his little group of misfits arrived in their lair. Bad word play, maybe, haha! If that also applies to silver... well, you have to wait and see ;D

Thanks for all the support, you wonderful peeps <3
In which they return to Beacon Hills

Chapter Notes

Hi...! I'm not dead! Which is a surprise even to me. The story isn't dead either! Which is not as much of a surprise, because I'd crawl from the grave to finish it. I have plenty of excuses which you know already, namely work (finished by now) and thesis (on its last stretch of editing). It's going to be publishing time soon. I'm sort of scared shitless of that. I've also moved apartments! Everything's green. I love it. Busy summer, all in all. Bonus, I also visited Vienna with gksmentality. What a fab way to meet someone. Best trip ever. I miss it and her already... And she got me addicted to B99. Why do you do this to me???

No regrets. Except for not having had time to write fics. Fine, one regret.

In addition, thank you all for all the support. Your comments, kudos and everything made my summer. They kept me going so I could finish real life necessities to get back to this sooner. So, yeah, thank you. You're all diamonds.

Without further ado, here's the new chapter! I hope it was worth waiting for, haha... There are probably mistakes but, eh. Honestly, I don't care at the moment. Hopefully you won't mind either (you're welcome to point them out though) ;D Enjoy!

They took their time to drive back to Beacon Hills. For many reasons, really. Mostly because none of them were particularly excited to return to the would be Hellmouth (even if Stiles was the only one calling it that; it hadn’t caught on yet, sadly). Except for Julia. Stiles thought it reasonable, and possibly therapeutic, to get as much land between her and her 99 problems, all of them with the Steeles. He did wonder if they should just change the continent completely. With California and the Carolinas guarding the coasts, the USA was pretty much closing in on them.

Especially with all the supernatural affairs dragging them down in the middle.

For example, the wendigo incident number two. They were just there, minding their own business and relieving themselves on the roadside – no bathrooms or gas stations for miles around them, what the fuck ever, this was the golden age of gas stations – when three wendigos attacked them. Three. Where do they even come from? Who spawns them? Then they, or rather Julia, were whammed by some dryads calling any nature-inclined magic users for their help. And then they stumbled upon an omega werewolf terrorising a small town in the middle of nowhere in Utah.

There’s nothing in Utah. Nothing. Except for that rogue omega, apparently.

It took them so long to untangle themselves from those messes that Kate’s exams were just around the corner when they finally passed the Californian border. Not to say that the extra time wasn’t useful.

During the time they spent travelling, or more likely because of all the crises they had to handle, they got more used to each other, the new connection and the random bursts of emotions. They were quite settled in the end – or as much as they could in the couple of weeks. Which meant that while there
were still some disorienting incidents, like Stiles getting excited by getting a travel-sized stove-

("I'M GOING TO BOIL SOME SHIT!")

-or Peter and Kate going on a particularly gleeful shopping spree-

("Stiles is going to ask father for more funds anyway, we can burn the rest of the money on what we need! And I totally need those knives. They'd look so pretty with runes on them. I want them to burn anything they touch."

“And I need an update on my wardrobe. All this fighting has ripped all my best clothes and I'm fed up with borrowing anything plaid. I need something that is actually from this century or doesn’t make me look like a lumberjack."

“You make a very sexy lumberjack, Peter. Wait a minute, don’t diss the plaid! And hey! How come do I have to beg on my knees to fund your spending habits?!")

-they could go hours or even days without too big of a disturb in the force. Mostly. Maybe.

In any case, the change was mostly positive. After the initial shock had worn off, everything had been sort of… brighter. Kate’s laugh was lighter, Peter’s eyes a brilliant blue and even more brilliant gold, Julia’s presence more serene. They were still themselves, but somehow more. Their presence in his mind, twining him tighter against them, was louder.

It was grounding.

It was almost as if part of Stiles’ weight had been lifted from him. There were less flashbacks when he was awake and when there was, they were less of the horror genre and more of the nostalgic, good ol’ times stuff. Like when he and Scott had driven Roscoe for the first time, when Allison was all dimple with the queen-of-the-school Lydia, like… Like nothing had ever gone wrong. He even daydreamed about that one evening in the McCall house, everyone still alive present, one of the last days of melancholic calm.

For once, it didn’t leave him with regret and pain but rather gave his mood a wistful turn.

After letting the door open, it was almost as if the act had also swiped his nightmares with it. Not completely, no. He still experienced them, woke up in the middle of the night with cold sweat and a cry on his lips. Yet, now, there was also the soothing combined presence of Julia, Kate and Peter surrounding him. He was surrounded by a pack again. He realised he hadn’t quite had panic attacks in weeks, like when things had been stable and good in the-

It made a world of difference. Stiles found he could breathe again, smell the fresh air – actually smell it, not just take it in and find it musty even if he knew it should be fresh like morning dew – and just… be Stiles. Whoever that was. It was a work in progress.

The pack bonds seemed to have a sort of calming effect on them all. Stiles noticed things he never had before. Kate was being less rebellious. It was like she no longer had to prove herself to someone, to know she excelled, because she could feel how proud of her they all were, how glad that she was with them instead of just with them. If that made any sense.

Julia was happier too, lighter, almost like a burden had been taken off her shoulders even if she tended to fall morose once in a while, dark thoughts plaguing her mind. Stiles kept wondering just how much the Steeles had affected her. Her bouts of depression hurt them all every time they surfaced. Stiles could now understand Peter and Kate better, knowing what they had gone through with him, even without the full bonds. He couldn’t help but marvel-
And Peter was steadier as well. He had become the rock of the pack, the rock Stiles leaned on, the rock he – and they all – depended on. He was strong in ways none of them were, had always been, but with people around him who cared he was only becoming stronger. He was more settled. He was more Peter, somehow. The Peter who had been lost somewhere after the fire, the potential just there, lying in wait for it to be lit. He would never become that Peter, the loose cannon a hairbreadth away from exploding. Peter was just… Peter.

Just like Stiles was just Stiles.

Slow but sure they settled into a rhythm that suited them the most. They weren’t a traditional pack so traditional hierarchy didn’t quite fit them. Not that Stiles was too familiar with traditional before. Stiles might be the figurative head of the pack but all of them were alphas in their respective fields. Alpha pack two point o? No, they were the prototype! Much cooler. Despite them, you know, not being alphas. At all.

The good parts didn’t solve all their problems though. Stiles was still leaking magic, as Julia confirmed. They had tried everything from meditation to Julia trying to connect Stiles to earth through a ritual so he could push the excess magic into the ground. Nothing. Well, the latter had helped for a minute before the leaky faucet his insides were started leaking even more to compensate for the loss and frizzled Julia’s hair. It had looked pretty funny. She was a regular Hermione Granger!

…They had stopped trying afterwards. It had taken Kate and Julia three hours to get her hair back to normal. In lieu of handling Stiles, they had then decided to focus on more pressing matters.

Aka. Peter.

The problem with Peter lied in his innate shapeshifting magic. It kept interfering with anything they tried to make him undetectable. Long-term, it seemed they needed either a physical connection – which would be impossible to maintain and regulate day and night – or something that runes could be carved into and stuck onto Peter’s person. Naturally, they had no information on the ritual, spell or necessary ingredients to make any sort of amulet or a portable power source for him. Just Stiles’ luck.

It seemed that, if worst came to worst, they might have to draw runes around the Argent compound and cage Peter in. None of them liked the possibility but Peter had said he’d rather go stir-crazy than meet up with Talia without a buffer. Peter did always have the best survival instincts of them all. Stiles had only ever heard tales of Talia’s deeds, but what he did know made him less willing to be on her bad side as well.

On which he currently was.

Probably at the lowest possible level.

Yay.

Stiles yawned and stretched. He smacked his lips rather unattractively as he blearily took in his surroundings. Nothing. He rose to sit on his bed, looking around the hotel room. Nothing. He gingerly stood up and shuffled around, peeking into the bathroom. Nothing.

Where was Peter?

Stiles closed his eyes. He let his mind wander, picking up on Peter’s energy. The emotional response to the bond might not be as constant as when it was just established but the bond was there. Stiles chucked on his clothes and followed it. He found himself at the reception. The hotel employee was
nowhere to be seen. Neither were any of the other guests there. Stiles checked the time, blinking blearily at the wall and its yellowish wallpaper. The clock was… there. It was barely seven. No wonder no one was up yet.

Stiles focused back on Peter, finding him by the window. He was sitting as gracefully as ever but… Stiles frowned. This near him, he could sense something wasn’t quite right. He knew those invisible lines. He knew that face, that posture. His back was a bit too straight, shoulders drooped a little too much in contrast. Even with his immaculate hair and simple yet flattering clothes, all new and somehow not stained by the 90s fashion statements, his appearance seemed to be in a disarray.

“Peter?” he called out, walking closer. Peter probably knew he was there already but- yes, he nodded at him although his eyes remained transfixed to his coffee cup.

Stiles gingerly sat next to him, knocking his shoulder on Peter’s. He leaned a little on him. Peter sagged just the slightest bit.

They sat in silence, watching as the light started pouring little by little through the windows.

A small burst of emotion – shockfearreliefhappiness – alerted Stiles that Julia had woken up. Stiles concentrated on Kate’s link. It felt sort of muted, calm in a way Kate never was. She was probably sleeping in, avoiding the reality of high school examinations as long as possible. Smart. Stiles’ seal of approval on that one. A seal seal, not an animal seal.

If selkie approved of something, would that be the ultimate seal of approval?

Time ticked forward. Stiles watched the clock tick bit by bit, glancing at Peter once in a while, until it hit 7.30, and then Kate was awake. All of a sudden there was a hitch in the serenity, alarm of a kind, before Julia bubbled with amusement and Kate with indignant rage. Stiles wondered what Julia had done to wake her up.

Peter stayed quiet, even if his lips twitched into a pale version of his trademark smirk. He looked tired. Those lines seemed even more pronounced. So, so tired.

Stiles totally knew that face.

“How long had Peter been awake?

“Come on, let’s get some breakfast. The girls will appreciate a warm welcome.” Stiles nudged Peter, shifting the cup so that he could grab Peter’s arm to pull him up. The wolf went willingly, and together they walked to the hotel restaurant. Stiles piled food on a tray before sticking it to Peter. He almost put the half-full cup of the cold heavenly drug on it but just gave it to a passing waiter. He got them drinks, warm ones, and then they were off towards their rooms.

They hit the elevator, alone, before Stiles asked the question he had been wanting to ask since he saw Peter. Well, shortly after. The signs were clear.

“Nightmares?”

Because Stiles knew his mirror image was a copy of Peter, if a lot less immaculate.

Peter sighed. He moved the tray so he was holding it on one hand – werewolves – and rubbed his
eyes. “Unfortunately.”

Stiles shifted a little. “Halemouth bothering you?”

“You watch too much Buffy,” Peter snorted. The elevator dinged, and the doors opened. There was a couple looking like they wanted to come in but the trays took too much space. They seemed to decide to test their luck on the next one. The doors closed again.

To the second-highest floor, everyone.

“We’ll make it through,” Stiles reassured him. “With Kate distracting the Argents, Julia is going to be checking out the perimeter and adding her own touch to the wards if there are any. That will give us some room to figure out a better solution. And more room to you, period.”

“Holed in the local hunter stronghold. Joy.” Peter’s voice was dry as a desert wind. Stiles shrugged apologetically, almost jostling the drinks. He managed to catch himself though. Luckily. This time.

“I’m sorry.”

Peter sighed again. The elevator music paused. “We’ll make do. If we get past the mountain ash line.”

“It’ll work,” Stiles said, as the doors opened again, this time to their correct floor. They stepped out. “We’ll just need to quickly disrupt the line. I can do it. I promise! Discreetly even.”

“And if they don’t recognise me.”

“Ah… yeah. That. You just have to be as un-Haleish as possible.”

Peter looked at him, unimpressed. Stiles grinned.

“You know, as human as possible. They are not going to expect a werewolf to be in the middle of things. Besides, despite the treaty, does your pack really have a lot of contact with the hunters?”

“Not much,” Peter admitted. “And mostly through our emissary and alpha. The enforcer is supposed to be there in the meetings but…”

“See? It’ll go well! We’ll just pretend you’re my cousin Pedro if it comes to that. Sorry, Miguel’s already taken. Just leave it to this slayer of slayers!” Stiles had to admit that his victory pose might have looked weird with the tray in his hands.

“Heavens above.” Peter’s eyes rolled towards the ceiling. “We’re going to a town full of hunters, werewolves, grudges the size of Texas if not the North American continent, and who knows what. Nothing scares your testicles back into your stomach, does it?”

Stiles pretended to ponder it for a moment. When put it like that…

Sounds like a day ending with a -y.

“Nope,” he popped the last syllable and butt knocked the girls’ room. There was some commotion before a dishevelled Kate answered the door, feathers in her hair and her wet shirt clinging to her body. Julia was smirking behind her. Her appearance was just as messy.

“You’re paying for the repairs yourself,” Stiles announced as he stepped inside the room. Peter chuckled a little. It sent a warm feeling tingle down Stiles’ back. “Peter’s my favourite. He’s going to get all the nice, warm coffee I got for you. And the treats. Especially all the bacon.”
The quick, almost perplexed smile spread over Peter’s lips, and he looked at Stiles so fondly he felt his cheeks heat up a little and his heart skipped a beat.

“I always did like you, Stiles,” Peter said, setting down his tray and stealing every piece of bacon there. The groans from Kate and Julia gave Stiles life.

Yeah, they’d manage. They always did.

***

Surprisingly, the drive was not that tense. They passed Talia’s territory border and the Beacon Hill’s sign – population still in all of its five digits, wow – without fanfare. That wasn’t too surprising, considering how warded the car was. All runes doubled up, with a woman’s touch on them! Yet, despite the extra reassurance, Peter was quiet again. He was more alert than usual too, dressed in one of Stiles’ hoodies that covered his face and pretending to be asleep while Stiles drove through the town. At least Stiles thought he was pretending to be asleep. The bond between them felt awake but Peter did play a very convincing coma patient.

Too soon? No, too early?

Stiles honestly needed to stop. Besides, it wasn’t like he was ever going to let any of that happen to any of his pack. Especially Peter. He just didn’t deserve that fate.

They arrived at the Argent compound without any incident, thank god. Stiles parked the car by the road, unwilling to drive it past the fence. Always have an escape route ready. Or try to. No one was waiting for them but Stiles knew from the last visit that they had enough guards hidden so that any threat would be eliminated before they could reach the porch.

However, that gave them free hands to mess with the mountain ash line whiiiiich… wasn’t visible. Of course, it wasn’t last time either. So it was probably buried in the ground or something. If there was a line. Was there a line? They had thought there was one, it was Gerard after all and even Kate said there should be one but-

Julia gave him a cursory look. She took off first, wandering to the edge of the fence. She turned towards them and shook her head.

No ash line?

They gathered their stuff and walked towards the porch. It was a little eerie with the stillness around them. Peter moved around without a problem but Stiles was holding his arm, his scent blocking runes activated. It was the only way they could ensure Peter left the Hales no trail to find since Stiles could regulate his magic through touch. He might have been able to do it a short distance away like with Isaac but he didn’t want to take that risk.

It was the porch where Julia stopped at. Stiles looked around as surreptitiously as he could. He saw nothing. It had to be built in. Right.

Well.

Stiles squared his shoulders a little, determined. They would just have to pass it. There was no other choice. This had to work. It would work. For Peter. Everything for Peter. Stiles took a deep breath. He tugged Peter along and-

They walked through. Peter shivered as if doused in cold water but his eyes didn’t flash and neither did his control fail either. They were standing in front of the door waiting for them to knock its
They made it.

Stiles let out his breath, slow and steady. It whistled quietly as it made its way past his teeth.

The door opened before they managed to make their presence known. Wow, the warranted a welcoming committee of total one. The man who stood there did look a little familiar though. As if Stiles had seen it at some point… Those hateful eyes, the nondescript looks… Hmm… Where on earth- Wait-


“Mr. Argent has had your room prepared for you, miss Kate. The rooms below yours have been prepared for you… guests.” If disgust had a human face, it would be Dick’s.

Stiles felt Peter twitch the barest bit.

“Where is father?” Kate asked. “I thought I’d warrant a welcome of a sort.”

“He’ll be back for dinner,” Dick just said. He moved so Kate could walk in, gesturing towards the stairs. “This way, miss.”

“I’d like to think I know where my room is,” she snapped, pushing past him. He hurried after her. Another woman followed them. No one else seemed to be in the hallway. Or wanted to come forward anyway. Well.

“I guess I’ll show you where we’ll sleep then,” Stiles said. He sent one last glance at retreating Kate’s back before walking in as well. His hand had moved lower, holding Peter’s in his, as he tugged him forward. Julia followed them after closing the door.

They had prepared them all three guest rooms there. Where were the rest of the hunters who’d used them last time?

“We should give Peter the middle one,” Julia said quietly. Stiles nodded in agreement.

“And ward it,” Peter said quietly under his breath. His eyes flickered, resting on the shadows too long for there to be nothing there. “Before you do it elsewhere.”

Julia and Stiles nodded. They all went in, looking around, and closing the door behind them. It felt better to know that they were at least seemingly separated from the Argents.

“I can’t see anything,” Julia said. Peter nodded thoughtfully. He made a motion, mimicking writing the runes. Julia got to work, scribbling the necessary runes down in a record time, and Stiles felt the magic seep into the walls. He let Peter’s hand go. Stiles blinked and stared at his hand for a moment, wondering why it suddenly felt so cold.

“At least we are not under surveillance in our rooms,” Peter said. He sighed, sitting down on the bed heavily. “The lot of good that will do.”

“I’ll do the rest of the warding as soon as I can,” Julia said. Peter nodded.

“I appreciate it. But do just the house.”

“Why?” Stiles asked. “Didn’t we decide that the perimeter would be less suspicious?” Since you
wouldn’t be confined to the house, went unsaid.

“It would,” Peter agreed. “But it wouldn’t stop passers-by from recognising me. It would also notify our emissary that there was another druid in town. It might draw attention. Within the house, they’ll blend in with the ash. But outside…”

Anyone perceptive enough, hunters and supernaturally-inclined alike, would know there was something rotten in the state of Denmark.

“So make your runes as unnoticeable as possible,” Peter told Julia. She smiled. It was sweet. Her brows were slightly raised though.

“Naturally.”

“We’ll do them little by little. You might have to be confined to the rooms for tonight but we can just claim you’re feeling under the weather,” Stiles said. He bit his lip in thought. “Four points, right? North, east, south, west?”

“Symmetrical lines often work best, yes,” Julia nodded.

“All right. Then we need to do the kitchen and the third bedroom…” Stiles mused out loud, considering what he remembered of the house’s layout. The problem was how to reach them while in the Argents’ line of sight and drawing them without being too obvious to what they were doing. “…The living room and the hallway near the entrance.”

Stiles checked the time. There were a few hours before dinner.

“Let’s do this.”

***

They were half-way there by the dinner time.

Half-way wasn’t enough.

That didn’t matter though. Since there was no dinner. No lie needed!

Oh, they did get delivery – which, why, they had a kitchen, why god why fast food?? did he actually have to get his portable stove out to make some real food? in a house with a fully-equipped kitchen? – but Kate wasn’t there to share it with them. Neither was Gerard. Which is why there was no real dinner. Dick did graciously mention when their Chinese arrived that Gerald had fetched her before leaving again with some of their hunters.

Kate, alone with Gerard. Fantastic.

Her presence in the back of his mind was there, though, if somewhat muted. She was fine. She was brilliant. She could handle herself.

…Stiles still didn’t like the idea of her being alone with him.

They somehow managed to finish the runes by the next morning, thanks to some epic ninjaing and invisibility runes, so Peter was able to join them to breakfast. Gerard was already leaving by the time they entered the kitchen. He didn’t spare them a glance as he strode out. There were other Argent hunters there – Sandra and Liam, they introduced themselves as – who were there to escort Kate to school. She looked a little tired and her distant smile didn’t reassure him much at all but she seemed
well. She did press her hand against Peter’s arm when she passed him, her touch lingering on Stiles and Julia too. Stiles turned to her, opening his mouth to-

Dick was watching them from the doorway. Stiles’ jaw clicked shut.

“Good luck,” he managed to say. Kate spared him a grin, head bobbing in thanks, and then-

And then she was gone. Leaving without them.

Stiles felt deep resentment for what had to be intentional separation of their pack – even if no one knew they were a pack. Even if their (successful) attempt at clearing the house for Peter had lingered on Kate keeping the Argents busy. It worked too well, was all he was saying. Keeping Kate out of the house must have been part of some grand master plan. Especially since everyone else were kept inside. Somewhat. Mostly because of their own plan. And especially since Kate actually had her exams to do.

Was he getting too paranoid?

He probably was.

 Damn it.

To his defence, it was Gerard Argent he was paranoid about. Even if he hadn’t, to his knowledge, done anything too suspicious. Yet.

Dick couldn’t stop Stiles from leaving however! Although he did it rather reluctantly. Because he had to leave Julia and Peter, the source of his reluctance, in the house. Alone. To try to figure out how to make runes work on a werewolf. There probably was a neat and easy way to do so but ugh. Why wasn’t any of them informed of such?

Rationally, Stiles knew they would be safe. No one had as much as breathed wrong in their direction, not really. None had pointed out them being anything else but normal humans either which was already a win in Stiles’ books. Them all crossing the mountain ash line might have had something to do with that.

…Stiles still didn’t like the idea of them being alone there.

But he really needed to find out more about the Nemeton. There was no question of that. It was in the middle of the preserve – and thus the Hale territory – but he had to. He had left it alone long enough. He should have visited the Nemeton the moment he came to past but… then Kate happened. And Claudia. And Peter. And he himself.

So.

Yeah.

He had to find out what Gerard was doing too. He was acting suspicious. He was acting beyond suspicious. It wasn’t like the man to avoid confrontation. He had become their principal to hunt them. Well, not that Stiles had expected a confrontation right now but a little slander and undermining of his dubious credentials wouldn’t be out of place. Gerard had never wanted Kate to go with him in the first place.

But not even staying in the same room as them, as Stiles?

What was the reason of him being too busy for gloating or scathing remarks, all the trademarks of the
next big bad?

Stiles shook his head to clear his thoughts. Again, he might be barking at the wrong tree. He needed the Nemeton so he could woof at its direction. See what he did there? Because-! He paused in his steps. His feet had taken him to the Beacon Hills’ high school. He had to have subconsciously followed Kate’s mental thread. Fuck. That wasn’t what he had meant to do. Even if he did want to check how she was doing. A lot.

He looked around. The neighbourhood or the school hadn’t really changed from what Stiles remembered. The same red bricks, the same signs pointing at the local ‘sights’, the huge sign under which the Hale vault lingered. Wait, the Hale vault. Should they try to break into it? There might be books or some sort of leads on how to defuse the Nemeton… Its mysterious ticking noise was just growing stronger.

Stiles lifted his head when he felt eyes on him. The hunters staring right at him, the ones from the morning. Sandra and Liam. Of course, Kate’s ‘bodyguards’. The staring was done very intently. There was judgement there. Glaring. Ducking fuck.

This would reach someone’s – most probably Gerard’s – ears immediately. Stiles, sniffing around Kate. He wasn’t sure if he could play a concerned mentor card on Kate’s home turf.

Stiles shook his head. He lightly tucked on her strand. It still felt distant, even a little slippery, but he felt her answer him all the same.

That had to be enough.

Stiles turned on his feet and walked away, determined to at least do something right today. Soon enough he had turned around the corner, losing the eyes on his back.

Beacon Hills couldn’t stop him from that, he swore to himself.

He would march over to the Nemeton right now, and then-!

Then he was almost run over two streets down.

Fuck his life.

He cursed his rotten luck as he tried to get his heartbeat to calm down, sending reassurance to the panicked response from Julia and slightly, just slightly, less worried Peter, when a car stopped next to him. It wasn’t the same one, at least. Stiles might have given the driver a shiner otherwise. Or tried to. Depending on the driver’s muscle mass or if it was an old lady…

“Are you alright?” the man behind the wheel asked. Stiles sighed, head rolling to look at the sky. The weather was mockingly perfect. Something was flying there, away from him. Ah, he recognised that familiar form. There went his dignity. He was only surprised he had any to lose anymore.

“Yeah. Thanks for asking. Did you get his plate? He was speeding, I swear to all powers holy, I’m not that blind in traffic,” he said. He looked down to meet the man’s eyes and-

Oh.

“I just called the car in. They’ll be looking out for the driver. Looked like he was in a hurry. You looked like you were busy as well,” his father – no, Noah, he’s Noah, like Claudia is Claudia – asked. “Do you need a lift?”
“I- no, I mean, I’m not in a hurry, not really, well, maybe a little but it’s all relative and I think it can certainly wait for a bit longer even if I might not like it but-”

“Breathe,” his fa- Noah laughed. “You’re new here, aren’t you?”

Stiles blinked. “Is that so obvious?” he blurted out.

“Haven’t seen you around. As a deputy, it’s my duty to know these things,” Noah’s eyes were twinkling. Twinkling. His grin was almost radiant. This was his father before- when he had it all. When he was truly happy.

Not that he hadn’t been happy after. But. This was his father without any burdens. Without having lost the love of his life. Without years of grief. Without having to be a single parent, raising a son with ADHD, undiagnosed until a few years later. A man in his prime.

Stiles didn’t remember him ever being like this. Not as clearly as he was right now.

That was the moment his stomach decided to make itself known. Loudly. He froze.

Noah’s eyes flickered between him and his stomach.

“Did you skip breakfast?”

He hadn’t. He hadn’t just been able to eat too much with Kate not being there with them, no matter how much Julia had tried to coax into him. He had noticed that he wasn’t the only one skipping on their meals though.

Peter had hardly touched his.


“Maybe a little.”

“What’s your name?”


“A curious name.”

“I’m a curious person.”

Noah quirked a smile. “So it seems. Hop in. We’re going for a quick lunch before we have to be anywhere.”

“We?” Stiles asked, brows knitting together. He hadn’t seen anyone there-

Only then did the person on the front seat lift his face. Stiles found himself staring at himself.

Fuck his life.

“Hop in,” Noah repeated. “We’re going for curly fries.”

Fuck. His. Life.

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He hopped in. He hopped in because he was a masochistic idiot. Probably. The close proximity to
his father was almost more of a torture than anyone he had met from the past. Possibly because no one else had meant as much to him as his dad had, with perhaps the exception of Scott who was who knows where enjoying toddlerhood and whatnot. They had gone through so much together. They had gotten past all the lies, all the grief and deaths and-

His father was here.

Somehow, it was even more of a miracle than meeting his mother. While Stiles loved his mom, adored her really, she was more wonderful than he remembered, but his dad just… he had been there when he had grown up. Been there to give him the talk – which he could still remember, thanks a lot, – to sign his report cards, to sing him a happy birthday when he reached adulthood and every birthday before that.

He loved his mom but he had missed his dad more. It was easier to miss something, someone, who had been his one constant his whole life. Until he wasn’t.

Losing his pack almost drove him insane with grief. It had driven him to research time travel. But losing his dad… It was something that, had he had the time to ever dwell on it in the past-future, might have ended him.

If there was one good thing about the apocalypse of their lives was that there hadn’t been time to grieve. As much as it sucked to have PTSD now, he was still alive because of that. Ironically.

Was it weird to find it morbidly funny?

They ended up going to his dad’s favourite diner. Stiles still remembered it. The owners, an elderly couple, had ended up leaving the Beacon Hills a few years before the shit hit the fan. They were some of the lucky ones. Of course they weren’t so old now, merely in their sixties. They greeted his-Noah with a smile on their faces, cooing over Stiles’ younger self. They even spared a kind look for him.

“No missus today?”

“She’s at the hairdresser, enjoying herself. I’ll be getting her a piece of your blueberry pie when we leave, please,” Noah smiled.

“Then what will you be having today, deputy?” the woman asked, belatedly handing out the menu. Noah took it, gave it a glance, and shrugged.

“The usual, Maria.”

“What about the sweetie here?” she ruffled Stiles’ head – little Stiles’, not his, damn it, this was going to get confusing really fast, why did he agree to this in the first place – who preened under the attention.

“Milkshake!” he announced. Maria chuckled, noting it down dutifully.

“What kind?”

“Uh, st- stob-” little Stiles scrunched up his nose. “S-t-r-a-w-berry.”

“Strawberry it is!” Maria agreed cheerfully. “Would you like some curly fries with it?”

Little Stiles nodded frantically. Noah clapped him on his shoulder gently.
“Growing boys need to eat. How about a small burger as well?”

“Okay, dad.”

“Well, you are a new face!” Maria greeted Stiles. He blinked. He knew Beacon Hills wasn’t the biggest place but it was still in the five digits. It should be statistically impossible to know everyone.

“Just passing,” he said instead. “I could take the…” He glanced at the menu. “The house salad.”

“Coming right up!”

“A salad?” Noah furrowed his brows. There wasn’t a drop of silver in them. Stiles suddenly realised that his dad was also almost his age, just a few years older than him and Claudia. Jesus.

“I’ve been on the road for the past months. Diners have lost their shine on me.”

“A gap year?”

Stiles shrugged. “Of a sort.”

Noah gave him a quick look, one of those that always seemed to call Stiles out on his bullshit, but said nothing. “Well, I hope you enjoy the quietness of our Beacon Hills. Nothing really happens here, nothing big at least. Might help you sort out what you need.”

Or he would call him out anyway. Stiles barked a laugh.

“I’m sure it will, one way or another.”

Little Stiles let out a small sound. Stiles found himself being glared at.

He had already managed to piss himself off. Way to go, Stiles.

“I don’t think we introduced ourselves,” Noah said. He ruffled little Stiles’ hair again. “This little man here is my son, Stiles. I didn’t think there was anyone else with that name.” The blue of his eyes was striking. Stiles shrugged a little anxiously.

“It’s the only name I’ve got.”

It’s the only name I have a claim to in this life.

His father looked like he wanted to ask but held his tongue. “My name is Noah Stilinski. I’m a deputy in the Beacon Hill’s Sheriff’s department.”

“Nice to meet you,” Stiles said. He leaned over to shake his father’s hand. Thankfully he was saved from further small talk when the food arrived. He dug into his salad – salmon and fresh veggies, it was heavenly – while Noah ate his burger and fries. Little Stiles, though, didn’t seem to be eating too much. The burger had only a couple of bitemarks and only a few fries were missing. The milkshake was the only thing there was significant progress being done.

“Hey,” Noah nudged Stiles. Little Stiles. He took one his fries and held it before little Stiles’ mouth. “Eat up. We want to be done by the time to pick up mom, don’t we?”

Little Stiles nodded and took the fry from his dad’s hand. Noah smiled gently, his love visible in every cell of his body and bit of his soul.

Stiles felt something squeeze his heart. It was like someone was choking him. He felt like-
The feeling was gone so soon it was almost like it had never even existed. He felt surrounded by everything warm in the world. A smile broke on his face. Peter. Julia. Even Kate. All of them.

“Are you alright?” Stiles blinked, turning to Noah. He looked concerned. Stiles nodded.

“Yeah,” he said, his smile widening the tiniest bit because that was the truth.

Stiles would make sure this Stiles would have his family for far longer than he had his. None of them would be taken before their time. Not Noah, not Claudia, not anyone of the past-future’s pack and definitely not anyone in Stiles’ newfound family.

It would be alright.

Noah nodded, a little puzzled. He stiffened almost immediately. He dug a phone from his pocket and sighed. “I have to take this.”

“Dad-!”

“I’m not going anywhere, Stiles,” Noah said gently. “It’s probably just about the person I called about earlier. I’ll just take this and then we’ll go and pick up mom. Alright?”

“Pwomise?”

“I promise.”

“Okay.”

Noah squeezed little Stiles’ shoulder once more before stepping out of the booth. He gave Stiles a nod, eyes flickering on little Stiles, before he walked outside the diner doors where he couldn’t be heard. His form could still be seen behind the age-stained glass.

They sat in silence, listening to the cheery bustling of the diner. It was lunchtime and getting a bit busier than when they had arrived. Well, Stiles was listening to the noises. Or trying to. Because his mini-me was busy murdering him with his eyes.

Welp, it was nice knowing you all, Stiles thought. This would bring being your own bane to a whole new level.

“You.”

Stiles looked at his younger counterpart. That was the first thing he had said to him this whole time.

“You,” little Stiles repeated. His scowl would have put Derek’s to shame. “You took my name.”

Stiles short-circuited. He had had this conversation before.

Shit.

“Listen,” he said as calmly as he could. “Just because we share the name, it-”

The look darkened. “An’ you said mom dies.”

Shit.

“I don’t-”
“You said! Mom said it! ‘Cause you said it happen! Mom doesn’t lie!” Little Stiles’ voice started to rise. Maria looked concerned in their general direction. Stiles felt cold sweat pour down his back. He tried to get his thoughts under control, to figure out what he should say to save himself from this trap.

“Stiles, listen to me,” he said. He couldn’t treat little Stiles like he had gotten it all wrong. He was convinced he was correct so no one but his parents could talk him down from a fit. Stiles should know. Still, he had to try. He had to be able to reason with himself. Which, taking note of his track record, was probably going to be a disaster of some sort. Yay.

“’m no Stiles,” little Stiles muttered sadly, glaring at his half-eaten lunch. “You took my name.”

“Stiles-“

”’M NO STILES!”

Maria’s eyes narrowed. She made a move towards them. Stiles took a deep breath before he met his counterpart’s eyes, seeing angry tears pool in them. He swallowed. He couldn’t afford to screw this up. He never wanted to screw little Stiles over. He deserved better than to become anything similar to him. Stiles would be damned if he destroyed his childhood because no matter how he called mini-me, well, mini-me or little Stiles, in his mind, they were different people. Different experiences. Potential to become the same but no necessity.

No necessity at all.

Wait. His parents. That gave Stiles an idea…

“What does your father call you?” Little Stiles glared at him.

“Stiles,” he answered sullenly after a pause.

“What does your mother call you?”

“Stiles.”

“You just said your mom doesn’t lie. Is she still lying about your name?”

Little Stiles’ face froze into a slightly constipated look as he thought that over. Maria walked to their table, a dangerous glint on her eyes. Stiles could see Noah turn towards them, watching the situation, still talking to his phone.

“Is there a problem, boys?” she asked, but her question was clearly addressed towards little Stiles. Shit, Stiles thought, slightly panicking. If he said yes-

“Want ‘nother milkshake,” little Stiles pouted, pushing his almost empty glass towards her. He looked up to her, all sad puppy eyes and hopeful smiles. Stiles stared. Since when did he have Scott’s superpower? Or were his weaker so they disappeared in Scott’s eventual constant presence? Or, heaven forbid, did Stiles grow out of them? Forget how to use them in the face of Scott’s superior ones?

Wow, Maria didn’t stand a chance. She melted quicker than butter on a hot pan.

“Don’t tell your father,” she winked, and was back with a refill in the blink of an eye. Like she had waited for an opportunity to do so.

Noah turned around again with a headshake. Stiles sighed in relief as Maria left their table again.
And look at that. Little Stiles seemed decidedly less hostile with his new drink.

“Mom doesn’t lie,“ he said slowly. “But you have my name. Mom said it’s un- uni-”

“Unique.”

“Unique. So why you got my name?” little Stiles accused. Stiles took a sip of his almost warm coke. This he could handle. He had established contact. Commence operation ‘Mothers are always right’, Melissa style.

“Your name is unique.”

“But-!”

“Where does your name come from?” little Stiles frowned.

“My name.”

“Which name?”

“…Oth’ name? Stil- Stile- Stilinski!”

“See? You have something where your name comes from,” Stiles encouraged. “That’s what makes it unique. Your name has a story. Your story. Only yours. There are others with similar names but they have different stories. Like Harry Styles.”

Little Stiles’ frown deepened. “Who?”

Stiles blinked, backtracking. “No one you know.” Christ, was he even born yet? “Besides, I’m sure there are no other Stiles but you. You are the only Stiles Stiles there is. Just because I share your name doesn’t make you any less unique. Just ask your parents.”

Little Stiles considered this, drinking his milkshake. He even took another bite of his burger.

“Where your name come f’om?”

Stiles paused. He chuckled, nervous energy leaving him with each giggle. Little Stiles watched him, head tilting in confusion. Gosh darn, the kid was cute.

“Let me get back at you on that later.” Wrinkling that itty-bitty nose made him look even cuter. Was this narcissism? But look at those little frown lines-

“And about your mother dying,” he tackled on, smiling as kindly as he could on his younger counterpart. The scowl that had lessened for a moment was back, with wide, fearful eyes taking space from the angry glare. Stiles reached to pat little Stiles on the head. His head wasn’t shorn as short it would be in the future. Maybe. Or maybe it wouldn’t. Maybe it would keep this fluffy quality this time around.

“Do you really think she would just leave you? Or your father?” Stiles ruffled little Stiles’ hair one last time before sitting back. “Who is your hero?”

“Dad is a supa-superhe’o,” little Stiles declared. “And mom’s hugs are best!”

“They are, aren’t they?” Stiles nodded, “like magic, right?”

“Magic!” little Stiles agreed enthusiastically.
“And you know what? Since she’s magic, it means that she’s not going anywhere.” Little Stiles watched him with wide eyes. “She’s always going to be with you.”

“Pom-pwo-promise?”

Stiles extended his hand, little finger first. “I swear it.”

Little Stiles’ frown turned upside down and, wow. He had forgotten how his features looked without stress lines on his face. Even with all the baby fat and round cheeks. “Mom’s the best. She can beat up eve’yone!”

“She can do anything,” Stiles smiled. Little Stiles beamed and grabbed his hand, shaking it with his own pinky.

Stiles felt like someone punched him in the gut. Time seemed to slow to a stop. He was frozen in place, unable to move but no one else seemed able to move either. Only Stiles and his counterpart’s handshake existed in a slow motion. He watched as their hands went up and down for eternity.

It lasted but a second but when their hands separated and time seemed to return to normalcy, Stiles felt less jittery. Almost calm, calmer than even after the pack bond episode. He received a few questioning nudges from Peter and Julia to which he answered, hoping to make it clear he was alright.

Stiles took an absent bite of his leftovers. At least salad couldn’t go cold. He felt hungry again, all of a sudden. He might need to get something to go when he left. Maybe take some back to his pack. He suddenly missed them like hell. He wanted to go back.

Screw the Nemeton for today.

It took a couple of minutes more before Noah returned inside.

“I’m sorry it took so long. My colleagues had a couple of things to ask from ongoing cases as well. You know how it is,” he apologised. Stiles smiled and nodded.

“It’s fine. I had the most enlightening conversation with this little guy here,” he said, grinning at little Stiles. The boy smiled back a little tentatively, previous anger all forgotten.

“Oh?” Noah hummed, grinning. “And what about, if I may ask?”

“About how you’re his superhero,” Stiles announced. Little Stiles squawked before puffing his chest, milkshake and meal – mostly eaten, wow – forgotten.

“He is!”

Noah beamed, the same happy smile that had graced little Stiles’ face appearing on his. “Is that so?”

Stiles smirked, leaning over and whispering loudly: “But Claudia gives the best hugs.”

The betrayed look on Noah’s face made both Stiles giggle.

When they left the diner to go on their separate ways, Stiles looked around, frown making it on his face as he stared at the busy street, lined with cars of every colour. He slipped into the crowd, blending in with the rest of the passers-by.

He would not be followed.
A figure of a tall woman, jaw clenched and eyes flashing briefly red, emerged from a just parked car. She stared at the diner Stiles had just been in, turning her head around and discreetly scenting the air. Her lips turned down on the corners.

Gone.

The beckoning bonfire with Peter’s scent was gone.

Talia growled under her breath before she slipped back into her car and sped away from the scene. She’d get them. She would get her brother back from whoever had taken him from their family and forced their bonds to snap like they were air; like they were nothing.

Her eyes flashed again as her hands tightened around the steering wheel. Her window was open as she kept scenting the air, hoping to catch a whiff of her brother again, as she patrolled the area.

Talia picked up her phone and alerted the pack.

Peter was there, somewhere, and they would help him find his way back home… and exact their revenge on the ones responsible for this disaster at the same time.

As the alpha of the Hale pack, she promised that.

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“Stiles!”

The onslaught of happy emotions barraged into Stiles, bright and unrestrained. They made him dizzy in the best ways possible. He got a confused look from Peter who scented the air but seemed to find it wanting.

Kate jumped up and dived to hug him. He almost dropped the bag he had with him but managed to hold onto it.

“I’m sorry!” she said, tightening her arms around him. Julia closed the door to Peter’s room, keeping it unlocked for show. With the runes around the room, they wouldn’t be eavesdropped. “Gerard took me out to see how my training has gone and made sure I went straight to bed afterwards. I couldn’t sneak away. I think he still resents the fact that I’d rather travel than stay in Beacon Hills so I didn’t want to start a fight.”

“More like he still resents me but we don’t care what he thinks, right?” Stiles hugged Kate back, sighing in contentment at seeing her well. Her bond pulsed brightly back. He paused. It was more powerful now than earlier today.

“Why do you feel different?” he blurted out. He put her at armlength, examining her as if he could find the reason just by looking at her.

“That would be the fault of this,” Peter called from where he was sprawled on the bed. He threw something at Stiles and he fumbled to catch it, again almost dropping his bag to the ground. Instead, whatever it was Peter threw at him fell to the floor with a sharp clink, rolling next to Julia’s feet. She picked it up and held it for Stiles to see.

He blinked. That… A necklace?
“A necklace?” he asked, blinking for good measure.

“It’s a little something father gave me,” Kate said. “It was my mom’s.”

“It also has spells imbued on it,” Peter said, nodding towards Julia. “Julia recognised the runes on it. They are used to block supernatural influence of any kind.”

“They didn’t completely block the pack bonds but managed to suppress them by some. Probably because the maker didn’t think a hunter would willingly join a pack,” Julia added. She shifted a little from one foot to another but the small smile that made its way onto her face was a little proud.

“It was my mom’s,” Kate reiterated. Her brows creased and her posture was a little stiff.

“And no one’s saying it’s your fault.” Peter straightened on the bed to a sitting position. “But are you sure it wasn’t given to you with… purpose?”

“What?” Kate shook off Stiles’ arms, turning to look at Peter. “Of course it was given to me with purpose! To protect me. Father doesn’t know I’m in any contact with the supernatural except for hunting which, well, why wouldn’t he want me to be protected?”

“She does make a point,” Stiles admitted. “Even if I don’t believe Gerard Argent’s motives are any good.”

“What has he ever done to you?” Kate then asked, facing him again. The scowl on her face was impressive. “I’m not saying he’s the greatest shit alive but he’s done nothing to warrant that. He’s only ever given you money. And a car. All of which you were happy to take.”

“The car was from Shannon!” Stiles protested. He sighed. “I do see your point. It’s just… Gerard’s just…”

“I know he has his vices,” Kate interrupted. She crossed her arms. “Perhaps better than most. His code is flawed, I admit that. But he’s my father. He wouldn’t want anything to happen to me. Just because my mother’s pendant was imbued with spells doesn’t mean he did it. Even Julia said they’ve been there for a long time.”

Julia nodded. “Years. Probably since it was made.”

“I’m not questioning the necklace,” Stiles said. He held his hands up in a general peace sign. “It’s just… hunters. Don’t really trust them.”

Kate stared straight at him. “I’m a hunter.”

Stiles looked back at her helplessly. “But you’re Kate.” Her eyes softened.

“I’m still a hunter. We’re not all bad,” she said, surprisingly gently.

“No one’s saying that,” Julia announced. She threw the necklace back to Peter who caught it with all the grace Stiles didn’t possess. “But it did manage to solve our problem.”

Stiles turned to her. “Which one?”

“Well, the necklace blocks supernatural influence. It also hides the owner from supernatural senses, mostly,” Julia explained. Her grin was eager, like she had found the juiciest gossip to ever juice. She gestured at Peter and the pendant dangling in his grip. “There’s a notice-me-not sort of element there which diverts supernatural senses. I mean, it’s not a perfect block like the runes you do but it should
be enough to distract the Hales and their allies from finding Peter the instant he goes outside the perimeter. We just need to add a little something about his scent and we’re golden. Well, as much as we can be on the Hale land. I’ll try to trace the ritual used on it to do that.”

“So Peter’s going to use a hunter relic to avoid his family,” Stiles snorted. Peter wrinkled his nose but shrugged.

“It’s a little tasteless but no can do. I’d prefer platinum or gold over silver.”

“Argent means silver. Of course it’d be made of silver,” Kate deadpanned.

“At least there’s the irony to keep me alive,” Peter said. He examined it before slipping it on. “A wolf wearing the ‘silver bullet’.”

Stiles grinned. “It suits you. You did tell the trolls we were a hunting group. Now we have proof of that! Hunters, assemble!”

Peter sent him a look. “Please don’t.”

“Please don’t, what?”

“Just… don’t.”

Stiles blinked. He thought something just flew past him and hard but… “Okay?” He lifted the bag he had with him.

“Does anyone want a celebratory donut? They’ve got sprinkles!”

Chapter End Notes

Foreshadowing! Resolving problems and creating new ones! Plot moving forward! Yay!

I'm just gonna throw this out here. Our group is going to grow by one person next chapter! Any guesses? ;D Hint, the person's not actually a villain. Go figure. Sorry for anyone who might've been looking forward to meeting Deucalion. Not yet…!

Until next time (which is not going to be after another 3 months, I swear, because I actually have time to write now)!
In which Stiles gets adopted

Chapter Notes

Favourite chapter alert, favourite chapter alert.

<3
Aaaaaaand the new member of the crew is... *drum roll*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Operation ‘Find the Nemeton’ was under way.

Stiles trekked through the preserve with Peter and Julia trailing after him, glancing at the shadows like they would attack them at any second. Stiles didn’t fault them. Julia was getting more jittery by the minute, the dark taint of the Nemeton permeating in the air. She tended to walk almost on Stiles’ heels, tripping over his feet whenever he stopped to find his bearings.

“Could you walk a little bit behind me? For your own safety?” Stiles asked after he saved Julia for the third time from making best friends with the ground. Julia flushed, her cheeks gaining a reddish hue.

“It’s just… your magic. It feels clean.”

Cleaner than the air around them, Stiles realised. Whatever was going on with the Nemeton was clearly on its way to poison everything. And Julia, being a druid, was particularly sensitive towards it. Stiles couldn’t help but wonder yet again why Deaton, a druid himself, hadn’t done anything. He had to have sensed it, right?

But if Stiles thought about it, he had never really seen him take a step towards the preserve unless the situation forced him to, preferring to stay inside his veterinary.

“Just…” he paused, and grabbed Julia’s hand. The druid shuddered before relaxing a little. Stiles exchanged a look with Peter who nodded. He would be keeping the rear. Stiles could see how tense Peter’s shoulders were, the lines on his neck. Peter was alert, waiting for his family – particularly his sister – to jump at them at a moment’s notice, despite the fact that Kate’s pendant seemed to be working. At least no one had bounced on them the moment they left the Argent household that morning. No one seemed to be following their trail either if Peter was to be believed, his senses overworked as they were.

Perhaps it was because they hadn’t had the chance to try the pendant out yesterday... although, to be fair, if they had tried it out and it had failed, they would have exposed Peter anyhow and right on the Argent’s backyard. That would have been just the best, right? Nothing screams a good idea like inciting a war between the hunters and the supernatural.

It had taken them until midnight to trace the ritual – there had been remnants of it left on the pendant, traces of the magic cast, thank god – and then a few hours more to add the scent blocking rune there without disturbing the spells already there. They were lucky that they had been at the hunter stronghold because there were quite a few magical ingredients lying around from successful hunts.
What was more, they had the heiress herself, so accessing them didn’t prove too difficult. Explaining why they needed them was a whole another thing. Their hastily concocted explanation included Stiles teaching Kate about magic users and spells but it wouldn’t take long until that vein dried. They needed new material, as soon as possible. Thankfully, Kate outranked Dick and his minions so they didn’t have to explain themselves to them, but sooner or later Gerard would hear about it.

Which reminded him, Stiles still hadn’t seen the man.

Suspicious.

While Stiles still didn’t like leaving Kate alone with the minions, she had a late day at school and Stiles had to confront the problematic tree of doom, decidedly not his favourite. Peter and Julia hadn’t let him go alone, just as worried over him as he was over them, so they just stuck together and hoped for the best.

It seemed to be working, somewhat.

Stiles shook himself from his thoughts and continued his way deeper into the woods, Julia just a step behind him and Peter a few feet away.

“This area feels old, older than the rest of the forest,” Julia wondered aloud. She squeezed his hand lightly. “It also feels very strange. Unhappy. Discontented. And there’s decay in the air.”

“It’s the Nemeton,” Peter said. Stiles whipped his head around to meet Peter’s eyes. The look in them was apprehensive.

“You know of it?” he blurted out. Peter broke the eye contact to glance at the depths they were walking toward and nodded.

“The Hale alpha always knows,” he said. He shivered. “Nemetons tie themselves to the land and the Hales have been here for centuries. It’s no wonder we know.”

“Do you think it’s likely Talia’s going to pop for a visit?” Stiles asked. Peter shook his head.

“She’s a werewolf, not a Bond villain. I doubt it. The Hales are merely coexisting with the Nemeton. We cannot use it or connect to it the way druids or other magic users can. We can only sense it and abide by its whims, making sure nothing untoward is sent its way. Perhaps if she knew we had a druid among us, or a spark, but we’ve been on the down low. Haven’t we?” Peter questioned. Julia bobbed her head aggressively but then she paused. She turned to Stiles who glanced at her in question before ducking under a branch. Julia followed in tow.

“Well, I have. But Stiles…”

Peter sighed, a smile tugging on his lips. “Fair enough.”

“What?” he asked, bewildered. “What have I done now?”

“Something!” Julia cried. Her voice echoed around them but no birds flew to the skies like in the movies. There was no noise around them but what they were causing. They were close then. “You don’t leak anymore!”

Stiles stumbled, almost taking Julia down with him. He stopped at the edge of a clearing. He blinked rapidly, turning to look at his pack mates. “What?!”

“You mean you don’t know?” Peter asked. He barked a surprised laugh. “Oblivious. I shouldn’t be
too surprised though. This did concern yourself.”

“Hey!” Stiles harrumphed. He would have crossed his arms if he could.

“Peter’s right though,” Julia said. “I wasn’t sure before since it could have been just the wards tampering your magic but… your magic. It’s no longer loud. It’s still there but you don’t draw attention like a… like a lighthouse or a beacon anymore. It’s like you’re just an ordinary magic user now.” She frowned. There was an element of sulking present. “How did you do it? We tried everything.”

“I don’t- are you serious? Fuck!” Stiles threw a hand into the air and waved it around in agitation. He was not that blind, damn it! “What the hell did I do? I don’t remember doing anything!”

“You had to have done something yesterday,” Julia accused him. She peered at him like that would help her solve this mystery. Stiles worried his lip.

“I already told you, I went for a walk, ended up at the high school and almost got run over. Then I had lunch and headed back,” he huffed. “Because I- I missed you guys, alright? It’s not like-” Stiles paused and frowned tentatively, something just out of reach tugging on him. “I-”

There… had been a small moment. The moment when he shook hands – or fingers – with the younger version of himself. Crap. He hoped he hadn’t done any damage to him in case that was it. He had to call Claudia. Or meet her. Although he didn’t want to seem like a stalker in the face of his da- Noah.

“You remembered something,” Peter stated. Stiles pensively nodded after a moment.

“I- I may have done something after all,” he said. “I shook hands with someone, a kid, and- if I’m not totally off the rails, that may have been that. But- I just- how? Why?”

Why would that have been the reason to stop whatever leakage his magic caused? What had been the cause of it, in any case? Something that happened in the future? Residue from time travelling? Something that happened in the past? Fuck, he had no idea. If it weren’t for his mom, he would have never even known he was even leaking magic. It wasn’t like he could sense himself, alright?

“What’s his name? Her?” Peter asked. He tapped his arm. “I’ll probably know of the kid or at least the parents. They may hold a clue.” Stiles considered that but, given the fact that Peter was fucking smart… he wasn’t sure if he wanted him to know. Mostly because Stiles was also called Stiles. On the other hand, it would also be suspicious if he said nothing. Also, disrespectful of the pack. Of Peter. And he didn’t want to lie. Well, then there was no choice, was there?

“Stilinski, first name unpronounceable to most. Son of deputy Stilinski? He’s also, weirdly enough, called Stiles. The kid, not his dad. That was a trip and a half. Kid didn’t take it well that we shared a name,” Stiles laughed, trying to play it cool. He could feel a poke in his head but he stayed calm. He wasn’t lying. Of course he wasn’t telling them he had been that kid once, but he wasn’t lying either.

He didn’t even have to fake the amusement either that rose when he thought of the other Stiles and his antics.

“Aww! How old was he?” Julia asked. Stiles pretended to think about it.

“Three or four? Probably closer to four? Less than six in any case.” He glanced at Peter who looked thoughtful.

“I know of whom you’re talking about. I may have to dig a little to find out what may have caused it.
Do you have any other details of your encounter?” Peter asked. This time Stiles really did think about it, hard.

“I managed to convince him his name was just as unique even with me sharing it. I conned him into believing his parents would never lie to him,” he grinned, and laughed shortly. “Although that was no hardship. Anyone could see his parents thought the world of him.”

Which was fine, fantastic even. Because he knew his parents had loved him just as much as well. Getting reminded of what he had lost was a tad hard but he was glad that it no longer controlled his life. It was- he was getting better. Slowly but surely. Thanks to these people.

“I hope you know I appreciate you. All of you,” he said aloud. He grinned and tugged Julia with him and jumped on Peter, dragging them all into one huge hug. “We need to do this again when Kate’s here,” he mumbled against Peter’s neck, and admitted, “I miss her.”

“We all do.” Peter sighed. Stiles felt his breath ruffle his hair. “On another note, is that tree stump the one you were looking for?”

Stiles twirled around. There the Nemeton stood, in all its glory. Apparently, he just had to show his back to it for it to reveal itself. Dick. The tree was a fucking asshole. Not that that was anything new. Well, at least Stiles now knew he wasn’t wrong about the location. Logically he knew the damn tree wouldn’t change places but it was always nice to have confirmation. And that he remembered where it was. It wasn’t like navigators or even compasses worked on that fucker.

“Yep,” he said, popping the p. He stepped into the clearing. He had felt the corruption earlier as well but stepping inside the tree’s territory – if it could be called that – was a wake-up call. Julia clung to him. When he glanced at her, her eyes were wide in terror.

“It’s so dark,” she whispered, trembling. “And in pain. In terrible, terrible pain. Can’t you hear the screams?”

Stiles couldn’t. But he could believe it. They all stared at the tree stump, deceptively ordinary but with ominous presence.

“Why are we here, Stiles?” Peter finally asked. He stood next to them and Stiles could see the tense line of his neck.

“I want to find out what’s wrong with it,” he said. “And fix it.”

He felt eyes on him but decided to ignore them for the time being. Instead, he resumed observing the Nemeton. It didn’t look different from what he remembered before it went nuts, before the age-long decay settled in. It just… looked like a giant stump. He focused on the ground, seeing as the grass was dead in weird lines around it, leading away from the tree. One of them were even a couple of feet away from them.

Stiles crouched, leaning to examine it. It was like… there was power pulsing under the ground. It was leading towards the town, towards the Hale house even, if Stiles wasn’t wrong.

Something clicked inside his head.

“The telluric currents,” he whispered. Of course. They knew there were massive currents underneath Beacon Hills – hence the name, probably – but the bits of knowledge had fallen to background with everything going to hell. But… the telluric currents had a few hot spots. If the corruption reached them…
A disaster would strike. Stiles sighed. If they had remembered, if they had known, if the corruption hadn't been so overwhelming and if their focus had been on anything else but surviving, perhaps… perhaps Derek wouldn’t have had to burn with the ruins of the Hale house. If, if, if. He squared his shoulders.

That was in the future which hadn’t happened yet. It wouldn’t if Stiles had anything to do with it. The corruption originated from here. Here. This was something he could do. Something was poisoning the Nemeton. It wasn’t the Nemeton itself which was a problem but something… there was something there.

Stiles felt a chill go down his back as the realisation settled in. He thought he might know what that something was and he really didn’t like the idea of touching it even with a stick longer than the fucking continent.

Well, there were good news and bad news.

Good news was that he wouldn’t have to find out how to destroy a Nemeton.

Bad news was that he had to find out how to purify the telluric currents and handle a Nogitsune without anyone getting possessed or without it going on a revenge spree.

Fun times.

He had been on a stroll for sort of declawing villains. He hoped this didn’t break his streak now.

***

They left the clearing soon after that. Julia had been turning whiter and whiter by every passing minute. She had looked ready to lose her breakfast by the time they rushed away. She didn’t puke, for the record, even if the white on her face had gotten a greenish tint.

“IT’s getting pretty cold,” Julia said. She wrapped her arms around her as best as she could while still holding onto Stiles. “That whole place felt sick. It’s like the whole area was in a rejection.”

It was quite well said, Stiles thought. The Nemeton was in a rejection, trying to expulse the parasite clinging on it, feeding on it. He wondered if the Nogitsune was the only source of corruption. It seemed logical, sort of, but it didn’t feel exactly right. Perhaps it had been a start…

Perhaps he was making it all too complicated. He should just focus on one thing at a time. He had to start from somewhere anyway.

The cold got worse with each step they took away from the Nemeton, weirdly enough. While Julia could now walk without strictly holding onto Stiles, again lingering just a step or two from him, she was shivering even worse than before. She gained her colour back, little by little, but only for the tip of her nose and cheekbones to turn red. Stiles himself felt the cold but it wasn’t too bad – yet. When he tugged one of his shirts off to give her, leaving him with just a short-sleeved, he could feel the wind bite into his flesh. Julia still grabbed it fast, shivering less, but looking just as miserable.

They had just left the area the corrupted telluric currents reached – crap, that was surprisingly far already – when they heard yelling, loud growling and multiple thumps. It was coming straight at them. Peter’s eyes widened in recognition.

“What on earth does a yeti do in California?” he asked, astonished.

“That’s a yeti making all the ruckus!!” Stiles demanded at the same time Julia asked, “You know
what a yeti sounds like?”

“That’s actually a valid question,” Stiles blinked. Why hadn’t that been his first question? He was usually the one with that sort of question. “Why do you know what a yeti sounds like?”

“It almost sounds like its… chasing something. Someone. A human,” Peter said, ignoring the question despite the enraged noises from Stiles and, well, Stiles. Stiles sent a disappointed look in Julia’s direction who just shrugged sheepishly. Peter ignored their antics and stared into the distance critically. He opened his mouth-

There was a loud crack as a tree nearby fell down and his eyes widened.

“They’re here.”

A figure rushed at them from the tree line and that’s how Stiles found himself and his small pack running away from an angered yeti. With a random stranger, probably responsible for said angering.

That wasn’t even the worst of it. No.

That had to go to the fact that Stiles actually recognised the random stranger. Again.

“It’s fucking cold!” Coach Finstock yelled, stomping a few steps on Stiles’ left. “I’m going to freeze my balls off!”

At least it wasn’t a villain this time although Stiles wasn’t sure this was an improvement.

“What the fuck did you do to him?!” he demanded, almost slipping as the ground beneath him frosted. Peter, running just behind him, caught him before he did. Julia was already panting and tiring. She was fit, there was no doubt about that, but it seemed that the exposure to the Nemeton had drained her more than anyone had imagined.

When she stumbled one last time, Peter snagged her up and carried her without faltering for a second in his run. Stiles had to give Peter props for that. It was smooth as fuck. Probably helpful for seducing anyone. His heart skipped a beat.

“Bitches be crazy!” Coach yelled instead, waving his arms aggressively. “Walk into one taking a bath and, bam, instant hate! It’s not like you could see any boob action from under all that fur!”

The yeti behind them let out an enraged howl, not unlike the winds of winter.

“Wait, that’s a female? You peeped on her?!” Stiles couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“It’s nature! I was appreciating the wonders of nature!”

Stiles sent him an incredulous look. He honestly couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

The yeti threw a snowball the size of a fucking NBA player at them. No, Stiles thought as it flew over them and fell a tree, a sumo wrestler. That was a fucking sumoball.

“I’m going to die famous!” Coach screamed as the snow exploded around them, obscuring their vision. “Jesus was stoned as well but now he’s famous for it!”

“What the hell are you talking about?!” Stiles yelled back. All sound suddenly stopped.

There was a thump sound akin to an earthquake with tremors to match in front of them. Stiles looked up.
The yeti stared back at them. Her eyes were blazing an unnatural blue, paler than a wolf’s blue, but just as dangerous.

Well, Stiles thought as he stared at the (female?) yeti. She was certainly a wonder of nature, even if he couldn’t exactly tell her gender. Would the lack of dangly bits be an indicator? But yetis live in the colder climate. Usually. Their genitals had to be protected somehow so it would make sense they wouldn’t just dangle for all to see-

She howled at them. Shards of ice flew past them and Stiles felt one of them nick his cheek. He could feel the blood flow from the small wound.

“Your boobs suck!”

The yeti attacked with an unmatched fury.

Fuck. His. Life.

***

“That went well!” Coach said cheerily as he sat down. His behind made a wet sound as he slumped unflatteringly. He patted Julia’s retreating vines with unnatural interest. Stiles collapsed a few feet away from him, choking on his spit as he tried to draw air in in huge gulps.

“Well?!” he coughed. “Are you drunk?!”

“I’m Finstock!” he introduced himself with a manic grin. Right. He wasn’t coach yet. “I’m actually sober for the first time in months! I should leave alcohol off if this happens when I don’t drink!”

“Please don’t,” Stiles moaned. He hid his face in his hands. “Drink your liver off and save us all from the misery.”

“Hah! Banter! Now we’re talking!”

Stiles was entirely serious. Co- Finstock whistled, ignoring the daggers Stiles was glaring at his direction.

They were all soaked to the bones. Julia was shivering worse than before and even Peter sneezed. Stiles was sure he also looked like a wet rat, stringy and pitiful. Finstock… well. He looked the same as ever with his messy hair and manic expression.

They did manage to get the yeti to calm down after some intense acrobatics and almost drowning in snow. After Stiles managed to trip the yeti by messing with her senses, Peter succeeded in actually downing her and keeping her down until Julia managed to trap her with her vines. It was hard, with Finstock crowing and bouncing around, but they managed. Peter sweettalked her into half falling in love with him probably and shitthatwassosmoothwhatthefuckPeteryoubastard and they then washed her fur because Finstock had disrupted her grooming session.

Stiles apparently had a talent for making fur shine in light. He was glad his ribs didn’t break under her hug. If being a hunter didn’t pan out, maybe he should open a salon.

No, ugh, the smell of wet yeti was enough for a lifetime.

“This had to be fate!” Finstock declared. He rolled on the ground to reach Stiles and clapped his thigh. Stiles felt vaguely violated. “Knew there was more in this world than the boring goodie-two-shoes werewolves! I like it!”
Peter froze.

“You know about werewolves?” he asked neutrally.

“Sure! Fucking Hales. So annoying. Anytime anything interesting happens that Talia woman appears and all the fun is sucked out of things,” Coach- no, Finstock ranted. He paused, critically staring at Peter. “You’re a Hale. You have the same nose. Do you sniff at people as well when you try to spy on whatever their body odours tell you?”

Peter looked at the man like he was a bug he wanted to squish under his feet. Finstock shrugged.

“No matter. Wait! You’re the troublemaking little brother!” Peter stiffened but Finstock just grinned wider. “You, I like! You stuck it to that fun stealer! Then you disappeared and that woman’s grip on all supernatural tightened, like, a lot. I had to start drinking even more heavily after that!”

Stiles didn’t know how those two correlated but he was too tired to care.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to say a thing to the Talia woman,” Finstock said loudly, reaching over to pat Peter who rested on Stiles’ other side. Well, tried to. Peter avoided him, nose wrinkling. Finstock let out a loud bellowing laugh.

Julia stared at him in strange fascination.

“You’re so weird,” she said in wonder. He nodded, suddenly solemn, as he stared at her. His nostrils flared and his head was cocked on one side as his slightly bulged eyes were locked on hers.

“It is important to understand the hides of all creatures,” he told her seriously. Stiles blinked at the sudden change in mood. “Having experienced it all, I can tell you that there is much more to be experienced even for me,” Finstock ended heavily.

Stiles could hear the crickets chirp.

“I don’t get it,” Julia admitted quietly. She looked so confused that Peter snorted a laugh at it. She shot him a wounded look.

Finstock clasped Stiles on his shoulder. He had to take a step forward to steady himself just so he wouldn’t have another date with the ground.

“I have decided to accompany you all in your venture!” Finstock announced. Stiles froze.

What?


“Well, you’re clearly getting into trouble with things and thangs of all kinds! I want in!” Finstock declared. “And let me tell you, you’re going to need me.”

Stiles stared at him. He turned to Peter who looked quite surprised as well.

“His… heartbeat’s steady,” he said finally. “He’s speaking, or at least thinks he’s speaking, the truth.”

Finstock nodded, looking like the cat got the canary.

“Also, I have decided to adopt you.”
“What?!"

“You saved my left testicle from exposure! You’re now like family to me!”

Dumbfounded, Stiles couldn’t help but stare.

“Stiles Finstock,” Finstock tasted the words, and nodded in satisfaction. “I like it!”


Kill it, kill it with fire.

***

When they got out of the forest, the first thing Finstock did was to march them into a pub Stiles didn’t remember existing in Beacon Hills before. They made their way to the backroom where it smelled like stale beer and more weed than it was healthy to breathe. Coach then proceeded to flag down a tattooed bald guy with moustache to bring Hercule Poirot to shame.

They gestured for a while, waved hands and yelled, and Stiles couldn’t escape Finstock’s strong grip even if he tried. Peter was no help, amused as he was at his plight, and Stiles cursed him mentally and aloud, shaking the pack bond between them. Julia tried to send soothing waves at him but they clashed with Kate’s affront at having missed something big again because of school, so they were next to useless.

It took five minutes, some flashy camera action that left Stiles blind for ten seconds, and a shake of hands and nursing a less stale beer than it smelled like for a half an hour – still in Finstock’s grip – and Stiles was officially no longer a Stilinski.

“But I’m an adult!”

“Can you prove it?”

“Uh. No-”

“WELL NOW YOU CAN!”

He was Stiles Finstock, 23 years old, Finstock’s – call me Bobby – third cousin twice removed or something.

He was clearly in hell.

Stiles had known Finstock was crazy in the future but, damn, the guy had mellowed the fuck out in the years between then and now.

“Call me Bobby,” Fin- Bo- Finstock reiterat. And then he flashed him a grin. “Bros who save other bro’s testicles are bros for life.”

He handed the Moustache Guy what looked like a hundred bucks, and declared that “A happy dick is worth more than a hundred!” and then added a twenty as tip.

Stiles hung his head.

What did he do to deserve this all?

***
Well, at least he got meds out of it. Prescription of Adderall and, bam, Stiles was- well, he hadn’t taken a dose yet, but he would soon and then he would be thinking clearer again but the point was that he had his meds.

Julia had gone to take a bath the moment they arrived at the Argents which left Peter and Stiles by themselves. They changed clothes before they retreated to Peter’s room. Finstock had insisted on coming with them but, suddenly, had decided otherwise. And then again and again until he had just taken out a flask from his coat pocket – wow, what deep pockets you have – and taken a long drink out of it.

He had turned on his feet then, and declared he would be there when they left the town, that he would have to finish some business first.

Which…

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Which…

“Do we really have to take him with us?” Stiles huffed as he collapsed on Peter’s bed. He really didn’t need another crazy to hop onto their train, even if it was Finstock. Especially since it was Finstock.

“I’m not saying I want that,” Peter mused, nose wrinkling, “but I have a feeling he would find his way into our company whether we allowed that or not. He seemed… rather insistent.”

If that wasn’t the truth then nothing was.

“Fuuuuuuuuuuck,” Stiles groaned. “Why do you have to be always right?”

“It’s a gift.”

“Ugh.”

“I’m more concerned whether we have space for him,” Peter said. He sat down next to the window, a few feet from where Stiles lay. “Your car’s a little… cramped as it is.”

That’s true as well.

“You just keep giving,” Stiles whined. He starfished on the bed. “Stop it.”

“I just cannot contain myself,” Peter deadpanned. Stiles couldn’t help it. He laughed.

“I’m glad you are here,” he confessed after he calmed down. “I don’t think we’d still be here if it weren’t for you.”

Peter peered at him, brows raised. “Why, Stiles, you’re in an odd mood. Did you catch a cold?”

“I wish. I got adopted. I blame the family.”

“Valid reasoning,” Peter nodded. His eyes softened and a small smile curled on his lips. Stiles’ heart thudded and stuttered. “I am glad to be here as well. If I had stayed, I think I’d have burned one too many times.”

“I feel the same,” Stiles sighed. He rolled on the bed so he was facing Peter. “But you’re… I mean—”

Peter watched him calmly, waiting for him to gather himself.

“I loved my pack,” Stiles finally said, tone quiet and contemplative. “Once I wouldn’t have thought I could have survived their deaths. It was only through a miracle I did and ended up here, with you. I
was on a suicide mission, I can admit that now – destroy what destroyed us and I could die in peace.”

He stared at Peter who stared right back. Stiles couldn’t really feel anything through Peter’s bond but… it did feel different somehow.

“And you’re not now?” Peter asked. His hands rested on his lap in an almost exaggerated act of calmness.

“No, I’m not,” Stiles admitted. “I found another reason to live.”

They fell into a silence in which they didn’t look away from each other.

“You’re all important to me. I don’t think I could do the same again,” Stiles whispered. He knew he wouldn’t survive losing his pack, small as it was, not again. Not Julia, not Kate – definitely not Peter.

Peter stood up then and walked to the bed. He gently lay there behind Stiles and tugged him into an embrace. Little spoon. Stiles was a little spoon again. His mind flashed to when Malia was in the habit of cuddling him from behind and-

Somehow, this felt even better than he remembered.

“Things will be different this time around,” Peter promised him. His breath tickled the back of Stiles’ neck. “I promise.” A smile curled on Stiles’ lips.

“Pinky promise?”

Stiles felt more than heard the rumble of chuckles from Peter.

“Pinky promise.”

They shook on it.

Stiles felt relaxed. Things were… good. Despite the fact that they were in Beacon Hills, it almost felt like home again.

“You are all mine,” Peter said. Stiles could feel his lips move against the nape of his neck. “And I won’t let anything take what is mine. Not again.”

No, perhaps it wasn’t Beacon Hills that was the home. It was the people in it. Peter, Kate and Julia. Perhaps others too, in the future, but right now those three were his family. The only pack he needed. Stiles closed his eyes and enjoyed the thrum he got from the bonds tied to him.

Perhaps he was always home when he was with them.

***

It was late in the evening when Kate stormed in. Her hair was coming loose from her braid and she had smudges of dirt on her face. Her eyes though were blazing like a wild fire and her bond was straining with barely contained anger.

“We are leaving,” she told Stiles, Peter and Julia who were staring at her, dumbfounded. They had been contemplating on how to stop the Nemeton’s corruption – Stiles had disclosed that it was one of the primary reasons he had wanted to come back to Beacon Hills, just saying that he had sensed something wrong with the town – and if Stiles’ leaking had left any adverse side effects on him – it didn’t seem so – when Kate barged in and issued her order.
“Don’t you have another day of exams left?” Julia asked delicately. Kate crossed her arms.

“I don’t care.”

“Kate…”

“It’s your future in question,” Stiles pointed out. He sighed inwardly. Why was he the adult in this situation? Why was he always the adult in any situation?

“I don’t care!” Kate yelled in frustration. She kicked the chair near her and it hit the wall, one leg falling off due to the impact. She swore heavily, eyes dark.

“Kate!” Stiles was up in a flash. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine, I’m fantastic!” she said, grimace twisting her mouth. “I just really want to leave Beacon Hills right now.”

“What happened?” Peter asked. He was the only one still sitting, legs kicked back and lounging like nothing was going on. Julia had rushed up in fright the moment Kate had snapped at them the first time. Kate growled, almost animalistic, in her frustration.

“It’s Gerard. He’s- he’s-!” she kicked the chair again. “He’s just impossible!”

“Tell us something we don’t know,” Peter snarked. “I asked what happened, not his character traits.”

“He wanted me to stay, alright?!” Kate complained, teeth gritting together. “I know, ‘what a surprise’! We were arguing and, well, he threatened to hold off my rightful title, the bastard, if I left! You’re becoming unstable, he said, I can’t see any improvements in your skills, he said, you need a real mentor, he said! Argh!” She hit the wall, swearing all the while. Stiles quickly grabbed her hand, enclosing it on his own. Her knuckles were red. They would be bruised for sure.

“He said… he said that I’m bringing shame to our family,” she whispered. Despite the quiet tone, her words reverberated around the otherwise silent room. “He said my- my mother would be disappointed in me.”

“Oh Kate,” Stiles sighed, and pulled her into his arms. She clung to him, head resting on Stiles’ shoulder. Stiles felt her tears of – sadness? frustration? anger? – wet his shirt. “If you truly want to, we can leave right away.”

“Really?” her words were muffled by his shirt but he could still hear them.

“Really.”

“Do you want me to go pack our bags?” Julia asked. She hugged Kate from behind, petting her messy hair.

“I’ll run to the store quickly,” Peter said. He was staring at Kate oddly, eyes drifting to her chest. He didn’t say a thing though, even after Stiles quirked his brows at him. “We’re out of chocolate. And wine. I think this situation definitely calls for wine. Perhaps I could suggest the great vintage of-”

“Hey!” Stiles protested, playing along. “She’s underage!”

Kate hiccupped and laughed wetly. She raised her head, radiant smile on her lips.

“I know where Gerard keeps his best bottles. Let me tell you, they are not in the wine cellar.”
“You have a wine-, forget it, of course you do,” Stiles shook his head. He frowned suddenly. “Wait, you have a wine cellar and no one told me!”

Kate giggled at his faked outrage. Stiles quickly sobered.

“Kate, be honest. Do you want to leave Beacon Hills right now?”

She sighed. “I- I guess we shouldn’t. I mean, there’s the fact that I’m the heiress and there are still the exams and- and Stiles, you’re an adjacent hunter to the Argents. It would look bad. And- and money, Gerard definitely wouldn’t- wouldn’t fund us-”

“I asked what you wanted Kate, not what others want,” Stiles interrupted her. He held her an arm length away from him so she would see how serious he was. “Just you. What do you want to do?”

“I- I-” Kate stuttered. Her mouth snapped close and she squared her shoulders. She took a deep breath and-

“I want to leave.”

Stiles grinned sharply. Peter barked a laugh behind them and Julia beamed as well.

“Well then, let’s get going!”

***

They left the town in a hurry. While Julia was packing their stuff, Stiles and Kate raided Gerard’s private stash. They didn’t bother hiding the fact that they did it, leaving the expensive bottles smashed on the carpet and walls. In fact, Kate left a card waiting for him. It basically said ‘fuck you, you old coot’.

Stiles promised not to repeat the exact words.

This did not mean they didn’t tell they were leaving to anyone. Kate’s bodyguards, or ‘babysitters’ as she called them, were clued in because they certainly couldn’t follow. They could do shit about it, however; Kate was still the future matriarch and thus higher in rank than even Gerard in some ways.

The excuse they did was that they were ‘called for a job’. Stiles’ cover as a hunter, accidental as it was in the beginning, did come in handy. After all, they were a ‘hunting group’ if only by association. The only ones who knew they had supernatural creatures with them – or that Kate was the only ‘normal’ human if she could be called that – were in no condition to talk about or were supernatural themselves. You don’t just reveal others’ secrets.

It was bad manners.

“So, off we go!” Stiles cheered, raising his bar of chocolate in a toast. Peter, again acting as their driver, and Kate and Julia followed his example. Less than an hour after Kate had come storming in, they were again on the road. Teachers were called, excuses were made, promises to retake the exam later on. It was surprisingly easy with whatever deal Shannon or Gerard had made on her behalf. They wasted no time in leaving the Argent household in the dust; none of them had wanted to take any chances at Gerard arriving and pissing in their cereal more than he already apparently had.

And because of that there was also no Coach. Stiles felt a little guilty but- also sort of relieved. It was Finstock for fuck’s sake. He’d screw up everything and laugh at the destruction in his wake.
“Stiles, can I borrow your phone?” Kate asked. “I left mine home just in case but I should probably call Shannon. I don’t want to risk anyone coming after us.”

“Sure,” Stiles agreed, digging into his pockets. This rock was so big and heavy, ugh. He couldn’t wait to get his hand on a flip phone or, god forbid, a smart phone. He tossed it to Kate who caught it with honed reflexes. It was so flawless Stiles couldn’t help but admire the move for the nth time. “Don’t break it, I don’t want to use our remaining savings on a new one.”

“Sure sure, mentor dear,” Kate saluted, and punched the numbers into the phone. They conversed quietly while Kate explained the situation to Shannon. To the Tribunal. Stiles pursed his lips. He didn’t like the Tribunal but it was a necessary evil to work with right now. And they were great hunters. Some could maybe even be called ‘just’. He wondered if they-

They probably did.

“Heeeeeeey, Kate,” he drawled, twisting around to look at the girl. Kate cocked her brows in question. “The hunter library. The big one you mentioned. At some point. I think. You were talking about one, right? I didn’t imagine that?”

Kate nodded slowly. She tilted her head, clearly also listening to the other side of the line.

“Is that a Tribunal library?” he asked. “It has to be. Right? Do you think Shannon could get us in there?”

Kate looked affronted. “I can get us in there. Why didn’t you ask me first?”

Stiles blinked in surprise. “You can?”

“Duh. Well, maybe. Future matriarch, remember? Clearly you were dropped as a baby, it’s not like it wasn’t the reason we came to Cali or anything. I should have at least some priv-” Kate was suddenly distracted. “Yes, I was answering a question. Stiles. He asked about the great library. Really? So that- Oh. Oh! You would do that? That would be… great, actually. You sure you don’t mind? Alright, I’ll tell him. Just a second.”

Kate turned back to Stiles. “Shannon is in St. Louis, Missouri, right now and will be there until the New Years. If we make it there before, she can make sure we get in. There still could be… complications,” she grimaced, nodding at Peter, and, yeah. The main library probably has far better safeguards than a mere hunter clan residence.

“Do they take in supernatural?” Peter asked curiously. There was no judgement in his voice, just healthy self-preservation.

“Would you mind if we had supernatural with us? What? Uh- I’d rather not say. We are-” Kate flicked her eyes on them and- “escorting them. Sort of. It’s complicated. The point is, we’d rather if they could come with us.” Kate listened to the other side of the line before she handed the phone to Stiles.

“Shannon would like a few words with you.” Stiles nodded, and took it. He exchanged a look with Peter. “This is Stiles.”

“It’s Tribunal hunter Caldwell.”

Welp, this was a nice start.
“Tribunal hunter Caldwell, it’s nice to hear from you,” he glanced at Kate who blanched at the honorific. “What can I do for you?”

“What are you doing with Kate’s training?” Shannon asked bluntly. He could hear the threat in the question.

“Mentoring, like I was told to,” Stiles answered. “My methods may be unorthodox but I can guarantee Kate will be a splendid hunter by the time I’m finished. She already is.”

Kate beamed not so subtly in the backseat. Julia nudged her, offering her a piece of congratulatory chocolate.

“This is not what we agreed.”

“Honestly, Hunter Caldwell, we only agreed on mentoring. I was pretty much given free hands. Kate had the best training possible from her mother but was lacking in knowledge about supernatural,” Stiles explained as calmly as he could. Figures that even Shannon, who had seemed relaxed and level-headed when he met her, was suspicious of those who were ‘different’. “It was a coincidence we ended up with a couple, uh, otherwise inclined in our little party of two but I think it has been a good experience for her.”

“In what way, would you say?”

“Well, for instance, she has an unbiased view of what the other side looks like. While we have hunted some bad eggs, they were just that, bad eggs. Not every supernatural we’ve met have been set to dig a grave for us.”

The line was quiet for a minute. Stiles waited patiently, watching as the familiar sights of Beacon Hills flashed by. He could see from the corner of his eye how Julia was fidgeting a little, glancing at the direction where he knew the Nemeton was.

He wondered if it was already calling a disaster to strike.

“I am going to be honest with you, Stiles,” Shannon told him finally. “I don’t like this and I know the Argents would like this even less. Did you discuss this with Gerard beforehand?”

“No. I did not.”

“Why? He is her legal guardian. This is something—”

“You appointed me as her mentor and told me to teach her. I am only doing as I was asked and I couldn’t have been unbiased if I had taken into account anyone else’s opinions,” Stiles interrupted. “You say you’re being honest with me, so let me be frank with you. This is not high school. I don’t follow any sort of curriculum. I judged her needs and answered them the best I could.

"By now she has also completed her first hunt with me and is regarded as an adult in the hunter community and doesn’t need to answer to anyone. Not even me if she so wishes. If you have any questions, I am willing to discuss my methods. You can ask Kate to elaborate on what she has learned. But hunters are supposed to be unbiased and follow the code. How can she do that if she doesn’t know the other side as well?”

“I do want to have that discussion. Come to St. Louis and we’ll discuss your… methods. Kate should be there too. You are welcome to bring your guests but know that they will be supervised for any sort of trouble.”
“I hope they won’t be harassed in any way,” Stiles warned. “They have not done anything to warrant anything but courtesy and I will retaliate if they are wronged.”

“I promise to keep my eye on things,” Shannon said, and didn’t that amount to a fat load of nothing? “I’m expecting you before the New Years.”

“I’ll see you then, Hunter Caldwell. Do you want me to give you back to Kate?”

“I think we discussed all we needed. Until later.”

The phone disconnected.

Stiles rolled his eyes and tucked his phone back to his pocket. “So, we’re going to St. Louis and, good news, we all have entrance tickets. Bad news, we are the exhibition. I know I included all of us into the count but if you don’t want to visit a Tribunal stronghold, well, you’re excused,” he said, grabbing himself a piece of chocolate to chew on. “What do you say?”

“A library, no matter who owns it, is always worth a visit,” Peter shrugged, turning them on the road leaving Beacon Hills. “Besides, I can defend myself and I think you’re going to need hands to search what you need.”

Stiles sighed. “Unfortunately, that is true.”

Julia smiled although her expression was a little uncertain. “I’m in too. I am a druid and hunters often deal with us. They might not like magic all too much and they may look us sideways, but they shouldn’t have that big of a problem with me.”

“Unlike with a werewolf, you mean,” Peter commented dryly. It spoke volumes of how far Julia had come that she only shrugged and didn’t dissolve into a litany of apologies.

“Peter…” Peter’s eyes met Stiles’.

“I’ve experienced far worse than what the hunters could do to me,” Peter said, shaking his head. “We have diplomatic immunity. They won’t dare to touch me until I’m alone and I’m not planning to be found on my own.”

Stiles nodded after seeing that the decision was already done and Peter wouldn’t change his mind.

“We go in as pack and leave as pack,” he agreed, and stretched. “Well, if I can convince Shannon – sorry, Hunter Caldwell – that we’re golden, maybe I can get her to hand us some cash too. We’re running a little low after your impromptu shopping spree.” He side-eyed Peter and Kate who grinned unapologetically.

“I needed that knife!”

“And these clothes belong with me,” Peter added, flexing his chest. Stiles’ eyes wandered down with the movement. The shirt was almost painted on Peter. He did look good, very good, and-

Stiles shook his head, and didn’t catch the wicked look Peter sent him.

“Well, in any case-”

Whatever he was saying got lost when a fucking army of deer ran them over. Julia shrieked from the backseat and Kate was also shouting. Peter managed to keep them on the road but, man, the car-

Stiles was out in a flash, examining the damage. The windshield was almost shattered thanks to that
deer they had run over – which mysteriously wasn’t dead behind them – and the front was smashed as well. The back didn’t look too good either while the sides we mostly fine. In any case-

“This car is a hazard and we would be stopped by the first officer coming across us,” Stiles groaned. “Why, oh, why? What is with this punishment? Karma, haven’t I already paid for my sins in my past life?”

“Don’t be so dramatic, Stiles,” Peter said. He had hopped out as well and was frowning. “You are right though. We can’t drive this.”

“What do we do?” Julia asked. She looked around the forest they were surrounded by, eyes always finding where the Nemeton lied.

No sooner than she said that, they heard a car coming from behind them. A minivan, to be exact. It looked a little worn but otherwise seemed to be in a good condition. It spluttered to a stop – a little worrying – next to them.

The driver’s side window was pulled down and Stiles groaned when he saw who was manning the vehicle.

“Hey, I got us a ‘venture vehicle for all kinds of adventures!’” Finstock grinned widely, and waved at the van like there was no tomorrow. It was like he was excitement in human form.

“Hop in, young knights and knightesses and the little ball brother of mine!”

Stiles died a little inside.

“Who the fuck is that?” Kate wondered aloud.

Scratch that. Stiles was fucking dead.

***

“So you just upped and adopted Stiles?” Kate asked in fascination. She had climbed behind Finstock, at first interrogating him but which soon turned into just listening him talk.

“He saved my testicles from exposure!” Finstock boomed, cackling all the while as he drove the car. It wasn’t the most stable of rides but at least they were moving forward. They – or Finstock – had called for a tow for the car they left behind, billing it to the Argents – as per Kate’s instructions. “Of course he’s family!”

“How did you know he didn’t have an ID before?” Kate questioned. She leaned against his seat, grinning as she listened him weave his tales. Stiles – as per Finstock’s insistence – was sitting in the front with him. Peter had located himself as far from the front as he could and was seemingly trying to sleep. He didn’t seem too successful if the baleful looks he sent were of any indication. Julia was sitting behind Stiles, immersed in her book about something or another. Stiles had no clue.

“He just seemed like the type!” Finstock boomed. His inside voice was seriously lacking. Stiles scowled.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just look at that!” Finstock waved his hand at Stiles. The car swerved almost to the other side. The car coming from the front honked at them. Finstock gave him a finger.
“You just gestured to all of me,” Stiles deadpanned.

“Exactly!” The laugh didn’t seem malicious in nature but Stiles felt an increasing urge to stab someone. Preferably his former (future?) lacrosse coach.

“Interesting,” Kate said, admiring. Her eyes glinted when she glanced at Stiles. He made a face at her, imploring her to-

“Tell me more.”

-stop. Fine, he saw how it was.

“First things first!” Finstock announced. “I want to hear when everyone’s birthdays are!”

“Why on earth do you need to know that?” Peter called out, exasperation evident in his voice. Stiles rolled his eyes. People who let other people adopt someone against their will have no room to complain.

He stuck a tongue at him for good measure. The wolf had his eyes closed. The bastard. He wouldn’t even let Stiles have his moment. Kate snickered at him.

“Obviously he needs to know your astrology sign!”

“Exactly!” Finstock beamed. Kate’s snickers turned into a full-blown laugh. “One should never ignore what the celestials have to say about us!”

Why must I suffer so? Stiles wondered inwardly. He didn’t know what waves he was emitting but Peter nudged his bond. There was a strange comradery there, immersed in the annoyance they had to deal with.

“You first, cousin!” Stiles winced at the volume.

“April,” he answered reluctantly.

“Ah, a child of spring! Of new beginnings and end of winter! Which day, which day?”

“…8th.”

“I see, I see!” Finstock hummed. He didn’t elaborate. Stiles was almost glad.

“I was born on July 16th!” Kate announced. “And Julia was on February 5th!”

“How do you know that?” Julia blinked. Kate just winked at her.

“What about you, Peter?” Kate asked, twisting around to see the werewolf in his dark corner.

“Do I have to?” Peter sighed. With Kate waiting impatiently, Peter sighed even deeper and said, “October 27th.”

There was a pause.

“Your birthday was in 27th of October?!” Kate gasped as if mortally wounded. Peter opened his eyes finally, quirking his brows.

“And?”
“That was a month ago!”

“…And?”

“We didn’t even celebrate it!”

“……And?”

“You know what this means!” Kate jumped on her seat, flinging herself at Finstock. “We are going to Vegas, baby!”

“What?” Stiles breathed in surprise. “No, we are not!”

“Come on, Stiles! We need to celebrate!” Kate insisted. “And Vegas is just around the corner-”

“It’s in the neighbouring state and not in the direction of St. Louis-“

“-and what better place to celebrate than Vegas?” Kate ended, mischief personified.

“She’s got a point,” Finstock grinned. Stiles shook his head vigorously.

“She does not!” he denied.

“Driver’s choice!” Kate said quickly, leaning towards Finstock. “Right? We should definitely celebrate Peter’s birthday! Right?”

“Definitely!”

“Is anyone asking what I want?” Peter called from the behind.

“No!” Kate and Finstock echoed. “You Scorpio!” Finstock added.

“I see.” Peter and Stiles shared a commiserating look. Stiles could feel Peter thrumming from amusement, however, and perhaps intrigue, so Stiles knew he wasn’t offended. He sent him a curious nudge but Peter flashed him a quick leer.

Stiles felt himself flush and he quickly turned forward again.

“To Vegas it is!” Finstock announced cheerfully. He didn’t even turn the car around. Stiles noticed then that he had already been driving towards the City of Sins.

“To Vegas!” Kate cheered.

This is my grave, my legacy, he sighed mentally.

The warm thrum of the bonds made him smile despite the horrified expectations of the future ahead. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad.

“I want to go to a casino,” Kate said seriously.

“I’ll smuggle you in!” Finstock agreed.

“What? NO!”

“I just want to ask something,” Peter interjected over Stiles’ protests. His lips twitched. “Has our driver been drinking?”
Stiles stared at Finstock in horror. His ‘cousin’ just whistled tellingly.

“Get off the wheel!”

By the time they arrived at the stop of the day – the same motel actually they had stayed a few months ago – Stiles was exhausted. Trying to handle Finstock – a hurricane on the best of days – who had refused to stop the car and had almost caused them to crashed them ash twice, and Kate on sugar had drained everything he had in him. He was a prune, a disgusting, old prune that had been left to dry in the desert sun for thirty days.

He felt like collapsing and never getting up again.

“Stiles.” He heard his name called. He looked up at Peter’s concerned blues. “I can stop them if you want.”

Stiles stared at him before he felt an urge to hug Peter. He didn’t stop himself. “I’m sorry I didn’t know when your birthday was.”

*I’m sorry I never cared to find out before.*

Peter startled but barked a surprised laugh.

“It doesn’t matter. I’ve never really celebrated them anyway.”

It’s not like I had people to celebrate them with before, Stiles heard. He tightened his grip before he loosened it enough to look Peter in the eyes.

“It’s your birthday party. Do you want to spend it in Vegas?” Stiles asked. “Because we are going to hold a party. I swear we are going to hold a party to celebrate you. But if we go to Vegas, it’s going to derail. This is Kate we are unleashing upon them. Kate and Finstock since he’s not leaving,” Stiles added and sighed. He shook his head, bringing himself to look at Peter’s shocked expression.

“But we are going to celebrate that you are here with us. So, tell me, how do you want to do it?”

Peter stared at him, his shock melting into an unreadable expression. They held each other’s eyes for what felt like eternity but must have been merely a minute or even just seconds. Peter then smiled so warmly Stiles couldn’t help his staring.

He had never seen Peter so happy.

“Thank you, Stiles,” Peter said. He leaned over and kissed Stiles on his forehead, washing him over with so many gentle emotions Stiles was afraid to move in fear of breaking something.

Peter gave him one last flash of that smile – *holy shit* – and left in the direction where Kate and Julia were already haggling over the price for the night.

Stiles stared after him dumbfounded, his heart racing. A sudden slam of a door broke him from his reverie and he blinked rapidly when Finstock arrived in his view. The man looked him over and snorted before stepping past him to follow Peter inside.

“Hey, Bilinski, that man loves you. Do something about it or let the man out of his misery,” he called behind his shoulder before slipping inside as well.

Stiles’ brain short-circuited. He stared at the now closed door.

…What?
Laura raised her head.

It had been the most annoying evening. Cora had cried, like, two hours straight and mom hadn’t done a thing, too busy with arguing with Derek about something or another. Laura hadn’t really listened. She had tried to study, she had a test tomorrow, but was there any peace in the house? No. There was none. It felt that even all her cousins and her aunts and uncles and, ugh, everyone was just so loud.

It had gotten so bad that she had stormed off into the preserve to cool off. It was a nice evening all in all. Cool but not wet, warm enough too so she didn’t need a jacket. There were some weird traces of… was that melted snow? She shook her head. Couldn’t be.

She trekked further, just enjoying the solitude. She understood why Uncle Peter had loved the forest.

Laura frowned.

It had been months since anyone had heard of Uncle Peter. There had been some rumours of him appearing in faraway states but what would he be doing in Michigan or the east coast? There was no family there, nothing for a Hale. There was no family there. There had been sightings of him, or his scent, in Beacon Hills too but if the ones before had been dead ends, why wouldn’t this?

Laura missed him. She missed the funny uncle who always had something smart to say about anything and everything, who would brush her hair and tell her stories when she was little. He was more like a big brother to her than an uncle. But for some reason, it had always felt like he didn’t belong. Why was that, she wondered. He was family, he was a Hale. They should all be family. But he was still in the fringes, it felt sometimes.

To be honest, Laura wasn’t even sure what his place was in the pack. Her aunt Samantha had told her he was an enforcer but her cousin Jared claimed he was the pack liaison. When Laura had gone to ask her mother, she had just shaken her head and told her they would talk about it later. But when was later?

It felt like too late already. Maybe later meant never.

She didn’t like the word.

Because the only bond she had had to her uncle had grown thinner and thinner as time went by before, a few of weeks ago, it had just snapped. It had rattled the entire back. No one knew if he was alive, if he had done it on purpose or if it had been forced. The consensus seemed to be of it to have been forced because what else could it have been? Uncle Peter was crafty. He was the most resilient of their pack, mother excluded. He was wicked smart! But he was also family. Family doesn’t throw each other away, they stick together through sticks and stones or- or even Voldemort!

Laura looked around. No one there, even if she said his name. She was still a little disappointed she didn’t get her letter even if she was a big girl now. She knew it was all a story.

But if the bond had been broken by force… who had done it? The people who took him? People who have him now? Why? For what purpose?

Laura knew Cora was still crying because of that broken bond. She had been tailing after Uncle Peter since she learned how to crawl. She knew Derek was acting out because there was something – someone – missing and she- she couldn’t find the peace and quiet she needed. Mother was restless too, distracted. She had thrown herself into finding Uncle Peter with vehemence she had rarely
showed for anything else. She was worried, she was scared that something had happened to her little brother. Now that mother seemed to think she had smelled him in Beacon Hills, she had gotten everyone looking for him. In vain too. But Laura knew she would never give up.

Laura knew that. She knew because while Derek was more like their father, she was more like their mother. And she knew she would hurt, maybe even be willing to kill, if someone hurt her baby brother or sister.

She sighed. She was starting to smell Uncle Peter because of how much she missed him. The wind pushed against her face and-

Wait.

She didn’t imagine that.

That was the scent of Uncle Peter.

It had to be. It had to be!

Laura took off in a run. Maybe she could catch him. Maybe she could see him, take him home, bring him home where he belonged with their pack, together again-

She ran. She ran as fast as she could. She was panting from the exhaustion, taking off where the wind was blowing the scent. She had to stop when a herd of deer almost ran her over but when they had passed her, she just ran towards the scent again.

Laura found herself near the place where the Hale land ended and they had last seen Peter. She peeked from the brushes and saw… a minivan. There was a girl, no, two girls. One had a golden braid while the other had long brown hair that Laura couldn’t help but envy. They were laughing about something this weird-looking man was cackling about.

They all climbed inside the minivan. One man, young, maybe Uncle Peter’s age, was drawing something on the van. She couldn’t see what but…

He had the scent. He had Peter’s scent. Why did he have Uncle Peter’s scent?

The guy suddenly swore and slapped a hand over his arm, Peter’s scent disappearing with it. In fact, Laura could no longer smell a thing. Not Peter, not the guy – although his scent had been overpowered by Peter’s more familiar one – and definitely not the car, which was totally weird.

Magic, it had to be magic. But, why…?

The car started and the guy rushed in. He knocked on one window in the back and-

That was Uncle Peter who peeked from behind the glass.

That was Uncle Peter!

Laura stared, flabbergasted, as Uncle Peter laughed at whatever the guy did. Laughed. Uncle Peter. Laura didn’t remember when she had seen him laugh this freely before.

Why?

Why was he laughing?

He was away from home, from family, taken by force. He wouldn’t turn his back to his pack. Unless
there was magic involved…?

Uncle Peter disappeared from the window and the guy rushed from Laura’s view, probably to climb in. The weird-looking man, the one who had cackled, poked his head from the driver’s side. He stared at the sky, then at the road ahead and then-

Then he locked his eyes right on hers.

And grinned.

And then they were off, leaving her in the dust to watch them go.

Chapter End Notes

Did you expect Coach fucking Finstock to appear? Because I’ve been waiting for this moment for a long, long time. Too long. Finally, this glorious person is here and... so is Steter.

I hope you are as excited as I am :)

Also I realised that this fic is already way past what I intended but what else is new. Oh well. This is my escape from reality and I happen to like it <3
In which Vegas sends its regards

Chapter Notes

*waves*

I love you guys. Just- I love you. The feedback I've gotten from you has been absolutely fantastic (and the amount of joy I got from introducing Finstock was... *cackle*) and truly helped me to keep writing bit by bit. I lost my groove a little while back and wrote all the stories for Steter Week. Woops. I hope this is up to the standards <3

(Also I can't wait to see who my giftee for Secret Santa is! I want to start planning already!)

Peter loved him.

Stiles stared outside the window as they drove towards Vegas, tapping his open journal with his pen, lost in his thoughts. He was sitting in the front again but Peter had replaced Finstock as the driver after they had found the man half-way drunk in the morning. They had thrown him in the back where he had, at first, taken a nap before Kate had woken him up to regale them with wackier and weirder tales than Stiles was used to. He had, honestly, mellowed in the ten or so years before Stiles first met him in his original timeline. What was the weirdest thing was that, while Kate was certainly interested in Finstock’s stories, it was Julia who was bonding with him the most. She kept drawing him into conversation and falling into discussions that Stiles couldn’t completely follow with the loud thoughts in his mind clouding it.

Peter was in love with him.

He watched Peter’s reflection on the window, squinting his eyes, as if trying to see if the fact would become visible on his face if he just tried hard enough. It was a handsome figure, he had to admit. Every single one of the Hales Stiles had ever met had been beautiful in their own way. Derek had been classically handsome. He had been the perfect tragic hero you couldn’t help but root for even when he messed up. Cora was the badass princess, fighting for a cause bigger than herself but holding her head high even in the darkest of times. Sometimes, deep down so she never would have heard it, Stiles had likened her to Leia. Beautiful, smart and deadly. Malia-

Well, she was never really a Hale. She was just Malia, and she liked it that way.

And then there was Peter. He had been the cleverest of the bunch and the most dangerous. Even in the throes of insanity he had been the villain with an unmatched cause. Aesthetically he was also pleasing, now and then. He had a strong build, clear eyes and a wicked mouth. Superficially, he was a ten out of ten, Stiles had to admit. Peter was attractive and he knew it.

But that wasn’t it all. He was smart as hell and his wit was sharp. He had always been Stiles’ favourite villain. Charming and persuasive, not just violence and death even if that had been something he liked to utilise – not that Stiles was too different on that front, mind. Yet, he had also been one of the most valuable allies Stiles had ever had. They were similar characters and Stiles honestly could see part of himself in him. But the appeal came in that they complemented each other. They pushed and brought out the best in each other through their familiarity. It had once been a
recurring ‘joke’ in the pack that it was Stiles and Derek who should have, at some point, gotten together. Opposites attract, and all that.

Stiles still remembered idly thinking that, yes, perhaps in another world. But in this one, with all their scars and brokenness, it was Peter who understood him the most, who could relate to him – who he could relate to. They were two of a kind. If Stiles was feeling romantic, he could even liken them to soulmates. Different to his brotherhood with Scott, the shared grief with Derek… It had always been Peter who he confined his frustrations to, hidden in the banter, even when they weren’t exactly on the same side.

There had always been a level of trust between them Stiles had never been able to completely explain. He had just… always known he could trust Peter. Peter had never lied to him. Mislead, spoken half-truths, yes, Stiles had done the same. But pure white lies?

Never.

Peter loved him.

His heart was beating surprisingly calm in the face of the revelation. He wondered- no, he hadn’t known it before. Perhaps the feelings might have developed eventually in the future if it hadn’t been such a clusterfuck. If they had been given the chance. Probably not though. The only one of them who had ever been free to love had been Scott and that was because his whole being had been so full of love. Stiles had envied him. He had so very limited capacity to love. He cared about others, yes, but love? It had always been hard.

He loved his family.

He loved his pack.

Everyone else could just fuck off.

But that was familial love, wasn’t it? Had he ever truly felt romantic love? The toe-curling love Scott seemed to have experienced so many times in comparison when Stiles-

He had never loved Lydia. He had been obsessed with the idea of her, he was mature enough to admit it. He had had a short-lived, ill-advised crush on Derek until it had withered and died in the face of adversity. Malia? That should have never happened and they both knew it. They had been insane and out of their depths and shit had just-

No, it was safe to say Stiles had never been in love. Should he then do as Finstock – god forbid – had suggested, to let Peter go? Just so he wouldn’t hurt him any more than he- 

Something painful gripped Stiles’ chest. He felt like he was drowning. He let out a soft gasp and his head dropped to stare down at where his heart was beating. He pressed a hand against his chest. It hurt. Something made it hard to breathe.

A hand reached over and rested on Stiles’ thigh. He slowly raised his eyes, following the arm to the person it belonged to. Peter was driving forward but his eyes were faintly shining gold. It was a beautiful colour. It suited him. The blue had as well, it had been a sign of danger, of survival, but the gold held a touch of innocence Stiles had never before been able to link to Peter. Their gazes met.

There hadn’t been a second of doubt over Finstock’s words.

Stiles’ heart slowed down, time between beats increasing until Stiles felt he could breathe again. The world was clear and it was written in every shade of gold. Stiles broke the contact, retracing the steps
to watch the hand pressed against his thigh. He took one of his hands from his lap and placed his hand on top of Peter’s.

It was warm. Stiles felt warm.

He felt safe.

Stiles looked out of the window again, watching the scenery change before his very eyes. He closed his little red book and laced their fingers together.

Peter was in love with him.

Stiles closed his eyes.

Peter loved him.

Peter-

Peter.

***

They arrived in Las Vegas in the evening and it was decided that they would stay the night in. Kate and Finstock protested but it was Peter who put his foot down and managed to make them – or rather, Kate – to listen. It was, after all, his birthday she had used as an excuse for this excursion.

“Also, this way we are free to explore the city tomorrow for the whole day,” he reasoned, mollifying Kate. “We can leave the day after to catch up the lost time and get to St. Louis before the New Year’s.”

“Fine!” Kate threw her hands in the air. She pouted the entire way to her and Julia’s room. Peter took the first shower, claiming he needed to wash off the last remnants of California and Beacon Hills of his skin.

This suited Stiles just fine.

He barged into Finstock’s unlocked room. The man ignored him, downing what looked like a quarter bottle of something clear. Stiles blanched in horror.

“Are you trying to kill yourself?!?” he demanded, rushing forward and grabbing the bottle off of Finstock’s hands. He sniffed at it and immediately regretted it, the strong stench burning his nostrils. “Yeah, you certainly have a death wish.”

“Leave me alone!” Finstock complained. He tried to grab at the bottle again, but Stiles evaded him. Not that it was hard. Finstock was quite unsteady on his feet, and his words were slightly slurred. It was no wonder. Stiles had seen him take a shot of something – probably some of the bottle’s contents – once in a while thorough the day.

“You’ll be dead before you hit thirty if you continue like this,” Stiles admonished. Quick on his feet, he was in the bathroom and downed the rest of the alcohol into the sink. Finstock let out a sound akin to a dying whale and flopped down on the mattress.

“Even pirates get to eat in peace! Full of good will, they are!” he moaned, kicking the air. It reminded Stiles of a petulant kid. “Now how do you think I’m gon- going to sleep tonight?”

“You’re probably drunk enough to fall asleep on your feet already,” Stiles said, tone sandpaper dry.
Finstock grinned wistfully.

“Pirates get me.”

Stiles shook his head. “You definitely are not normal in any timeline.” Finstock snorted at that, choking on his cackles.

“The best timeline is when no one is late and no one writes about circumcision, when the leaves are green and the red is natural,” he recited, head lolling from shoulder to shoulder.

“A-ha!” Stiles pointed at Finstock victoriously. “I knew it, I knew it!”

“And by the meter the hill becomes smaller,” was the grave – and only – answer he got.

Stiles slumped, previous energy suddenly drained. “Is there any time I could actually understand the fuck’s coming out of your mouth?” Finstock looked at him, being surprisingly able to convey his disgust from the heap he was on the bed.

“Not worth even ten points, I’m keeping my parrot sticker to myself.”

“I am not a pirate!” Stiles ran a hand through his hair. “I doubt I ever was even in the past- wait a minute.”

Finstock watched him as the realisation dawned on Stiles.

“You are a seer.”

“Well done Bilinski. Perhaps your new teacher will think more of your essays.”

Stiles opened his mouth, offended, because his essays were always brilliant, and hadn’t he always gotten A’s from Finstock, but snapped it shut as Finstock’s words hit him. Finstock cackled.

“Did you think me coming with you would be without consequences? Everything has consequences! Your coming to past has consequences! Your tendency to pick up all these people, messing with their business and the lives of others has consequences! I’m fucking sick of consequences! CONSEQUENCES!” Finstock ranted. He sat up suddenly, all erratic movement, before his face suddenly whitened. There was a greenish tint to him now too. Stiles grabbed the basket from toilet as quickly as he could and just managed to fling it to Finstock barely before he was vomiting all over it.

Ugh, the smell-

“Why did you have to take it all away? You’re killing me,” Finstock moaned. The basket fell to the floor with a loud clank and he wiped his mouth with his sleeve, snagging his flask from his pocket to drown the taste of the vomit out of his mouth. There was a mouthful or two there but, as Finstock’s expression indicated, definitely too little of it.

“Are you being serious right now?” Stiles questioned. He shook his head in disbelief.

“Addicts to grave, grave to addicts – I really shouldn’t have skipped a day, hours, whatever, fuck this shit, why do I always try,” Finstock mumbled dully. He sent longing looks at his now empty flask, licking away the few droplets left. “It’s not like we ever live old.”

“Coach-”

“Listen!” A hand was waved in front of Stiles and he almost fell over onto what had once been
inside Finstock. “I’m not your Coach. I’m never going to be your whatever-I-was or anywhere near high school. I don’t know where the hell I’ll end up but at least I’m not going to have to suffer through that life. Dealing with hormone-ridden teenagers, sounds like literal hell.”

“Just, stop for a little,” Stiles interrupted the rant that Finstock was building. “But you were-”

“I said there were-”

“-consequences, yes, but-”

“-fucking bottle stealer, thief, making me suffer through another night with things no one wants to see-”

“I- what?” Stiles blinked. “I was just-”

“Being all noble, I’m sure. Something learned from your past, I’m sure, there was someone there- no, shit, no, leave me alone- asshat, fuck, this wasn’t welcome,” Finstock mumbled bitterly. “Shit. This is why there are problems when there’s not enough to drink.”

“They induce visions?”

Finstock snorted. “Like anyone actually wants to see anything. No, they take them away.”

“But wouldn’t that defeat the purpose of, you know, actually seeing?” Stiles pointed out. His hands were shaking. He licked his lips. “Why wouldn’t you do that in the future? You know what-”

“No, I don’t, and I don’t want to either,” Finstock interrupted Stiles. He sighed deeply, slumping a little. Stiles felt suddenly less sure of himself, the wind on his sails disappearing, something nagging at the back of his mind.

“You want to hear everything? Huh? Oh, yes you do, I think you do, in every vision I saw- fuck. Seeing everything, all the possible consequences and routes things could go to… It’s too much information.” Finstock swayed on his spot. He shook his flask hopefully, but nothing had magically appeared there. He threw it away in frustration. The flask hit the wall with enough force to dent it.

“Insane, it drives people. Makes us seem lunatic, knowing bits and pieces but never the whole picture, never enough or all too much, what we retain a puzzle incomplete or with too many pieces. Cassandra is our name, our lives worth the same.”

“So you-” Stiles gingerly sat down on the chair nearby.

“ Took me three days to learn alcohol suppresses this insanity,” Finstock groaned. “Three days of pure hell, vision after vision, reality after reality, I was going to kill myself- but I couldn’t. The fourteen-year-old me was convinced this was the best way to go about things-”

“Fourteen-? You’ve been almost constantly drunk since you were fourteen?!?” Stiles gaped. Finstock shrugged.

“It’s not like anyone cares. It’s the fucking teen culture, it’s the land of freedom! Every chance is a chance!”

“I-” Stiles shook his head to clear his thoughts. Finstock stilled, all predatory and silent, as he watched Stiles. He suddenly seeming saner than Stiles thought was possible.

“The thing is, I don’t know what’s coming and I don’t want to.” Finstock’s dark eyes drilled into Stiles’, holding him hostage, frozen in his place. “I saw just a brief moment in time and it was
enough. For two days I spent agonising over death and destruction. There was a volcano of power, just spewing shit out, and there were battlefields full of rotting corpses and skies grey as ashes. The night was dark and full of fucking terrors and there were no dragons to save us, only bonfires with nothing left to burn.

“But then,” he continued, eyes drifting to someplace far, “On the third day, I was already reaching for my brother’s gun- he went crazy, yeah? Shit was probably in the family. Not that it matters anymore,” Finstock mumbled. “Yeah, not that it matters anymore…”

Stiles swallowed but it hurt. His throat was dry as a desert. He opened his mouth to-

“But then there was a light.”

Finstock suddenly surged up from the bed and was all over Stiles. His hands were crushing Stiles’ arms and he knew he would have bruises tomorrow. The crazed grin was back.

“There was snow and there was light. There was a new day, and in that light? There stood a wolf with his skin ripped off and feathers buried into his skull. There stood a forest woman with her throat cut open and eyes pecked. There stood a gunner with a mad look in her eyes and blue was her skin. And then the light spat out a man rotting inside, filled with so many holes he had no blood left. And together? They melted. They melted and melted and melted until they were all liquid and there was only a lake left and from that lake rose a single branch.”

Fintsock was so close to Stiles he could smell his breath. But it was his eyes that caught Stiles’ attention. They were filled with tears.

“And from that branch grew a tree,” Bobby rasped. His hands squeezed Stiles once before letting go, tilting backwards until he was bent in an impossible shape, all the while holding Stiles’ eyes.

“I want to see that tree again. I want to see all those people who rose from that lake. Because I saw myself there. I walked up the shore. The shadow, never alone. I was- I was-”

Bobby fell like the strings were cut off his body. It took Stiles mere three seconds to reach him, but he was gone. Not dead, no, but unconscious with tear tracks on his cheeks and a look of desperation, of longing, etched into his features.

Stiles stared at him for a long moment. He was still shaking when he reached for the blankets and covered him, tugged him in. He washed the bucket on autopilot and returned it to Bobby’s side with a glass of water. The man was still except for a few twitching fingers. When Stiles left the room, he found Peter coming towards him from where he knew Kate and Julia’s room was.

“I-” Stiles wet his lips, voice still hoarse. “I need to visit the store quickly.”

With a glance at the closed door, Peter nodded and tugged Stiles along. Ten minutes later, they were back in their room, Stiles hiding in the comfort of Peter’s arms.

When Bobby would wake up tomorrow, whether having rested peacefully or with sights haunting him all night long, there would be two Vegas specials waiting for him.

***

“Vegas!” Kate cheered, bouncing around like she was high. Maybe she was. The air in Vegas was full of fumes of all sorts. Kate grabbed at Julia’s hands, dragging her to look at the nearest displays. Bobby was laughing loudly. He seemed lighter this morning, as if he didn’t remember a thing of what transpired last night. Or like nothing was wrong, like he hadn’t just spent a day sober just to-
Stiles himself had dark circles around his eyes, having been unable to sleep well. His mind had wracked on what Bobby could have meant with his vision. He had a pretty sure idea that part of the vision had already come true. It seemed like they, Stiles, Peter, Kate and Julia were supposed to become pack in this world Bobby was reaching for. Yet, he had also separated himself from the quartet. What did that mean? The branch and the tree had to have something to do with the Nemeton. In that case, it meant that they had to fix it so that the future would be saved. Which, Stiles knew, of course, but this added a whole new level of responsibility on his shoulders, on their shoulders, and-

“Stiles.”

Stiles blinked rapidly, gaze suddenly focusing on the form before him. Peter. He looked amused if not also a tiny bit concerned.

“You’re spiralling.”

Stiles nodded mechanically. He probably should start on that Adderall. He played with the bottle of pills on his pocket but… it felt somehow wrong? He knew they weren’t knock-offs and he knew he needed them but-

“Stiles.” His hand was suddenly cradled in Peter’s and it pulled Stiles straight out of his thoughts. He flushed, feeling like a schoolgirl with a crush. Perhaps that was even accurate description. That he had a crush, not that he was a schoolgirl. He looked at Peter through his lashes and couldn’t help but focus on how pretty his eyes were.

_Peter’s in love with you_, the memory of Bobby whispered into his ear. If his reaction was any indication, Stiles was half-way there as well. How did that happen? Stiles’ heartrate picked up, more blood creeping up on his cheeks.

With his pale skin, the reddening of his cheeks had never looked great.

He turned around quickly, dragging Peter with him. “We are going to be left behind,” he announced, even if the rest of their group were mere thirty feet from them.

“As you say,” came the amused reply, and Stiles felt a squeeze on his hand. He squeezed back a couple of beats later. He chanced a look on Peter and found a small, almost carefree, smile on his face. Stiles’ heart skipped a beat.

Yeah, definitely half-way there.

“Vegas is such a place!” Bobby admired, pocketing his flask, when they caught up with them. Stiles rolled his eyes.

So was he, it seemed.

They spent the day touring the city, toasting for Peter and paying for anything and everything he might want. Well, Stiles paid. It wasn’t like anyone else had too much money to spend. They ended up singing loudly, with the entire restaurant, happy birthday to Peter who looked entirely too amused, basking in the attention. They didn’t really have any presents to give to him, but Julia did use a bit of her savings to buy Peter the scarf he had been eying and Kate won on some obscure game a plush bird for him. She had been aiming for the only wolf, narrowly missing it, and decided to call the bird – a crow-shaped one, if Stiles wasn’t off too much, but it was entirely too colourful to be one – a peacock because, “You are one.”
Peter accepted it with a twinkle on his eye that Stiles knew spelled mischief for later. Kate seemed to sense it too but merely stuck out her tongue and tried again. She ended up with the wolf.

She didn’t give it up, deciding to keep it herself instead.

Then the evening arrived and, as if by mutual decision – by everyone but Stiles, that is, – they split into two groups. Stiles with Peter, and Kate and Julia with Bobby. Bobby leered at Peter before taking off after the girls.

“Weren’t we supposed to celebrate your birthday?” Stiles asked in confusion, watching the trio disappear from their sight. Hadn’t they – and by ‘they’, he meant Kate and Bobby – been planning the party of a lifetime during their entire ride to Las Vegas?

Peter grinned sharply.

“We are.”

Stiles turned to him. “Are?”

Peter leaned towards him, eyes half-lidded and spelling trouble. “We are.”

And- oh.

Stiles found an arm around his waist, a smirk sent in his direction, and then Peter was directing him to the opposite direction where the girls and Bobby had been heading. “There was a quaint little restaurant a couple of blocks away and I thought we might start from there.”

And Stiles, leaning against Peter, wrapping his arm also around him, just let himself be.

***

Kate walked around the casino, bored out of her mind. Well, not bored exactly, but… exhausted? Julia was off somewhere, probably got lost on her way to the restroom, and Finstock was wasting his money and drinking again. Kate had to admit she was getting a bit tired of constantly smelling the alcohol on his breath, no matter how fun the guy was. She had been looking forward to spending time with everyone, running around and causing havoc, but she couldn’t fault Peter for wanting to take Stiles out. Hell, she had stakes in making that happen! And- and she really wanted them to be happy. They both, they deserved it.

Kate sighed. She still sometimes missed when it was just her and Stiles and Peter, even if Julia had quickly become very dear to her. She stared at her hands morosely. Not even the brilliant light shows and the fun to be had in the casino was lifting her mood. She looked around, seeing Finstock play with two tall redheaded guys and not finding Julia. Had she gone to the bathroom again? Kate hadn’t really heard what she had said before she disappeared. She shook her head and decided to slip outside the main room, sitting down at the stairs nearby. It wasn’t the service entrance, so she was relatively sure she could just sit there for a while. Kate pulled out her necklace, watching as the wolf motif glimmered under the dim lights.

There had been one thing nagging at the back of her mind since the whole pendant debacle which her fa- no, which Gerard had pretty much confirmed the day they left Beacon Hills. She hadn’t answered any of his calls, hoping that Shannon would explain him where she was going and why. Well, maybe not the why but where. If he ever called her. Ugh, perhaps she should have just answered but she didn’t want to talk to him.

Not now at least.
She tilted her head. The necklace was pretty enough, she supposed. And useful. They had tinkered with it enough that it now managed to let her pack bonds shine through the way they should. It was not too surprising what her determined pack could do when they put their heads together. Her only regret was that she hadn’t been there with them. But what could she have done, with the way Gerard-

Her exhale was loud and full of fury. Even now she was avoiding her problems. It wasn’t that she was necessarily hiding them from her pack but she just— this was personal. This was Argent business. At which point does her grief with her clan become the pack’s?

But Peter had trusted the pack with his grievances. While they didn’t all know the details of what was going on with the Hales and Peter – although Kate suspected Stiles might know more than most – had still come forward and they had solved his problem as well as they could. She knew they would go the same to her but-

But.

How could she say that she suspected Gerard had arranged her mother’s death?

Her grip on the pendant tightened. His dismissal of her feelings and his dismissal of her friends: of Julia, who was pretty much her best friend; of Peter, who was sharp and gentle at the same time; of Stiles, who was practically another big brother to her.

This pendant had strong protective spells on it, older than her, older than perhaps her mother had been herself. If it was so strong and so old, then… how come her mother had been killed so easily? One minute she was there and another she wasn’t.

And Kate hadn’t gained a scratch.

She closed her eyes. She needed to tell her pack. She couldn’t pretend everything was fine, that Gerard and she had a small spat and that was it. Not that they thought that, she smiled grimly. They were probably giving her space to collect her thoughts. They were so unlike her parents, even Chris-

She opened her eyes and saw Julia at the doorway, looking at her, worry colouring her brown eyes. Kate made her decision. She gestured at Julia and soon they were huddled there together. Kate drew strength from Julia’s presence next to her as she whipped out her phone and pressed call.

It only took a few rings before she heard a hoarse voice answer. Kate rested her head on Julia’s shoulder.

“Hi, Chris.”

The call took them only five minutes, conversation stilted because of the distance long ago imposed on them, but in that time, she managed to set a meeting for them in St. Louis. When she ended the call, Julia squeezed her knee. Kate saw that the worry hadn’t lifted from her features but there was no suspicion or anything like it there. The bond between them resonated in harmony.

Julia smiled.

“Want to go out there? Bobby was there, and I think he may have gotten into a fight with a couple of leprechauns.”

Kate’s grin sharpened. She would reveal everything when they left Vegas – she was not about to interrupt the date she had an invested interest in, it was not that urgent – so for now-
They didn’t go to the restaurant Peter had seen but rather took a walk around the city. There was plenty to see. Stiles laughed at the over-the-top outfits in the store windows and the many sex shops for all sorts of fetishes more or less in full display, while Peter tutted and pointed out how fake the jewellery were in the one store they actually walked in. They got thrown out after they had frightened three potential customers away and the owner banned them from ever coming back.

…Okay, they did the same for the next two as well. It was fun, alright?

Stiles felt at ease. There were glances sent their way, some hostile, some curious, but the city was buzzing; they didn’t stand out for anyone to truly care. Peter had laced their fingers at one point of their walk and Stiles felt no desire to remove them. It brought so much comfort to him, to Peter as well, that the bond between them just enhanced the feeling until Stiles felt like he was drowning. In a good way. This was the way to go.

Nothing had ever felt like this.

And the strangest thing was that Stiles wasn’t even freaked out. No, it felt so fucking natural. Like natural progression, like evolution, like… like a gift.

Stiles smiled fondly as Peter gave a sex shop worker a tongue lash on how the knotting dildo he was holding wasn’t anything like the real thing. The woman was just nodding along. She looked like she wanted to take notes, god forbid. Stiles hid a snort on his sleeve. Peter was quite convincing and the way he moved his hand on the- well.

If Stiles hadn’t bugged Derek once about it, he probably would have bought the speech as well. With extra.

In the end, they did end up in a remote Nepalese restaurant. It was a quaint hole-in-the-wall sort of place but the few locals they had met and hadn’t scarred had recommended the hell out of it. The lights were dim and, although the décor was lacking, the food turned out to be just as delicious as they were promised.

“I am in heaven,” Stiles moaned around his mouthful. Just tipping the garlic naan bread into the sauce was pure fantasy come true. Peter nodded, eyes dark as his gaze lingered on Stiles.

“It is delicious,” he said after a moment, louder than usual, and gave a nod to the nearest waiter. The young man acknowledged the compliment with a bright smile and asked if they needed anything else. Shaking their heads, Stiles resolved to leave a huge tip.

They were nursing some excellent ginger tea after finishing – gosh, Stiles was so full, you’d think he was pregnant or something – when Peter drew Stiles’ attention to himself.

“Stiles.”

He blinked, pausing in the middle of taking a sip. “Peter?”

The werewolf eyed him for a bit before going straight for the kill. “You do know this is a date, right?”

“Yeah.” Stiles placed the cup down, careful not to slosh any of the precious drink. He may be, perhaps, maybe, slightly oblivious in some matters that concerned him, but he wasn’t stupid.
The look he received was expectant. “And?”

“And… what?” He could play stupid pretty well, however.

Peter sighed, lips twitching. “I have made my intentions quite clear.”

“Yet you won’t say them aloud.” Stiles reached over, toying with the sleeve of Peter’s, feeling the heat of his skin through the fabric. He had been reaching for contact more lately, he realised absently as he continued his petting. All the handholding, cuddling, everything he had once denied or been denied, things he had- he wondered if that was because of- well, maybe.

“I’m honestly kind of baffled,” he mused out loud. Peter loved him. What could he ever say to that?

“I have ninety-nine problems with everything under the sky. But you,” Stiles paused, meeting Peter’s eyes, “you are not one of them.”

Peter looked like he wanted to laugh. “And that baffles you?”


“Many would say the same thing about me,” Peter pointed out. He captured Stiles’ hand, dragging his finger along the lines on his palm.

“We are works of art,” Stiles declared, a corner of his mouth lifting. He stopped Peter’s tickles by lacing their fingers together at the tips. “If-” he licked his lips, “if we- crap, this was quite inevitable, wasn’t it?”

This time Peter did huff a laugh. “It did take you a while.”

“Well, someone isn’t helping his case.” Stiles rolled his eyes. He sighed, tightening his hold. “I did mean what I said. I’m still a mess and you know it. Why would you want to throw your lot into…?” He made a vague gesture with his free hand.

“You just gestured to all of you,” Peter said. Stiles blinked. Well, that was a reference way too early of its time. “And I happen to like that part of you. Stiles… I don’t think you know what you’ve already done to me.”

“Is this a romantic speech?” he blurted out. Peter snorted.

“You wish. But not entirely inaccurate.” The smile that spread on Peter’s face warmed Stiles all over. “You didn’t answer to my advances in the beginning.”

Yeah, that had been a thing. Stiles had been way fucked up all those months ago. They had stopped pretty much the same day, however, if he remembered correctly.

“Instead, you rebuffed my efforts and practically gave me a speech about not selling my body,” Peter said, amused. “I knew right then and there that I wanted to be your friend.”

“Because I implied you were a prostitute,” Stiles said flatly. Of all possible things-

“You don’t know how rare it is to find someone who didn’t expect anything out of you. It was… charming, you could say,” Peter continued as if he hadn’t heard Stiles although the twinkle in his eyes said he did. “I don’t mind staying as your friend if that’s what you want. But the few months we have spent together have honestly been some of the best of my life. I have a home now. Stiles. I wouldn’t do anything to sabotage that but honestly… I think we could be great together.” He twisted
their hands, managing to slide his fingers down Stiles’ wrist, tracing the vulnerable skin there. The intense look sent shivers down Stiles’ back.

Stiles opened his mouth – to answer or to snark, he wasn’t quite sure – but they were interrupted by their waiter, bringing them their bill. In his surprise he let go of Peter but covered it by digging out his wallet, placing a few bills on it and told him to keep the rest. The man thanked them and wished them a good night.

Stiles took a sip from his cooling tea. He cleared his throat, cradling his cup again.

“I’m not sure how fast I can move,” he confessed. “I like you, Peter. I honestly do. It’s like you’re the nicest thing I could ever have. But I’ve been fucked up for so long I don’t know if I can be something, something like-”

“Stiles.” His mouth clicked shut, killing off the beginning of his ramble. Peter’s lips twitched again. “I only want what you are willing to give. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Because consent is sexy?” Stiles offered weakly. Peter snorted.

“Sure, let’s go with that.”

Stiles was silent for a moment. “I don’t want to disappoint you,” he said finally. Some days he felt years older than he was, world-weary and tired, and Peter, he deserved better.

“Oh, dear boy, you could never disappoint me.”

Stiles rolled his eyes. “I’m older than you are.”

Peter blinked and chuckled. “So you are.” He drank the rest of his tea, clearly waiting for Stiles’ answer. Stiles sighed. He had lost, not that he had fought very hard. He still thought Peter was making an extremely uninformed and ill-advised decision here but-

“You do know I’m a lost cause, don’t you?”

“Good, then there are two of us. I am hopelessly lost in your eyes.” Stiles narrowed his eyes at Peter who just looked at his serenely.

“Oh, you think you are so smart, don’t you?”

“I don’t just think – I know.”

Stiles huffed, the corners of his mouth twitching up. “Alright then.”

Peter’s eyes snapped to him. “You are sure?” The gold was swirling in the blue.

Stiles quirked his brows. Peter shrugged.

“Consent is sexy.”

Stiles barked a laugh, drawing the attention of their nearest tables. He wiped the escaped tears away, suddenly feeling something shift inside him.

Perhaps- perhaps-

“Sure, let’s go with that,” he answered, and smiled.
“Excuse me?” Their waiter was back, looking unsure and apologetic at disturbing them. Stiles looked up in surprise.

“What is it?”

“Two of your bills… they are fake.”

“Fake?!” Stiles yelped, mood dissolving. The man nodded, placing them on the table. Stiles snatched them back before Peter could get a good look at them, squinting at them. He paled. Shit, these were the money from the future. They were printed in the future. Why on earth had he placed them with the rest of the funds?! What had gone in his mind to think-

Well, he probably hadn’t really thought anything back when he-

“Let me get the rest of the bill. It appears we have been scammed earlier,” Peter interjected smoothly, giving the man his credit card. The waiter looked relieved.

“At once, sir. Are you just visiting?” Peter made a noise of agreement. “You should be careful around Vegas then. The money-launderers around here are professional.”

Stiles stuffed the bills into his back pocket, resolving to destroy the evidence as soon as possible.

“Is this common then?” Peter asked. The man shook his head.

“No, quite rare actually. Still, we know what to look for.”

“Of course. The small businesses suffer the most.”

The man left only to come back a minute later. He gave Peter his card back, thanking them again. They left after that, the cool air brushing their faces as they started to trek back to their lodgings.

“I do have one thing I would like to ask you though.”

Stiles tilted his head, gesturing him to go on. Peter cleared his throat.

“I’d like to know if… if this is not happening just because I might remind you of someone else.” Peter looked hesitant for a brief second but then he clarified: “From your past.”

“No,” Stiles said without hesitation. He started to say something more but then stopped and considered his immediate reaction. If he was honest, they – the Peter he had once known and the Peter here – were alike enough for Stiles to sometimes see flashes of the former but that was it. Flashes of someone, a story unravelled and unwritten, a mess of red markers all over. This one, however, the one they were currently filling in-

“No,” Stiles repeated. He squeezed Peter’s hand reassuringly. “You are the only one I am thinking of, the only one I…” Stiles licked his lips, admitting softly, “the only one I have feelings for.” Perhaps it wasn’t love yet, not exactly, but it was close. It was something that crept slowly, so slowly Stiles hadn’t known it was there until it had taken his whole being a willing hostage.

The smile Stiles received was a treasure he hid within his heart.

Perhaps, sometimes, things were just that easy.

“I don’t think I need the medication anymore,” Stiles confessed quietly. Peter’s eyes widened as he made the connection, expression awed as he stared at Stiles.
“I’m honoured.”

Julia, Kate, Peter. Peter, Peter, Peter. His pack. His something.

His anchor.

Stiles closed his eyes and enjoyed the caress on his cheek. With Peter here, Stiles felt like he could do anything. He never wanted to see the heartbroken blue replace the golden shine in Peter’s eyes. He wanted, from the bottom of his heart, that this man before him was happy.

And if what made him happy was Stiles-

And if that also made Stiles happy-

Stiles leaned over and pressed a chaste kiss upon his lover’s lips. It was dry and unassuming, just a brush really, and yet it was something larger than life.

It was a promise; a promise Stiles swore to keep.

And the look in Peter’s eyes as he answered made everything worth it.

***

“You cheated!” Finstock screamed with his face red and hair standing up when Kate and Julia arrived at his location. He was standing away from the tables, thankfully, and away from most of the prying eyes and judging gazes of the people around them – as well as the security guards. Now that Kate was determined to enjoy her evening, she didn’t want to be thrown out by anyone. “You cheated, you- you cheaters!”

“I beg your pardon!” one of the redheads – or leprechauns, as Julia had pointed out, even if they resembled tall and wiry scarecrows more than the green-glad elves from fairy tales – said. “I did not cheat!”

“Yeah,” the other redhead agreed, twisting his long ponytail and popping gum like he was in a teen film from the 80s. “He merely used some of his potluck for himself – which is what he has been advised against since time immemorial.”

“Hey!” the first redhead – Kate was just going to call him Red in her head – yelped, offended. “I didn’t see you complaining before!”

Ponytail shrugged. “You didn’t get caught before. By a human no less.”

“You give me back my money or I am going to show you why life is called life,” Finstock threatened. Or tried to. Kate herself didn’t think he looked particularly dangerous with arms waving like a mad chicken.

Red and Ponytail exchanged a look but only snorted in unison. “Bring it, drunk,” they said, turning back to the man ready to spit them into the depths of hell. Finstock spluttered.

“I like the odds,” Kate inserted cheerfully. The three men turned to her and Julia, Ponytail taking a doubletake at them. “Three against two. No matter how lucky, people will always look down on those threatening women. Especially in such a high-class location as this. I’d be more than happy to oblige though. I’ve been missing me some punching bags lately.”

“Now, now,” Ponytail raised his hands in a universal surrender. He smiled kindly down on them.
“Let’s not get hasty!”

It was Red’s turn to splutter at the quick change in attitude. “You fucker, you just want to get laid!”

Ponytail hushed him, beaming at Julia and bowing in her direction. “Milady, would you be so kind as to tell me your name?”

Julia flushed bright red beside Kate and Ponytail’s expression turned slightly predatory as his eyes traced how deep the blush went. Kate stepped in front of her, her eyes narrowed to slits.

“No,” she stressed. “She would not.”

Red snorted. “You just got rejected by the vicious guard dog, Ned.” Ponytail – Kate didn’t bother registering his name – threw him a dirty look.

“Shut it, Michael.”

“I want my money back!” Finstock bellowed, still just as mad and drunk, interrupting everyone. Kate grinned sharply.

“You heard the man. Ditch the gold, fellas, and you’ll live to see another day without a black eye or two.”

“And who is this hero who’ll make us regret we ever crossed you, little girl? Hmm? You?” Red mocked. Kate tilted her head. He wasn’t classically handsome or anything but the dimples in his cheeks gave him a sort of boyish look. He was tall and lean, the same as Ponytail, and while he did have his height and weight going for him-

Kate had taken down worse and no pot of luck would help him out.

She grinned, revealing all her teeth, and Red took an involuntary step back.

“Yes.”

“We could just go on our way if you’ll just give our friend what he is owed,” Julia chimed in. Her smile was genial enough and her cheeks were still pink, but she was playing with her sleeve which Kate knew was hiding some fearsome runes. Even Finstock took a step forward and- Kate blinked. Well, his eyes were clearer than she thought. Maybe he wasn’t as drunk as she thought.

“If you would honour me with a date, milady,” Ponytail said to Julia. She slowly shook her head.

“I’m sorry,” she said sincerely. “You are- um. You’re not my type.” She twisted a curl on her hair, and added again, “I’m sorry.”

Red burst out into a braying laugh.

“Listen to her!” he howled. Ponytail grinded his teeth. “You’re not her type, Edward!”

“I said shut it, Mickey!”

“At least she has good taste!”

Ponytail threw a punch at his friend but Red evaded it last minute, cackling all the while.

“Fucking pothead,” Ponytail grumbled. Red wiped tears from his eyes.
“High on life,” Red agreed. He tilted his head and sent his most charming smile at Julia. “What do you say, sweetheart, would you go out with me?”

“She would not,” Kate asserted. She crossed her arms. “Now give our friend his money back or we’ll take it back.”

“I don’t think so.” Red leaned down, grinning sharply at her. “You’re just not getting lucky tonight.”

Kate looked up and met his eyes, but she didn’t tilt her head, never showing her throat. Red’s eyes narrowed at the deceptively innocent yet predatory stance. She grinned slowly.

“I am more than capable of taking you apart bit by bit,” she said softly, sweetly. Her hand pressed against her thigh and Red’s eyes followed the movement. His eyes widened as he took in the shape of the dagger against her leg. “Never seen a leprechaun inside out before. Julia will probably mend you after I’m done with you but not before our friend here has done his share as well.” The sound Finstock’s knuckles made echoed in the silence left behind Kate’s words. Her grin twisted into something dark.

“And if that’s not enough to convince you, well… our leader and his second-in-command are entirely capable of finding you anywhere and there is nowhere you would be safe from the five of us.”

Ponytail paled suddenly. He quickly tugged at Red and whispered something in his ear. Red scowled. They started a heated argument, at times glancing at the three of them, making sure they weren’t making a move. Julia grabbed Kate’s hand while pressing at one of her runes – one of Stiles’ – and winked as the inaudible whispers were no longer as inaudible.

“Are you stupid? There are five of them if they even–” Red hissed but Ponytail quickly cut him off.

“Are you stupid? She isn’t a wolf but that was a wolf move–”

“Doesn’t mean a–”

“Wolf! They have a wolf! And that knife is a hunter weapon!”

“Hunters and wolves don’t mix together, Ned!”

“They do! They fucking do, and that’s what I’ve–”

“Five is not four, you–”

“They could have added one to their numbers! They could be growing!”

“We have luck on our–”

“And they have a druid called Julia–”

Red suddenly lost the rest of his colour too. Kate and Julia exchanged a puzzled look just in time for Red and Ponytail’s eyes snap onto the glowing rune under Julia’s sleeve.

“Shit,” Red whispered, eyes bulging ever so slightly.

Kate instantly schooled her expression, smirk taking its rightful place over her lips.

“So… what do you say?”
The redheaded duo glanced around but they were effectively cut off by the wall, Finstock and Kate and Julia. Ponytail chuckled a bit shrilly.

“What do you say, we could take you ’round a few tables, yeah? Maybe double your, eh, initial bet, yeah?”

Finstock’s eyes crossed for a moment but he quickly took a sip from his flask – could he even have that here? – and his expression cleared, and his eyes sharpened. Kate frowned.

That was… not how alcohol worked.

“Let’s talk about tripling it,” he said as he rubbed his hands together. Red seemed like he was about to protest but Ponytail jabbed him in the ribs. Julia sent another confused look in Kate’s direction, but she just shrugged, a plan already unfurling in her mind.

Maybe the leprechauns were up for some… fun while they were at it.

***

Stiles and Peter arrived at the hotel before the rest. It was barely nine, so it wasn’t a surprise; Stiles suspected they would come back only after midnight. Peter gave him a quick kiss before saying he would pop by the store nearby to get them something. Stiles suspected wine. Not that he was against that, definitely not.

Especially after what he was about to do.

When he pulled their room’s door close behind him, he took out his phone, selecting one of the only contacts he had. He couldn’t postpone this any longer. The phone rang a couple of times but when it was answered, he could have sagged in relief. At least there was some mercy left in the world.

“The Stilinski residence, Claudia on the phone.”

“It’s Stiles.”

“Stiles!” Claudia exclaimed, joy evident in her voice. She sounded so much like his- well, his mom that his heart hurt. “I haven’t heard from you in a while! You’re not really keeping up with our deal, are you? Oh! I heard from Noah that you are in Beacon Hills! Why haven’t you come to see me yet?”

“We were only there for a few days for Kate’s exams and left when they were over,” Stiles explained, leaving out all the drama.

“Oh… that’s too bad then,” Claudia said. He could hear her pout from state over. “How are you doing?”

“I’m- I’m fine. Brilliant, actually.” Stiles flopped on the bed, bouncing a little. “Peter and I, uh, we are going out now.”

“That’s wonderful! You have to bring him around soon! I don’t think I’ve ever met him before. I’d love to meet the person who captured your heart!” Claudia gushed. Stiles winced.

“That’s… actually why I am calling.”

There was a pause on the line. “Is everything really fine, Stiles?”

“It is. More than fine. And- and- yeah. Is Stiles okay?”
“Stiles? Yes, I just put him to bed an hour ago. Been a bit wild, my little Mischief, tiring himself to bed early.” Claudia sounded fond, the soft love she felt for her child twisting something inside Stiles. His shoulders also sagged in relief. Stiles was alright. His inability to check on him hadn't caused anything bad.

“I think you need to keep an eye on him.”

“...What do you mean?”

“I am pretty sure he partly awakened a few days ago.”

Claudia gasped. “But I- when you met? I haven’t felt anything from him!” Stiles heard rustling from the line.

“That’s why I said partly. And I-” I think you might be cured, he thought, but he couldn’t voice it. What if he was wrong? His gut told him he wasn’t but what if he was? “Never mind. There was a thing and when we touched I think he may have used my power to do something.”

“Do what? Stiles!”

“It’s not important. What is important is that you need to focus on him. Not- not me.”

There was another pause.

“What do you mean?” Claudia repeated, quiet, uncertain. Stiles closed his eyes, his back hitting the sheets.

“I can’t rely on you,” Stiles said finally. The line was quiet. “I realised after Noah- well. When it’s all said and done, you are not my mother, you’re little Stiles’ mom, and you only had the potential to-” to become mine. He took a breath and forced himself to go on. This needed to be said, for both of their sakes. “But I already had my time with you. Little Stiles needs you more than I do. He needs you now. Not later, now. He was hurting from thinking that you would die, that he was being replaced, you know?” He heard a wet gasp on the other end of the line. His mouth pressed into a thin line. He hated making anyone – especially her – cry.

“I love you, and I will always love you. But you’re not my mother. And- and I know I will have to do this without you, I can’t mix you up with what is going to happen because I can’t risk your life and the lives of your family. I can’t be the reason Stiles- no. I won’t, I will not, play with him, his childhood, his life.” He could see in his mind the tears that were flowing down the pale cheeks he had inherited from her.

“You have a chance at doing better with him. You have a life. But that life is not with me.” He drew a shaky breath to gather his strength and- “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t- I don’t understand,” Claudia choked out. “What are you- Stiles, what are you saying?”

Stiles licked his lips. “I’m saying that you need to focus on Stiles. I- I have my pack now. They make me happy. They understand me. They ground me. And you know what, I don’t even leak anymore? All because of Stiles. He’s going to become better than me, so much better. He’ll never have all these doubts holding him back. But for that, for him to reach that, he needs you. You and Noah both. Maybe others as well but-

“Me? I need to let go of my past, to move forward. If I want to- I need this. I am not going to forget anything, of who I am. But I need to move forward because if I’m stuck in the past, then I cannot give the person I- I-” Stiles choked up. He swallowed, or tried to. His mouth was dry as the desert.
“Perhaps someday we can start over but we both need to understand that I am not your son.”

“No.” Stiles’ tone was sharp as he cut Claudia off. He licked his lips, wincing at the wounded gasp he heard. “This is exactly what I was talking about. That name belongs to your son. My name is Stiles Finstock now. Nothing else. I am… grateful for all your help, helping me get up on my feet and push me forward, listening to me. I know I am being very much selfish here. But, please. Be there for Stiles.”

The line was quiet, but Stiles could hear some muffled noises from the other side. He took a deep, steady breath before he-

“Thank you. I’m sorry.”

He ended the call.

The phone fell on the bed, his limp hand falling with it. It rang a few times – and a few times on top of that – but after minutes of not answering the caller gave up. Whether of her own volition or not, he didn’t know. Not that it was any of his business anymore. Stiles stared at the ceiling and absently counted the cracks he found there.

It hurt.

But it was necessary.

He liked Claudia. She was bright and sunny, the way he remembered his mother being when she was still herself. But that was in the past. He knew no one would demand him to forget, and he wouldn’t. His life, his memories and pack and everything that made him who he was, all these things would always be part of him.

But he couldn’t do this. He had awakened something in Stiles, far before his time. Perhaps, since Claudia hadn’t sensed anything, it was nothing serious. But the kid needed her more than Stiles did. He had been lost when he first came into the past and he was grateful… but, maybe…

Perhaps in order to save her, he had to lose her as well.

And then there was the matter of his pack.

Stiles turned to his side, watching the city lights from the window. He didn’t have the courage to completely enter his mindscape yet. He was still skirting around, playing at the edge with the new bonds he had, his back to where he knew lingered the broken memories of what once was. But he would do that as well to settle his inner demons. He would get better. He would become a person who could devote himself to his pack, a person he could be proud of again.

A person who could love with all his heart and with no doubts in mind. Because while he could love his pack, he didn’t love himself. And while that wasn’t necessary for him to devote his life to his loved ones, he knew he needed to get better. He knew he needed to heal.

But that meant closing a chapter of his life and starting a new one.

It might not be forever, like he told Claudia. They could turn a new leaf, become friends… but not when the past was lingering in front of them. Not when a person his own age was trying to parent him when she didn’t know him, didn’t know what he had gone through – not really.
Stiles felt someone embrace him, waking him from his thoughts, the rich scent of all things Peter filling the air around him. The arms around him anchored him tightly to the present.

“…How much did you hear?”


It didn’t offer any particular answers, but it wasn’t that Stiles was particularly looking for one. Perhaps… Perhaps Peter could be the one who could understand what Stiles had done. Now and before.

Peter had always had a knack for understanding things far beyond what others could.

“I have vintage wine and treats,” Peter announced behind him. Stiles blinked.

“Treats?”

“Mmm-hm.”

“…What treats?”

Stiles could feel the wicked grin against the nape of his neck.

“Now that? That depends entirely on you.”

A surprised laugh was startled out of Stiles, and he turned around to face Peter. Just as he thought, the familiar smirk was present as Peter was languidly spread over the sheets. Stiles licked his lips, and found eyes following the movement.

“How about we start with the wine and see where we’ll go from that?”

The smirk on Peter’s lips turned into something more genuine.

“Consent is sexy,” he said sagely, nodding along, and Stiles fell on the bed, chuckling helplessly.

Gratefully distracted as he was, Stiles never saw how Peter glanced at the phone lying at the other end of the bed, contemplative look in his eyes.

***

“What on earth vomited on our car?” Stiles asked, longsuffering expression taking over his face. Kate was still giggling, had been all morning, and hungover-looking Julia was looking greener than ever. She had smudges of green paint on her, like a clover painted on her cheek, and it looked like it was winking when she yawned. Bobby, on the other hand, looked proud as fuck.

“I got our car painted!” he announced with a bright grin, arms sweeping over the… monstrosity. There was nothing else that could be described it as. Stiles stared. Their minivan- the colours. They reminded him of…

Wait a minute.

“If anyone makes a joke about me being the dog of the group, I am going to feed your remains to you while you still live,” Peter said flatly. Stiles nodded faintly.

He didn’t want to know where he fell in the scale of Mystery Inc. but, honestly, he didn’t want to know. Although he at least knew he wasn’t Shaggy, that dubious honour went to Bobby. Crap.
He was Scooby, wasn’t he?

Guess it was time for all the dog jokes Stiles had made coming to bite him in the ass. Well, at least—

_He was the Alpha._

He was still cackling as they left the city behind, driving towards Missouri, with his Daphne on the wheel and Shaggy and Fred teasing Velma about some redhead or another.

He opened his little red book and, with a smile, burrowed into his notes.

There were mysteries to be solved.
In which the Code gets rewritten

Chapter Notes

Been a while! Hi hi, I hope your year has started in good spirits! In my defence(?) I only started working on this primarily in January, cheers to finishing my thesis and publishing it online (!!!) and writing Body and Soul in about a week or so in December. All that writing kind of forced me to recover my inspiration during winter hols. But here we are! I hope you enjoy :)

(Can you believe this story is already a year old? Whoa!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I don’t like mysteries anymore!” Stiles yelled as he ran away from the angry monster of the day. “I thought gryphons were native to Europe!”

“They are!” Julia told him helpfully, almost tripping over her feet and taking Stiles with her. If not for Peter, they would have been run over.

“Get a grip,” he grunted under their combined weight. He pushed them forward, sending them tumbling but on their feet again, and Stiles just knew the door would cause them trouble. It would be just their luck. It was open for god’s sake. Open doors always meant trouble and mischief and harm-the gryphon let out a screech and flapped its large wings, causing them to stumble. The moment Stiles regained his balance, Peter swore.

“It just swung itself shut with a click!” He sent an accusing look at Stiles. “Believed it was locked now, did you?!”

Stiles groaned. The now closed door was getting nearer at an alarming rate, as was the gryphon. “My magic doesn’t work like that!”

“Your pessimism will kill us!” Julia shrieked.

“It’s not my fault!”

The door suddenly burst into flames. A mad cackle escaped from the other side and they heard a scream ordering them to “dodge!” They did, with Stiles throwing himself into Peter who fell with a resounding ‘oof’ and Julia actually tripping down in her haste. Not a moment later, a spear burst through the fire, hitting the gryphon’s wing. The screech hurt Stiles’ ears, leaving them ringing, but he supposed he was let off lightly when he heard a pained whimper from under him.

“Julia!” Stiles yelled, trying to scramble back up but managing only to tangle himself more into the mess of his and Peter’s limbs.

“On it!”

Vines burst from the ground, twisting until the gryphon could no longer advance at the rate it had. Enraged, it started stomping on them, and Julia’s eyes widened as the creature’s sheer power started overwhelming her spell. The spear cluttered on the ground, hitting the wall nearby them, when the gryphon rose to its hindlegs and roared. Stiles saw the opportunity as it presented itself.
He grabbed the discarded weapon.

“Peter! Kate! Distract it!” he ordered, finally untangling himself and standing. Kate rushed through the burning wood, her — their — gasoline container and torch with her. With a low growl Peter jumped up as well. Bobby cackled, throwing a bottle at the gryphon, coating its chest with wine and shards of glass.

“White wine is for sissies!” Bobby laughed. Kate swiped at the wet patch, the feathers catching fire, while Peter pounced, slashing at the hindlegs. The screech that followed disoriented Peter and he barely managed to dodge the kick the gryphon aimed at him.

“Julia!” Stiles reached the place she stood, sweat sliding down her forehead while attempting to hold her spell. “Let it go and enchant the spear!”

Julia blinked. Her head snapped at the gryphon’s chest which barely had a scratch despite the burning feathers. She nodded hesitantly.

A log flew past them, hitting the creature between its eyes. It took a step back, shaking its head. Bobby cackled from behind them.

“Do it! We’ll hold it back!” Kate cheered, throwing some of her gasoline on the creature’s feathers.

“Piercing rune, enhanced by fire!” Peter yelled. Julia nodded, more self-assured.

“Ready! Dropping it- now!”

The effect was instant. As the vines died there was nothing holding the gryphon back. Kate swiped at it with her torch, setting it on fire. Peter swore, dodging underneath it and clawing at its stomach as best as he could while avoiding getting trampled. Julia painted the necessary runes, digging into the drying leftovers of her ink bottle, shattered by her impact to the ground. With whispered chants, the pointy end glowed and Stiles tightened his grip on the shaft.

“Get out of the way!” he roared and then the chest of the creature was just there and Stiles threw it—

And the gryphon’s last dying wail echoed around the ruins.

“Merry Christmas, motherfucker!” Kate cheered.

Bobby poked his head through the fire-eaten remains, dragging the shaken guy whose large farm house they had just half demolished with him. He brandished a broken bottle in celebration. Knowing Bobby, he probably didn’t even care he had stolen it… or broken it. Stiles usually did not either, less for him to pay, but—

“We’re not getting paid, are we?” Stiles asked, longsuffering. The one time a guy approached them with about the gryphon infestation at his ranch and this happens.

“Oh, we are,” Kate said cheerfully, twirling her still flaming torch. The guy paled even further.

They left a couple hundred bucks and three wine bottles richer.

“But it’s white!” Bobby whined. Stiles just groaned.

“Please, just drive us out of here,” he begged Peter. Peter just laughed at him, the ass.

“White!”
“Shut up!”

***

“So Gerard murdered my mother. I want to get even.”

Stiles choked on his milkshake and spit out what he hadn’t managed to swallow down the wrong pipe. Chocolate and strawberry bits flew to the glass and started to slide down. They left muddy tracks after them. Peter wrinkled his nose.

“You’re cleaning that.”

Kate arched her brows. “Why are you so surprised?” she asked while Stiles coughed. “You were the one who expected the worst of him.”

“Let me just progress this! It’s not a conclusion one jumps to every day!” Stiles said hoarsely. He took another gulp of his shake to clear his throat.

Bobby stared at Kate. “Is this a band of broken homes or something?” he demanded. “I’m not adopting the rest of you. I have my hands full with the junior here.”

Stiles looked horrified. “I’d almost rather you call me by my given name than- than that,” he said. The disgust he felt was something awful.

“You mean Stiles isn’t your first name?” Julia asked curiously.

Peter suddenly grinned. “We can play a game. I’ll start. Stiles’ given name starts with… an M?”

“How do you get an M from Stiles?” Kate demanded. “I’m calling for an E!”

“Why is no one claiming the S? I’m taking the S! The S is mine!” Julia said hurriedly.

Stiles huffed. “Why is everyone more interested in my name – which, thanks a lot, consider it dead – than Kate’s revelation?!”

“It’s Gerard.” Peter shrugged, switching the line. Someone blew their horn behind them to which he just flipped the bird through the mirror. “And her heart stuttered when we left Beacon Hills.” He peered at the road sign, ignoring Stiles’ indignant response. “We’ll be in St. Louis in a couple of hours,” he announced.

“Also we are meeting my brother there,” Kate said. Stiles lowered his drink just in case.

“Your brother,” he said flatly. Kate grinned.

“And his wife and my littlest cousin! I’m so excited!”

Stiles felt a headache coming. His temples thrummed with anxious energy.

“Let’s start from the beginning,” he begged. He snagged his notebook from where he had thrown it hours earlier – under his seat, apparently – and dug around for his pen. He tapped the blank page before writing down Gerard, killed Kate’s mom? “How do you know, why, what the hell?”

Kate sighed, her flippant attitude vanishing as she sobered. The hand that had sneaked towards the drink held precariously between Stiles’ knees lowered.

“My mother’s necklace, the protective spells – they were old. And still effective.” Stiles nodded in
agreement. Kate grimaced. “My mother wore it when she was killed but it was I who was left alive.”

Stiles paused, nodded absently, and noted it all down.

“I can see why you might think that,” he mumbled, tapping the paper again.

“Think? I know-”

“Yes, Kate, he’s a bad egg, rotten and smelly, you don’t need to convince me of that.” Stiles interrupted Kate’s angry response. He held his hand up when she still tried to speak, quietly asking for a silence. For a moment the only noise in the car were the echoes of those that came from the cars before them.

“Did he mention any plans? Reasons?” he finally asked. There had to be something there. If he killed the previous matriarch and his wife – and Stiles didn’t have any doubts over Gerard having it in himself – then there had to be something bigger in picture than merely gaining power. Especially since he had started moulding Kate into his image. Stiles didn’t know the Argent history prior to the Hale fire well – or at all really – but Gerard never did anything for ‘just because’.

Kate frowned in thought. “Nothing really,” she had to concede. “I may have goaded him a little.”

“When aren’t you?” Peter snorted. Kate stuck a tongue at him.

“To him, supernatural are, well, you know, so I was like, that’s bullshit, so when he started spouting his opinions, I may have told him to fuck off and he just- just told me my mother would be disappointed in me, but I argued, like, what did he know? No matter the reasons, he was still the absentee, yeah? He just got so mad after that.” She paused, sucking in her cheeks.

“He said something like- like he made sure I was up for a brighter future than this and he wanted me to stay, right? To become who I was meant to be, instead of this runaway thing I have going on. He doesn’t trust you, like, at all, not that that’s any news-”

Stiles agreed silently.

“And when- when he gave the necklace to me he said that- that ‘it was only meant for those worthy of it’. That I shouldn’t bring shame to our family like- like my mother, like she had. All I could hear was- I just- I mean, I’m just paraphrasing but the way he said it.” Her words suddenly cut off. When Julia offered her a bottle of water, she downed half of it in just a few gulps.

Stiles inclined his head thoughtfully. “He is smart, unfortunately,” he said. “He said nothing concrete. What you said wouldn’t hold in any court.”

“But-!”

“Kate, he said ‘court’,” Peter chuckled. “We are not in one, are we?”

“Well, no,” she said. She crossed her arms. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“We don’t need convincing. You said he killed her, we believe you. Now we just have to make the world believe it too.”

Julia nudged Kate, smiling at her gently. Kate flushed, pleased smile spreading on her face. Bobby snorted.

“You guys are disgusting,” he declared and took a swig. “This Gerard fellow sounds fantastic. A real
garbage person. He must have mice in his pants instead of balls. May he forever be unable to quench
the itch.”

Kate choked on pure air before bursting into helpless giggles while Julia looked horrified at the mere
thought.

“What does your brother have to do with anything though?” Stiles had to ask. He didn’t particularly
want to meet with Chris. Not that he didn’t like the man, he had once upon a time, but this Chris
came Victoria, the woman who was made of nightmares, and- and Allison.

“He needs to know,” Kate said. She sighed, playing with a strand of her hair. “He’s not particularly
close to Gerard but- and I need to talk to him. Face-to-face.”

“It’s better to have both heirs at our side,” Peter commented.

Bobby leaned against the window. “You are all insane,” he said and hiccupped. “Insane, I tell you.
Or your families are. Which one of you were dropped as a baby? How many of you have daddy
issues?”

“Sister issues.” Peter raised his hand. When someone made a move to pass them he suddenly
switched lanes, making it impossible. Another bird was flipped. Stiles snickered.

“Friend issues,” Julia said with a wan smile.

“I’m the daddy issues, clearly.” Kate shrugged. She pointed at Stiles. “And he’s just a pile of
everything in between.”

“Hey!” he exclaimed, pretending to be offended. “No daddy issues here, thank you very much!
Mostly resolved mommy issues, maybe.”

“And you’re just a mess.” Kate grinned at Bobby who just snorted, raising his bottle.

“I’ll drink to that.”

***

The building they stood in front of seemed… normal enough, Stiles thought, as he stared at the grey
tiles of the hunter library. Centre. Stronghold? On the west side of the city and in a relatively calm
neighbourhood too. There was a park nearby, giving the area even more deceptively relaxed outlook.
It was a few days until New Years so they definitely made the deadline.

He just wasn’t too sure if he was too appreciative of that though.

“When is your brother getting here again?” Stiles asked as they stopped on the street. The inside of
the place reminded Stiles of an office building as all he could see a receptionist and white walls
through the glass. She was definitely a hunter though, there was no way she wasn’t. He’d bet his
pants that she wasn’t the only first defence they had either.

“Tomorrow,” Kate answered. Her tone was just as enthusiastic as Stiles felt. They shared a miserable
look between them. Peter rolled his shoulders. He seemed utterly unimpressed.

“You were the one who decided to challenge a high-ranking hunter,” he said. “Suffer the
consequences.”

“She started it,” Stiles whined as he turned around with unnecessary flourish. “She’s the one who put me
in charge of her!” He dramatically pointed at Kate.

Kate placed a hand over her heart and gasped, “Why, I never!”

Julia giggled behind her hand. Kate shot her an exaggerated wink which earned her a light shove. Bobby just swayed dangerously with his feet steady on the ground and his gaze flicked from the doors to ground.

“So you got to get the lover boy in without much of a fuzz, yeah?” he said behind his bottle, rolling his shoulders.

“I resent the nickname."

“It’s merely the truth!” Julia piped up.

“Ugh.” Peter looked disgusted but he didn’t bother denying it. Stiles felt heat at the back of his neck and he bumped into Peter, merely gaining an exasperated eyeroll for his efforts. Peter’s expression was quickly replaced with alarm, however, and Julia audibly gasped. A sudden crash came from behind Stiles and he almost tripped in his haste to face the building again. There Bobby was, standing with the remnants of his wine bottle littered around him.

Bobby huffed, letting go of the neck of his broken bottle and the noise it made as it hit the ground and shattered was loud even with the traffic around. Passers-by stopped on their feet and gawked.

“Bottles just aren’t made the same,” Bobby grinned with another sway. “See? No fuzz needed, fuzzy fuzzies!”

“What the fuck,” Kate cursed in amazement. Stiles just shook his head. What did it mean that he was almost getting used to these surprises?

“Let’s go,” he said as he stepped around the shards and the hunters who had swarmed the entrance by now and definitely had been guarding the place from somewhere inside. Stiles sometimes wished he was wrong with these things. The doorway was imbued with mountain ash, he noted as he closed in, with traces of magic mixed in. That was a bit of a surprise, yet he didn’t doubt if they could do it. He stopped and pretended to impatiently tap the ground as he felt for the strength of the barriers. He needed just a small crack that he could use.

Hunters rarely if ever used magic themselves. After all, they’d stoop down on druids’ level, even if they had the inclination. Therefore, there had to be a failsafe there, just in case…

Found it.

He hid his grin. “Well, hurry up! Hunter Caldwell is awaiting!”

The hunters that had carefully surrounded him as they were cleaning the shards twitched and made way. There were glares involved. Kate tugged at Julia and together they marched in, Julia nodding at the hunters politely while Kate pretended to ignore them. Stiles heard one of the women mumble “Argent” and nod in Kate’s direction, deliberately ignoring her companion.

Peter stepped up next to him, glancing at the doorway before meeting Stiles’ eyes. When Stiles held out his hand, Peter grabbed it without hesitation, despite the apprehension that tinged their bond. Together they walked past the threshold of the fortress – and it was one, there was no doubt about it – into its depths, only the tingle of the wards and ash glossing over them, the mess of glass and wine tainting the ground and hiding the shudders the shadows made underneath them.
“…you for coming here, Heir Argent,” the receptionist said when Stiles and Peter walked up to where the rest of their company were standing. The receptionist looked them over, feigning disinterest, and inclined her head at Stiles. “Tribunal hunter Caldwell is in a meeting right now but will be able to meet with you and your mentor during dinner hours. We will have rooms made for your company and would ask them to-”

“We are not going to be confined to those… rooms, are we?” Kate interjected. Her head was held high as she stared down at the receptionist. The woman didn’t even blink.

“Of course not, Heir Argent,” she answered calmly. “This building is a sanctuary for all hunters. However-”

“Actually, we have the permission to use the library while we are visiting.” Stiles tilted his head. His grin was all teeth against the bland look he himself received. “I trust it wouldn’t be too much of a hassle? I think you’ll find out that the request has been approved.”

The receptionist – Inna, her tag read – didn’t even twitch.

“Adjacent Argent Stiles, you may be-” she started. Stiles quickly glanced at Kate who crossed her arms in a clear message and mouthed something. He blinked but forced himself to face Inna again. “-mentoring Heir Argent but that does not-”

“Finstock,” he echoed Kate’s unvoiced words. His eyes widened as he caught her meaning.

Inna blinked, the first reaction Stiles had seen her make. “Pardon?”

“My name, it’s Stiles Finstock.”

Inna turned to her books, forgoing her computer – Stiles didn’t even want to know how slow it had to be – in the process. She swiftly skimmed the pages before turning back to Stiles. “There is no mention of a last name in the books. Tribunal hunter Caldwell did not provide one when she registered you. Would you like to make an amendment to the records?”

Registered.

Shannon had registered him. As a hunter.

It made sense, Stiles supposed. Peter squeezed his hand and Stiles felt himself relax on a reflex. Kate hadn’t mentioned it as a possibility, but they probably should have expected it with his cover story and subsequent mentoring. Not that he still liked how his name had been plastered on the records without his consent.

He glanced at Kate again. She quickly nodded her head, disguised as sneeze. Or that’s how Stiles interpreted it anyway.

“Yes, thank you,” he said instead. If it actually had been a sneeze, well, too late. He smiled genially down at her. Inna scribbled something down.

“I will inform others of this mistake immediately, Hunter Finstock.” That was fast. Good or bad? Could go either way, he supposed. Bobby suddenly clapped his shoulder, beaming at him, and Stiles could still hear the jarring ‘junior’ echo in his ears.

He nodded while trying to hide his wincing. “My thanks. And my request?” The woman smiled thinly, even as she flipped her book.
“Approved, Hunter Finstock. It is, however, noted here that your company includes supernatural creatures.” Ah, there was the disgust he had been waiting for. “Would you mind identifying them for me?”

“I would mind, as a matter of fact,” Stiles said. No way he was doing that. “It is of no importance to the Tribunal unless we break rules, isn’t that right? After all, Hunter Caldwell gave us her permission.”

Inna blinked slowly.

“Yes,” she said finally, and then gestured to their left. “You can find the stairs on the left side of the second corridor. If you and Heir Argent would arrive to the reception at 6pm sharp, Tribunal hunter Caldwell would be willing to meet with you as per her instructions.”

That would give them five hours. If they combined their efforts-

“That would be acceptable.”

Inna nodded and made a note in her books.

“Then I shall make haste with your arrangement,” she merely said, and then continued a tad louder, “Good day, Heir Argent, Hunter Finstock.”

And then she picked up her phone and ignored them. Stiles glanced at Kate who tilted her head towards the direction Inna had pointed at.

“Follow me,” she said cheerfully and breezed past the hunters still mingling around. Stiles was pretty sure they hadn’t been close enough to eavesdrop – his pack made a pretty impressive wall – but Inna had made certain people heard who they were with her last announcement. It left Stiles wondering again.

They walked to the corridor Inna had described them and Kate walked in front of them, thinly smiling at the hunter walking down the staircase and disappearing into the hall they came from with a mere, “Regards to your father, little Argent.”

“That went well,” Kate said quietly as they climbed the stairs. She threw a grin over her shoulder. “Hunter Finstock, eh?”


“It also practically took any protection my clan might’ve given you away,” Kate said. “Not that it ever meant much.”

“That still sounds bad,” Julia said pensively, but Kate shook her head.

“It might but-

“-it might also be a good thing,” Peter interjected. Julia turned to him, curious.

“Why do you say so?” she asked. Kate pushed the door on top of the stairs open and peeked in. Seeing no one, she motioned for them all to follow her as she stepped inside.

“Because if he’s not seen as an Argent, he can’t be used by the Argents,” Peter said once inside as well. “The most problems it could cause is that with an unknown name like that, Stiles is basically a nobody in the face of the Tribunal.” Stiles hummed in agreement, examining the room they were in.
It was quite small and merely held a closet and a couple of mostly empty shelves. On the other wall there was a door that probably led to the real library.

“Exactly,” Kate said, and then elaborated, “It’s true that the hunters may look down on him as a, well, ‘freelancer’, but at least no one can truly lord anything over him or restrict him, thus us. In case Gerard tries to use his status over him, well, Gerard never made it official, it seems.”

Kate shrugged her jacket off and tied it over her hips. “Shannon’s not an Argent and could only make Stiles adjacent to my clan due to her power. Easy to make, easy to break.”

“That still seems unnecessarily difficult,” Julia admitted. Kate shrugged again.

“The Tribunal trumps over the clans but the clans trump over the Tribunal in their private matters. Nothing was official official since Gerard didn’t induct him. And now that he’s taken Finstock as his name, it could be seen like he’s starting his own clan—”

“Whoa there!” Stiles suddenly whirled around. “I am not creating any new hunter clans!”

Kate rolled her eyes. “Of course not,” she said a little condescendingly. Stiles glowered at her. “But they don’t know that. So—”

“So we can take advantage of that,” Peter said, and nodded in approval. Kate flashed him a grin.

“Got it in one!”

Stiles shook his head, taking a few steps back even as Peter asked Kate for some detail or other over creating a new clan. He didn’t want any role in that even if he would agree to almost anything to oust Gerard from his position of power.

Almost.

He might have to draw his line to this if they insisted. He had a pack. That was enough.

Stiles blinked as he realised that Bobby had been suspiciously silent through all of that. He looked around, finding him standing relatively close to the door, back to them. His fingers were twitching, and he was cracking his neck. Stiles stepped back, leaving Peter and Kate to hash out how they could milk the most out of the situation with Julia throwing in her few cents as well.

“So are you alright?” Stiles asked quietly as he reached him. Bobby scoffed but his eyes flew to watch the shadows in the corner.

“The question sounds like a question.”

“Because it was one.”

“Oh hoh hoo, right. Yes it was, yes, yes.”

Stiles frowned at the nervous ticks. His eyes widened.

“Bobby, your—”

“So what are we searching for?” Bobby asked loudly. He ignored everything and everyone as he barged through the door, and when Stiles followed him, he found him sneezing into a dusty selection of books. There were a few hunters watching him, offended and horrified. Bobby eyed the books critically before wiping his nose on his sleeve and pulling out a leaflet made of old paper.
A look passed Bobby’s eyes, leaving behind only tired lines. Stiles opened his mouth to say something, anything, but the moment passed as the rest of the pack entered, Kate and Peter still furiously throwing ideas around.

“So what are we searching for?” Julia asked, echoing Bobby’s question. Her eyes were trailing the large room filled with all kinds of books and scrolls, delight shining through her like the sun. “The Nemeta, right?”

“Pirates!” Bobby cheered suddenly. The hunters glared at them. One even shushed so loud it sounded like a hiss.

“Yeah. Any references to the Nemeta and the telluric currents, please,” Stiles said after a beat, keeping his voice down. “Any and all references to magical corruption as well. I suspect those are very spread around, but if you find any, write them down.”

Stiles licked his lips and then nodded. “Kate and I have to leave in less than five hours, so just- keep safe. Move in one group, whatever happens.”

Julia nodded with barely hidden glee, the enthusiast. Kate and Peter---were ignoring him. Great.

“You’d think they had been raised in a barn,” he commented idly. Julia snickered even as she followed Bobby to the shelves.

“Underground caves, remember?” Peter said absently. He stiffened for a mere second before tilting his head towards Stiles. Stiles blinked.

“I did listen,” Kate insisted. “The- the Nem- something or another. See! I listened!”

Stiles sighed and rolled his eyes. “The Nemeta and the telluric currents. You still have paper, right? You better, I sacrificed pages from my notebook. Good, I see them. Now, chop chop!”

He watched them spread around the wide room before wandering to a section of his own. He traced the spines, glancing at the names. Hidden somewhere in the room had to be a key to solve the mystery of Beacon Hills. There just had to be. If this trip turned out to be for nothing… He shivered at the memory of cackling laughter, vicious riddles, and game pieces falling to the ground, breathless and still.

They might actually be doomed.

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Kate groaned. She wasn’t too fond of research. She had always been more hands-on learner than the kind of girl who would hit the books the moment she had spare time. Sure, she liked reading well enough but she didn’t get the same feeling of satisfaction from finishing a book than when she hit a bullseye at the range.

A note on telluric currents caught her eye, something about them attracting supernatural creatures like nymphs and sprites. Oh, a double hit! Giant trees like the Nemeta were more likely to grow around telluric currents – or perhaps they were the cause of them, Kate mused as she scribbled it down. No, probably not. She’d jot it down too, just in case.

As she lifted her pen, Kate frowned at her piece of paper. She had only managed to find less than dozen mentions in the hours they had spent looking.
“Hey ho,” Finstock mumbled from where he was lounging in a chair, swinging his legs like a little kid. He had at some point started reading three books at once, muttering to himself and almost tearing pages off, before Stiles had escorted him to his seat. Finstock had forlornly waved his flask, the one he never left behind. Now that she thought of it, she hadn’t seen him drink in a while. They were in a library but that sort of thing hadn’t stopped him before. She squinted her eyes at him.

Finstock suddenly beamed and waved at Julia. It took a while – a long while, Kate snorted – for her to notice but when she did, Finstock just smiled serenely, and told her that, “Memories are not the end of all things.” What the hell that was about, Kate didn’t know, and the puzzled look on Julia’s face claimed the same. Finstock then started chuckling to himself before he tipped his chair back, almost throwing off his balance.

Kate shook her head. There was something off about him. Peter had told her and Julia that Finstock was human, no doubt about it, but that if there was anything else about him, all the alcohol drenched the scent.

“It’s seeped into his very being,” Peter had said, disgust twisting the corners of his mouth down. It didn’t seem to be directed at Finstock though, but rather the nightly overdose he was taking of his chosen poison. Kate couldn’t see why he would but, well… it wasn’t that any of them had had an easy life. According to the statistics, Finstock probably hadn’t won the lottery either.

Kate took a peek at Peter’s paper and saw two pages full of notes. She blanched. Hers barely made half a page and with his handwriting-! And there were so many, too many, more shelves to go through. She checked the time and her face fell. Fuck. Half an hour and then Shannon-

She didn’t want to go even as she did and she hated feeling this torn. It was just Shannon. She was the aunt she never had, the one who always smiled at her whenever she came to visit her mother. The one who made training more fun than work. Kate had got so many laughs at her mother and Shannon bickering about the smallest of things and-

Kate sighed. She had longed for a friend like that for the longest of times because… well, they just worked so well together. Her mother’s quiet and strict nature against Shannon’s wildness had been a thing to see, their fury a thousand strong. Kate had heard tales of their adventures her whole life and she- she had just wanted to experience it all. Find her own Elizabeth because, she had to face it, her temperament resembled Shannon’s more than her mother’s, something Shannon had often taken pride in while her mother had shaken her head with that rare curl of smile on her lips.

But something had broken within Shannon after Kate’s mother died, and she had become obsessed with finding whoever or whatever had killed Elizabeth. It was even the reason she had been in California when Stiles had walked into Kate’s life. She wondered what Shannon would say if she found out what Gerard did. Would Kate become the matriarch before she even graduated from high school? Could Shannon even do anything since it was the Argent business? Knowing her, she might even ignore her position and rain down her wrath without a care of it caused a rift in the community.

Kate wasn’t sure what she thought of that happening but liked to think she knew herself well enough, and she just knew that if someone ever wronged her that badly enough-

Well.

She would claw back from the grave just to finish them off, no matter the consequences to herself.

“Kate.”

Kate straightened her back and turned around to see Stiles standing there. There was a dark look on
his face even as he tucked his journal away. He didn’t look any happier than he had earlier, arguably even less so.

“We don’t want to make them wait, do we?” he said lightly but his words were searching. Kate blinked before she inclined her head. She suddenly remembered that she was the expert now. She was the one who knew the protocol by heart, the one who knew those they would face. Stiles’ experience in the supernatural world might be more extensive but Kate was a born hunter.

“No, we don’t,” she agreed. Stiles offered her a smile to which she answered.

That’s why they were a team, a pack. She didn’t have to go through things alone. She might not have an Elizabeth for herself but she had something better, she thought privately, even if her words tasted slightly bitter. She wasn’t the hunter her mother probably wanted her to be – nor Shannon and certainly not Gerard. She was Kate, no ‘just’ about her.

She lifted her chin, stepping around Stiles to hand her paper to Julia. She was grabbed to a quick hug which warmed her to the core. She ruffled Finstock’s hair while Peter drew Stiles in for a quick kiss – and fuck, they were cute, certainly worth the wait – and his loopy eyes targeted her.

“Your soul is fire,” he told her as his hand reached to touch the air around her. Kate blinked again. Right.

“Sure,” she said. Finstock’s eyes sharpened briefly before the haziness returned.

“The coal beneath your cinders is what makes you.”

Riiiiiiiiight.

“Stiles, you ready?” she called out instead of answering. It was weird how Finstock turned drunk sober. Stiles reluctantly let go of Peter who leaned in to steal one last taste. Kate scoffed and went over, taking hold of one of Stiles’ arms and dragging him with her.

“Be careful!” Stiles called hastily, and Peter rolled his eyes before they disappeared from view.

“Peter’s an adult, he knows how to handle himself,” she said. Stiles turned around in her grip, walking out after her.

“I know that,” he answered, even as he threw one last look behind.

“You worry too much.”

“Gee, thanks, I wonder why.”

Kate pinched him in retaliation. Stiles yelped. He glared at her as they descended the stairs, rubbing at the aching patch of skin.


“My skin is a high maintenance bitch, I’ll have you know.”

“That’s where all the funds I earned went to?”

“You mean the bucks you poached?”

“Earned our wages,” she replied sagely. Stiles snorted.
“One way to put it.”

“Don’t be such a bore!”

“Never said I disapproved.”

They exchanged a quick grin before entering the entrance hall. The receptionist was still there, I-something, no last name. She reminded Kate of the Floridan clans but she wasn’t entirely sure if she actually belonged to them. They rarely ventured inland from the east coast.

Stiles peered at the clock above the desk. “Five minutes.”

Kate kicked the air but didn’t answer. It was already darkish outside. The streetlights distorted the view but it didn’t seem any shit was raining down.

The elevator dinged from the other side and out walked a man and two women, none of them Shannon. Kate did recognise two of them however. They were also from the Tribunal. She shoved Stiles, nodding at them.

“O’Leary and Ridgewell. The Latina I don’t know.”

Stiles frowned. “Why does O’Leary sound familiar?”

“That’s Dick’s cousin,” Kate quickly explained as the three hunters closed in on them.

They didn’t seem to want much though but to greet Kate, asking after her and Gerard. She answered genially enough but with enough bite that, for some reason, seemed to amuse the women. O’Leary instead looked like he was dissatisfied with her. She checked her nails just to see his reaction and his mouth twisted into a snarl.

Ha. Gossips, all of them.

When the elevator doors opened again, Shannon stood there with Dawkins. Kate sucked in her cheeks.

And there they were.

“My apologies, but Shannon is waiting for us,” she said cheerily. O’Leary’s expression darkened again but Ridgewell and Garcia just nodded, those amused smiles never leaving their faces.

“Naturally, Heir Argent,” Garcia said. Stiles nodded beside Kate.

“Tribunal hunters,” he said, none of his cheek present.

“Hunter Finstock,” Ridgewell answered without so much as a tilt of her head.

Whoa. The gossip really did travel quickly. Kate eyed the receptionist who was looking at her computer. She had perfected the nonchalant look she sported and Kate couldn’t see if they were being spied or not.

As they moved past them, Kate was suddenly engulfed by a hug and the scent of lilies and gun oil. She still smelled the same, Shannon did.

“Hi Shannon,” she greeted, voice muffled by her chest. Shannon wasn’t the tallest of women but she still towered over Kate by at least half a head.
“Kate! I’ve missed you!” Shannon exclaimed, tightening her hold before letting her go. She looked at her over, eyes flicking from her face to her clothes. “And you seem to still hold onto your training, I see. No flab, eh?” She patted Kate’s stomach before grinning at her, in full view of all.

“Stiles is keeping me busy,” she just said. Shannon’s expression didn’t even twitch as she turned to him.

“Hunter Finstock.”

“Tribunal hunter,” he answered. Shannon’s expression cooled just enough for Kate to notice.

“We have a lot to discuss. Come! I have ordered some cakes to my room,” she said. Kate nodded her head and Shannon twirled around, leading them back to the elevator where Dawkins was waiting for them.

“Her room?” Stiles asked lowly as they followed behind.

“Officially, no one is feuding and the Argent-Caldwell alliance is all fine and dandy,” Kate whispered back. Stiles nodded slowly.

“So that’s why she emphasised ‘hunter’…” he mumbled in his thoughts. They boarded the elevator but no one said a thing as they rode it to the right floor. The smile had fallen from Shannon’s face when Kate sneaked a look at her. She looked… she looked nothing like the woman they had met downstairs.

Shannon noticed her looking and flashed her a mischievous grin but it looked like it was pulling the wrong muscles on her face.

Kate lowered her gaze, staring at the metal doors in front of them. She almost startled when she felt someone touch her arm. Stiles. She inclined her head just the barest bit, feeling his worry poke her through their bond.

Something she wouldn’t divulge to anyone.

The ding of their floor was loud in the silence. Shannon swept past them in long strides and Kate and Stiles followed her with Dawkins taking the rear. While she knew Shannon wouldn’t do anything to them – or rather, to her, and by extension to Stiles – it made her nervous. In a quick sequence Shannon pushed a door open and entered, leaving Kate and Stiles yet again to follow.

The moment they were both in the door clicked shut.

Kate tensed the barest bit but as she examined the room, there were only the three of them present with Dawkins probably guarding the entrance. Even the bathroom door had been left open, revealing no one. How thoughtful.

When Kate turned back to Shannon she found her sitting with a table between her and a couch. She smiled that smile again, the one that almost sent chills down Kate’s back with its artificiality and gestured at them to sit too. Stiles moved first with Kate a mere fraction of a second behind. Kate felt Shannon’s eyes judge her.

There was tea and cakes set between them but no one made a move to pour even a drop.

“Which ones of your companions are supernatural?” Shannon asked finally after long stretching minutes.
“Does it matter?” Kate threw back, crossing her arms. She was aware it might make her look uncooperative and petulant but why should she care? She was uncooperative and petulant.

“Does it matter?” Shannon repeated. “Of course it matters.”

“Why?” Stiles tapped the arm of the couch. “I’m mentoring Kate as per your instructions. It shouldn’t matter who our companions are while I continue to do so.”

“My instructions did not include her travelling with those who murdered Elizabeth,” Shannon said, the sharpness in her voice betraying the detached look she was holding onto.

“Mur- you mean you don’t really care about his methods but rather about the lies you’ve been fed?!” Kate blurted out. She couldn’t believe it. She couldn’t believe it! “It was not a supernatural creature that killed my mother!”

Shannon tilted her head, her brows arched. “No?” she questioned. “Then what was it?”

Kate bit her lip. She glanced at Stiles quickly but he just reached out and squeezed her hand in reassurance. When she met Shannon’s gaze again, the judgment was back.

“Not what but who. Gerard Argent,” she said. Shannon’s expression didn’t even twitch.

“Your father.”

Kate nodded. Shannon leaned back in her armchair.

“You know well that I don’t like your father,” she said bluntly. Kate nodded again. “He wasn’t worthy of her. A good match, lineage to lineage, but not worthy of Elizabeth. However, killing her? That’s some serious accusation.”

“He confessed to me,” Kate said. She tightened her grip on Stiles’ hand but he said nothing. She swallowed. “He said he was only thinking of my future. That my mother was weak. She even had her necklace, see? You have to know about its importance, right? And instead of me being killed, it was her. He insisted- he insisted I left Stiles and our friends-”

“A hunter, a werewolf, a druid with an additional human and… a spark leading them.”

Kate felt the words strangle her. She felt Stiles stiffen next to her.

“You… know,” he said, forcing the words out. Shannon reached to the pot on the table, pouring herself a cup.

“So the rumours are true then,” she said instead, taking a sip after blowing at her cup. “I had wondered.” She looked at Stiles. Kate didn’t like what her expression implied. “You are influencing Katherine.”

“I am a spark,” Stiles admitted. There was no lying about it. Somewhere along the line he had gathered his composure. Kate herself still felt like someone had just slapped her. “But I am a hunter as well. My talents just give me an advantage against our enemies. I would never use whatever power I have on my allies or innocent.”

“Perhaps,” Shannon conceded. She took another sip. The cup clacked ominously against the plate on her hand. “But I find myself quite unable to believe what you said. Even now you are holding onto her, perhaps influencing how she acts. What she claims.”
Stiles lifted his chin in a clear challenge. “I didn’t realise showing support was a sign of manipulation.”

“Shannon, do you really think anyone could make me do anything I didn’t want?” Kate found her voice again. “I’m more stubborn than my parents combined, you’ve said it yourself!”

Shannon merely took a sip. Kate found that infuriating.

“If I ever found out I’ve been manipulated you know I wouldn’t stand for it. I am by our law an adult, a hunter myself. I have had my first successful hunt, just after we left Beacon Hills the first time. No one can force me to do anything I don’t want. No one has forced me, period!”

Kate lifted her and Stiles’ entwined hands. “And Stiles wouldn’t do that! He’s a fucking idiot but he’s- he’s everything I wanted in a mentor. He didn’t try to mould me into any particular shape and he took my bullshit and threw it against my face. He respected me for the hunter I am, not what I could be!”

Near the end her voice had gained a few octaves and she felt the flush on her cheeks. The wonder she felt coming from beside her made her look and she saw the- the wonderment and- and- affection that poured from Stiles. And the little quirk of his smile-

-it made Kate smile right back.

“But your future is who you are,” Shannon said.

“Maybe, but the Codes my family has adhered to are wrong. Wrong for me, anyway.” She turned back to Shannon to see her watching her like a hawk, the right corner of her mouth twitching.

“I saw first-hand how the Codes were being mishandled. We hunt those who hunt us. We hunt those who hunt us before they can. There are innocents who are caught in that. Supernatural, they are people, not creatures. Some of them may be irredeemable, I haven’t met a single wendigo who was entirely sane, but so are some hunters, the Codeless ones who don’t care shit about those caught in crossfire.” Shannon opened her mouth, but Kate cut in.

“The ‘druid’ you spoke of was almost hurt, could have been killed, because of someone else and she’s one of the sweetest, most caring people I know. She’s a fucking nerd and last time I checked that wasn’t a crime!”

“Language, Kate,” Stiles said. He sounded like he was choking in his amusement. Never looking away from Shannon, Kate let go of his hand to shove him, earning herself a groan as her elbow burrowed between his ribs.

“Shut up, I’m making a point here!”

Stiles just raised a hand in surrender while dramatically clutching at his side, the fucking idiot.

“I’m not a saint or shit like that but I’m also not going to hunt innocents just because of what they were born into. We have a werewolf in our group, yeah? The fuck does it matter he can turn furry at his own will. I can draw up my knife and no one would look twice at that!”

As if a demonstration, she snatched one of her hidden blades and threw it at the door. Shannon didn’t even blink while Stiles whistled. From the corner of her eye Kate saw it stick from the door and the handle waver with the force of the throw.

Kate paused. She swallowed. “You can stop trying to look for her in me,” she almost rasped her
declaration. “Look at Chris if you want, he’s the stuck-in-the-mud in the family. I give zero fucks of what you or anyone else thinks, no matter how close they were to my mother. I am not her, I am Katherine Amelie Argent, and if someone can’t see that, then they can just fuck off.”

The silence that fell could be cut only with a chain saw.

“Your middle name is Amelie?”

“Shut it, Finstock.”

The clack of the plate and the cup Shannon had held was akin to a gun shot in the room. She sat there, hands on her lap, knuckles white despite her even expression. Kate sat there under her scrutiny, defiant.

“Elizabeth would be proud of the headstrong woman you are growing into,” Shannon said finally. Kate felt like someone had kicked her in the guts. “She always wanted you to follow the tradition and find your own Code. Preferably similar to hers, the Code the first hunters used, but your own nonetheless.

“However, I feel that you are letting your feelings get the best of you.”

And just like that, the little hope which had grown inside Kate withered away.

“My- my feelings?” she repeated, incredulous. Shannon nodded calmly, the hypocrite.

“Due to your… situation, you are no longer unbiased. A good hunter knows when to be harsh and when peaceful. Clearly your… travelling companions have made you-”

“Excuse me but I must disagree,” Stiles interrupted. He was frowning, scowling even, and his lips were drawn into a thin line. “My mentoring methods included showing her all sides and not merely the part about hunting. We have negotiated with bridge trolls and hunted wendigos, latest trip even involved killing a gryphon terrorising a farming community not too far away from here. However you look at it, you cannot say she’s uneducated. She gained the best combat training from her mother. I showed her the world beyond that.”

Shannon’s mouth was pursed. It was such a familiar expression, just on a different face.

“Gerard wouldn’t approve.”

Stiles snorted. “I don’t doubt that.”

“Neither would Elizabeth.”

Kate stiffened. “Why?” she asked.

“You are growing soft. Biased. Seeing them as-”

“People?” Kate interrupted. She suddenly stood up. “But that’s who they are!” She felt Stiles touch her thigh and she flopped back on the couch. Anger was coursing through her veins like her very blood.

“Can’t you see?” she continued, quieter this time. “I’m not going to rabidly attack like a trained dog. I’m supposed to lead, not be led.”

Shannon crossed her fingers, the very picture of calm.
“I once said that not all tradition was good,” she said, distant look in her eyes, sadness clouding her thought. “I told that there were more to see than rules and lawbreakers, shades of grey instead of black and white.”

She had that look. The look she always had when she was thinking of Kate’s mother.

“But there are things you don’t know, Kate.”

She gritted her teeth. “I told you-”

“I’m not talking about your convictions. Do as you must, as long as you recognise your responsibility as well.” A weird, twisted smile curled on her lips, self-satisfaction darkening her gaze.

“I’m talking about Gerard having evidence on Elizabeth’s killer.”

This time someone had to punch her in the guts. All air left her lungs and she found herself gasping for more.

“What?” she choked out. The smile only widened. “No.”

“Oh yes.”

No, he can’t- he was the one who- Kate had been so sure-

“Gerard told me he kept investigating. Naturally, I did as well but he found the evidence first.”

“But- but it was he who-”

“Do you have any proof but your word? Circumstantial evidence?” Shannon tilted her head. Now she was laughing at her, Kate realised. She was still thinking of her as a child!

“The necklace. You must know it too, it’s beyond suspicious-!”

Shannon just shook her head.

“Even a powerful trinket like that can be deceived,” she said. Shannon uncrossed her hands and she tugged at her loose bun. “You weren’t there when it happened, you told us yourself. Inconsolable, afraid. Unstable. A mere teen, perhaps more than you are now. Oh, I saw her in the morgue. Awful work, with her belly cut open and eyes unseeing forever…” Shannon’s voice trailed off. Kate tasted blood as she shook.

“I am going to get her killer,” Shannon said dreamily. “That is why I will follow Gerard for now. I will get her killer and make them taste pain a thousand-fold.”

“So you are going to kill an innocent instead of her true murderer?” Stiles asked. His hand lifted and raked through Kate’s hair. “Without doing an investigation of your own? That’s what a Tribunal hunter is supposed to do?”

Nothing apparently was going to brush the smirk off Shannon’s face. She even let out a giggle, not unlike the ones Kate had heard during her childhood. For the briefest of moments she could see the woman she had once known.

“There’s a lot for you to learn, Hunter Finstock,” she merely said. “As is her right, Kate is still your mentee for as long as she wants until she comes of age. Despite Elizabeth… No. Never mind.” She shook her head.
“Nonetheless… be careful, dear hunter,” Shannon whispered, her eyes widening just the smallest bit. “For these walls bleed lies and danger is the air you breathe.”

“Dramatic much?” Stiles said, blinking rapidly.

Kate suddenly felt a jarring alarm as Julia’s emotions suddenly spiked.

“We are going now, thanks then, not fun to meet with you under the circumstances, let’s not do this again,” Stiles blurted out as he stood up. Shannon nodded but her eyes were focused on Kate, like she waited for her move. Kate slowly stood up and she merely inclined her head before taking off after Stiles who had already called up their elevator. She only paused on her way to snatch her knife back. Dawkins watched them go with impassive expression before he entered Shannon’s room and closed the door behind him.

Kate didn’t know what truly happened inside those doors. There was something afoot, something Gerard was in the middle of and perhaps the hunter community as a whole. Perhaps it was just Shannon. Whatever it was, it was no good.

But it didn’t matter. Tomorrow, it would, but not now. Now-

It was time to hunt those who deserved it.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter, we are having a ton of cameos if my plans work out, even more so than just the Argents. Any guesses? ;D

See you next time!
In which they realise they are famous and a lot of cameos happen

Chapter Notes

Favourite chapter alert! *Favourite chapter alert!*

:D

I honestly teared up writing this. I hope you enjoy!

(Also 2k kudos? Whoa, thanks a bunch, peeps!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Julia placed the book on nymphs gently back in its shelf, lamenting the time constrains. There was so much information here, so much knowledge that wasn’t spread, merely gathered in one place to gather *dust*. The things the druids, the emissaries, could do with this kind of gold vein at their disposal…

But no, here it was, unattended and forgotten, taken out only to see if someone could find an easy way to kill another being.

Julia hoped from the bottom of her heart that the talk between Kate, Stiles and Shannon was going well. She would love to spend more time here, diving into this well of fortune. She glanced around, spotting the pair of hunters still watching them. They had come in sometime after them and observed their every move since. She hadn’t really noticed them prior to Stiles and Kate leaving but now they didn’t even bother hiding the scrutiny. Or perhaps she just was more nervous with their group divided in half. Peter didn’t seem to care at all. He just grumbled to himself occasionally and wrote notes almost absently.

She tilted her head. Peter’s mind really seemed to be somewhere else. He still skimmed the books – a scroll now – but there was no element of hurry. She found herself walking to him before she even realised it. Peter lifted his gaze, his lips twitching in amusement only he seemed to see.

“How is your search going?” she asked. Peter gestured at his paper – second paper now, she noticed. She compared his notes to hers. His notes were surprisingly clear and concise, considering the knowledge was just as scattered as Stiles had said it might be.

“Can telluric currents really cause earthquakes?” Julia frowned. That didn’t seem right, not exactly.

Peter shrugged. “On their own, I doubt it. But given that someone might use them and disrupt the natural flow? I’m leaving no stone unturned.”

Julia just continued to frown. It made sense but– “But that doesn’t make sense. Earthquakes are a natural phenomenon, the enhanced movement of earth. Telluric currents are separate entities even if they may lie underneath the ground.” She showed him her notes, pointing to one of her first marks.

“See, here? Telluric currents often are located underground because most things living make themselves home here. Seas too, of course, but the bottom is too far to be of much use unless– but if we use that logic, then there must be some in the air too! It still doesn’t mean the winds are caused by the currents. Or hurricanes. Or–”
“Julia.” Peter rolled his eyes at her. She slapped a hand over her mouth and flushed. She had gone off-tangents. Again. She was treated to an exasperated smile that hid none of his fondness. It still sometimes left her feeling awed, that people could care like that, care about her like that, and be so forthcoming about them with her.

“Sorry,” she mumbled behind her hand. Peter shook his head.

“Don’t be. Let’s just collect everything we can and discuss them later. We were left with a job to finish.”

Julia lowered her hand and smiled but found the look in Peter’s eyes suddenly wary. When she turned around, she found the hunter pair walking towards them, with a couple others looking in on them as well from the far end of the room.

“No one is left a virgin in this world, for we are utterly fucked by it,” Bobby said. Julia worried about him. He had stopped pretending to help them, instead preferring to sit in his chair, legs akimbo and hair tugged into wild spikes. He didn’t look good at all. She had tried to ask him if he wanted her to get him a drink but he had just guffawed until they had been shushed again. And then there was the cryptic words he had whispered to her.

Memories are not the end of all things.

What did that even mean? She didn’t understand. Of course they were not. She was moving on despite knowing that Kali– no, she promised herself she wouldn’t delve in that too much. Bobby just said the weirdest of things sometimes.

“You seem to be looking for something,” one of the hunters said genially. She attempted a kind expression but Julia found it utterly lacking in warmth. It reminded her of how the Steeles often looked at her whenever Kali was around, when they couldn’t just outright ignore her. The woman gestured at her friend. “In a hurry too. We could help you out, dig around the books.”

“I think we are fine, thank you,” Peter said. His smile was just as frozen as the woman’s. “We are mostly done anyway.”

“Oh?”

None of them elaborated. The silence stretched when the hunters didn’t retreat despite the rebuff.

“Did you want something?” Julia asked cautiously. When the woman and the man turned to her, she took a step back on reflex.

“Oh, just curious,” the man laughed. “You were so intent on finding something! You and little Argent. If you wouldn’t mind, was the guy that left his mentor? You know, Hunter Finstock?”

Julia blinked. How did they know already?

“I’m afraid that’s Kate’s business and not yours,” Peter said pleasantly. When Julia glanced at him, his lips were pulled tight and she wondered if there were sharp teeth lying in wait behind.

“Come now, we were just wondering! She is shaping up into quite a lady!” the woman said. She reached out with her hand but Peter sidestepped her when she got close. Her demeanour suddenly got a whole lot more predatory. “My, my.”

“Please, we are not even on first name basis,” Peter exclaimed. Julia bit her lip nervously.
“And he’s taken too,” she added. The woman scoffed.

“As if I would be interested in a were.”

Julia blinked, suddenly taken aback.

How did she know?

“If you do anything to us, Heir Argent will raise hell. As will my pack.” Peter flexed his hands. The man looked offended but with how his eyes were twinkling, Julia suspected it was all fake.

“There would be no evidence even if we did,” the woman just said. She sounded so sure as well. Julia craned her head, peering at the hunters at the back of the room, but they didn’t seem to be paying attention anymore. She worried her lip. If Kate were here, she would claim they were merely pretending, surely. Julia would have liked to give them the benefit of a doubt but…

“We have done nothing wrong,” she insisted. Julia wanted to cover again as the attention shifted to her but she was already pressed against Peter. She still watched warily as the man stretched towards her. The woman seemed to lose interest in her though, focusing on Peter again and staring him down. Or trying to. Peter didn’t give her an inch however, even had a smirk curling on his face.

A spark of jealousy hit Julia before she could smother it. How was he so brave, his composure well–maintained as ever, when she–

“The old soul rests on the bones of the ignorant,” Bobby announced, leaning back on his chair so he could watch the standoff. Or, perhaps, watch was not the right word for it, Julia thought, shaken from her momentarily lapse. He was staring at something above them, eyes flicking from left to right and back with no rhythm.

“Finstock,” Peter hissed. The woman suddenly looked more interested again.

“This the famous mentor?” She backed a few steps so she could have a look at him. Julia made an aborted move to stop her but with the other hunter standing between them, it was impossible.

The woman looked at him critically. Bobby tilted his head at her, and he seemed just as loopy as he had before.

“He breeds with the mouth of a goat,” he said seriously.

“I don’t doubt that. Animals often do,” the woman commented.

“Peter is no animal!” Julia suddenly bristled but she was ignored. She opened her mouth to argue again – Kate would be proud of her – but Peter placed a hand over it. When she glanced at him, he quickly shook his head. He tapped his wrist twice, eyes flicking at the door. Julia’s mouth formed a silent ‘o’.

She nodded.

When she turned back, she found the man watching them with narrowed eyes, his beard partly hiding the suspicion the look in his eyes didn’t.

“What on earth are you teaching little Argent?” the woman asked, more like demanded, from Bobby. He tilted his head, swaying from one side to another before abruptly standing up. The woman took a step back in surprise, hand going to her side when Bobby stepped closer to her.
“Women wail as you cut them down,” he said, and then frowned, correcting himself, “No, the heights you reach are on the other side of the canyon. The little red death won’t be hurt by you.”

The woman snorted. “Nuts, I should have known. No wonder little Argent didn’t turn out the way she should’ve.”

“He’s not crazy!” Julia said. Her hands balled into fists. “Bobby’s a sweet man!”

Bobby leaned towards Julia, eyes bright. “You’ll find a way,” he assured her, flashing her a grin. It drained from his face just as quickly as it appeared. He suddenly clutched at his hair, tugging it so hard it looked painful. A clump of dark hair fell to the ground as he let go.

“The shadow is coming,” he whispered. “Coming, it’s coming, unstoppable. Unavoidable.” He hurried past the hunters, only to grab Peter’s arm hard enough that his knuckles turned white. “And when it does, a sacrifice is needed.” Bobby’s eyes sharpened.

“Don’t let him near it,” he said. “If you do, it will devour him whole.”

Julia gasped suddenly as the signs finally made sense. “But— seers don’t exist?” she whispered in shock. There had been stories, legends even from the ancient times, but no one actually thought they were real. Peter’s eyes widened.

“What is coming, Finstock?” he asked, eyes hard. Bobby’s nostrils flared.

“Chaos calls for chaos.”

“What the hell is he on? Drugs?”

Julia snapped from her daze, having almost forgotten they had company. The hunter pair looked at them oddly. Bobby didn’t seem to care, however, as his gaze slid to her and he stared at her unblinkingly.

“You look better alive,” he said. Julia felt her bones chill for some reason.

“Thank you?”


“Yeah, nothing lives forever…”

And then he started screaming.

Julia winced in pain before she could stop herself. She barely noticed the hunters covering their ears as she watched Bobby fall to his knees before her. She followed him immediately, dropping down Bobby’s level despite the ear–piercing screaming. Julia didn’t know what she should do. Could she touch him? Would it hurt him? Would it make things worse?

She knew nothing about seers. Nothing.

As Bobby started reaching for his hair again, Julia’s hands made the decision for her. She grasped his before he could tear more hair off. It also put her straight in front of his still screaming mouth.

“Bobby, please!” Julia begged. What could she even say? “Please!”

Peter appeared next to them, his lips bitten bloody. He pressed a hand on Bobby’s shoulder, a few
black lines disappearing up his veins before they dried up. “It’s all mental,” he said. He stood up again, taking a stand between them and the hunters. Julia briefly looked past him and winced at the number of hunters they had attracted. There had to be a near dozen of them in there.

“Bobby–” Bobby ignored her but his screams grew more hoarse by the second. His throat convulsed under the pressure and tears were spilling down his cheeks. Julia felt wet tracks follow on her own.

She threw her arms around him. She tugged him tight against her, sobbing into his shoulder.

“The lake, I want the lake,” Bobby blabbed. Julia felt his hands tear at her shirt. “The lake is safe, the lake but there’s no lake, no, a pond but no lake and a pond is not enough. It won’t drown the screams, the pain.” He sobbed loudly and then– and then–

“MAKE WAY!” A bellow came from somewhere behind the wall of hunters. Julia sagged in relief, sobbing in unison with Bobby.

“MAKE WAY OR I’LL BURN THIS PLACE DOWN AND YOU WITH IT!” Kate’s shrill order cut through the tense atmosphere. Julia looked up to see Kate rush to them. Peter was like an indomitable wall between them, large and powerful, and his back was so, so strong–

And then she was there. Kate was there. Kate–

“Where’s Stiles?” Julia asked. Kate patted her pockets before dragging out a napkin of some sort. Bobby gasped in her arms and Julia only held on tighter.

“He’s coming,” Kate said sternly. She wiped Julia’s cheeks and then looked at the weeping man in her grip. “He heard Finstock’s scream from the lobby and said he had to get something. But he’s coming.”

“There were hunters, they came to threaten us, Peter, they thought Bobby was Stiles–”

Bobby clawed at her again and then, with surprising strength, he threw her off. Julia hit the floor with a startled cry. He looked wild as he took in Kate.

“Alexander,” he gasped. His hand wavered as he traced Kate’s features in the air. “Alexander.”

“No, it’s Kate. Kate,” Kate said. Bobby continued to paint her in the air, mumbling to himself all the while. “What the fuck is wrong with him?”

“He’s a seer,” Julia explained quietly. She reached over to touch his arm but Bobby jerked out of her touch. He started scratching at his neck, leaving behind what looked like claw marks, even as his eyes never left Kate. His mouth never stopped moving.

“And that should explain all the crazy?” Kate muttered. She looked over her shoulder. “Are the hunters that threatened you still here?”

Julia craned her neck but– no, she didn’t think she saw them. They must have left during the commotion. She shook her head.

Kate cursed. She stood up, eyes dark, and took a stand next to Peter.

“Get fucking lost!” she ordered.

“But Heir Argent–” someone tried to say but they were cut off.

“Nothing to be seen here!” Kate continued. Her eyes narrowed. “If I see anyone attacking my friends
again, you’ll be dealing with me!”

“Friends?” a woman asked, and Julia recognised her as one of the ones who had stayed back to observe them. “But he’s a werewolf!”

“And that man’s nutter,” someone else said. Julia saw Kate’s back stiffen.

“And?!” she demanded. “No one gives a fuck what you think. We are the guests here and they were being threatened the moment I turned my back. You bet I am going to report this! Attacking them is attacking me! If I don’t find the ones who did it, I’m going to hold every single one of you responsible!”

Surprised and horrified murmurs and exclamations filled the air. No one stepped forward though. Kate squared her shoulders. Even with her smaller stature, she looked just as dangerous as Peter did.

Julia couldn’t help but admire his iron grip over his shift. She couldn’t see his eyes but none of the other traits of his shift were to be seen.

“Move it!” Stiles yelled and pushed through like he was ploughing grass and, oh, wasn’t he the most pleasant sight? “The Stiles is here to save the day!”

“Kate already did,” Peter said and, Julia noticed, his stance relaxed the slightest bit the moment he heard Stiles’ voice.

“Thanks, best mentee ever,” Stiles said as he brushed past them. His hand made a circular motion and Julia realised he was opening a… bottle? “Bobby? I’ve got your poison.”

Poison?! Julia thought in alarm, but Stiles was already pressing the bottle against Bobby’s lips. Bobby snatched the bottle from him and took heavy gulps from it, his babbles finally cut. When he paused to take a deep breath, he sobbed in relief.

“Off, off you go!” Kate yelled, shooing the hunters away.

“Are you alright?” Stiles asked Bobby. Julia rubbed Bobby’s shoulders as he took two more gulps of the drink – whiskey, by the smell of it. It almost made her stomach turn.

“It hasn’t been that bad since— since,” Bobby rasped. Half the bottle was already empty and his speech was starting to slur, but if it was from exhaustion or alcohol, Julia didn’t know. “Things are changing faster and faster and faster and the wheel is spinning in all directions at once.”


“You weren’t like this in the forest,” Peter noted, eyes sharp as he finally felt safe enough to take them off from the hunter threat. “You were sober then. I remember you insisting on that. Loudly.”


Stiles eyed the situation – none of the hunters had actually left, just kept their distance and stared like they were some sort of an attraction – and made the decision. “Let’s go. I’ll pay for a hotel. There’s no way we are staying here, slight against someone or not.”

“Good,” Peter said. He hoisted Bobby up and started dragging him away with him. Julia almost followed before she remembered her notes. She grabbed them and the ones Bobby had made and
rushed after them when she saw no more stray papers.

No one tried to keep them from leaving but their stares followed them all the way out.

***

“Bobby’s secret was not for me to tell,” Stiles said. He dragged a hand over his face, looking over where Bobby was lying on a bed. He wasn’t passed out but it probably wouldn’t be long before he was.

“No one’s blaming you,” Kate said. She sat on the floor, legs crossed. “It would’ve been nice to know though. So alcohol…”

“Helps him suppress his visions,” Stiles answered. He then shrugged. “I honestly don’t know much else. Just that when he does see visions, he can see all the possible outcomes. Somehow.”

“How do you make sense of them?” Julia wondered. She pressed her hand against Bobby’s forehead, feeling his temperature. “He’s too warm.”

Bobby snorted softly. His eyes opened to mere slits. “It’s bullshit,” he said gruffly. “All around dick moves, like, hey, here’s the thing but you won’t– won’t get the thing until it has already passed or is happening and then you feel like a dumbass asscake.”

He huffed, stretching wide, only to grab his pillow and hug it close. “I don’t know shit about what happens most of the time,” he mumbled into it. “Just that sometimes things are brighter. Sometimes a shitty tidbit that holds no sin– sig– impoaa– fuck. Things. Shitty shitty things that either never happen or will happen but who knows if they ever will.”

Peter’s eyes narrowed.

“This is wicked,” Kate breathed. She leaned forward. “So my future is linked to fire?”

Bobby turned his head and stared at her before sleep started dragging his eyes close. “You are fire. You are going to burn them all down and build upon the ashes.”

Kate blinked slowly. She turned to Stiles, her grin growing more wicked by the second.

“There’s the endorsement! So when do I get my flamethrower again?”

“When you pay for it yourself,” Stiles groused. “I don’t have enough cash to pay for it and our upkeep.”

Kate pouted. “We just got to start taking more jobs! Put them on Kate Fund. You’ll at least get me one on my birthday, right?”

“She’s your kid,” Peter said. Stiles gasped, hand pressed against his chest.

“You dare! What would she do without her other parent?!”

“Mom, please, let dad be,” Kate said, crawling close enough to pat Stiles’ leg. “He hasn’t had the best of days. Better than uncle though.”

Now Stiles really was offended.

“Why am I the mom?!” he demanded. He quickly raised his hand though so stall whatever answer was coming his way. “Wait, I don’t want to know.” Kate shrugged and lay down on the floor,
rolling away to start poking at Peter’s toes. Peter pretended to walk over her. Kate rolled again but her arms tangled with Peter’s legs instead.

Stiles did not find that adorable.

“Do you guys have your notes?” he asked, distracting himself from the sight. Julia nodded.

“They are on the table.”


“I want to be a star too,” Kate whined, watching Stiles upside down. Stiles snorted.

“Obviously you are, firecracker, the fire destined,” he drawled. Kate scrunched her nose and stuck her tongue at him.

“Daaaad, mom’s being a meanie.”

Peter snorted. “Your kid.”

“I hate you all,” Stiles said. He sat down and grabbed the papers. “I’ll just go through these quickly, yeah? Do you want to grab a bite or something and bring it up?”

Kate pouted. “Do I have to move?”

“Thanks, Kate, for volunteering!”

“Ugh!”

“I’ll come with you,” Julia said. She nudged Bobby. “Do you need anything?”

The lump that was Bobby Finstock let out nothing but a loud snore.

“Guess not,” Kate said. She raised her arms, demanding help, and Peter pulled her up after the sigh of the ages. Stiles handed her a few notes and the girls took off with a bye thrown over their shoulders.

Stiles shook his head and turned to the papers. He hoped they would reveal their secrets to him or at least point him to the right direction. He missed google.

“What are you going to do with the creature poisoning the Nemeton?”

Stiles’ thoughts blanked. He blinked slowly and looked over where Peter dragged his chair next to him.

“How did you…?”

Peter rolled his eyes like Stiles was getting slow in his old age, which, rude. He gestured at the notes. “Read them and see if anything else makes sense.”

Stiles’ mechanically nodded as his brain rebooted itself. He glanced through Kate’s notes – he wondered if he should look into her homework more, this clearly isn’t her best work – but had to spend a bit more to decipher Julia’s. She had been meticulous in her notes but she had also mixed in things Stiles thought she may have just found interesting.

“I didn’t know unicorns tend to follow the currents as they graze,” Stiles murmured. Energy, pure,
unfiltered energy. It made sense, especially since unicorns weren’t what the legends told. They thrived on purity, yes, but not in the virginal sense, the social construct it was. Undiluted emotions, like love, happiness, of course, but also hate and despair. Naturally they would follow the purest power the earth has, pulled towards it as well…

“They used to visit Beacon Hills too, once upon a time.”

Stiles’ attention snapped to Peter. “They did? When?”

Peter leaned back on his chair. “I remember my grandfather telling me how he used to see them wander and eat my great-grandmother’s precious garden. She used to get furious, he said, but that only made them eat her flowers more. Only when she tired of raging they would stop.” Peter looked wistful.

“I’ve never seen them myself. They disappeared long before I was born.”

The nogitsune.

Stiles’ worried his lip. It had to be. Everything came back to it, back to Noshiko trapping it by the Nemeton. Such a dark force, malicious or not, was bound to have an effect on the tree. And if it festered like it did, blocking the Nemeton—

Would it really block it?

Stiles rifled through the notes, skimmed until—

“See what I mean?”

Stiles nodded. “You are right.” He raised his head. “It’s a nogitsune.”

Peter gave him a look, both weirdly unsurprised and incredulous. “Chaos.”

Something snapped into place in Stiles’ mind. “Of course,” he said. He grasped for Kate’s paper – the only one with space, bless her awful research skills – and scribbled on it as his mind raced. “Chaos. Chaos and purity. Why unicorns flee and no birds sing. It blocks the power flow, trapping it, making it fester. And—” Stiles scowled at Kate’s notes. “No, Nemeta do not cause telluric currents, they tend to grow around the strongest hot spots because of the power the currents feed them. What are you even reading?”

“Algebra. Dead white guys. Genocidal history of everyone non-white,” Kate answered, unimpressed. The waff of Chinese made Stiles’ mouth water. He dropped his pen, notes forgotten, as he made ‘gimme’ hands at her.

“I promise we’ll stop another genocide if you’ll just give me my spring rolls.”

Julia looked hesitant. She handed him a bag. “I’m not sure if I want to know.” Stiles shrugged as he dug into it. Rolls! He was winning at life.

“Perhaps all the better for it,” he said around his mouthful. Disgust curled Peter’s lips.

“Why did I…?” he said but shook his head. Stiles quirked his brows but Peter ignored him and accepted another bag from Julia. Stiles shrugged.

“I’m attractive.”

“Sure.”
“And funny.”

“Right.”

“And the best thing ever to happen to you.”

Peter rolled his eyes. “Yes, you are,” he said in the most condescending tone possible. Stiles had often heard it when Peter had spoken with Scott. He pouted.

“Kate, your dad’s being mean.”

“The joke isn’t as funny when you do it,” Kate stated before going back to her noodles. Stiles scowled and took a sharp bite out of his third roll.

“I hate you all.”

“No, you don’t,” they all answered in chorus. Bobby let out a wheeze in apparent agreement.

Stiles stuck his tongue at them, bits and pieces of food sticking on it, and Kate pretended to gag.

No, he didn’t.

He’ll still eat all their spring rolls to spite them, he thought decisively, and bundled them all into one huge bite. He grinned viciously around them at Kate’s dismayed expression.

Fuck off, he mouthed, with bits and pieces falling to his lap. Peter made such a disgusted noise that Stiles almost choked on his cackles and Kate flipped him the bird.

No, he didn’t, but fuck them anyway.

***

“It makes so much sense!” Stiles flopped on his bed. Peter shrugged off his shirt and Stiles couldn’t help admiring the way his muscles contracted. “I mean, I knew, maybe, that purifying was the way to go but like— knowing that and knowing that are two completely different things! Dude!”

“Don’t call me dude,” Peter said. He chucked his shirt next to his bag and rummaged his bag. “We need to find a laundromat.”

“Peter,” Stiles whined. “We can save the day!”

“Sounds unpleasant.”

Stiles scrunched his nose. “It does, doesn’t it? But someone’s got to do it and I don’t see any volunteers.” As a matter of fact, he knew no one would even try until it was all too late. Thanks a bunch, Deaton. What a wonderful druid you were, are, keeping the handle on things. Next time Stiles should go there and punch him instead of just stealing his hoard of books. Well, Julia’s hoard of books. She still didn’t let him close to most of them if any had even a mention of sparks.

Which, if he ever had a chance again, he probably should visit the library again just for that. It was a wonder he hadn’t thought that before but— well. Perhaps he could be forgiven to have been distracted. Maybe.

God, Stiles hated himself just a little.

“Cutting the source of the corruption is the smartest thing to do,” Peter agreed after a moment.
“Removing the block and then kickstarting the healing is the simplest way to go at it.” Sometime during Stiles’ moment of self-loathing he had changed into a pair of pants Stiles knew from experience were soft. Great, he missed the grand sight of Peter’s thighs.

Stiles pouted.

Peter smirked at him. “You could always take them off me,” he teased, sauntering close. Stiles rolled his eyes.

“Full of yourself, aren’t you?”

“Why, I do think I have every reason to be.”

Stiles hated that he was right. He stuck his tongue out but his pout was quick wiped off when Peter kissed it away.

“Alright?” he whispered when they broke apart, a mere inch between them. Stiles smiled softly. He reached over to tug a stray strand behind Peter’s ear.

“All the consent in the world.” And he meant it. While they hadn’t gone past heavy petting yet—and, Christ, they really needed a laundromat, there was a totally unusable pair of creamed jeans somewhere in Stiles’ bag—Stiles was beginning to think they were long overdue a good fuck. He couldn’t believe how good Peter had been about all his misgivings—

No, that was a lie. Stiles could.

That’s what made it even more special.

He eliminated the space between them and pressed a light kiss over Peter’s lips before moving down, tracing a line only visible to him with his mouth. Peter groaned as Stiles’ teeth pressed against his throat, hard enough to feel but light enough to not break the skin underneath.

Peter tugged him up and devoured his mouth. Stiles moaned. He fumbled with his shirt, managing to free his arms but it was only with Peter’s help that the shirt found its way to the floor. Stiles kicked the feet from under Peter, moving to lie on top of him, hardly letting either of them to have any air.

Peter’s hard gripped on his thighs and the massaging only brought they crotches together. Stiles groaned.

“Not these pairs as well,” he mumbled against Peter’s lips. He leaned back, quickly discarding his belt and popping the button open. Hallelujah, on the first try! Peter lay on the bed, lips kiss swollen and eyes dark.

“You don’t find me complaining.”

“Because you like me in your pants.”

“I like me in yours more.”

Stiles kicked his jeans to the floor. “I meant real pants, asshole! With a booty so big, I’d drown in yours.”

Peter’s eyes slipped to stare at Stiles’ straining boxers. “I wouldn’t call that small,” he drawled. Stiles huffed a laugh, swatting his chest.

“Damn you.”
“A special place, just for me,” Peter said serenely before he snatched Stiles’ arm and pulled him against him. Their mouths found each other again and, yeah, Stiles really liked this. His hands roamed that perfect neck and chest, trailing down to tease the hard lining against his thigh. Peter’s hands were on the move as well, one holding his head in place while the other—

Stopped.

Peter gently pried him off and Stiles blinked in confusion. There was concern in Peter’s eyes, concern, and not just for the relief both of their cocks were definitely waiting for.

“When did you burn your back, Stiles?” he asked gently. Stiles blinked.

“What?”

Peter pressed his hands against the ridges where should be smooth flesh and, oh, yeah. Fuck. Stiles didn’t even remember they were there; they never bothered him.

“It was— a little something gone wrong, before I knew anything really,” he said. His breathing pattern was getting less and less harsh as he recalled the need to change things over his own safety. “It’s nothing important.”

The look that got him was utterly unimpressed. Stiles groaned.

“Seriously? Now? You want to have that question now?”

“You were burned, Stiles.” There was something in Peter’s tone that alarmed Stiles. Pain, worry–

“It– didn’t really hurt me,” Stiles said. He lowered his voice, smiling softly to reassure Peter. With the way his eyes narrowed, Stiles wasn’t probably too good of a job with it.

“It was desperation and rage, over in a matter of minutes,” he said. He lied down on Peter’s chest. He mourned the way their cocks were softening but this was more important somehow. “I lost my temper once. It was before— before.”

Peter traced the lines on his back that Stiles knew were already healed. They weren’t particularly sensitive – humans never healed like the supernatural – but Stiles couldn’t help shivering when the feather–like touches lingered on his skin.

“They killed her in front of me. And I hated them so much I killed them instantly in an inferno that I lost control over. Or, I guess, I never had any control over. It was like the embodiment of my hate.”

Stiles paused, considering. He didn’t remember much of how Lydia died. He remembered the loss of yet another person he loved, one of the last ones left as the hunters refused a ceasefire. He remembered her body hitting the ground, her scream cut off--

Stiles didn’t know if she screamed for herself or the hunters.

The next thing he recalled was the wasteland he had created and ashes he had left and scars he didn’t remember getting.

“They were old even as they appeared,” he finally said. He met Peter’s eyes. “I never suffered them. They were healed by the time I even realised I had them. The pain I felt when Lydia died was too much.”

Peter didn’t pause in his movements, mapping the scars he couldn’t see from his angle.
“Did it hurt when you crawled from hell?” he asked, words quiet. Stiles blinked.

“Don’t you mean fell from heaven?”

Peter’s smile was sad. “If you were from heaven, you never would have arrived here.”

And that’s the crux of the things, wasn’t it?

“Maybe,” Stiles allowed. Honestly, he would love nothing more than have his pack alive and well with him. But—“But I have you. You, Kate, Julia, even Bobby. You make it all worth it.” And his pack was alive even if they might never become Stiles’ pack. Perhaps they would, one should never say never. Perhaps something would happen in the future that would cause their destinies to align once again.

But if they never did, Stiles was alright with that as well.

“You are all my home, Peter,” Stiles said. He leaned in and kissed the man under him. He opened the eyes he didn’t realise he had closed. “And I will never go away, not for anything. Trust me in that.”

And Peter smiled. “I do.”

***

“Chris!” Kate called, bouncing up to her brother. Stiles glanced around the coffee shop, noting there weren’t too many people inside. A couple of students with books and notes and Stiles had to wonder when the scenery would change into laptops and books instead. He couldn’t for the life of him remember when the change had happened last time around. He had begged his dad for a laptop to replace their old desktop for years before he actually got one.

Probably a good thing, now that he thought about it. He recalled that the one Jackson got in elementary school was still full of bugs and it overheated too fast to be of much use.

Stiles followed Kate where she was busy hugging the life out of her brother and Victoria watched them in the quiet, reserved way Stiles remembered—no, he saw a fond smile curl on her lips. Stiles blinked rapidly but, no, the view didn’t change.

The only Victoria he could recall killed herself over becoming a werewolf, like a dangerous fanatic. This one seemed less… tense. She adjusted the girl on her lap and ooooooh. Big brown eyes fell on Stiles as he reached the table. His heart skipped a beat.

“Well hello there,” he said, dropping to his knees in an exaggerated manner. “Who is the fairest lady of the land?”

Allison dimpled at him but hid her face behind her curls and Victoria’s arm.

“That’s Allison, the loveliest niece in the whole wide world,” Kate told him. Stiles smiled at the girl he had died with and whom he had the hand at killing, however reluctantly.

“Hello, Allison,” he said. He lifted his hand for a shake but didn’t push. “I’m Stiles.”

“Hi,” Allison said shyly. Stiles pretended to gasp.

“Not a handshake kind of girl, huh?” He grinned. “What about a high five?”

Allison’s eyes grew wide and she giggled, gently high fiving him instead before leaning back against
her mother. Stiles gave her one last grin before he stood up again, facing the looks that were clearly sizing him up.

“Hello, Mr. Argent, Mrs. Argent,” he greeted. “My name’s Stiles Finstock, and I’m Kate’s mentor.”

“A pleasure,” Victoria said although she didn’t seem to know if that was the case just yet. Chris greeted him with a mere nod. Christ, he looked young and far less stressed. The lines on his forehead were minimal! He actually looked like he was in his twenties and with no grey hair in sight!

He was good–looking, Stiles could say objectively, if you were into that. He remembered the few ill-advised fantasies he had entertained before the world went to hell, before Chris took it upon himself to train him and kill every single one of them with his drills.

Stiles could also admit missing the man like hell.

“So you are the one father hates,” Chris said. Kate groaned.

“That is so not how you start a conversation!” she complained. She stuck her elbow in his side and the grunted. “Move your butt! I’m sitting next to you.”

Victoria had already made space on her side of the booth.

“Do you want anything?” Stiles asked. He pointed over his shoulder at the register. “I’m about to get a coffee myself.”

“Get me one too!” Kate demanded. “And a muffin!”

“One hot chocolate coming up,” Stiles said, miming a note. Nope, no caffeine. He’d take possible sugar rush over caffeine any day. Kate pouted while Chris sent her a smug smirk. “What about you two?”

“A refill of my tea would be nice, green,” Victoria said. “Chris?”

“A coffee, black, if you don’t mind.”

“Coming up.”

As Stiles waited for their orders, he watched the Argents interact. They were seemed much more normal than he would have thought – although, to be honest, things weren’t yet as dire. Victoria was a shock however. He squinted his eyes.

“Your order.”

“Oh!” Stiles whirled around and flashed the bored guy a grin. “Thanks!”

The coffee guy thrust the drinks into his hands and ignored him in favour of a new customer. Stiles balanced the tray, managing to not actually spill a drop as he returned to the table. “The drinks are here! And a small treat for the princess.” He winked at Allison, sliding over a small strawberry milkshake. Allison squealed as she reached for her drink.

“What do you say?” Victoria asked and Allison froze. She folded her hands on her lap and bit back her grin, dimples deepening.

“Thank you, Mr. Stiles.”

Stiles’ heart melted.
“You’re welcome.”

He distributed them all before sitting down as well. He sipped his coffee, humming around it. Not the worst he had had. Maybe would have done better with a dash of milk.

“How long have you been a hunter, Hunter Finstock?” Victoria asked.

“Please, just Stiles,” he answered as he lowered his cup. “I’m not big on formalities.”

“Unless he uses them to annoy people,” Kate quipped. Stiles shrugged.

“I am what I am. To answer your question, a few years. You may have heard but I consider myself a freelancer.”

“Yes, Gerard told us,” Chris said. “He also said you weren’t really considered an Argent either, despite the mentorship.”

Stiles shrugged again. “He doesn’t really like me. I could say the same. I also adopted the name Finstock recently and forsook my ties to the Argents. No offence meant, but I am happier this way.”

“Was the pressure too much?” Victoria’s lip curled.

“Not really. I just work better alone. Besides, being an adjacent to your clan didn’t offer me much but bound me more than was worth.”

“And Gerard blows worse than a two–bit–”

“Kate!” Chris hissed. Allison blinked.

“Where are the rest of you?” Victoria asked, ignoring the commotion and wiping Allison’s mouth where a few stray drops of the pink perfection had escaped her.

“One of us is feeling under the weather so he’s being watched over while the last one is doing our laundry. We… have a lot of laundry,” Stiles said, a smirk making its way on his lips. The pile of dirty clothes they all had – with everything, none of them had paid too much attention after leaving Beacon Hills – was insane. With Bobby still mostly out of commission, fever peaking, Julia was beside herself and with nothing to do she packed everything up and left to stalk the nearest laundromat. Peter, by default, was left to witness the drunken snore fest that was Bobby Finstock.

“We have heard… interesting things about them,” Chris said carefully. Stiles snorted.

“I’m sure.”

“They are not why I asked you to come,” Kate interrupted. Her hot chocolate hit the table with a clank. “They are fine, brilliant even. What I want to know is what Gerard has told you.”

Chris and Victoria exchanged a look.

“He has been quite vocal about his dislike of your mentor here,” Chris said.

Kate crossed her arms. “So you already said.”

“He was also dissatisfied with your travelling companions.”

“Uh–huh.”
“Kate, you do know this is not how things are done.” Victoria said, the question mark getting lost somewhere in translation. Kate gave her a look.

“No, I do not,” she replied snidely. “Because this is how I do things. He didn’t mention how I and my friends left abruptly, without a good bye? Before Christmas?”

Chris blinked. “He did not.”

“Well. We did.”

“And I suppose you’re here to tell us why.”

Kate took a quick look around. It was still just the couple students there and now an old lady sipping her tea, no one close to them to listen in.

“I’m sure Gerard killed mom.”

Chris visibly startled, his cup clattering on the table, but the only things Stiles saw Victoria do was tighten her hold on Allison.

“What makes you say so?”

Kate sighed and told them the same story she had now told a million times. Stiles knew how that felt. The numbers of times he had told his dad the same recount of events over and over again when his dad had tried to see whether he was lying or not.

Victoria and Chris were quiet when Kate finished. Chris almost absently cleaned the coffee he had spilled. Allison looked concerned over what her parents were doing but Stiles distracted her with another high five. The clap their hands made seemed to shake Victoria out of her thoughts.

“So the necklace…”

Kate pulled it from under her shirt, so Victoria could examine it. “Yeah.”

“I can’t believe this. Are you seriously telling us, telling me, that our father killed our mother?” Chris muttered, shaking his head. Kate lifted her head.

“I am.”

“And what is your role in this?” Chris turned to Stiles, his tone accusing. “Just an innocent bystander?”

“Mentor, if you will,” Stiles said. “Enabler extraordinaire. She’s your sister, you should know nothing can stop her when she’s in a huff.”

“Except when you apparently are spelled silent after you attack trolls.”

Stiles shrugged. “You learned.”

Chris opened his mouth to ask but then seemed to decide against. “You have a druid in your group?”

“Well, yeah,” Kate said. “But she came later. It was Stiles who did it. He’s a spark.”

Stiles groaned when both Chris and Victoria’s heads snapped in his direction. “Kate, we aren’t supposed to be advertising that!”
Kate scoffed. “We are trying to get allies to implicate Gerard. Shannon’s weird so she’s no help but I am not going to leave my clan under someone so ready to destroy my mother’s, our, legacy.”

“What a good little princess.” Stiles grinned.

Kate tilted her head up. “Excuse me, I am an Heir and demand to be called as such,” she said snottily.

“I’m telling Peter.”

“Don’t you dare!”

“Mom,” Allison whispered loudly. “They are funny!”

Stiles winked at her. “Yes, we are.”

“A comedy show of their own,” Chris mumbled. Kate hit him with her elbow again.

Victoria didn’t join the fun. When Stiles noticed her silence, she looked more thoughtful than murderous. A clear step up, he mused privately.

“Five of you, yes?” she asked. “A werewolf, a pair of hunters, a druid, and... one more. Someone human–like at the very least.”

Stiles’ eyes narrowed down. “Shannon said something like that too. What’s up with that? It’s not like we are common knowledge.”

Victoria arched her brows. “But you are.”

“What?” Kate’s forehead wrinkled.

“You can’t be serious, Tori,” Chris said incredulously. Victoria merely nodded. “Not Kate!”

“What?!” she snapped. “What about me?”

“About all of you,” Victoria said. “You have a certain... reputation.”

“You can’t be serious,” Stiles echoed Chris’ previous words.

“We are famous?!” Kate sounded far too eager for that. Stiles should have taught her better. Victoria nodded slightly.

“You were known as the Quartet.”

“Were?” Victoria glanced at Stiles.

“You seem to have found a fifth member.”

“Maybe we can be known as the Quartet plus one,” Kate suggested. Stiles sent her a dirty look.

“We don’t want to be known as anything,” he argued. That would make the job even harder! “Besides, what buuuull-- butterscotch is this? It hasn’t been even half a year!”

“It is rather extraordinary,” Victoria agreed. Chris looked like he had swallowed a lemon.

“Hear that, Stiles? We are cool.”
“Kate.”

“Amazing!”

“No.”

“Famous!”

“Ugh.” Stiles groaned, chucking the last of his coffee. It was cold. “Gerard is going to love that.”

Kate looked both elated and worried, her arms stuck in the air above her. Chris patted her on the shoulder, the movement oozing awkwardness.

“It’s not all bad,” he said, and then added, “The Quartet is seen as… surprisingly fair. Considering.”

“Considering we are a hunting group,” Stiles said dryly. Chris shrugged.

“You chose your poison,” he pointed out. Stiles wanted to laugh.

His life.

“What do you hunt?” Allison asked. She reached over to pull on Stiles’ sleeve. “There are monsters under my bed but daddy and mommy keep them away.” Stiles smiled at her.

“We help other people as well,” he said. “Not everyone has a mom or dad like yours.”

Allison nodded with her brows furrowed. “’s not good,” she said decisively. “Everyone needs a person like that.”

Okay, what the hell, she’s the cutest person ever, Stiles thought, dazed.

“Why can’t you be this adorable?” he asked Kate.

Kate pouted.

“But not every monster is a bad one,” he continued. Allison looked confused.

“But they want to eat us!”

“Some, yes, and some in a fun way—” Chris choked like he was dying, “—but some are just like you and me. They want to live their life the way we do. Go to day care, school, on holidays, work. Or maybe they just like dancing in the air or prancing in the woods.” His smile gentled. “Unicorns are pretty, aren’t they?”

Allison nodded. “They are white and like girls!”

“Good girls like you, definitely.” Stiles glanced at Victoria whom he couldn’t get a read on. He still reached over and poked Allison’s nose. “But then there are the sad stories. People are not always kind to those who are different. And then there are the bad ones who the good ol’ policemen can’t arrest, and that’s where we come in. To help when people can’t handle things.”

“Ally,” Kate called, and the girl turned to her. She grinned. “We are the ones who make sure people are protected, the innocent ones, no matter if mean people classify them as monsters or not. Because we aren’t the mean people or try our best not to be.”

“So you protect them? The monsters too?” Allison questioned, her head tilted. Kate nodded.
“That’s right, pretty girl. And bug the ones doing the hurt.”

Allison was quiet for a moment. Her forehead was wrinkled as she considered something hard. She turned to her mother.

“I want to do that too,” she announced. “Next time when you put me in bed, I want to speak with the monsters first. I want to know if we can be friends. If they are mean, you can scare them away again. I don’t like bullies.”

A flash of something passed Victoria’s face but it was gone too soon for Stiles to read.

“As you wish.” She kissed the top of Allison’s brown curls and Allison beamed wide.

Chris sighed. “I guess you could have done worse,” he said gruffly. He squeezed Kate’s shoulder before letting go. Kate’s grin rivalled Allison’s in brightness.

“Let’s hear this about Gerard again,” Victoria said, and this time her words had a steely edge on them. Stiles felt a burst of triumph through Kate’s bond and it echoed around joyously.

A step in the right direction.

They had their first allies.

***

“Mentoring breeds lies and misconceptions because biased hunters spread their biases, huh?” Stiles mused as he and Kate left the Argents behind. Kate whistled, the corners of her lips tugging upwards. She stretched her arms, reaching for the cloudy skies.

“This mentoring thing is bullshit,” she said. “I mean, theoretically, it can be good, I guess. Spreading information, knowledge, skills, but right now it’s not doing that at all. Like, if I had stuck with the mentors I had – or Gerard – there’s a possibility that I– I–” she paused, and then admitted, “It was a scary thought.”

Stiles poked at her side, and her arms dropped down quickly to protect her ribs. Stiles smirked.

“Victoria didn’t take too kindly to that.”

Kate snorted. “As long as she’s on the same page as us against Gerard, I don’t care. She can stay on her high horse if she wants to.”

Stiles hummed in agreement. Victoria wasn’t as stiff – or off her rocker – as the little he remembered of her but she hadn’t changed all that much either. However, “Chris did seem to have a small-scale identity crisis at the very end.”

“Yeah. Gerard’s training, maybe.” Kate sighed. “I’m just glad he believed us.”

Stiles nudged her. “Believe you. I was there just as a buffer. It was your show.”

“It was my show because of you,” Kate argued. “I’m not taking credit for all of that.”

“That would be a first.”

Kate shoved him so hard he almost fell over. “Asshole.”

“Hey, I’m going to pop by the store to pick up something for Bobby. Head back first to brief the
“Got it, boss.” Kate saluted. Stiles attempted to push her over but she danced out of his reach and stuck her tongue at him.

“Fuck off!” He flipped her the bird to the horror of the passing pair of grannies. She winked and sauntered off to the direction of their hotel.

Stiles shook his head and walked past the intersection. He thought he saw a sign and—yeah, there it was. Picking up his pace, he marched in the grocery shop. Thank you, Missouri, and its non–restrictive alcohol laws. As he made it to the right aisle, he frowned at the selection though. Not all that great but it’d have to do. He didn’t want to make multiple trips and he had no idea where the closest supermarket was.

He grabbed a few of the hard liquors and a couple of the nicer beers in case Peter wanted some too. He paused at the non–alcoholic beverages and then shrugged, grabbing two. He had been drinking in secret at Kate’s age already. At least these had nothing but the taste.

He should probably grab something else too. He moved his cart to the aisle that housed to-go salads. Not the best, probably, but they should tide them over. He was considering getting them chips – god, he always wanted something greasy when he had a drink – or nuts when a small juggernaut almost tripped him.

The curly black hair should have been a dead giveaway, Stiles would think later, but only when a male voice yelled “Scott” did Stiles’ heart stop. The all too familiar crooked jaw and wide dark eyes peered up from against Stiles’ leg.

“Dad won’t let me get chocolate,” Scott – Jesus Christ, Scott, it was Scott – announced. His already wide eyes grew larger. “Mom said I could but dad won’t get me any.”

Rafael McCall turned around the corner, his brows furrowed. “I said I wouldn’t get you a Snickers. It has nuts in it and last time you had a bad reaction to it.”

Stiles was still frozen. He couldn’t hear anything the two were saying and his eyes were glued to the child still clinging to his leg.

He was not ready for this. Allison, he had prepared for Allison, had known that was coming, but Scott? In the middle of freaking Missouri? He didn’t live in Missouri. Stiles felt faint and ill. He–

He felt like having a panic attack.

He collapsed on the floor, breathe hitching. He couldn’t get any air, he was drowning, he couldn’t focussomeonehelphimhecouldn’tbreathePeterhelphim–

He could vaguely hear someone ordering him to breath deeply, to count his fingers, that everything was fine, but it took Stiles a couple of minutes to actually listen. With shaky fingers, someone helped him count his breaths, gently coaxed him to resurface from the hell he had fallen into, all the while not touching an inch of his skin.

And then he did and his breath almost caught again.

Because this wasn’t Peter, Scott or even Rafe that was facing him.

No, it was fucking Deucalion.
“Are you alright?” Deucalion – Deucalion – asked him in that infuriating British accent of his. Scott inched closer as well, timidly holding his inhaler.

“Do you need it? I don’t need it right now,” he said, offering his lifeline to Stiles. Rafe made a noise somewhere in the background but Stiles shook his head shakily.

“It’s okay,” he croaked. He coughed a little and was handed a water bottle. He took a sip and closed his eyes, trying to calm his breathing pattern. The bonds inside his head were bouncing with alarm and he could hear – feel – that Kate and Peter were rushing to his location. He tried to send some reassurance through the line but they weren’t having it.

“It was a panic attack, I don’t have asthma,” he said, opening his eyes, and gently curled Scott’s fingers around his inhaler. “You need it more than me, don’t you?”

“Scott, you can’t just give a stranger your inhaler,” Rafe scolded but his voice betrayed his pride laced with worry. “What would your mom and I do if you gave it away and got an attack yourself?”

“I would have just loaned it!” Scott insisted. “Not given it away!”

“Oh Scott.” Rafe lifted Scott up and hugged him. “Like the last time?”

“I just forgot last time. Not this time, promise!”

“Can you stand?” Deucalion asked. He stood from his knees and offered a hand. Stiles accepted it with a quick nod.

“Thank you. I don’t know where it came from,” he lied and inwardly winced because werewolves. Deucalion didn’t even twitch, however, and Stiles suddenly remembered that he wasn’t supposed to know he was a wolf.

“Perfectly fine, glad to know you are alright.” The smile Stiles received felt strange. It didn’t have a bitter edge to it and his eyes–

He could see. There were no scars. Deucalion wasn’t blind.

“Are you sure, mister?” Scott piped up from Rafe’s arms. He struggled a bit and when Rafe let him down he walked over to tug at Stiles’ pants again. “Are you sure you are okay?”

Stiles crouched to his level. “A–okay, buddy. Are you?”

Scott nodded. Then shook his head and nodded again. “Mom and dad want to move. They talk about it when they think I’m asleep but sometimes I pretend. I don’t want to go even if I don’t have any friends home.”

At home. Which wasn’t Missouri. What the hell was this interesting about Missouri?

Rafe breathed in sharply. Stiles nodded.

“It can suck to not have friends,” he agreed. “I didn’t really have any friends either before my best friend moved to our town. Maybe you will be a friend to someone like that!”

Scott’s eyes brightened. “Do you think so?” he asked. Then his shoulders slumped a bit. “What if they have friends already?”
“I’m sure that even if that was the case, you would only fit in like a glove. People are puzzles, you know? You’ll just be the perfect piece to someone’s puzzle. Like your parents’.” Stiles glanced at Rafe who kneeled as well.

“I’m sorry, Scott,” Rafe said. “Your mom and I didn’t want to worry you. We haven’t decided yet but we thought somewhere with cleaner air would be better for your lungs.”

“So it’s because of me you want to move away? I don’t want you to move away because of me. It’s not fair,” Scott insisted. Rafe shook his head.

“Not just you but all of us. I have an offer in California and your mom is the best and she can work anywhere she wants.”

“Mom is magic. She heals people,” Scott told Stiles. Stiles nodded seriously.

“Then she must be a very good person.”

“The best!”

“What about Beacon Hills?”

Stiles startled. He had almost forgotten Deucalion there.

“What is that?” Rafe asked.

“A small town in northern California. A very lovely place with beautiful nature and a good heart,” Deucalion said. “Maybe not the easiest commute if you want to work in San Francisco but a friend of mine lives there and it has always been a pleasure to visit.”

“I– thank you. I’ll keep it in mind.”

“If you do consider it, I hope to see you there. I’m afraid I need to go now.” He glanced at the front window and nodded. “My cousin is waiting for me and we are actually on our way to visit the friend I mentioned.”

“Do you visit often?” Rafe asked.

“Often enough, I suppose, a few times a year. Our… families have been affiliated for a long time.” Deucalion nodded again and Stiles couldn’t help but wonder if the mentioned cousin was calling for him.

“I really must go now. Send Peter my regards,” he said, grabbing the basket Stiles hadn’t registered before, and passed them like he hadn’t just dropped a bomb.

“You knew him?” Rafe asked. Stiles slowly shook his head.

“Not really.” And it wasn’t a lie. “He is an acquaintance of someone I know. From Beacon Hills.”

“Beacon Hills again,” Rage chuckled. “Seems a little like destiny, Melissa would say.”

“He wasn’t wrong though,” Stiles said. Peter and Kate would be there any moment now; he could feel their presences getting nearer. “It is a lovely place. Calm.”

By the time the McCalls would move in, whether it was sooner or later, Stiles would make sure anything and everything there would be resolved.
“I’ll keep that in mind then.” Rafe dug into his pocket and answered the buzzing cell. “Still at the store. What? Milk? Do you need eggs too? Of course. I’ll see you soon, love you.”

“Would I get friends in that place?” Scott looked worried. Stiles nodded. “Promise?”

“I swear it.”

“Come, Scott, say your goodbye. Your mom and the Gonzales are waiting for us.”

“Oh. Oh! Um, bye mister! I’m fine, so you should be fine as well!” Scott said brightly. “We are both fine, see?” He waved his unused inhaler and beamed.

Stiles’ eyes felt wet. There was a commotion by the doors where Peter and Kate rushed past other customers in their hurry to get to Stiles.

“Stiles, are you alright?” Kate burst out. Peter looked worried too, the blue of his eyes looking decidedly brighter with a golden shine to them.

“Oh, I’m good,” he said. He stepped forward and hugged them both close. “Even better now.”

“Your friend here had a panic attack,” Rafe said. He sounded bemused at Peter and Kate’s sudden appearance.

“What triggered it? Are you really okay?” Kate questioned. She seemed a second away from shaking Stiles to force the answer out of him.

“The nice man helped out,” Scott piped up. “I bet mister would be better with some chocolate!” Peter made a small noise at that and his grip tightened a little around Stiles.

Rafe sighed. “Alright, squirt. Let’s get you your chocolate bar. But no Snickers!”

“Can I get two then?”

“Fine. But you won’t be eating them both today.”

“Okay! Bye mister!” Scott waved. Stiles waved back from where his pack was still making sure he was as fine as he said he was. Even as Rafe was already walking away, Scott stared at them a beat longer and said wistfully, “You look happy. I’m looking forward to meeting a friend that makes me as happy.”

And then he scrambled after his dad and Stiles watched Scott – alive, perfect Scott – disappear down the aisle.

Scott was fine. He was perfectly fine and alright. Stiles felt something in his heart settle finally.

When Peter opened his mouth Stiles just leaned against him and kissed him. And beamed, even as Kate made exaggerated retching noises.

“So I was thinking about chili nuts. Should we get something more?”

***

That night Stiles settled down and snuggled against Peter, both exhausted from Kate’s sugar rush and the unreleased energy from Bobby whose fever had finally broken. He rested his head on Peter’s arm and closed his eyes. A hand brushed the hair from his face. With a sigh, he plunged into the mind scape he had been avoiding for so long.
And when he dared to open his eyes, he couldn’t believe what he saw.

It was green.

The dark scape with only remains of ashes and despair was completely replaced by life and light. The green scenery felt like Julia’s influence but the lightshow around him was all Kate and the warmth at his back reminded him of the arms holding him in his and Peter’s bed. The bonds they had were somehow both intangible and everywhere around him but he could also press against the air itself and feel them pulse with him.

He turned around and met Scott’s gentle red gaze.

“Can you hear me now?” he asked. Stiles nodded, his eyes filling up.

“Yeah.” His voice cracked. Then he felt that familiar hug that was larger than life itself and hugged back just as tightly.

“We never blamed you.”

“I know.”

“You don’t have to feel guilty over us.”

“I– I know.”

“We are all alive, thank to you.”

Stiles’ breath hitched. Scott let go only so much that he could face Stiles again.

“We will always be with you, whatever you do. But it is time for us to be the memories we are instead of the scars we were.”

And then Stiles found himself surrounded by all of them – the pack before they were pack, the pack that was pack and the pack that would have been, should have been. They were all happy, bouncing and warm, healed; the bonds he had felt die and cut off too early, too violently, were echoing with the peace they all deserved. Lydia, his dad, Derek, Isaac, Liam, Malia– everyone.

A hand settled on his shoulder, both possessive and echoing Peter’s warmth.

“We might not remember but we will be there, every step of the way,” Scott said, his smile making Stiles ache. It turned a tad mischievous as he eyed Stiles. “Just be the badass you always are and save the day for your new beau.”

Stiles let out a startled laugh.

“Thank you.” For everything.

He wasn’t sure if it was him or Scott that said the words but with the way his alpha’s, his one and only alpha’s, eyes crinkled, it didn’t matter.

“Love. And be loved.”

Stiles snorted. “Now that was just a classic, overly optimistic McCall quote,” he teased. Scott beamed.

“But it worked, now, didn’t it?”
Stiles watched as his pack slowly faded, their bonds melding into the walls as the most beautiful tapestry.

“Yes, it did,” he said softly and with that the gentlest red washed into the crown jewel of the mindscape, his past shining in the light of his future. Despite being left alone, he didn’t feel that way. The hand on his shoulder, the light above him, and the green around him were making his life worth living again.

And when Stiles returned to Peter’s physical arms, he found him watching him. Stiles smiled through the tears that fell down his cheeks.

“I love you,” he choked out. Peter wiped the drops with his thumb and whispered back–

“I love you too.”

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“Well, aren’t you two all bright and happy?” Kate smirked as Stiles and Peter arrived at the lobby. Their hands were linked, and Stiles swung them in step. “Did you get laid?”

“Leave them alone,” Julia said as she smiled in their direction. She grinned impishly. “No one needs to know that.”

Bobby nursed his bottle of whiskey, looking tipsy but well-slept. “You are disgusting,” he informed them. Peter shrugged.

“At least some of us take showers.” He wrinkled his nose. Julia took a step back from where she was standing next to Bobby while Bobby bellowed that “I did take one, you nosy bitch!”

“He’s a wolf, of course he’s nosy,” Stiles cackled and was cuffed at his head for his efforts.

“No more of them,” Peter warned him.

“But you loooove me,” Stiles whined and pursed his lips. Peter looked pained.

“And I regret every second of it,” he said gravely. Stiles shoved at him but the bastard had the gall to not sway even one bit.

“Go back to the hole you crawled from.”

“Am I the devil now?”

“A maggot really.”

“That’s too bad. At least I’d make Prada look good.”

Stiles froze.

“Uncle Peter!” An angry voice called and they all watched as a girl in her early teens stomped over with a couple adults hanging at her back. “Finally- I finally found you!” she declared victoriously.


He didn’t sound surprised at all.

The Hales had caught up to them at last.
And when one circle closes, another one is just getting started. *The snowball effect is here!*

Also, if you want to have a chat or something, my tumblr is [here](#). I sort of feel like I'm coming out of the closet, haha. It would probably be warmer there than where I am now anyhow. I need to reconsider my life choices.

See you next time!
In which people are being trolled

Chapter Notes

Happy April! March was an interesting month and April seems to continue the pace. At least the sun is now shining and spring seems to finally be here. If only the snow would melt now. I'm knocking on wood right now, just saying.

Thank you for all the reviews, kudos and whatnot; last chapter's reception completely blew me away. Every time I saw a note in my inbox, I got a burst of inspiration which truly helped me to finally finish this chapter. You're all godsend. Cheers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stiles watched as the teen version of Derek’s sister – whom Stiles had only met as a halved corpse, Jesus Christ – stomped over. His mind scrambled to collect itself but there was a marathon inside his skull with no signs of direction. His eyes glued to the fantastic bird’s nest Laura was sporting. Her hair was sticking in all directions at once. Didn’t she have time to comb it that morning? Or night. Or whenever, wherever- Stiles was impressed.

Right, press reboot, shut down all unnecessary lines of thoughts and song lyrics you don’t need right this second- unanswered questions, filed away until peace and quiet was discovered again, thank you, and threat before his eyes, focus on. Compartmentalising, his shit it was, stomping on baggage until able to zip it shut, way of not dealing till-

“Did you want something?” Peter asked Laura genially. He curled his arm around Stiles. What a douche move, the douche. “Or I guess I should ask if Talia wanted something. A pointless question, that. She always does.”

“You!” Laura huffed and her scowl was rather awe-inspiring as well – or would be if she didn’t look 80 pounds soaking wet and scrawnier than Stiles was at her age which was actually sort of impressive. He briefly wondered if Derek and Peter had looked like her too in their pre-teens. There was no way they were born as the beefcakes they were as adults. No way werewolves were that lucky. “You left us!”

Peter sighed rather dramatically in Stiles' opinion. “Are we doing this here?” he asked, turning his head around the hotel lobby. People were definitely pretending not to be looking even when there was an unaired episode of the Californian Kardashians going on. Wait. Didn’t they live in California too? Which ones were the originals? Or were the Hales just a supernatural version of-

That was a shitty reboot, Stiles groaned inwardly. He needed a new brain, one that knew how to handle surprises of non-violent kind. \textit{Hopefully} of non-violent kind.

Stiles wasn’t taking any bets though.

“Don’t you dare look away from me!” Laura raged. It seemed liked her hair stuck up more with each passing second. “You left without any note! Mom went nuts! No one knew it you were alive or kidnapped or- or- and \textit{the only thing} holding us together was \textit{our bond. Which you snapped}-!”

“Laura-”
“How could you do this?! You— you—!”


Laura looked like she was about to explode and spill her guts then and there – and Stiles honestly wasn’t sure if that was literally or not – but the man who had come with her placed a hand on her shoulder. “As much as it pains me, Peter may be right. We might want to take this elsewhere.”

“But—!”

“Hello, Kevin,” Peter greeted the man. Kevin gave Peter a dark look even as he reluctantly reined Laura in.

“You are not off the hook, cousin.”

“I wouldn’t expect otherwise.” Peter didn’t sound worried at all. He nodded at the woman. “Lena.”

“Peter.” The woman sounded more exasperated than anything else. She kept eyeing the arm Peter had around Stiles.

“What, nothing to say to your nephew?”

“I don’t think I have anything to say to the stupidity of what you have done.”

“Ouch. That hurt. Right here.” Peter tapped his chest where his heart beat. Lena snorted.

“I’m sure.”

“Shall we go then?” Kate interrupted. She had crossed her arms at some point. “We were trying to take our leave when you stopped us.”

“And who are you supposed to be?” Laura spun on her feet, trying to glare Kate into submission. Kate smirked.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Alright, let’s get a move on then,” Stiles said before Laura could combust for real. “Do you want to drive, Peter, or…?”

“I am not letting something like a small family meeting get in my way,” Peter said. He snatched the keys from Stiles’ pocket. “I’ll meet you at the front?”

“Sure.”

“I am not letting you go again, uncle!” Laura announced. Peter rolled his eyes.

“I am not leaving my pack behind, dear niece,” he huffed, pretending offence. Laura looked confused, maybe even a little pleased. Peter smirked. “You, on the other hand…”

Before Laura could even react, Peter pecked Stiles on the cheek and took off to the elevator. When Laura recovered from her shock, the doors had already closed.

“He just confirmed it, didn’t he?” Kevin said, his glare now directed at Stiles’ pack. Lena stared at the closed doors.

“So it would seem,” she murmured.
“But he can’t!” Laura insisted. “Uncle Peter’s a Hale! He’s ours!”

Stiles clasped Kate’s shoulder before she could send a scathing remark that he could feel was coming. “We can talk after we are out of here. I don’t want to create a scene.” He glanced around. “Or more of a one.”

“And why not?!” Laura twirled to glare at him. Stiles arched his brows.

“Well, in case you want to draw attention to a bunch of wolves in the hunter capital…”

Lena and Kevin paled faster than teenager Stiles could trip over thin air. “St. Louis is…?”

“Yeah,” Kate said. “So we want to get out of here.”

“It’s rather reasonable, isn’t it?” Julia murmured but her voice held a wistful tone. Stiles could understand. The untouched resources of that library… He and Julia shared a look. They were leaving behind the supernatural nerd heaven.

Bobby squinted. Then his expression brightened. “I thought you looked familiar!” he bellowed. Laura blinked and her eyes widened, the burning rage lessening for a passing second.

“You are the weird guy!”

Lena pursed her lips. “The guy who winked at you?”

Stiles turned to Bobby, bemused. Bobby shrugged, completely unapologetic.

“Accelerating the wheel and all that. For the greater good!” He pumped his fist in the air.

“That’s what flirting with a minor is called today?” Stiles asked dryly. Bobby pouted.

“Now you are just making things unnecessarily dirty.”

“You’re the reason they are here?” Kate accused.

Bobby considered her words. “I don’t think so?” he offered. He didn’t sound all too sure of that.

“Peter didn’t seem too surprised to see them,” Julia said. She placed a hand on Bobby’s shoulder. “How’s your drink?”

Bobby sloshed his half-full whiskey with a demented grin.

Stiles nodded pensively. “She’s right.”

Peter was certainly plotting something, that was sure at the very least.

“You mean you wanted us here?” Kevin asked. He didn’t look convinced. It did sound a little insane, Stiles could admit. Knowing him, Peter probably wanted secure his base somehow. Stiles felt Peter’s bond tug at him.

“Oh, Peter’s outside,” Stiles said and grabbed their bags. “And I wouldn’t dare to claim to know what goes in on Peter’s head.” Not completely anyway. Guy was a maze in human form.

“You know him well,” Lena said. Her arms were crossed. Stiles shrugged.

“They are fucking,” Bobby announced. Stiles choked on air while Kate giggled in surprise. Laura’s
eyes threatened to bulge out of their sockets.

“Bobby, what the fuck⁈”

“As the patriarch of the family, ‘tis my duty to share what happens in the family,” Bobby said, nodding wisely.

Stiles wasn’t buying the act. “What happened to not make things unnecessarily dirty⁈”

“…Payback?”

“You were the one who winked at a minor!”

“For the greater good!”

“He does smell like him but not like they’ve had...” Kevin wrinkled his nose. Lena smacked him on the head. Stiles swallowed his scream. It almost suffocated him.

“I apologise for my son.” Lena eyed Kevin. “He got his tack from his father.”

Kevin grumbled something under his breath. Lena smacked him again. Stiles felt another tug.

The day was only starting and he was already feeling like going back to his room and never coming out again. He could just tell today was going to be such a lovely day. He shoved his irritation down the bond which bounced back laced with amusement.

“Right, so, off we go.” Stiles dragged a hand through his hair. “We have an appointment in getting the hell out of here, you follow me?”

“I’m not leaving uncle Peter alone with you!” Laura glared. Stiles bit his tongue.

“There’s no space for you in the car,” Kate said instead. Laura’s scowl intensified.

“Make some.”

Kate’s lips formed a narrow line.

“It’s not that we don’t trust you,” Lena started – and we definitely don’t, Stiles translated, – “but we would like some insurance you won’t disappear again.”

“We don’t deal in hostages,” Kate growled. Lena looked highly offended.

“We’ll go to their car,” Julia said, her hand still on Bobby’s arm. “They won’t do anything to us.”

With the runes painted on her skin, the Hales would have to be crazy to attack them.

“Fine.” Stiles still didn’t need to like it. He glanced at Julia who merely smiled at him. Stiles shouldered the bags and left to follow the insistent warm tug that was Peter.

He found him a street over. Peter was leaning against the door on the driver’s side, waiting, chatting up an old lady who tittered at him and seemingly pinched his arm. Stiles smirked and sent a wave of amusement at him. Revenge. When the woman moved on, Peter flashed him a fang.

“Adorable,” Kate cooed, propping the trunk open.

“Why, thank you.”
Kate snorted. The bags were quickly thrown in and Stiles found himself at a standstill with an irate teen wolf for the passenger seat.

“Dude, our car, our rules,” he said. Laura gave him a mulish glare and crossed her arms. He rolled his eyes. “You can ask your questions from the backseat. It’s not like Peter’s going to run away with you sitting behind… me.”

Kate smirked smugly from the seat she had claimed behind Peter. She gave him a jaunty wave which he decided to magnanimously ignore.

“He’s my uncle,” Laura growled. Stiles lifted his shoulders.

“And my boyfriend, so that trumps family. Isn’t that right, honey bear?”

“Not with that nickname, sweetheart.”

“Rude.”

When Laura still didn’t seem inclined to move an inch, Stiles found his patience thinning. He had better things to do than playing a babysitter to a child pretending to be an alpha.

“Back. Shoo.” He grabbed her arm and, when he felt Laura’s heels dig into the ground, willed her to move. He knew it was his seat, had been his seat since Peter stole the driver’s, and he knew he would win the argument one way or another.

Laura found herself looking at the filled front seat with an outraged look on her face.

“Just climb in, Laura, we want to leave,” Peter drawled, “unless you want to go with Lena and Kevin.”

With one last glare at Stiles, Laura did join Kate in the back.

They had barely managed to get past two set of lights when Laura opened her mouth.

“Mom wants you to come home.”

Peter snorted.

“Cute. You can tell her it’s not happening.”

Laura crossed her arms. “And why not?” she demanded.

“We are not pack anymore,” Peter said bluntly. The light turned green and he switched to the lane that would take them out of the city eventually. Laura winced as if she had been hit. Stiles squeezed Peter’s leg.

“I don’t say this to hurt you.” Peter nodded subtly before meeting Laura’s eyes in the mirror. “It’s just a fact. It doesn’t take away that you are my family, my flesh and blood, but it means that I won’t be coming back.”

“But why?!” Laura leaned forward, and Stiles could feel the edges of her claws where she clung to his seat. “Weren’t we enough for you? Mom was so mad when you left! She contacted every pack she could and the bits we got were like- mom says you are in danger!”

“Life is dangerous, Laura, and traveling as what’s known as a hunter pack makes it even more so.”
“Watch the seat,” Stiles warned when he saw the tips of her claws pierce the surface, while Kate mused aloud, “I like the sound of that.”

Laura didn’t seem to hear him. “That part was true?” she asked, taken aback. She brows knitted together. “Why would you do that? Leave the pack for- for-”

“That was more of an accident than anything else.”

“Cora cried! Derek wouldn’t eat for three days straight!”

“And I’m sorry you had to go through that,” Peter said. There was remorse in his tone but he didn’t pretend to be apologetic. “But I have found my place in the world.” He squeezed Stiles’ hand back where he hadn’t removed it yet. “And that’s the reason you are here. I wanted you to see it.”

Stiles sighed. He had been right then. “And that’s my cue to demand what the fuck Peter.”

“Language, there are minors in the car,” Peter answered mildly.

“No one gives a fuck, least of all your niece.” Stiles tilted his head back to meet Laura’s eyes. Her face was far too close for comfort. “How did you track us?”

Laura blinked. She clearly wasn’t expecting to actually be addressed. “Uh. There was something about… tran- transactions?” she said.

Stiles did the math. “When did you- Vegas. Of course. And the-”


“Those did help but we were on the way already,” Laura admitted. Peter paused before switching the lane again.

“Bobby apparently tipped them off,” Stiles explained.

Laura looked unsure. “He… I managed to catch your scent and he, I think, made sure I saw you…?” And then, more surely, because apparently that was her sticking point, “and he winked at me. Winked.”

Peter turned to Stiles with his brows arched. Stiles shrugged.

“He ‘accelerated the wheel’ or whatever. His words.”

Peter looked back at the road ahead. “Right.”

And that was it, the magic of Bobby Finstock. After all they’d been through, this didn’t even hit the top twenty. Even with the rather questionable methods.

Did Bobby even have any non-questionable methods?

When she found herself ignored Laura seemingly lost most of her steam although that didn’t stop her from trying to glare Peter into submission. They drove for a while and finally managed to leave behind the busy roads of St. Louis. It also seemed their only tail was Kevin’s car. Good news, Stiles thought. His mind travelled back to the discussion they had with Shannon. Something about it tickled his senses. He didn’t like knowing that there was something he didn’t understand – that there was something rotten in the state of Denmark, and he could do shit about that. He snatched his little red book and looked over his notes.
What had he missed? Her words? Her tone, the whole situation? He scowled. He hated this nagging, fucking-

The tires screeched suddenly, and the car jumped and promptly died as if from shock. Stiles’ heart skipped a beat. The seatbelt sunk into his skin. It was a miracle he hadn’t choked.

“What the hell?” he managed to bite out. He could taste blood. Kate had grabbed one of her knives and held it in front of her. Laura stared at her in horror.

“We have visitors, it seems,” Peter said. He stared past the wheel. Stiles followed his gaze to see two large stones that hadn’t still completely stopped rolling.

And then Peter’s words caught up with him.

Stiles cursed.

He tugged the ‘rope’ still strangling him off of him and kicked the door open.

“Hеееееу,” he drawled. “What can we do for you today?”

The rocks shivered and then rolled open to reveal trolls not unlike the ones they had escaped from before.

“Ohеeе Marruk favour,” the one on the left grumbled. “Marruk calls for favour.”

“Who the fuck is Marruk?” Stiles heard Laura ask but the only thing on his mind was the headache forming.

Of course.

Stiles turned to Peter who looked like he wanted to laugh.

Thanks a lot, buddy. Thanks a fucking bunch.

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“I hate trolls,” Stiles groaned as they turned left when the original plan was to head over to the opposite direction. “I hate them. I really do. Even more than wendigos. At least those can be killed! Problem solved! Easy!”

“Stop whining,” Kate piped up. “You’re worse than Finstock.”

“I hate trolls,” he repeated, dragging out his vowels. Kate rolled her eyes.

“At least the car still started,” Peter said dryly. “And they didn’t demand a lift. There’s no way we could have fit them in.”

“I hate trolls,” Stiles said, again. Kate watched him slap Peter’s hand on his lap. “And I hate you even more. You owe me so much for all the drama you’ve caused us.”

“Yes, dear.”

“Don’t ‘dear’ me, you- you- bag of knockoff bagpipes!”

Kate cackled. The disgruntled wet cat Stiles was the best kind of Stiles.
“That’s a new one,” Peter commented mildly.

“I’ll show you a new one,” Stiles swore.

“Is that a promise?”

“Are they always like this?”

Kate turned to look at the unwanted addition to their car. Peter’s niece was looking at the battle happening in front of her, brows knitted together. Kate glanced back just in time to see Stiles push Peter’s hand off his lap, only for it to poke him in the ribs. Stiles squawked.

“Pretty much,” she confirmed. Laura seemed more wary than angry right now. That was a good enough sign, Kate thought. “There’ve been a few rough patches but I don’t really think the banter has stopped unless they were both asleep.” She paused and then amended, “if even then.”

“But-” Laura looked lost. “I don’t- Peter isn’t like that.”

Kate bit her lip and counted backwards when her temper flared.

“Sass everyone once in a while, yeah, but… not like this,” Laura continued quietly. Kate was silent. Neither Stiles nor Peter seemed to be listening in on them but Kate would bet her knife that they were.

What, did they expect her to do the dirty job? Fuck them, no. Kate was no one’s babysitter.

“Did he have anyone to sass with?” she asked bluntly. Laura turned to her, eyes wide. Kate rolled her eyes. “From what he’s told us he was chafing under your alpha’s rule. Tell me, what was his place in the pack?”

Laura scowled. “That’s not any of your business.”

Kate glared back. “Well, in that case, none of our business is yours. We are his pack now,” she spat.

“And what does a hunter like you know?!” Laura demanded. She clenched her fists, eyes blazing. “Knives ready, sitting at his back! From all I know you’ve kidnapped him and holding him hostage!”

“Then why is he driving the car and not tied in the trunk?” She smirked. “Think your uncle is this weak?”

“What, no! I- no! Maybe your pet mage has charmed him somehow!”

“Charmed he is,” Kate said. Laura’s eyes widened. Kate smirked. “With Stiles’ dick.”

“Kate!” Stiles scolded her. She shrugged, still grinning.

“That’s more or less true, isn’t it?”

Peter just laughed.

“Did you enchant uncle Peter?” Laura spat out. She was glaring at Kate.

“Me?” Kate giggled. She waved her hand. “I just use him as target practice. Stiles and Julia are our resident Merlins.”

“Gee thanks, Kate,” Stiles said, his voice desert personified. “And to answer your question, no. We
did not enchant Peter in any way. Listen to my heart if you need to.”

“You can probably disguise it,” Laura growled. Peter shook his head.

“That’s not how magic works,” he tsked, as if disappointed. Laura’s glower deepened. “It’s all or nothing. Since you can hear it – and trust me, Stiles doesn’t know how to control his heartbeat without magic, never has – you can be reassured that your ears won’t lie to you.”

“I don’t understand!” Laura thumped her fists on her seat. “Why would you do it to us? To our pack? It hurt, like you tore my arm out! Cora wouldn’t stop crying! She went on for weeks-”

“So, what, he’s supposed to drop everything when your people come calling?” Kate said. She scoffed. “What a lovely existence. Not an enforcer, not worthy of- what was it Peter? Some sort of librarian?”

“Liaison.”

“Close enough.”

Laura slumped, her anger drained from her. She looked exhausted. Kate didn’t find any sympathy for her. She didn’t. She didn’t. “I don’t understand. How could you give your family up for them? For hunters?”

“If we are being politically correct, I am the only hunter here.” Kate shrugged. “Stiles is my mentor but he basically sucks-”

“Hey!”

“-and we are just a ragtag group that somehow got famous.” Kate brightened. “We even have a name!”

Laura squinted at her. “Yeah, right.”

“We do,” Kate insisted. “The Quartet!”

“But there are five of you.”

“Look, she can count.” Laura bared her teeth. Kate grinned. “The Quartet plus one! Oh, listen! A Hunter Pack!”

Stiles wrinkled his nose. “That makes us sound like sports brand or a DLC.”

Kate blinked. “A what now? Isn’t that a girl group?”

“That’s- well. It would make us sound a very sucky girl group too. Like, imagine us singing country.”

“Ewww.”

“Right?!”

Laura turned to look at Peter. “You left the pack for this?”

“Hey!”

Peter sighed. Stiles pat his hand.
“Not a word,” Peter threatened.

Stiles shrugged innocently while Peter sent him suspicious looks. Laura eyed them with looks not unlike Peter’s. The dip of the brows, silent snarl – yeah, definitely Peter’s relative, she was. Kate eyed her critically before deciding to dismiss her altogether.

It wasn’t like she could do anything, a dumb kid as she was. And she was supposed to be the next alpha? Yeah, Kate didn’t see that happening. If the rest were anything like this, she would kick their asses before they got their dirty hands on Peter.

Reluctantly Kate found her attention drawn back to Peter’s niece. She was glowering at the window, the flashes of gold visible on the reflection. Kate narrowed her eyes.

Although…

“So, what’s with the bird’s nest?”

Laura exploded. Kate grinned inwardly.

This was kind of fun.

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They finally arrived at the site three hours later. With Laura and Kate exchanging barbs in the backseat and Stiles itching to get Peter alone – he really needed to have a private discussion with Mr. Schemer here – the trip was the longest in living memory. Stiles wished the Hales had never caught up to them. Derek’s sister was a stubborn fucking brat.

He probably shouldn’t have expected anything else, knowing Peter. And Derek. And Cora. And Malia. Did she count? She totally counted.

And Kate wasn’t helping.

Stiles popped the trunk open and rifled around the bags, looking for a weapon. Kate nosed along, grabbing a longer pair of knives that almost seemed like short swords. They had a name, he knew that, but fuck if he remembered. He tugged the gun he found on his belt and deemed himself ready.

Kevin’s car screeched to a halt behind them and the man himself joined them outside.

“I refuse to drive that- that lunatic anywhere!” he burst out, eyes hinting gold.

Julia climbed out of the car. Stiles watched as she tried to pull Bobby out as well but he was busy belting out a rendition of the Yellow Submarine.

Lena escaped the car looking tortured.

“Finstock!” Kate yelled loud enough to shatter the off-key chorus. Bobby peeked out looking peevish. “Have you finally scared away your testicles? Because it sounds just like that!”

“You suck!” Bobby rolled from the car, the only thing keeping him from tumbling to the ground being Julia. “My singing is impeccable!”

Lena and Kevin’s hallowed expressions begged to differ.

“Maybe the yeti lady actually did cut them off! Would explain a lot.”
“My testicles are in premium condition!” Bobby scoffed. “She just couldn’t wait to get her hands on them!”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

“Bitch!”

“Lush!”

“Can we move on now?” Stiles asked. He closed the trunk with a bang. Bobby’s preening reminded him of this very old self-satisfied cat that had once lived in his neighbourhood. Christ, he had forgotten about it altogether. The big lump had to be prancing around Beacon Hills right at this moment.

“Please,” Kevin begged.

Stiles looked around. The bridge looked the same as the first and only time he had ever seen it. A bit old, a bit in need of a lot of repairs but sturdy enough to still be in use and not taken under maintenance – or rebuilt altogether. Might also be the current – and future – economic climate. Why bother with a bridge somewhere off the main roads until it killed someone?

Hopefully not them.

“What’s even going on here?” Stiles muttered. “Bridge under attack, sure, but with what? By whom?” He squinted. “I see nothing.”

“Perhaps move closer?” Lena suggested. Stiles rolled his eyes.

“Why, thank you! I never would have come to the same conclusion.”

Laura and Kate snorted in unison. When Stiles glanced at them, one’s shock was pitted against the other’s amusement.

Stiles shook his head. Julia and Peter fell in step with him as they walked towards the bridge. No one answered when he called for the trolls. It seemed like they had all truly fled from whatever the threat was.

“Your family is… nice,” Julia said after a beat. Peter barked a laugh.

“Are they?”

“They mean well.”

“You don’t have to try to find a silver lining in everything.”

“They do,” Julia insisted. She glanced over her shoulder and lowered her voice. “I mean, Kevin isn’t the nicest, maybe, but he and Lena were worried.” She bit her lip. “It wouldn’t have been the most painless for a bond to break,” she said distantly.

Stiles and Peter exchanged a look.

“That is certainly true,” Peter allowed. “But this is not the same case as with the Steele’s.”

Julia waved her hand. “I know. Which is why I think they’ll deserve an explanation at the very least.”
Peter rolled his shoulders. “That’s why they are here,” he said. “Do you really think I would reveal my location for nothing?”

The answer dawned on Stiles. “You want allies before confronting your sister,” he accused. Peter shrugged.

“Guilty as charged.”

“That’s pretty smart,” Stiles admitted. “Laura probably wasn’t…?”

“Not intentional, no.” Peter sighed. “She’d be one of the most hurt. Quickest to anger.”

“Close to alpha, easiest to influence,” Julia mumbled. Peter nodded.

“Exactly. Not on purpose but as Talia’s kid, she’s more attuned to her mother, her alpha, than perhaps anyone else.” His brows knitted together. “I’m still unsure why she’s here, however; she’s just thirteen.”

“That you would have to ask her.”

“I know.”

Stiles kneeled by the bridge. His hand traced the lines in the stone.

“It looks like something has left their mark,” he said. He waved his hand for them to get closer. “Look.”

Peter kneeled next to him, Julia leaning over them.

“Something sharp,” she said. She leaned up. “Kate!”

Kate jogged to them, blatantly ignoring the chaos she had tried to incite. “What?”

“Do you recognise these marks?”

Kate squinted. She crouched next to Stiles. “No,” she said. “They sort of look like wendigo claws, all thin and sharp, but not.”

Something unpleasant tickled Stiles. He leaned forward again, inspecting the depth of the marks. “You are right. No wonder the trolls called for us.”

“Seems like their natural enemy,” Peter agreed. “They have to be strong enough to harm their rock-like skin.”

Stiles sucked in his lips. He had a very bad feeling about this.

“Are we in danger?”

Stiles glanced at where Laura stood with Andrew and Lena, Bobby swaying next to them. His gaze was focused on the sky above them, eyes crossed.

“We are always in danger, Laura,” Peter said. “Haven’t you learned already?”

She opened her mouth but stopped when Stiles suddenly scrambled up. Something cold travelled down his spine.
“Something’s coming,” he whispered, out of breath. His eyes were fixed in the direction Bobby was still staring.

“Oh, so this is where it led,” Bobby said, distant. “The final push.”

“What is happening?” Julia asked. Kevin shoved him but Bobby didn’t elaborate.

“I can hear wings,” Peter said. His claws were out. “Many pairs of them.”

Stiles’ eyes widened as he recognised the screech coming from above them.

“Harpies, they are harpies!” He grabbed Julia and dragged her next to him. “Their claws are harder than steel and they eat all kinds of magic!” The shinier the better was left unsaid but didn’t go unheard.

“Shit!” Kate cursed. She grabbed her knives, twirling them. “Weaknesses?”

“Their skin is stringier than a human’s but essentially the same,” Julia said as if reciting something. “But they have needle-like claws in both their hands and feet.”

“And they are fast,” Stiles said grimly. The inhuman screeches were closer, far too close already. He groped blindly until he grasped Peter’s shirt.

He was there. Still there. Alive.

“Be careful,” he managed to say before they were onto them.

It was chaos. Stiles crouched when a harpy swooped on him, the only reason he managed to dodge because he had seen them coming. The Hale trio were busy protecting themselves – or Kevin and Lena were protecting Laura – leaving the rest of them on their own. Stiles lit a small fire with his lighter that Julia turned into a small inferno with a gust of wind. With the singlemindedness of knowing he needed to burn these fuckers he guided the fiery outburst at the circling vulture-women. He could see some of their wings catch fire.

He grasped for his gun. He knew it was loaded, shit, his dad would have killed him if he didn’t check that, never mind Kate, but shit, fuck, he had no idea which bullets- he knew mountain ash did shit for them but mistletoe- their soft skin would be easy to pierce. Precise hit if the poison wouldn’t work. The gun felt cold in his hands.

He trusted it. They would fly.

He would make them count.

Someone dragged him down – Julia, he realised belatedly – just before a harpy slashed at where he just had stood. They rolled around and Stiles tugged the safety off and pulled the trigger on the bastard trying to claw Julia instead. It fell half on top of her legs, stilling after a few suspicious twitches.

Julia’s face was painted with blood but her attention was already elsewhere as she fumbled up. His head snapped back when he heard Laura scream. A harpy had dragged Lena further away from them and she was viciously battling against the creature holding her hostage. Kevin was crouching nearby, looking for a way through with two harpies circling him, and Laura-

Laura was pressed down by one.
Before Stiles could react, the harpy let out a hollow shriek. A knife was imbedded into its back and it was thrown off of Laura by Kate. The harpy’s throat was slit before it hit the ground, Kate on top of the body. All in five short seconds.

Stiles’ instincts tingled and he rolled left. He aimed and shot at the one swooping on Julia. It let out an enraged screech – shit, did he miss? – but Bobby brought down his bottle on its head and used the broken bottom as a weapon.

“Keep your dirty little hands to your dirty little selves!”

“Julia!” Stiles yelled. He threw his lighter at her. She caught it and not a moment later the harpy was flying away in panic with burning plumage.

Stiles got on his feet again, holding his gun ready. When two of the harpies – did they hunt in pairs? – aimed at him, he stumbled. He shot.

He missed.

With an enraged howl Peter jumped at them and pulled them down before they could hit Stiles and Stiles-

Stiles knew he had seen this scene before.

He could see the ragged and ripped clothing drape over his shoulders where previously had been clean and formfitting 90s fashion. The gold gained a bluish tint and there were lines where there had been just smooth skin before. The muscles were back, painstakingly maintained after years of laying still.

The back was just as straight as it had been once before.

And Stiles was scared shitless.

Peter roared, ripping feathers from one of the harpies which caused it to crash down. It crouched, hissing, before advancing again. The one still in flight hovered just out of reach, slashing down whenever close enough. The white shirt on Peter was pink with blood, getting redder by the minute.

He couldn’t lose him again.

The thought broke Stiles from his trance. His hands were shaking as he took aim. He would kill for them, had kill for them, and this time he was prepared. The world quietened around him; the only sound he could hear was the blood rushing in his ears.

He shot. Twice.

The harpy dropped like a stone.

Peter slammed into the remaining flightless creature and tore its throat open with his teeth. It gurgled even as Stiles took aim again. As Peter’s head came up, he shot a bullet through the harpy’s. It died without a second twitch.

Peter stood up, eyes shining gold and blood dripping from his mouth. He said something but Stiles couldn’t hear a thing. All his senses were focused on Peter.

He was alive.

He hadn’t- he wasn’t- there wasn’t-
Peter’s head snapped up and he threw himself at Stiles. Stiles hit the ground, gun dropping from his grip, and he found himself as a spectator for an ambush.

No-

Peter grinned, vicious and beautiful. He ripped the head off the harpy.

_He was alive._

He sat on the ground, staring. Peter said something but he couldn’t hear. He could only watch his mouth move. It was moving. He was alive.

_He wasn’t ripped open in front of Stiles again._

Peter kneeled in front of him. The hand that cupped Stiles’ cheek was gentle, the brush of his fingers soft. Grounding. There was something wet travelling down his cheeks. Peter said something again, hadn’t stopped talking all the while, but all Stiles could focus was- was-

“-les, Stiles, shh, it’s alright,” Peter said. His voice, deep and whisper-quiet, pumped inside Stiles’ veins like his life-blood. “I’m not dead. I didn’t die. Shh, it’s alright. You’ll never have to bury me again, I promise.”

Stiles hiccupped.

“You- you-” his voice rasped before dying again. He coughed. Peter’s smile, the most beautiful thing Stiles had ever seen, graced his lips.

“I will never leave you again.” He kissed the top of Stiles head, blood, grime and dirt all. “I always did like you, Stiles.”

Stiles choked on his laugh. His hand curled around Peter’s wrist.

“So you’ve told me.”

“Is everyone accounted for?” Kate called out. Stiles leaned against Peter, gazing in her direction. She was standing, hair torn from its braid, and twirled her knife. “Julia? There you are. Is Finstock still conscious? Oh, his bottle broke, never mind. Hale one and Hale two? Shit, why are you still bleeding? Is your arm broken? You’re a werewolf, act like it.”

Stiles noticed Laura sitting not too far away from Kate, stare switching from her to him and Peter and back with a weird expression on her face. He closed his eyes, enjoying the beat of Peter’s pulse beneath his hand.

“Go be gross somewhere else!” Kate yelled. She picked up Stiles gun, turning the safety on. She peeked inside.

“Why is this empty? Did you use all your bullets?” Kate huffed. “You better not have used it as a throwing weapon, I’ll kick your ass if you did!” Stiles laughed weakly even as Julia placed a hand over Kate’s shoulder. He sunk into the warmth that was Peter.

“I hate trolls,” he whined. Peter shook beside him. The chuckles rumbled against Stiles’ side and a smile made its way on Stiles’ face. “Rude. It’s your fault we are here.”

“There, there.” There was no hiding the amusement in Peter’s tone. “It’s not like anyone was killed.” Stiles shivered. “Dude. Too soon. And don’t even think you’re off the hook.”
“Yes, dear.”

Something splashed. Stiles tilted his head just enough to look towards the river. Five heads poked through the surface, their eyes gleaming in the sunlight. Two of them were hissing in contest, glaring at them with their eerily large eyes, while the third hid beneath the surface again. The last two shared a look – the hissing in the background only grew louder – and the one on the right stood up, revealing scales dotting down her body in intricate patterns and web where there shouldn’t be. Stiles thought he saw gills too but he couldn’t be sure with the hair sticking to her body.

She still didn’t take a single step on the dry land.

“Are the trolls finally gone?” the woman demanded. Stiles closed his eyes with a groan.

“Don’t tell me, this isn’t over yet?”

Peter shook again. Stiles hit the ungrateful bastard.

Fuck his life.

***

Stiles was exhausted by the time they arrived at the nearest town. The sun hadn’t even completely sunk yet and he was ready to drop off the earth for the nap of a lifetime. He hated trolls. He hated river folk. He hated the apparent grudge between the two. He hated being forced to act as some sort of peacemaker for creatures who did not wish for one. He hated being used.

“Just kill me,” he mumbled as he sprawled on the bed.

Never again. No favours, ever. He’ll kick anyone’s ass who tries to force him into one.

“I wish,” Kevin said. Stiles rolled just enough to be able to glare at him. Stupid Hales and their rules about not letting Peter be alone in fear of him disappearing. What was privacy in the world of supernatural?

“If I died, would you miss me?” Stiles raised his voice just a little.

“It’s cute how you think death can get you out of this relationship,” Peter answered. Kevin groaned, flexing his newly healed arm.

“I don’t need to know, shut up.”

“Then you should have known better then to room with us, cousin.”

“And not be so interested in our sex life,” Stiles piped up.

“I hate you both and this wild goose chase you sent us on,” Kevin mumbled. He snagged a towel from the closet and sniffed at it. He made a face but didn’t put it back.

“Dibs on shower.”

Stiles lay there silent, listening to the room groan and water hit the tiles. The whole day had been exhausting to the nth degree. He just wanted to sleep. But-

“Don’t even think about walking out!” Kevin yelled from the shower. Stiles turned his head, snorting at the disgruntled look on Peter’s face. His hand hovered on the door handle.
“I was just going to the vending machine!” he yelled back. The water pressure rose.

“Go out now and I’ll be following you in my wet, naked glory!”

Peter’s expression turned to disgust. “No one needs to see that.”

Stiles snickered but the noise died out soon enough. He was just so tired.

Later, even if asked, Stiles could say he remembered nothing much past entering the room. He had vague lingering images of dull yellow tiles and cracked mirrors, a chocolate bar that tasted old and a bed that creaked whenever someone moved – someone being someone else than him, he couldn’t find a muscle willing to even twitch.

The moment his head hit the pillow he found himself in his mindscape. He squinted, wiping the sleep from his eyes. He knew his body was dead asleep – probably nothing bar another apocalypse could wake it, him, and even that was a stretch – and regaining energy but it wasn’t like his mind didn’t require rest as well. It did.

But here he was. Lucid dreaming inside his mind.

He stared at the walls, enjoying the view it presented. Peace. Quiet. Hope. And then Stiles’ breath hitched. His eyes flew across the lines, the figures, the feelings they induced. The light brightened in the room and a flower bloomed by his feet but he barely even noticed.

The missing piece he had been looking for sat next to him.

“I was there, you know?” Peter said. He gestured somewhere between where Stiles could sense the remnants of Cora and Derek. “Like the rest, I was just a memory you clung to.”

“How?” Stiles asked. Another flower grew, twirling around his leg like a vine.

Peter hummed. “I think it was part you, part me. I was waiting, as if standing behind a door, the me from now. Thirsty for the bond you denied, anything you would give. I knew you had lost but I thirsted for that, more than anything.” His hand found Stiles’ and he squeezed it.

It was familiar, the touch.

“Then you burned down every obstacle in my way and I was hit with something akin a presence. I had the bonds I craved – don’t feel sorry about it, I am happy – but then, midst of all that, there was something else.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Stiles whispered. Peter shrugged.

“Honestly speaking? I didn’t notice at first. You, Kate, Julia, you were all so loud. I wasn’t accustomed to anything like it. It was only when my dreams started to include people I had never met, people I knew but were too young to be, and you- I knew they had to mean something.”

Peter paused. The grassy area around them resembled more and more a flower bed than a meadow. Stiles was warm.

“It didn’t change who I was, who I am. The memories imprinted in whatever projection you held of me gave me insight into who I could be if given the chance. They’re patchy, even hazy, when I’m awake, but they helped me piece together the puzzle.” Peter threw his head back and laughed. Stiles blinked. It was mesmerising. “Time travel. Only you, Stiles.”
“Hey, you would have done the same,” he protested weakly. Peter shook his head, smirking.

“I still don’t have the same stubbornness that you do.”

Stiles snorted. “Now that I doubt. You dug yourself from the grave once before.”

Peter hummed again thoughtfully. “So I did. I wondered what that meant. I don’t think I’ve come across that spell yet.”

Stiles’ eyes widened. “Is that why you-?” Peter arched his brows.

“Why I what?”

Stiles squeezed his hand, meeting Peter’s eyes. “You do know I love you and not- not just who you were once?”

The smirk on Peter’s face grew. “If you remember correctly, I did ask you that once.” Stiles hit him with their hands.

“That’s why I asked.”

“I know that,” Peter said. He traced Stiles’ knuckles. “I didn’t, at first. I was very confused, you see. There were things I couldn’t reconcile together. The Kate I knew and the Kate I killed. The Julia I knew and the Jennifer I killed. The Stiles I knew and the Stiles I died for.”

Stiles flinched.

“I wondered if your feelings were somehow tied to that person. I am not him, you see. He doesn’t influence me. Well, maybe that’s not exactly true since the knowledge I have now does affect how I act but him, as in the Peter in twenty years? He is not me.” Peter licked his lips.

“But the more I saw, the better I got to know you, I knew. And I did ask.” He shrugged, smile playing on his lips. “You didn’t lie.”

“Once you wouldn’t have trusted that,” Stiles said softly.

“That time hasn’t come yet. I don’t believe it will.”

Stiles leaned against Peter.

“I do love you,” he said. “Only you. All of you.”

Peter cupped Stiles’ jaw and turned him towards him. He kissed him.

“As I do you.” Then he smirked and playfully bit Stiles’ lip without drawing blood before pulling back. “Because consent is sexy.”

Stiles’ jaw dropped. “Was that a reference to the garage? Was it? Peter, what the fuck.”

Peter laughed, bright and free.

“This is not going to our cutesy moniker. I’m older than you!” Stiles paled. “I’m older than you!”

“And a hunter to boot. What a cradle-robber you are.”

“A- Peter. This is not going to be our thing!”
“Oh, how the tables have turned.”

“Peter!”

***

“Everyone accounted for?” Stiles asked as he walked out of the motel with Peter, Kevin trailing behind them, and joined the people already waiting. He was in a surprisingly good mood, despite the present company.

“Hale one and Laura are not here yet,” Kate said. She stretched and her shoulders cracked. Julia shivered at the sound.

“Kate, are you sure-?”

Kate groaned. “Julia, for the last time, I’m fine. Just a little sore but nothing a little rest won’t kill.” Stiles noted her cheek had a gash but it didn’t seem too serious, even looked like it was already healing. He wondered if Julia had given her something for it.

“You did take out a number of them,” Peter congratulated. Kate preened. “How many?”

She grinned. “Four!”

Peter smirked. “Five.”

“No way! I don’t believe you!”

Peter shrugged, smirk still playing on his lips. Kate turned to Stiles. “Is he lying?”

Stiles spread his arms. It wasn’t like any of them had the time to count the bodies.

Kate turned to Kevin. “Well, did he?” she demanded. Kevin blinked.

“What?”

“Ugh, you are all useless.” Kate threw her hands in the air. “Fuck this, I quit, men.”

Kevin looked affronted. Stiles shook his head as Bobby crawled from the motel, dark circles around his eyes.

“Did you sleep at all?”


Stiles quirked his brows but Bobby just hauled him into the hug of a lifetime before he sauntered to where Julia and Peter were now conversing. Kevin glowered at them nearby.

Five minutes later Lena and Laura joined them. Stiles tilted his head. Neither looked particularly well-slept. He leaned against the… he refused to call it the Mystery Machine. Fuck. He just called it that in his head.

“Alright, so, plans. We have them.” He rubbed his eyes. Even if they had been waylaid by fucking trolls. He hated trolls. From the bottom of his heart. He was never coming back to Missouri.

Except… library.
He groaned aloud.

“We are taking Peter back to Beacon Hills,” Kevin said. He glowered at Bobby. “And I am not taking that drunkard into my car this time.”

“Ah, but lady Elena is disagreeing with you there, isn’t she?” Bobby beamed. Kevin blinked.

“What?”

Lena coughed and shrugged. “I may have promised he could join us again.”

Kevin’s look could only be described as betrayed.

“Mother!”

Lena just smiled helplessly. Laura gave her a look but said nothing. Instead, she turned to where Stiles stood with Peter.

“But we are taking him back,” she said. She didn’t sound as pissy as she had yesterday but the demand was still there.

“No, you are not,” Stiles said genially. When Laura’s brows furrowed and Kevin opened his mouth to argue, he added, “But we are coming to Beacon Hills with you.”

The surprise on the Hales’ faces made Stiles wish he had a werewolf-proof camera.

“What?” Kevin asked, taken aback. Stiles raised a hand to his chest.

“You don’t want that? Why, you should have said!”

“What, no! I mean yes, but no, I mean-” Laura spluttered. She stood up straighter. “But- you were so against it. What- why-?”

Peter snorted. “We were never against going back, just going back under false pretences.” He gave the trio a hard look. “I’m no longer part of the Hale pack,” he said bluntly. Laura still flinched, and Peter gentled his tone, “but I am your family. I will visit but I will not stay.”

“So why now?” Lena asked. She was calm, surprisingly calm, opposed to her son and grandniece. Stiles exchanged a look with Peter.

“We have unfinished business there,” he said. Peter threw an arm around his shoulder, dragging him close. For some reason, Stiles saw him eyeball someone hard. Stiles followed his gaze, meeting a half-grim, half-elated look on Bobby’s face.

“The shadow is calling,” Bobby said and cackled. There was a bitter edge to it. “But the beacon guides your way home.”

Peter stiffened against him and Stiles felt his face freeze with the smile still on it. He could hear the voice that used to whisper in his nightmares tangle in the wind around him.

*Everyone has one but no one can lose it.*

“We have things to confront, don’t we?” Stiles said. He squeezed Peter back and the reassurance that echoed between their pack bonds was comforting. All four of them relaxed simultaneously. Kevin and Lena looked confused – and then sour – when they realised why that was. Laura-
She stared, still angry, but more sombre.

“The beacon guides the way home,” Stiles repeated. They climbed into their respective cars, the same order as yesterday, and followed the road leading them back to the west coast. Towards the Argents. The Hales. The Nemeton.

The nogitsune.

*What am I?*

*Country roads, take me home!* Kate belted out, effectively throwing Stiles out of his thoughts. He grimaced, even as helpless laugh escaped from him.

*“Kate. No.”*
In which they return to Beacon Hales

Chapter Notes

Hey all! Happy spring! It's lovely outside. And inside! I'm graduating soon, maybe even before June. Whoa, that rhymed. I can't believe it. That I'm graduating, not that-forget it. We'll see when I'll find a job though, haha. Adulting is hard. Lower the difficulty.

I do hope you'll like this chapter! I liked writing it anyway :)

Oh, also, dudes and dudettes. Look at this fantastic art that was done for the fic! Shook me up for, like, days. Still shook. Thank you so much, Morni6 <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Of course, because fate was a bitch, the journey back had to be a mess too.

“Officer, I already gave you my ID,” Stiles sighed. “Even the registration papers! What more do you want?”

“I will have to ask you to step out of the car,” the police officer said. Stiles dragged a hand across his face.

“I wasn’t even driving,” he grumbled but obeyed. He climbed outside and stood straight. It wasn’t his first rodeo with the force, albeit usually he had had an in with them. Namely, his dad.

He was patted down roughly, probably with more force than was needed, even as the officer’s partner kept glaring at him. He was going to have bruises after this. “What’s this even for?”

“We are looking for a kidnapper with your description,” the partner said. Stiles rolled his eyes.

“Do I look like a kidnapper? No, do we? We may have a weird car, true, but isn’t the white van and candy more of an urban legend? Doesn’t really work in real life. The less attention criminals attract, the less they are remembered. Our car isn’t even white,” he rapid fired. He waved back to the vehicle. “Besides, why are you singling out me?”

Peter slammed the driver’s side door close and marched to them, essentially taking a stand between the officers and Stiles. Something suddenly cleared out and Stiles groaned.

“Really? The moment we actually start heading back to Beacon Hills, a pack stops us from doing that because they want us to head back to Beacon Hills? Really?”

Peter crossed his arms. They looked very nice. Stiles wanted to fondle them. Just a little.

The smirk sent his way slightly distracting but enough to make him focus back on the wolves before them. They didn’t look too impressed with whatever they had picked up. Too bad Stiles didn’t give a shit.

“Which packs are from Nevada again? The Bennetts are from the eastern side, yeah? These the Turners?”
The officers gave him an alarmed look. Peter nodded.

“You can tell alpha Cameron that the search has been called off,” Peter said matter-of-factly. He pointed at the backseat where Kate and Laura were peeking out and Kevin’s vehicle that was parked behind them. “We have made contact with the Hale pack and are returning to discuss the situation.”

“We were told—” the officer began but Peter waved his hand, shutting him up. The man turned his glare on Peter.

“Whatever you were told, it’s old news by now. Honestly, do you think we would be travelling with members of the Hale pack for nothing?”

The officer finally looked at where Laura had her face plastered to the window. He scowled.

“Are you sure we can’t arrest him?”

Stiles threw his hands in the air, startling the officer’s partner. “Jesus Christ, man, just let us return to Beacon Hills, fuck! It’s not like it’s a holiday we’re having here either!”

With grumbles and glares sent their—mostly Stiles’, let’s be honest—way, the officer wolves finally left. Stiles spew curses all the way to the next intersection. Kate brayed a laugh that never seemed to end.


“Shut up, you’re not cute,” Stiles sulked. He could keep his arms, see if Stiles cared. He slouched on his seat. “Kidnapper. Fuck that. My record is fucking clean as fuck here.”

“That’s what you get from a fake ID.”

“Your ID is fake?” Laura asked, bemused. Stiles’ head hit his seat and he groaned.

“Dude,” he whined. “Honey bear, sweetums, love muffin, why would you do this to me?”

Peter shrugged. “It’s fun.”

Stiles spluttered. “Dude.”

“Don’t call me dude.”

“That’s mean. Also, you draw the line at dude and not love muffin?”

Peter gave him a look. Stiles pouted.

“It’s still mean,” he said. Peter rolled his eyes.

“I’ve been called worse in my lifetime. I think I can handle a little mean.”

Stiles groaned. “You’re trolling me. I hate trolls. I hate you. Let me out of my misery and end this empty life for the shell that I am.”

“Now you’re just being dramatic.”

“I have nothing left to lose!”
Peter snorted but said nothing, just made a turn. Stiles would have lectured him on not using the signal, the empty road was no excuse, but the sign claiming California was merely a hundred miles away – and counting – distracted him. Shaking himself from his thoughts, Stiles dragged out his notebook and shifted through the pages.

So many things made sense now, he mused as he connected the lines between question marks. The morbid jokes, pop cultural references too ahead of their time. Like with Bobby, the things that had the most emotions attached to them must have stuck the best.

Stiles worried his lower lip. Of course the fashionista would attach himself to that movie. He’d bet it was a regular rerun at his place, his Notebook even. Stiles set his pen down and stared at the notes he had on the Nemeton, the telluric currents and the nogitsune. He shivered.

He probably should be more worried about the Hales since they were the immediate problem but, in the grand scheme of things, it just wasn’t worth it. Well, they were worth it, of course, they were integral in keeping the peace and quiet around but… worrying? It wasn’t like Stiles was ever going to move back to Beacon Hills. He didn’t think he would anyway. What would happen even if he did? The town couldn’t handle two Stileses around. Stileses. Was it really? Stiles? Stileses? Stiles? Could Stiles be the new fish-fish or plain old watch-watches?

He carefully didn’t think of how, once upon a time, he had never expected to even live this long. His battle plan had been severely lacking. Go back, save stuff, profit? Honestly, if he hadn’t stumbled upon Kate-

He was thinking about it.

Damn it.

Stiles closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He counted to ten, fingers playing along on his lap.

-Nine, ten, yes, fine, awesome. Alright then. He opened his eyes again and focused on the book before him. He leafed through until he found an unused page and nodded to himself, pen poised.

Letharia Vulpina. Or, as Julia had written, wolf lichen. Deaton had it before, Stiles knew that, it had hurt like a bitch. He might have it now or at least know where to get some. Maybe. Able to weaken the bastard but not kill. He scribbled the name down with a question mark. The nogitsune should be weak enough right now because of its imprisonment but Stiles would like to be sure.

If only he had been conscious enough to know all these details. But hey, it would have been fun not to have been possessed either!

Stiles relaxed his fingers before writing down again. Changing the host. Again, can only weaken it if it has a host, which, hopefully won’t be one. Stiles pulled the notes up, searching… there. Probable that it cannot possess a supernatural creature. Or was it too much effort? Because, if changing the host was one of the nogitsune’s weaknesses, then wouldn’t a changed host be perfect? If it had gotten its hands on Scott-

Stiles bit his lip. It would have been bad, very bad.

Stiles decided to straight up ignore the oni. Even if they ever appeared, they would be too late already. He couldn’t just call them up, like, hey! I have a business proposal for you!

Noshiko and the Yukimuras would be a no-go too. In fact, considering, they were a big fat no, and Stiles should be so lucky that they wouldn’t happen to stumble into this mess at all. Stiles loved Kira, but he wasn’t her mother’s biggest fan.
He went through the notes again. He sighed. Yeah, nothing much but imprisonment. Which is why Noshiko buried it underneath the Nemeton. But with it blocking the currents, and then there was the taint as well, yeah, it needed to be removed.

And this time, there wouldn’t be a convenient box to cage it in, now would there?

There were other interesting methods the hunters had discussed and apparently even tried overseas. Nothing really seemed to have stuck, except for the oni in case they arrived early enough for someone to be able to witness the kill, aka. still be alive.

They were in a lucky position though. Last time the nogitsune was able to take control of Stiles and gain strength before going against the pack. This time, it would be in its still-weakened position. What if they had the wolf lichen and poisoned it? It should still have a corporeal form. Or-

“Stiles,” Kate whined. He turned his head just enough to see the pleading look she sported. “I’m hungry.”

“Don’t you have snacks?” Stiles was pretty sure they bought plenty.

“They’ve gone to the wolves.” Kate’s tone was grim but there was a twinkle in her eyes. Laura crossed her arms.

“Don’t blame me!” she protested. She threw an empty packet of chips at Kate. “You ate this all on your own!”

Kate let out a gasp. “I have been infected,” she said gravelly. “I think I am turning. You will have to continue without me.”

“Great, so, just leave her at the next gas station?” Peter piped up. Stiles huffed a laugh.

“In that case, I’d be the only one continuing as the only one left. Always said lycanthropy’s like a virus!”

Peter smirked. “But what if it’s transferrable through bodily fluids?”

Laura made a disgusted sound that Kate pretended to echo. Stiles tapped his chin.

“I guess we all need to stay then. So, lunch?”

***

“Uncle.”

Peter took a bite of his steak and hummed. He had refused to eat at another gas station which, no surprise there, Lena had agreed with. In weird solidarity, they had pressured the group to change to their best – which wasn’t much, to be honest, but at least they made sure not to wear bloodstains – and gone to an actual restaurant.

“What is it, Laura?”

Laura shuffled before huffing and sitting in Stiles’ seat. Kevin had stormed off ten minutes ago because of something Finstock did – no surprise, again – and Kate and Stiles were busy obliterating each other by the pool table while Julia, Finstock and Lena were sitting a table over. That was an unexpected turn, Peter thought. People like Finstock usually turned Lena off, her being a small snob, but apparently he – or Julia, but it seemed to be him – had somehow wormed into her good graces.
“Why are you happier with them than with us?”

That was blunt. Peter finished his meal, not that there was much left, but at least he hadn’t gobbled everything down in two seconds flat. He wasn’t an animal unlike the rest of his pack.

“And how did you come to that conclusion?”

The look Laura gave him was pure sourness and reminded Peter of something – Derek, for some reason. Perhaps a remnant of the future-that-never-was? He wondered-

Oh. Peter blinked, lips thinning. He had killed Laura, hadn’t he, even if he didn’t really remember doing so. The vague feelings the thought raised in him chilled his bones. He didn’t understand what kind of madness would drive him to do such a thing, but he would do his damnedest not to repeat… that.

He did love his family, after all, his nieces and nephew more than most.

“I’m not stupid,” Laura bit out. Peter nodded.

“Never said so.”

“You implied- no, just-” Laura threw her head back and stared at the ceiling. Peter waited patiently. He felt Julia nudge at him and he looked over. She looked curious but tilted her head towards the till. Peter sent her a quick smile. Julia leaned over then, said something to Finstock and Lena, and together they made themselves scarce. False sense of privacy, maybe, but Peter appreciated it anyway. When Peter looked back at Laura, he found her staring at him.

“What?”

“That’s why,” she said. Her voice was flat. “You just- you have whole conversations with just looks alone. You never did that with us and- and you were there but you weren’t.” She took a shaky breath. Her whole countenance drooped. “Why isn’t it like that with us? What did I- uh, we do wrong?”

Peter lay a hand over Laura’s. She looked startled to find it there. Peter frowned. That was something he never intended.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” he said quietly. Laura didn’t look like she believed him. Peter squeezed her hand before letting go and taking a sip from his drink. “Not you, Derek or Cora, or any of the kids. You were fine, the best things in my life.”

“But there’s a but there.”

A smile touched Peter’s face. He could taste its bitterness. “But,” he continued. “I was suffocating. How should I explain it? Imagine Cora, she’s born years after you were. You with me?” Laura nodded. “Now, imagine Talia and Marcus die, let’s say in an accident you feel you could have prevented, and leave you as alpha when she was just a kid, maybe your age now.” Laura stared at him. “Can you picture it?”

“Yes…” Laura drawled but she didn’t sound entirely sure. That was fine. Peter could carry the slack.

“What do you think you would do?”

“Try to… be the best alpha?”
Peter inclined his head. “Naturally. But what would you do?”

Laura pursed her lips. “I would make sure none of my family would suffer the same. Especially Derek or Cora.”

“But they were already teenagers, even young adults, and starting to step into their roles. You can’t protect them from the world, can you?”

“I could try!” Laura insisted. Peter’s smile was fleeting.

“And that is why I couldn’t – wouldn’t – stay.”

Laura blinked before scowling. “Because… Mom protected you?”

“Sounds stupid, doesn’t it?” Laura hesitated but nodded. Peter smirked. “What would you say if your mother suddenly told you that you’d have to stop learning about being the alpha and stick with Derek and Cora?”

“She wouldn’t-!” She stopped. Her eyes widened, and she continued softly, “I would tell her that she shouldn’t- that it’s my life. My responsibility. To the pack. Family.”

Peter waited.

“She- the hunt- Kate said that you weren’t worthy of-”

“A poor choice of word that,” he said. He took another sip. “But not entirely inaccurate. I was either to be Talia’s enforcer or the pack liaison; I had talent and interest in both. However, they are both some of the more dangerous roles to be had and, as her younger brother, she didn’t want me hurt. In the end, that was the worst she could have done.”

“It cut you from the pack.” The hurt in Laura’s voice was unmistakeable. “Pack is supposed to support each other, be there for each other. And you- you couldn’t.”

“She tried to offer me other parts to play but I refused them. I’m not made for them. As it was, I was coddled in a way you never weren’t, that even Cora isn’t,” Peter said. And how true that was. “I’m not sure what I could’ve done for her to understand that I was – am – no longer a child. Sometimes, I think she views me as your brother rather than hers.”

“So you ran away.”

“So I ran away.”

“And you found people who-”

“And I found people who were there for me. Let me be myself. Cared for me as who I was and could be, didn’t restrict me.” Peter watched as Laura’s lips quivered. He told her softly, “Know that it was never you nor your siblings. You annoyed me, yes, but that’s what family does. But I was born late and didn’t fit with my generation. I was born too early to fit in yours.”

He found himself with lap full of his niece.

Peter raised his eyes and met Stiles’. He was watching them with a peculiar look on his face. Peter couldn’t help the smile that spread on his lips and Stiles instantly answered that with his own.

Despite telling Stiles that he wasn’t that Peter – he wasn’t – he still had some lingering grievances and regrets that had plagued his mind, especially during the night hours. Regrets from a life unlived.
Knowledge of what could have been. This was one of them. As Laura’s hands gripped him tighter, Peter let her, and wrapped his arms around her as well.

He could try to do things right this time around too.

Starting with Laura.

And himself.

***

They arrived in Beacon Hills the next day when it was-

“High noon!” Kate crowed. Stiles pushed his seat back as far as he could. Kate squawked. “Don’t squish perfection!”

“I’m just making sure the outer shell fits the good parts,” Stiles said. Kate dug her knees on the seat’s back. Stiles groaned. “Stop that!”

“Stop yourself!”

“But I’m not doing anything!”

“You are so full of shit.”

Stiles did jazz hands high in the air. “Look, no hands!”

“Just you wait until we get outside. It’s you and me, buddy, and I wouldn’t bet on your life,” Kate promised darkly. She kicked his seat as well as she could but it did little more than jostle him. Stiles clucked his tongue.

“If you ever do. Rest in pieces, Princess Katherine Amelie Argent.”

“Ugh. Did you really have to?”

Stiles peeked at her and grinned. Kate crossed her arms, and threatened, “I will find your real name and spread it like the plague.”

“The name itself is a terminal disease.”

“So I could just throw it at you and you’ll keel over? Fantastic, I’ll keep it in mind.”

“It’ll rot your mind. Better be careful not to ever learn it.”

Kate grinned darkly. “I’ll chance it.”

“You’re one of the Argents?” Laura asked. Stiles glanced at her. He couldn’t really make his mind about her. She had been downright loud and annoying right up until Peter had a heart-to-heart or something or another with her. Stiles didn’t ask and Peter didn’t tell but she had been a lot more subdued ever since. Lena as well. The only one who didn’t seem to have thawed even a little bit was Kevin and he had seemed to get even angrier as time went by.

Probably due to Bobby, Stiles thought and snickered. Peter sent him a look to which he just shrugged. Bobby seemed to do his absolute best to torture the guy. Stiles wholeheartedly approved.

“Yeah, why?”
“Kevin’s sister, Elsa, and Matt, he’s one of my cousins, were out a few months ago when three of your hunters attacked them. He’s been carrying a grudge ever since.”

Kate shrugged. “Probably. Some are a bit trigger happy.” She soured a little. “A bit too much too.”

“Your temper doesn’t really instil a lot confidence in your words.”

“Shut up, Stiles.”

Stiles grinned and pulled his seat back. Kate kicked the back for good measure and Stiles swore. Laura started another careful conversation, but Stiles wasn’t too interested in that. Kate was, apparently, because the backseat was suddenly very loud. He turned to Peter and poked his arm.

“Why are you so quiet? Is there something wrong? More than usual, anyway.”

Peter rolled his eyes. “Nothing. I'm just saving my personality for when we get there.”

“There’s not a lot to save.”

“Ouch.”

“Well, at least you can compensate.” When Peter glanced in his direction, Stiles made sure to eye his crotch area. Peter promptly preened, eyes twinkling.

“Finally bowing down to my superiority, I see.”

“I would be willing to go down on that superiority,” Stiles admitted. He had seen the rigid line of it on more than one occasion and rubbed against it – fuck, that had been hot, and he had come in his pants like a teenager.

“Why am I not surprised?” Peter said, a smirk playing on his lips. Yep, he was still smug about it. It made Stiles tingle all over his body. In response, he wiggled his fingers and winked.

“You are disgusting, you know that?” Kate piped up. Laura nodded. She looked both horrified and strangely intrigued – mostly horrified though. Her hand was clapped on her nose.

“Aaaaand you’re eavesdropping, so it’s all your own fault,” Stiles said. Kate scoffed.

“We are in a car together. You are sitting right in front of me. Not much privacy to be had.”

“Excuses!”

“Excuse you!” Kate said snottily. “Valid excuses!”

“Right-o. Which reminds me, Peter, let’s make a quick stop by Maria’s. I’m craving curly fries.”

“We are almost home,” Laura said tentatively. Stiles shrugged.

“They can wait for a few minutes longer. We can even eat in the car.”

“I meant- forget it.” She slumped on her seat and leaned against her window. Stiles looked at Kate whose puzzled expression mirrored his own.

Fifteen minutes later Stiles was sitting in a booth, waiting for their orders, with Peter. He thought he could hear yelling outside – it sounded rather like Kevin and Bobby – but he honestly didn’t care all too much right now.
“So. Any last words before we face the doom and gloom?” Stiles asked. Peter hummed.

“Not really. Although I am questioning your fashion choices.”

Stiles pouted. He spread his arms. “What’s wrong with plaid and leather?”

Peter’s sigh was longsuffering. “Everything.”

Stiles’ smirk melted into something fond. He tugged at the worn jacket. “It’s Jackson’s, you know,” he said. “Pretty much the only thing that survived, well, everything.”

“A good luck charm then?” Peter’s lips twitched. “Expecting the worst?”

“Well, when the in-laws already hate you…”

They shared a laugh. In another life, it might have been the other way around.

“It should go down well enough,” Peter said. Stiles made a questioning noise. “After all, if my good luck charm is wearing his, we should have double the fortune.”

“It doesn’t work that way,” Stiles said immediately. Then he cooed, “I’m your good luck charm? That’s adorable.”

“As is your nose.” Stiles didn’t even have time to react before Peter had darted in, biting it.

Stiles slapped a hand over his face after Peter evaded it. “Hey! What did my nose ever do to you?” Stiles rubbed his nose. It hurt. More because of the slap than the bite but it was nevertheless Peter’s fault.

Peter didn’t answer, only radiated such self-satisfaction he should have been born a werecat instead of a werewolf. Stiles tried flicking him, but the bastard stood up, avoiding him again. Stiles followed.

“You-!” Stiles yelled and proceeded to chase Peter around the diner. The few customers laughed at them as Peter continued dodging Stiles and even helped him when Stiles tripped over his own feet, somehow still evading being caught.

Only when a grandma – the loveliest, most brilliant old lady – sneakily tripped Peter, making him fumble with his footing, did Stiles catch him.

“Ha!” Stiles crowed. His arms were around Peter, preventing him from escaping. “You are done, Mr. Hale!”


“I have a few ideas.”

There was something in Stiles’ voice that seemed to catch Peter’s attention. “Oh?” he said, inching closer. Stiles hummed and let him go, only to pull him ever closer.

He kissed him.

It was soft and gentle, perfection by another name, and when Peter broke his arm from Stiles’ hold and tilted his head- Stiles smiled into Peter’s mouth. The dart of Peter’s tongue against his lips wasn’t startling, not really, but it still coaxed Stiles to open his mouth under Peter’s ministrations. The hand on his neck was grounding.
They pulled back only when someone coughed next to them.

“You order is ready,” Maria said. She almost sounded apologetic at having interrupted them – almost. No, that was pure amusement that was there.

Peter’s smile was small and tender, eyes never leaving Stiles’, even as he reached for the bags. Maria deposited them on his hands before sauntering off, cackling to herself.

“For luck,” Stiles whispered. He leaned in for one last peck – which didn’t actually stay as such – before they left the diner. One of the men glared at them, mumbling something to his friend, who nodded. The granny, close enough to hear, shook her cane at them. Peter snickered all the way back to their car.

What was with all the grannies and Peter? Stiles commented on it, but Peter just shrugged, smirk playing on his lips.

When they resumed their journey, Laura wrinkled her nose even as she dug into her own portion of curly fries. Kate seemed ready to start a fight – which, no, unless she was willing to clean up after herself – but stopped when Laura mumbled, “They stink of feelings. It’s gross.”

The expression of Kate’s face could only be described as ‘unholy glee’. She raised her hand for a high five. Laura stared at it as if it could bite her. When Kate didn’t lower it, refusing to give into the awkward pause, Laura smacked it. The jostle caused Kate’s fries to spill onto her lap.

Stiles just shared a look with Peter and the stuffed his mouth full of the manna straight from heaven. Peter rolled his eyes and took the turn right towards the preserve.

Hale-ho, here we go.

***

The house actually looked nice when it wasn’t all burned ruins, Stiles mused as they parked at the front. The strong structure and large windows were quite awe-inspiring. Whoever had designed it was a genius or at the very least extremely talented. The front door swung open and a few people came outside. The curtains flickered on a nearby window too.

“So, let’s get this over with,” Stiles said and pushed the passenger side door open. He jumped out and slammed it shut. The moment he did, Bobby pulled himself out of the car behind them too, demented grin on his face. Stiles could barely hear what he was saying but Kevin, who had also left the vehicle, certainly looked like his life was made from pure suffering.

“…unless you’d rather play with yourself.”

“Shut up,” he yelled and stomped towards the Hale house and the small crowd gathering there. A woman stepped forward and Kevin pulled her into his arms, hugging her tight. A collective gasp was heard when Peter took a step outside as well. He glanced at his family and seemingly dismissed them, stopping only when he was standing by Stiles’ side.

“His sister,” he nodded at Kevin and the woman. Stiles hummed. No one made a move to come closer to them, however. Kate snorted.

“This is almost as cheerful as back at my place.”

Laura made her way to the porch, Lena following close behind. They were greeted warmly even as suspicious and worried looks were being thrown in Peter’s direction.
“Where’s mom?” Laura asked, loudly enough for them to hear too. The man who had hugged her tight answered.

“We have guests in town, so she’s visiting them. She’ll be back by the evening.”

“Okay.”

The man looked up, his eyes narrow as he took in Stiles and the rest. “Is that really Peter?”

Laura nodded. “Yes, dad.”

Stiles ignored them for a moment as he was distracted by the power flowing underneath his feet. He stared the ground but couldn’t see anything but ground and dirt. He drew a line with his shoe, frowning.

He turned to Julia who was crouching next to him, hand placed on the ground. He nudged her bond and she hummed in response.

“Can you feel it?” he asked. A smile spread on her face.

“I can,” she answered.

That confirmed it.

They were, indeed, standing on another hot spot of telluric currents. He turned back to the Hales still watching them and looked past them at the beautiful house. The hot spot that, given what Stiles knew, could turn into another beacon of death. Death would call upon death. The Nemeton would call for the creatures, the house for the destruction.

No wonder the showdowns had almost always happened in the general vicinity of the accursed ruins or in the surrounding preserve.

“Are we invited in or are we going to wait for Talia’s return in standstill?” Peter drawled. Stiles silently agreed. It was getting a little ridiculous. He looked over the line of the Hales.

“Your family is big,” he noted aloud. Although, considering most of them were either orphans or otherwise lacking in familial connections, that wasn’t saying much. Peter snorted.

“And nosy.”

“Ooooh,” Kate crowed. “Dog jokes.”

At her voice the woman Kevin had hugged stiffened. Her eyes flashed gold.

“Hunter,” she hissed. Kevin started to nod and then stiffened. He turned back to them, snarl tugging his lips.

Kate looked baffled. “I didn’t think it was that bad,” she said, mystified.

“You dare bring two of the hunters here that attacked Matt and I?” Elsa growled. Some of the Hales moved to form a wall before her and the guy who probably was Matt. Stiles blinked.

Right.

“Kate, when on earth did you have the time to- oh, yeah, I did meet you during rather unpleasant circumstances now, didn’t I?”
Kate frowned. She tapped her chin in thought before her expression cleared.

“Oh! You mean with Dick!”

“Yeah, Douche Dick the nth, of the Dickinsons.”

“Right. Yeah.” Kate nodded at the Hales and flashed them a grin. “My bad. I probably would’ve stopped him myself eventually but, you know, Stiles did save your ass a bit earlier.”

Stiles rolled his eyes. “After you got bored, you mean?”

“Hey, I’ve changed, haven’t I?” Kate pouted. Stiles squeezed his thumb and forefinger together.

“This much.”

“Come on!” Kate moved to do the same, only leaving the barest sliver of air between. “At least this much!”

“Children,” Peter chided. Stiles and Kate straightened, looking thoroughly unapologetic. Peter rolled his eyes. He turned back to his family. “They won’t do it again. Besides, as Kate said, Stiles did fix what Kate’s former mentor caused. No harm, no foul.”

Kevin spluttered, and Elsa scowled – “I was poisoned!” – but Matt waved his hand leisurely.

“No harm, no foul,” he repeated. Then he added, “you do know we will still keep an eye on them, don’t you, cousin?”

“Role reversal,” Julia mumbled. Kate and Stiles exchanged a look and shrugged in unison.

“I don’t mind,” Stiles said. Kate echoed the sentiment.

“However,” she continued, glancing at Stiles. “In the spirit of sharing, I also won’t be giving up my weapons. You have yours and I’m not using your otherness as an excuse, but the fact is that there’s apparently some… hostility here. While acknowledging my own part in it, I reserve the right to protect myself and what are mine – Peter included – if necessary.” Her tone was light yet unforgiving. Kevin in particular bristled. Laura made a face, but she tugged at her father and said something to him that Stiles couldn’t hear.

Laura’s father inclined his head and gestured at the door. Kevin and his sister gave him incredulous looks and grumbled but made their way in. Bit by bit the porch emptied of the Hales, leaving only Laura and her father there, and then even she went inside.

“I understand and agree to the stipulation,” Laura’s father said. He sounded calm and Stiles couldn’t see or sense anything fake about it. “I do hope things won’t escalate that much at the very least.”

“None of us want that,” Julia said earnestly. Laura’s father seemed to sense that she truly meant it because he smiled at her.

“We are here mostly to clear things up,” Stiles agreed. “You are still Peter’s family despite what else may have transpired.”

“Thank you,” Laura’s father said. He gestured at the door again. “Why don’t you come in? I’ll make sure Samantha and Felicity are in charge of the refreshments.”

Peter seemed to relax at the mention of the two. Stiles took it as a good sign.
“Thank you,” Stiles said. He glanced at his pack, all of them—wait, no. “Bobby?” Stiles called out.

Bobby stood there, still as a statue, staring in the direction where Stiles knew the Nemeton lingered. He startled when Julia pressed a hand on his arm and blinked rapidly. Peter sent a dark look in the same direction.

“What, we finally getting somewhere?” Bobby asked, dazed. Stiles quirked his brows but Bobby just whirled past him. “Do I need to get my own vodka or do I get an in with the master of the house?” he asked breezily.

To say Laura’s father looked bemused would be an underestimate.

“I can ask, however, isn’t it a little early for that? We are just past lunch time. Speaking off, are you hungry?”

“Bobby is… a special case,” Stiles said delicately. Bobby preened at that.

“Damn right I am!”

“And thanks but we already ate.”

Peter shook his head. “I would advice on giving him a glass or two. Or the whole bottle, he’s not too particular on what kind as long as it has alcohol in it,” he said. When Laura’s father continued to look puzzled, Peter just shrugged. “It is what it is.”

“You will explain this later?”

“Sure.”

Laura’s father looked sceptical—as would Stiles, as Peter never said when the later was—but made space for them to go past him. They moved together, like a pack would. When they reached Laura’s father, Stiles lifted his hand for a shake.

“My name is Stiles Finstock. I’m the acting alpha of the pack.”

“Marcus Hale,” Laura’s father said, gripping Stiles’ hand briefly before letting go. Stiles nodded and entered the house. It sort of…blew his mind. He felt something weird coming from Peter’s end of the bond and glanced at him. He was frowning, staring at the wall before them like it was offending him.

Stiles followed his gaze. The last time he saw that particular wall—was never, he realised. The frames had been there but the wall itself crumbled down before Stiles ever set a foot inside the ruins. Christ. He bumped into Peter who started, misty look disappearing from his eyes.

The Hales who were mostly crammed inside the living room looked at them weirdly. Stiles grinned.

“So am I in the dog house now?” he asked. Julia gave him a horrified look.

“Stiles, no,” she whispered, the exact same moment as Peter told him, “You are now.”

***

Anyone could tell that meeting the Hales was awkward as fuck.

First of all, there were so many of them. There were around at least ten of them there, without counting those absent, and Stiles wouldn’t be able to repeat all the names he was told during the
introductions. There were a couple of humans in the mix, like Samantha’s wife Felicity and Matt’s mother Willow, but the rest were all wolves. It probably would’ve been proper to try to remember all the names of the in-laws but it was hard, alright?

Secondly, Kevin and Elsa were arguing with Marcus over something or other about Stiles and Kate – which, rude – and he had tuned them out a while back. He wasn’t all that interested to be honest. Lena had gone to sit by her husband, shaking her head at her kids, and holding a baby in her arms. Apparently one of her kids – Jesus, just how many did she have? – had had twins of his own. Stiles had to admit they were cute as buttons.

Samantha and Felicity had accosted Peter – and Kate by default, she had taken her role as a barnacle very seriously – and he seemed almost relaxed in their company. Perhaps things weren’t as dire as they seemed in the Hale front as Stiles had imagined.

He still kept Jackson’s leather jacket on, refusing to be parted with it.

Perhaps a wrong choice as Stiles found himself being sized up by Peter’s grandfather who had, Stiles swore, told him his name so quietly that Stiles couldn’t hear it. Thrice. And it was annoying as fuck but after three times you just aren’t supposed to ask anymore. He didn’t seem all that approving of Peter leaving the pack but he wasn’t all that torn about it either. In fact, he was more interested in knowing more about Stiles.

Honestly, the situation was quite weird. Stiles had expected that the Hales would have been more aggressive in telling that Peter should come home. Instead, they were focused on Stiles’ pack. The demands that Laura had made were nowhere to be seen. Like the kids of the house, like Laura herself.

Speaking of the kids…

Stiles’ eyes caught up a figure peeking from the doorway. The kid had messy black hair and looked a bit younger than Laura with stick-like figure and awkwardness that belonged to every preteen in the world. His eyes looked familiar though and Stiles realised that he had known those eyes for years and years, since the moment the person had thrown him against his own bedroom door.

Derek.

Peter glanced in his direction as did the closest of the Hales as Stiles’ heart skipped a beat and his breath hitched. Stiles plastered a smile on his face, forcing himself to focus on the mumbles grandpa Hale said in his direction. Nope, still couldn’t hear shit. Stiles’ mind wandered-

“Awww, aren’t you a cutie!” Kate cooed suddenly. Stiles’ head snapped up and he found Kate crouching on Derek’s eye level. Derek’s eyes widened comically, and his mouth dropped open. Those bunny teeth.

“What is your name, sweetie?” she asked, reaching over to pet the mess that was Derek’s hair. Derek quickly took a step behind, avoiding Kate’s hand completely. Kate pouted.

“Don’t be like that, cutie! My name’s Kate! What’s yours?” she chirped. Derek just stared at her before quickly running past her and hiding behind-

Julia.

Julia blinked at the sudden presence around her legs and she twisted enough to see who it was. Bobby eyed him too but decided to ignore the kid as he launched into whatever argument Kevin and
By Kevin’s expression, it was entirely unwelcome.

“Hello,” Julia smiled sweetly. Derek stared before seeming to realise he had run from one stranger to another. This time, though, he didn’t back away immediately. He answered her smile cautiously.

Julia kneeled next to him and then decided to sit on the floor entirely, so it was she who had to look up now. “I’m Julia,” she introduced herself.

“Derek,” Derek said. Then hastily reached for her hand and shook it. Julia looked slightly bemused at the forcible shake her hand got. “Hi.”

“Hi,” she greeted again. “Are you a Hale too?”

Derek nodded. Julia smiled again. Kate looked shocked and then crossed her arms, her pout growing. She looked jealous at how easily Julia had formed a connection with Derek. She sent a dark look in Stiles’ direction. He wondered if she sensed his amusement even as he tried to bite his lip and keep his face neutral.

“Any relations to Peter? I can see something of him in you.”

“He’s my uncle.”

“Really?” Julia mused as if she didn’t already know anything about him which was a straight up lie. If there were some people Peter had been fond of, they were his nephew and niece – nieces, even. “Don’t you want to go and say hi to him too?”

Derek glanced at Peter who met his eyes and looked away quickly. He mumbled something that Stiles couldn’t hear. Julia didn’t seem to either as she said, “Sorry, I couldn’t hear that?”

“…No.”

Peter’s mouth formed a thin line. Julia looked surprised too.

“Why not?”

“…He doesn’t want to see me.”

Alright, that was a straight up untrue. Stiles was about to make his excuses to the grandpa who had to know by now that Stiles wasn’t giving him one lick of attention, but Julia shook her head minutely in his direction.

“Why do you think that?” she asked instead. Derek bit his lip and glanced at Peter again and back at Julia.

“Because he left,” he said plainly. He fiddled with his shirt. Then, like he was gathering strength, he blurted out, “He wanted to be with you more than with us.”

The room had gone silent during the exchange. Everyone seemed to be paying attention to Derek and Julia, with looks sent in Peter’s way too.

Julia just smiled in that sweet way of hers.

“That is not true,” she said gently. “He does want to see you. He wanted to see you a lot. But, see, part of it is my fault that he switched packs.”
Derek blinked rapidly. He took a step back.

“Your fault?”

Julia inclined her head. “Yes,” she said. “Peter and Stiles and Kate were saving me from my former pack and during the conflict we formed bonds that replaced all the others. I’m sorry it happened that way but, if that had not happened, it is possible that I couldn’t have been saved. So, if you want to blame someone, you should blame me.”

Derek’s eyes were wide. “Your pack was mean to you?” he demanded. Julia’s smile tinted a bit sad.

“They were, very mean. Not all of them meant it, but most did.”

“What did they do?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to bother you with the details,” Julia said. She reached over, waited for Derek to move away if he wanted, and when he didn’t, she turned him around. “But there is an uncle who did miss you a lot. You can ask him about it too. You can hear his heartbeat, don’t you?”

Derek nodded. Julia gave him a small push. He looked back and then at Peter again.

“Did you miss me?” he asked. There was fear in his voice, like he was afraid of what Peter’s answer might have been.

Peter knelt down to his level to be able to look straight into his eyes. He nodded solemnly.

“I did. I missed you a lot.”

Derek hesitated a little, frowning. “Say it again!” he demanded. Peter’s lips twitched.

“I missed you, Derek.”

Derek nodded, shifted on his feet, and then reached for a hug. Peter drew him into his arms. The conflict that flashed on his face wouldn’t make sense for anyone else, but Stiles knew he was thinking of the other Derek; the Derek who never reached for a friendly touch, not really, and if he did, then never from his uncle.

Not when the bridges had been burned so many times over.

It wasn’t like that yet and this only proved it, that things could be fixed.

He was glad.

“There’s someone else who missed you too!” Laura announced. She set a small juggernaut on the ground who rushed and almost threw Peter to the ground in her hurry.

“Uncle!” the little girl – Cora? – yelled. “You’re back!”

And then she kicked his shin and promptly burst into tears.

The suffering was clear as day on Peter’s face that Stiles couldn’t help it.

He laughed, Kate and Bobby joining in, ugly and bright. Even Julia couldn’t hide the grin behind her hands. Peter gave them all a baleful look but gathered both Cora and Derek into his arms, leaving room for one more.
Laura looked surprised barely for a breath but then she was on the other side of the room as well, clinging to her uncle. It made for such a cute picture Stiles mourned his lack of camera. He looked around the room and his amusement slowly fizzled out.

He couldn’t place it, but something changed in the air.

And he didn’t like it.

***

Talia wasn’t back by the time dinner was ready, so they ate without her. She did call, expressed her dismay, but told them she would be back by eight and that the kids should be in bed when she did. It set Stiles on guard even more and through him the pack. They all sensed his unease. It had the unfortunate side effect of the people around them sensing the change in the atmosphere too which, well, was less than ideal.

It made dinner an interesting affair, with half the table more or less openly wary or hostile, while the other half pretending nothing was wrong.

Cora followed Peter around like a puppy – Lena’s husband didn’t look too amused by the comparison but Marcus merely smirked – and Kate had tried to weasel her way into Derek’s good graces, but the boy avoided her like the plague, clinging to Julia. It only made Kate pout even more and she decisively turned her attention to Laura, edging her on to a competition or another. It seemed to involve cramming as much dessert as they could into their mouths. Laura was game.

Kate did sneak glances at Derek, though, but he was just listening, fascinated, as Julia introduced him to the art of herbs and gardening.

Stiles shook his head. Geez, the kid was weird. Still, not as weird as Cora, who was clinging to Peter’s arm and sitting on his lap like an anchor. It was super cute though.

It wasn’t all that long that the twins and Cora started nodding off, and Marcus and the twins’ mother took them all to bed. By the time the clock started nearing eight, Derek was sent up as well. Laura refused to move, though, and planted herself on the floor and mulishly glared at anyone trying to approach her.

The Hales wisely chose to forgo that battle.

But she did create a sort of a wall between them. Now that most of the kids were gone, and Laura was sitting in the middle of the carpet, the room was divided into two. Stiles’ pack with Peter were sitting on one side of the room and the remaining Hales on the other. Not all of them were present – Willow and the twins’ mother had left – but most still were.

The clock inched on eight.

Stiles noticed the twitches that could be seen around the room and knew that someone was approaching the house even before he himself could hear it. Peter took his hand on his. Stiles sighed.

Someone parked outside.

It was show time.

***

Talia was a beautiful woman, Stiles had to admit. Her features were fine but strong and she
resembled Laura a lot in terms of looks – or Laura resembled her, Cora too. Stiles could see Derek in her as well, in the jawline and cheekbones, but he was more cut from Marcus than the girls in terms of build. Her eyes were all Derek, though, and it was strange to see all that intensity he remembered seeing in Derek’s eyes on hers.

It was apparent that Talia was the alpha, however. The Hales were alert the moment she arrived, the wash of what had to be her presence sending them at ease at the same time. Stiles bit his cheek in an effort not to say anything about it.

She didn’t arrive alone.

Deaton looked the same as when Stiles had known him, perhaps with a few less lines on him. It was his presence that threw Stiles off-kilter. Mild as ever, he looked unobtrusive inside the Hale house and practically melted in Talia’s shadow. Yet, the way his eyes immediately snapped to Julia and Stiles spoke of the sharpness that lied beneath.

“Peter,” Talia greeted her brother. Peter’s lips twitched, and he inclined his head.

“Talia.”

“No hug for your sister?”

Peter arched his brows. Talia smirked.

“I trust you are well?”

“Could have been better,” he answered. When Talia’s eyes veered at the people around him, Peter added, “if only the welcoming committee had been less… aggressive.”

“You wouldn’t have returned otherwise.”

“Ah, but that is where you are wrong.”

Talia looked almost taken aback. Peter seemed to enjoy his moment of power.

“We were always planning on coming back to Beacon Hills,” he told her. The smile that spread on his face was all teeth. “Just, you know, not to stay.”

Talia’s expression darkened.

“Why?” she asked simply. Stiles let Peter have his show and focused on Deaton instead. The man looked like he was more interested in Julia, recognising a fellow druid, but his gaze strayed to Stiles more often than not. He seemed to sense something in him but didn’t seem to be able to make what that something actually was.

Stiles was fine with that. He would rather stay as anonymous as possible – considering that the Stilinskis would become prominent enough family when Noah was elected as the sheriff and little Stiles would grow into his own power.

“Tell me one thing, dear sister,” Peter said. When Talia gestured him to continue, he waited for a few seconds – just because he was an ass and could, Stiles mused in amusement – before asking, “What was my role in the pack?”

Talia scowled. “You are my brother, my beta-”

“Ah, but I didn’t ask for my place. What was my role, Talia?”
When Talia didn’t answer, Peter magnanimously did for her.

“You have peacekeepers and enforcers,” he theatrically gestured at Samantha and her wife and to Lena and Kevin, “and pack elders, heir, even your emissary.” His hand moved, pointing at different members of the pack. He paused, but Talia didn’t say a thing. She merely crossed her arms, waiting for him to say whatever he was saying.

“But what was I, dear sister?” Peter asked. He nodded at Laura. “Even your heir didn’t know and if she didn’t- then what was it again?”

“Don’t be obtuse, Peter,” Talia said. “You know well enough what you were training for.”


Stiles noticed how Lena moved forward, chin resting on her hands.

“It was nice of you trying to showcase what it would mean to be back,” he said. “To be ‘home’. I understand the draw, truly, but you do know that this hasn’t really been home since mother and father died.”

“Have you said all you wanted?” Talia asked calmly. Peter shrugged.

“No, but you can have your turn.”

“Thank you.” She turned to Stiles and the rest, finally giving them a cursory look. “Would you introduce your travelling companions to us?”

“With pleasure.” Peter pulled Stiles closer with their still linked hands. Talia’s eyes lingered on them before flicking on Stiles’ face. “This is Stiles Finstock, the acting alpha of our pack.”

Stiles waved even as Talia’s brows climbed her forehead.

“Next to us is Kate Argent, the future matriarch of the clan. She is being mentored by Stiles here.”

“How did that happen?” Lena’s husband asked. His voice was gravelly, like he didn’t use it much.

“Blackmail,” Kate said, shrugging. Stiles hummed.

“Pretty much.” They unapologetically fist bumped. Stiles saw Laura hide a grin behind her hands.

“With us are also Julia Baccari, formerly of pack Steele,” looks were shot at her but when Stiles tilted his head, her back was straight, “and Robert Finstock, Stiles’ adoptive… brother? Let’s go with that.”

“How the fuck did you know my first name?” Bobby gaped. Peter smirked but didn’t answer.

“This means that we all know all of our first names except for yours,” Kate added, nudging at Stiles. “Let’s hear the brain rot.”

“I will go down with this ship!” Stiles declared. Bobby lifted his glass, the one he had kept topped, and cheered with something what sounded like, “pirates!”

“What kind of name even is that,” someone murmured.

“The Argent was the girl who attacked Matt and I,” Elsa said quickly. “This ‘alpha’ was there too.”
“And we have already established that Stiles was also the one to heal you and the main aggressor was Dick van Dickenston,” Peter said. He seemed to be enjoying himself. He shared a look with his cousin whose expression soured but she eventually backed away, unable to milk it anymore.

“You’ve been poaching from other packs as well?” Talia questioned, unimpressed. Stiles took offence at that, but it was Julia who took the stage.

“It’s not poaching if both sides wanted it,” she said. “Our departure might not have been amicable but the Steeles did not want me with them and- and I didn’t want to be with them either.”

With the clarity she spoke, there was nothing left to discuss of the matter.

“Honestly speaking,” Stiles then said, “I just pretty much picked them all up like strays. In the forest, side of the road, the like. Nothing worse than that. Your brother is a grade A hitchhiker. Got picked up by the first car that passed even.”

“I’ll add it to my resume,” Peter snorted.

“And how can we be sure of that?” Talia turned to Stiles. Stiles scowled.

“It’s not magic,” Laura piped up. Heads swirled to where she still sat on the floor. “At least I don’t think so. That’s why you brought him, didn’t you? To confirm it.” She waved in Deaton’s general direction.

“I will admit I do not sense anything magically binding your brother,” Deaton said serenely. He turned to Peter. “Would you allow me to approach and see for myself? Miss Baccari can observe my work and interfere if she feels necessary.”

“As long as Julia is allowed that, yes,” Peter said. “I would like to say that I find this extremely unnecessary.”

“And I do not,” Talia said. She nodded to Deaton. “Please.”

Murmurs spread around the room but Deaton worked silently and Julia crouched with him, eyes sharp. Stiles observed it too and reluctantly removed his hand from Peter’s, the movement of it broadcasting how he definitely wasn’t interfering with anything. When Julia nodded, Deaton finished the rune.

Nothing happened.

Nothing, except Deaton’s eyes widened and Peter’s narrowed in turn. He grabbed Stiles’ hand again almost defiantly, and Deaton backed away quickly. Julia scrubbed the rune away before she found her seat again as well.

“Bonds like that-” Deaton mumbled quietly, almost too quietly. He shook his head and turned to Talia. “There is nothing magical affecting your brother. However, I find their bond far too strong for something so… new.”

“Unnatural my ass,” Stiles huffed. When Talia’s eyes flashed at him, he rolled his shoulders in tune with his eyes. “It’s different, sure, but not necessarily bad different like was clearly implied.”

“Deeper bonds like that-”

“May hurt more if they ever break,” Stiles interrupted. Deaton looked unflappable as ever again, composure gathered already. “But that doesn’t mean it’s bad-wrong. I’ve had a pack die on me
before. I’m not particularly fond of seeing – feeling – that happen again, so you can be assured that Peter will be protected.”

Talia recoiled like someone slapped her. “You- Peter.”

“Wasn’t his fault,” Peter said, eyes flashing. Talia answered it with flashing her own, but Peter wasn’t cowed. Laura made a small noise in the background, but everyone’s attention was on the opposing siblings. “And don’t say I couldn’t possibly know that. I do.”

“Have you lost your mind? Binding yourself to a sinking ship like that?” The ending to the incredulous question – over us – lingered in the air while left unsaid. Peter’s snarl was all teeth as his hand squeezed Stiles’.

“The only thing sinking is the good will in this meeting,” Bobby stated. He had kept surprisingly quiet the whole day, needling people, or Kevin, every once in a while, but kept to the side lines. Now he was eyeing the pack critically. “If this is what happened, what was left, I’m not too surprised they all burned.”

“I will not stand for any threat to my pack!” Talia finally snapped. Bobby raised his hands mockingly, saluting her with one last mouthful.

“Just saying.”

Kate played with the line of her boot, while Julia fidgeted in her seat. Peter was focused on his sister. Stiles, however, was staring past Talia’s posturing. Laura met his gaze.

There was something in there, something that made Stiles wonder.

“Peter, don’t you think you’ve played around enough?” Talia spat out. “You’ve run around the country for months, even forgoing your own degree.”

“And what would I come back to?” Peter bit back. “Back to not knowing what to do, where to belong? Degree I’m good at, degree I don’t want and only took to get away from here? Here, here I am barely a glorified babysitter and while I do like your progeny and the twins, I am much more than that!”

“Fine! You can continue learning the role you wanted, enforcer was it? Liaison? Willow and Matt could need some help with that-”

“No!” Peter raised his voice and he stood up. “I don’t want that. I haven’t wanted that for weeks, months, years! Yes, I wanted a place in the pack, a role to fulfil, but it was never going to happen the way I wanted to. You don’t see me as an adult, Talia. You let Laura to go on a journey across the country when you barely let me go to Yale. She is training to become your heir at thirteen while, at twenty-two, I’m lost in whatever this is.” Peter sighed, deflating ever so slightly, and he dragged his hand across his face.

“No, Talia,” he said finally. “I am not going to be happy with your pack. Resigned, perhaps even content in the end, if I stayed, but not happy. And I respect myself enough, am selfish enough, that now that I’ve found what really does make me happy, I don’t want to give it up. I will not give it up.”

“Even over your own family? Your own blood?”

Something nasty crossed Peter’s features and Stiles knew what came next would be ugly.
He was right.

“Then what about my daughter?”

Chapter End Notes

:D

Find me on tumblr.
In which there are confrontations and preparations

Chapter Notes

Happy June! Hopefully this is worth the previous chapter's cliffie, haha! Have fun! ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The hushed silence reminded Stiles of death. It was as if something was breaking, right then, right now, and it was impossible to tell if anything could patch the widening gap. The echo of pieces falling apart screamed of finality.

“What?” Talia asked faintly. Her eyes were wide, stunned. She resembled a startled statue, Stiles thought. He looked around.

She wasn’t the only one.

“Yes, Malia,” Peter drawled. “Nice of you to at least hold onto the traditions, if not keep the girl herself.”

“Mom?” Laura piped up. She rose from the ground slowly, just as shocked as the rest. “What is uncle talking about?”


Stiles narrowed his eyes.

Guilty?

“Apparently digging your claws into my neck isn’t the only way to cause memories to appear and disappear,” Peter said. Someone gasped in the crowd. Peter’s eyes narrowed. “I do not appreciate anyone messing with my mind, not even you, especially you, who were supposed to be my alpha – and sister.”

“Peter has a daughter?” Kate gaped. Julia’s hands were up, hiding her mouth from view, but Stiles could hear the belated “shush!” she still made. Bobby slumped on a nearby chair, dragging his feet on the coffee table now that no one was watching.

When Talia still didn’t speak, Peter quirked his brows, sneer staining his mouth.

“Well?”

That seemed to shake Talia out of her funk, at least some of it. She still looked dazed, but her gaze was getting sharper – as were her teeth.

“How?” she asked curtly, confirming Peter’s statement. Lena and Kevin stiffened at her tone, spines coiling, answering the call of their alpha. Samantha averted her eyes. There were looks of confusion, of bemusement, of unrepentance.

All the while Stiles watched, hawk-like, silently noting all the small lines between the Hale pack. Those that didn’t know…
And those that did.

He rubbed against the runes on his arm, ready to disrupt any and all senses of those around them at moment’s notice. Talia’s nose twitched, her eyes flickering between Peter and where the rest of them stood.

“Shouldn’t I be the one doing the questioning?” Peter challenged. His canines peeked out as well, matching Talia’s. “Why, Talia?”

Talia ignored him then, turning her burning eyes on Stiles and Julia… and then wholly on Stiles. “You did it,” she growled. “I thought one of you smelled familiar.” She took a step forward but then Peter was there, standing just the slightest bit before Stiles.

Stiles shrugged. Talia's glare intensified.

“You hid him from us – and took him from us.”

She could have just said ‘me’ and be done with it without the royal ‘us’, Stiles thought, darkly amused.

“Guilty as charged,” he admitted. Talia’s eyes flashed. Stiles scoffed and elaborated, if only to diffuse some of the electrified air, “but not on purpose, at least the leaving-the-pack-for-another kind of purpose. When our bond snapped in place, it may have affected Peter in more ways than one.”

Talia’s forehead became more pronounced. Stiles had been wrong. Derek was definitely cut from his mother and not his father, despite their similarities in appearance.

“What. did. you. do. to. my brother,” she snarled the words out. Yep, all Derek that one. Words trailed by full stops and, look, she lost all her question marks too! Stiles had to bite his cheek not to start laughing so hard he could taste blood. There was definitely something screwed with his survival instincts.

Peter growled low back, warning her to back off.

“He did nothing I didn’t want or wouldn’t have wanted if I had had the chance to agree or disagree,” he bit out. His eyes were starting to gain that golden hue, replacing the ice in his gaze. “Which is more than I can say about you.”

Talia’s growl – which had never really stopped, strengthening the undercurrent her words – was suddenly cut off before it returned with vengeance.

“You have no idea what you are talking about!” she erupted, the walls shrinking as her presence grew. Stiles blinked and then fought to focus on his surroundings. He wouldn’t be caught off-guard like he had been with the Steeles. He wouldn’t let her alpha presence blind him again for possible threats.

He. Wouldn’t.

“Don’t I?” Peter mocked, flexing his hands. His nails were sharpened at the tips, just the tiniest bits. “Then why do I know about Malia? Why do I suddenly remember that one night stand? It was the day I received the invitation to Yale, remember?”

He grinned dangerously. “You should, shouldn’t you? I thought I had just been drunk enough not to remember the celebrations but guess what? It seems like I wasn’t.”
“And here I thought my family has issues,” Kate mumbled.

“You do, just of the bloodier kind,” Stiles murmured back. Talia suddenly latched on them, eyes glowing. Kate immediately brought up her knives and crouched into a protective stance like it had been drilled in her since birth.

Which it pretty much had, so Stiles would have to give her a pass on this one. And maybe buy her a treat later on. Hopefully not another knife – or that fucking flamethrower – because, fuck, her taste was expensive.

“Who gave the permission to bring weapons into the pack house?” Talia boomed.

Marcus winced but it was Laura who spoke up, “I did.”

When Talia’s gaze turned to her daughter, Laura didn’t back down to her credit. Her shoulders did drop a little and her neck tilted even when she met her mother’s eyes.

“I vouched for her.”

“Laura-” Marcus started but Laura pushed on. Elsa glared at her.

“She said she only wanted to protect her pack. To which- to which you are a danger. So.” This time she winced as well but it had the effect of calming Talia down a little. She took a deep breath and some of the glow retreated and her shift pushed back. Stiles wasn’t convinced of anything else but her control.

He could recognise a pissed off alpha a mile away.

Hey, perhaps he still had some survival instincts left!

“What she said,” he then blurted out and winced as Talia’s attention was back on him.

Or not. What use were they anyway? Right?!

“What kind of a witch are you?” she asked, voice low, threatening. Stiles wrinkled his nose.

“That’s sexist, isn’t it?” he said. Then he smirked. “Also, none of your business.”

“Not a druid, not a witch…” Deaton trailed off. He had been quiet, observing, but attention focused on him now, almost completely forgoing Julia. Well, if this came to blows, it was his mistake.

“As you say, Doc,” Stiles said. Deaton frowned ever so slightly. Hopefully he choked on his doubt.

Seriously, it was Stiles’ turn to be unhelpful as fuck.

Oh, he was still bitter. What a surprise.

“Seriously though, no magic used on Peter here,” he continued. “You checked on it too. And don’t think we don’t see the deflecting you’re doing.”

“These are the people you bound yourself to,” Talia said flatly. Emotionless. Peter shrugged.

“At least I’m not digging my own grave here.”

That’s when Talia’s temper exploded.
“You have no idea!” Talia yelled. Her eyes were red but not only from her temper. One gleaming track coloured her cheek. “Do you understand what the Desert Wolf could do? What her connections are?” Talia’s hand swept over her pack, some of whom were still waiting for their cue, some biting their lips.

“I did everything I could that she wouldn’t kill her but if she knew where Malia was? She would kill her after killing everyone else!”

“You put her with people with no supernatural connections!”

“For her own safety!”

“And what about the safety of her ‘family’?”

Talia rumbled, the sound of it echoing from the walls. “I gambled,” she admitted, but it was like pulling teeth. “Of course I know that with two shifter parents, it is more likely than not that the child is one as well. I hoped she would take after you. That’s why they live nearby, close enough to monitor, but far enough that she shouldn’t be found. Alan-”

“Oh, so you are part of this too,” Peter said, unsurprised. Deaton nodded serenely.

“Alan found parents who were willing to take her in, that would be alright giving us updates on her wellbeing. But I cannot – will not – put our pack in danger because of anyone’s actions, whether they are pack or not. We lost our pa- previous alpha pair because of- and uncle Matthew,” Talia added, glancing at Matt. He looked grim but inclined his head, standing straight.

Talia turned back to Peter, her face made of stone. “I will never apologise for doing what I saw best for the pack. I will not look over anyone digging our graves either,” she threw his words back at him. Peter scowled, brows furrowing deep.

“Then you agree that sometimes ‘blood’ doesn’t make the best of packs,” Peter spat out, the air quotes hanging in the air, also throwing Talia’s words back at her.

“I-!”

“Mom.” Laura’s voice cut into the argument. When Stiles glanced at her, her whole appearance screamed weariness. “Uncle. Enough.”

Talia’s voice died and both her and Peter’s heads snapped to the girl. Laura’s lips were a thin line. Peter shook his head, disgust marring his mouth as his eyes found Talia again.

“You will never be my alpha again,” he said quietly. Talia fell back as if hit. “You lied to me, kept me away from pack business and tried to control my life. I don’t trust you with any part of myself, not enough to ever join the Hale pack again. This is me, officially resigning from under your leadership.”

“Peter-”

Peter held his hand up. Talia glared but, surprisingly, obeyed the request for silence.

“When we leave Beacon Hills, I don’t want anything to do with you. At this time- I can barely look at you. I am an adult. I was an adult when Malia was conceived. It was my right to be part of the decisions you made!” Peter’s tone reached heights it hadn’t before.

“The crux is that you don’t trust me, Talia, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”
“I do trust you-”

“Don’t lie to me, Talia-”

“You insufferable- I am not lying-”

“Enough!” Laura screamed. It was shrill and awful and it shut up everyone. There were tears running down Laura’s cheeks. “Can’t you just- why do you have to-” she stopped, hiccupped, and took a deep breath.

She turned to Peter. “Is it all of us or-?”

Peter’s eyes softened. “I don’t mind you contacting me – you, Derek or Cora. But the family members who knew and didn’t lift a finger-” Peter shook his head. “I don’t want to hear from you. Not now. Not after we leave. Not until, for once, I am fine with it.”

Someone tripped into the room. Derek. He looked pale and sick.

“You’re leaving again?” he asked. The sadness in his voice tugged at Stiles’ heartstrings. It was clear that, at some point, he had snuck out and started eavesdropping.

Peter looked at the ceiling, like it would reveal its secrets to him, and then back at Derek.

“Not yet. Soon.”

“You’re staying?”

Peter glanced at Talia, eyes flashing. “Not for you,” he told her nastily. “We have unfinished business here.”

Talia suddenly straightened. “Malia?”

Peter scoffed. “She’s better off with her family. But mark my words, Corinne will come for the Tates.” Stiles noticed how Deaton looked momentarily surprised. “Malia is going to take after her birth mother and you know what that means. Your gamble has failed, and you will take responsibility without taking her away from her family.”

“You don’t want her.” Talia sounded confused. “But why-?”

The eye roll couldn’t have been more unimpressed. “I don’t want to uproot the kid. I may be her blood but I am not her family,” he sent a significant look at her, “and I acknowledge that.”

The corners of Talia’s mouth turned down. She looked ready to push forward with one last argument-

“He’s right, mom,” Laura said, interrupting her before she could even start, from where she was hugging Derek. Both of them were crying but Laura’s voice was surprisingly steady. “He’s right.”

Kevin opened his mouth to say something but Lena slapped a hand over his mouth.

Talia deflated, managing to even look like she was lost.

Laura found Peter’s eyes and held on them.

“Don’t forget us,” she said quietly. Derek sniffled loudly next to her. “You’ll call, won’t you?”
“I can do that,” Peter easily agreed. Laura stared at him for a while before slowly inclining her head.

“Pack is a family, mom,” she said, just as quietly as before. A couple more tears fell but it was like she didn’t even notice them anymore. “Peter’s happy with- his. Just because- because we would- it’s not right,” she choked. The arms she had around Derek tightened considerably.

The spark of pure pride that flashed on Peter’s end of the bond was like the sun.

Talia bit her lips until it bled. She turned around and stalked out, disappearing into the night. Marcus, silent as he had been like the rest of them during the heated argument, gave Peter an unreadable look before ushering Derek and Laura upstairs. As if by silent command, the Hale pack dispersed. Some followed Marcus, some Talia. Peter’s grandfather stayed in his chair, rocking back and forth.

Lena’s husband dragged Kevin with him while Lena paused by Peter. She gave him a searching look. Peter’s back was straight under the scrutiny. She sent a quick look at Bobby before nodding, lightly patting Peter on the arm, and followed her family out.

In the end, it was only the five of them – and the grandpa – left.

“Well, as we were rudely left without any offering of accommodations,” Peter drawled. “I do believe they kept my old room for when I’d come back. Do you want to crash there or…?”

“Which would piss Talia off more?” Kate asked. Stiles snickered. Peter considered the question.

“Probably staying.”

Because staying wasn’t staying.

“Let’s do that then?” Kate suggested, glancing at the rest of them. Stiles shrugged.

“Do you have the space?”

“I have a king. We can always kick Kate onto the floor if needed.”

“Hey!”

“Fine by me.”

“Stiles!”

Peter flashed a fang and then took off, Stiles following behind, laughing, with Kate hot on their heels. Julia smiled and, together with Bobby, left the room in a more leisure pace.

The creaking of the rocking chair and the howling in the forest followed their retreating shadows.

***

Stiles felt that the morning came too fast. It was hot. The bed was far too small for five people. Four. Three. Five. How many of them slept there again? He groaned as someone’s elbow hit his stomach. He opened his eyes just enough. Who the hell-?

His vision was full of thick brown hair. And sunlight. Too much sunlight. He closed his eyes with another moan.

If there was one person he hadn’t expected that from, it was Julia. With everything that had gone past and the bruises he had gotten, his skin would be permanently changing colours soon.
The arms around him – using him as a shield, probably, the bastard – tightened and Peter rubbed his nose against his nape. Stiles found himself falling asleep again…

“Wake up, all of you!”

The sun suddenly intensified as the curtains were drawn back. Julia – sweet, little Julia – let out a curse unlike any Stiles had ever heard. It dragged him back from the gates of oblivion.

“I’m up, I’m up,” he mumbled on repeat. He tried to fumble his way up, but Peter tightened his hold again and, yeah. “Or not.”

Staying in sounded far better. Peter was a genius.

Kate tsked. She hopped on Peter’s desk and observed them all tangled up together. “Bobby’s already shoving all the bacon into his endless pit so unless you want to miss breakfast, I’d suggest you get up. Should we shower? I don’t think we should. I went to look for a toilet and that snooty bitch’s face got so scrunched I thought it’d stay that way!”

“Which one of them?” Stiles asked. He struggled against Peter and Julia who only cuddled closer.

_Hot._

Peter wasn’t a genius anymore.

“Uh, the one Dick attacked.”

“Oh, Elsa.”

“That was it. What a boring name.”

“Let it go, let it go,” Stiles sang under his breath and shook Peter. Peter made a disgusted noise and, surprisingly, did exactly that.

“Never again,” he said blearily. “I don’t want to hear that song ever again.”

“Sorry, babe, afraid I can’t promise that.”

“I hope the Mayan people were right this time around,” Peter said. “I miss the apocalypse.” He stretched while Stiles rolled over Julia and onto the ground.

“Amen. Though it wasn’t that bad.”

“Yes, it was.” Peter shook Julia who rolled into a burrito to try to escape. “Wouldn’t remember it otherwise.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, but I would like to know if I can torture her in any way,” Kate announced eagerly. Stiles huffed a laugh.

“Not raising any of your points there.”

“Stiles, I don’t really care.”

“Point.”

“I wasn’t kidding about the bacon though. It’s like Bobby’s eating his last meal or something.”
“With everything that’s going on, I wouldn’t be surprised if it actually was. Hey, is it possible there’s poison in the food?” Stiles asked, looking around for his discarded clothes. Peter snorted.

“If there’s one good thing in this house, it’s that wasted food is considered a crime. Felicity would kill anyone even attempting that.”

“But is it wasted food if the attempt is successful?”

Peter just shook his head and headed to the door next to the one heading to the corridor. He locked it behind him. They could hear the water running.

Kate looked enraged. “I thought that was the closet!” she whined loudly “I searched for that toilet for, like, five minutes!”

Stiles laughed. Kate continued pouting.

“Shut up, it’s a long time with full bladder!”

“The closet is behind the bookcase!” Peter called out.

Stiles and Kate stared at each other before scrambling to look. With teamwork for the ages, they quickly found the right switch and, lo and behold, the bookcase swung open. They gaped.

“What the fuuuuuuuck,” Kate said. Stiles agreed vehemently.

“I always wanted one of these!”

“I know right?!”

“Dude, you suck!” “Peter, you’re the worst!” They chorused. Peter stepped out of his bathroom. He rolled his eyes.

“Thank you, thank you,” he told them and pushed past. He glanced at the clothes critically before picking out an outfit for himself. Then he inspected Stiles and took out a shirt and a pair of pants. “Put these on. And not a word,” he threatened, emphasising every word.

Stiles’ jaw clicked shut. He glanced at the plaidless clothes and pouted. Peter pointed at him.

“Now.”

“Alright, alright!” Stiles threw his arms up, clothes hitting Kate on the face, and stomped to the bathroom. Kate snorted.

“So, breakfast?”

Julia groaned and hid her face under her pillow.

Kate grinned evilly. She jumped. The consequent shriek made Stiles trip on his feet and probably woke up anyone else still sleeping.

It took a while, but they managed to drag Julia out of the bed as well. Bobby had, indeed, finished most of the bacon by the time they arrived at the dining room where the breakfast was set. Some Hales – there was the woman with the twins and probably her husband, one of Lena’s kids – were
eating there but it sounded like most were already done with their meal. Samantha glanced at them and winced before disappearing into the kitchen. They could Felicity’s voice coming from there, singing a surprisingly on-key Mariah Carey song.

Cora waved at them and greeted Peter with a toothy grin. Peter sat opposite her, reaching over to steal one of her bite-sized sausages. Cora growled in response, hoarding her plate closer.

“She’s going to grow up terrifying if you continue like that,” Julia said, smile on her face. She still looked tired but the way she filled her coffee mug told them that that fact would change fast.

Stiles snorted into his coffee. Wasn’t that the truth.

“The best way to be,” Peter said serenely. He quickly filled his plate, hollering a thank you to Felicity, before digging in. Stiles and Kate followed after him while Julia hugged her coffee mug. She kept glancing towards the living room uneasily. Stiles’ lips thinned. He piled a plate with less greasy dishes and put it in front of her. She blinked at it, her stare broken.

“You need to eat,” he told her. She nodded quietly and reached for her fork. Stiles glanced past Cora’s head too.

Yeah, he understood.

Suddenly her dark circles made a lot more sense.

Bobby threw himself into a seat beside her, dragging her into a conversation about the different types of bacons in the world. He showed her the plate he had confiscated from the kitchen, mad glint in his eye. Stiles glanced there and saw Felicity staring at Bobby like he was an alien.

Well, at least one of them was making himself at home.

Peter kept Cora entertained with PG rated stories of their adventures while the rest of them finished their plates more or less successfully. Despite Stiles’ efforts, Julia only finished half her plate. Bobby nudged her and gently placed a few strawberries on her plate. Felicity threw her arms up and disappeared back into the kitchen.

“Now, eat little forest woman,” he said gently. “Eat so that you won’t be eaten.”

Stiles looked at Bobby sharply and even Peter’s voice faltered for a moment. The few Hales that were still eating with them gave them weird looks.

Julia’s lips twitched. “I always thought I would be the grandmother in all those scenarios.”

Bobby pondered that and nodded. “Could be. But our hunter isn’t hunting and our wolf is lusting after Little Red, so you can just eat the basket for once, right?”

Julia giggled. The strawberries didn’t stay in her plate for long. Neither did the comfortable air around them as Talia burst into the room. Her look was sour as she took them all in – hopeful, but like she had swallowed a whole lemon.

“I thought you would have left,” Talia said stiffly. She looked like she hadn’t gotten much sleep that night. Stiles shrugged.

“We have business in the preserve.”

“And what would that be?”
“Why, curious?”

Talia’s voice gained an edge. “This is my territory, Finstock.”

“Maybe. But you’ve left the Nemeton on its own for so long that I doubt you could claim it as your business anymore.”

Talia’s brows shot up. “You know about the Nemeton?” she hissed. That gained them a few curious looks. Stiles rolled his eyes.

“I think that was implied,” he sneered.

“You know I can’t let you visit it unsupervised. If visit at all.”

“Then, if you had looked after it better, perhaps you would know that we already have.”

Talia paled. “But no one should be able to-”

“Yeah, but if the Nemeton wants to be found, eh, who are we to deny it?”

Peter smirked. “Sane.”

“What?”

“If we avoided the call, we could be called sane.”

Stiles paused and then hummed in agreement. “Good thing we all have a screw or two loose.”

“Or that we have Finstock to balance the odds if not.”

“True.”

“Why don’t you call me Bobby?” Bobby whined. He didn't even bother denying the claim. He stabbed his greasy fork in Peter’s direction, narrowly missing Julia’s coffee mug. “You always call me Finstock. No one else does!”

“Kate does.”

“Not anymore,” Kate announced. She clutched at her shirt. “He got to me, Peter. Avenge meeee!”

“Avenge yourself.”

“Rude,” Kate reached for her boot and picked up her knife. Talia took a step towards Cora. As if putting a show, Kate twirled it in a rather spectacular manner – Cora was mesmerised – before stabbing a pear. All the while she sent significant looks at Bobby who-

Ignored her. Kate cut a piece off the fruit and chucked it at his head.

“You still have weapons?” Talia hissed. Kate shrugged, taking a bite herself.

“I’m not convinced of your goodwill,” she said bluntly around her mouthful. After she swallowed, she added, “I’m not about to go and kill you all in the middle of the night or something. How would I even do that? Line the house with mountain ash and burn it down?” Stiles choked on his eggs. Kate decidedly ignored him. “It’s not like one knife is going to change a lot in the middle of all you wolves.”
Talia looked surprised. “Wolves?”
Kate side-eyed her. “Yeah. Wolves.”

“Good morning,” Laura said loudly as she stepped inside the dining room, Derek following at her heels. Cora waved at them from her seat and they quickly took theirs on both sides of her. She turned to Kate. “Do you want to see my room? I bet you I can beat you on console.”

“You’re on!” Kate said immediately. Stiles hid a grin.

Laura would murder her.

“Cool. Derek can act as the referee. Cora’s my official cheerleader…” she trailed off as Cora shook her head, pointing at Peter who sat on the opposite her. “Or not. She’s sticking with uncle I guess.”

Peter snorted. “Or my ankles.”

“Wolves,” Talia said to herself. She entered the kitchen, quiet and contemplative, very unlike how she was last night. Stiles squinted after her.

“Looks like her run did a whole lot of good to her.”

Peter’s utensils clacked against his plate. “We can hope so.” He tilted his head a little and sighed. “We can apparently expect company. Deaton and Talia, at least, are planning to go with us.”

Stiles groaned. “Of course. More people. This is what we wanted. It’s karma. Thanks, Kate!”

Kate poked her head from around Peter. “What?” she asked. “And is that a no for the tournament?”

“Until the evening at least.”

If there was an evening to be had.

Nope, stop it Stiles. Your pessimism is not going to be the reason you’ll all be killed.

“Boo,” she and Laura said in unison. And high-fived. Stiles stared at the ceiling.

What was even life? The Hale and the Argent heirs, bonding.

The world was ending.

Maybe they should have just waited until next day? Just so they would be at each other’s throats again. Maybe then the world could stop spinning, even if he happened to breathe in the wrong direction.

“I’m not taking any of you with us!” Stiles said, raising his voice. It cut through the air and the conversations halted in the house. “And that’s a fact.”

Talia entered the dining room again. She didn’t look too happy; in fact, she looked very displeased.

“Are you now,” she asked. Well, Stiles supposed she asked. He could hear the missing question mark, again.

“Yep. It’s better if we’ll go alone.”

“And what makes you think I’ll let you go alone on my land?”
So they were backtracking now. Great.

“Listen-”

“No,” she said quickly, mouth twisting. “You listen to me for once. I may recognise some fault in my actions-” which she hadn’t admitted to yesterday, so at least that was progress, “but I cannot, in good conscience, let you roam free where my pack walks, let alone with the Nemeton.”

Stiles scowled. “You don’t under-”

“So I don’t understand this either?” Talia interrupted, unamused. “I don’t know you even if you seem to think you know me. I am an alpha – the Hale alpha – and I do not appreciate you telling me how I should handle my territory.”

And that… was a pretty damn good point too. Despite their personal disagreements, Talia was a successful alpha with a powerful pack at her back that certainly wouldn’t follow her if they didn’t trust her. She was renowned enough that Kali’s bitch of a mother knew about her and had been playing with the idea of gaining her goodwill.

“Fine then!” Stiles snapped. He knew when he’s lost. And if he can’t win them all, then- “Four then! To balance,” he said. He still couldn’t help the scorn that coloured his words.

“I think he needs to do my math homework at least once for practice,” Kate stated. Laura snickered even as she kept looking at her mom. Stiles wondered what she was sensing from her.

“An alpha can be counted as two,” Stiles said.

“Then what about you?” Talia countered. “Acting alpha on another alpha’s land. I will bring as many as I want.”

“Nope,” Stiles said. “Fine, bring five, yourself included. But I won’t have any more of you.”

“Five plus Deaton.”

“Because Deaton doesn’t really belong to the pack?” Stiles asked and snorted. “Try again. Bobby’s the same. Five or nothing.”

“I can just keep you here.”

“Pfft, no you can’t.”

“Try me.”

“Gerard would have a problem with that,” Stiles threw out easily. Talia looked irritated.

“I don’t doubt that,” she said. She dragged a hand through her hair and tugged it. “That’s what I’ve been saying the whole week.”

Stiles blinked. “What?”

“Nothing,” Talia sighed, irritation morphing into weariness. “Fine. Five. But I don’t want to hear any complaints and we will be monitoring you. What do you even want with the Nemeton?”

Stiles opened his mouth, about to send a scathing remark, but then hesitated. He met Talia’s eyes, the lines around his mouth grim.
“I’ll tell you on the way there.”

Talia was instantly alert. The look she directed at Stiles was so piercing he thought she would be able to see through him, literally. He absentmindedly patted his chest to see if there was a sudden hole in there. Nope. No holes.

She nodded slowly.

“And I’m one of them!” Laura announced.

“No, you’re not,” Talia said. Laura’s grin morphed into what looked like her mother’s look of affront.

“But you let me go look for uncle Peter!”

“With my enforcers watching your every step and school not knocking on the door,” Talia said. “The situation is different now.”

Laura looked flabbergasted. “But how?”

Talia sent Stiles a look.

“It just is.”

And that was that, to the confusion of everyone and Stiles.

***

They left soon after breakfast. It was as chilly as he remembered January usually being. Stiles had wrapped himself in Jackson’s jacket and Julia in layers upon layers before they began their trek. Kate was stubbornly in her combat gear – or, well, less baggy and less warm clothing – and Bobby just… he had apparently stolen a bathrobe from someone. It was thick and soft though. And had huge, bulging pockets. Deaton was dressed warmly as well when he arrived at the Hale house.

The wolves, dicks as they all were, ran around with thin clothes and the first five minutes Peter complained about the fashion disasters that they were.

“Shut up,” Stiles finally snapped. He tugged at his jacket again, jostling most of the poisons and powders they had and he had hidden in his pockets. “Not all of us want to brave the cold with only brands covering us.”

“You hid all my hard work under—”

“Yeah, I can appreciate your hard work inside when we are not trampling through your ancestral grounds. We cool?”

Peter smirked. “I’m certain you will.”

Kate groaned. “Stop it, you too.”

Kevin muttered some unflattering things and Kate shot him a dark look. “You especially, keep your mouth shut or I’ll sew it shut.”

“Kate.” “Kevin.”

The two took a step back and continued to glare at themselves. Talia’s mouth was pursed as she
looked at her beta. Kevin winced while Kate smirked smugly, only for her expression to transform into a full-blown pout when Stiles stared at her as well. She nodded sourly.

Stiles sighed. This was turning better and better. With the bad blood between them, they would be ripe pickings for the nogitsune. It wasn’t even the *somewhat* good-natured kind of banter between Kate and Laura. Life sucked, majorly. But Stiles also knew that had they tried to sneak off, the Hale pack *would* have tracked them down and *that* would have turned even uglier.

At least right now they were a contained disaster walking.

He knew he shouldn’t have let his pettiness get in the way of business.

Stiles turned around for a moment, walking backwards so he could look for Deaton. There, nearly the furthest one from him, dragging a large bag with him. “You brought your whole arsenal?” As requested. Stiles hadn’t wanted to give Talia the specifics back in the house, but he *had* let her know that something serious was going on.

“I did,” Deaton said. Amazingly, Stiles could hear a hint of concern from him.

“You wouldn’t happen to have any wolf lichen in there?”

Deaton’s brows shot up. “Why would you have any need of that?” he asked. Then he shook his head. “The only known place it grows is in Japan.”

Because of course it was.

Stiles sighed, mentally ticking it off one from his short list of possible nogitsune repellents, and turned back around. “Knew it was unlikely, why are you so disappointed,” he mumbled to himself.

He absently noted how their packs had formed lines after them, almost like in hierarchy, with Peter, Kate, Julia and Bobby on his side, and Lena, Samantha, Kevin and Deaton on Talia’s. Stiles wished they could have gone with Marcus instead of Kevin – he thought if might make sense even – but with the fit Laura had thrown, he was needed to control the chaos that had erupted.

“The Nemeton is poisoning the preserve through telluric currents,” Stiles announced. There was confused silence after his words but Talia paled – and Stiles suspected Deaton wasn’t behind her either.

“What?” she asked faintly. Then her eyes sharpened, and she demanded, “what do you mean?”

“I’ve discovered that years ago, decades even, a powerful creature with dark inclinations was bound to the damned tree. And by dark inclinations, I mean *dark*, like the most gothic black of all blacks. With a whole lot of smudged eyeliner.”

“And what would that creature be?” Lena asked from behind them.

Stiles’ lips twitched grimly.

“A nogitsune.”

Deaton inhaled sharply, so sharp that even Stiles could hear it despite the distance.

“A what?” Samantha asked, wary. “Sounds foreign.”

“It is one of the darkest creatures on earth,” Deaton said, *repeating Stiles’ words*. “A Japanese fox
spirit with a taste for strife, called upon when revenge is desired, no matter the consequences."

“Spirit, incorporeal?” Lena frowned.

“Unfortunately, very much corporeal,” Stiles said, and added, “and it really likes to possess unsuspecting passers-by.”

“That… would be bad,” Samantha said. Stiles nodded.

“It always is.”

“Is?” Talia asked sharply. Stiles twitched. Fuck, he didn’t mean-

“Stiles has had the unfortunate luck of getting possessed before,” Peter interjected. Stiles slumped and nodded, draining the comfort Peter pushed at him. He nudged him mentally, a silent thank you.

“Yeah. It was not fun.”

Talia pursed her lips and nodded. Stiles was a little surprised she didn’t prod. He might have in her shoes. It was rather relevant piece of information for the present problem and for future defamation.

“What do you intend to do with this knowledge?” she questioned. “The Nemeton needs to be purified. We can’t let the taint spread.”

“That’s exactly what we are planning to do,” Stiles said. “We’ve compiled some ideas of how to proceed but we have no knowledge if the situation has worsened in the past month or so. Probably not drastically but, well.”

“The present situation needs to be appraised first,” Deaton said. Stiles waved his hand.

“Exactly.” He stretched, and his joints popped. “I’m not so worried about the purification process. It should be – not claiming it will be but should be – the somewhat easier part to solve. There’s finding the source of corruption, the removal of said corruption, and ta-da, the Nemeton should start repairing itself out of self-preservation. What we need to do is drain all the compressed energy that’s sickening the tree so that it won’t blow up and become a literal beacon.”

“That would be rather awful,” Talia murmured. “A full-time job, if you will.”

“Yeah, that’s one way to put it. And that’s not even the worst part.”

“The nogitsune.”

“Yeah. See, it’s not really trying to poison the damn tree. As much as I would like to say it’s the bad guy, well, it’s actually just blocking the natural flow of power which in turn sickens the tree. Because while it is all kinds of sentient and powerful, it’s not meant to house that much power.”

Stiles licked his lips. “The main problem comes next. Because in order to remove the nogitsune from the Nemeton, we need to free it. And that’s going be a headache or a few hundred.”

“Pissed off and powerful.”

“Yeah. With years of starvation it shouldn’t at its best…” Stiles trailed off. “Shit. Peter? I’m not thinking what I’m thinking, right?”

Peter sighed. “Not a mind reader. But… I see where you are going. We just won’t know with the Nemeton festering. It has to be chaos in there,” Peter said. Stiles’ lips twitched, unamused.
“Yeah.”

He just hoped that whatever Noshiko had contained the bastard in was strong enough to also separate the nogitsune from the godforsaken tree. It was acting like a block, it should then block everything.

Right?

“Would it be attracted to your power?” Deaton asked mildly. Stiles rolled his eyes.

“Maybe.” He didn’t elaborate. “So whatever happens, don’t start a fight with each other. The nogitsune lives for that shit. And by this, I mean all of us, even if I am singling out Kevin.”

Kevin scoffed but Talia inclined her head. “If you’ll keep your hunter and… your relative… on a leash too.”

“They know how to behave.”

“I’m sure.”

“It’s like they’re talking about pets,” Kate complained. The silence was loud. “I am not a pet!”

“Of course you are not,” Stiles placated. Talia sent him a look. He bit his lip. “Is this the moment I should say I have almost no self-preservation instincts left?”

Talia looked pained. Peter wormed his hand in Stiles’, stepping in closer.

“Don’t worry,” he said silkily. “I’ll watch your back.”

And then let go, only to whack Stiles’ backside. It echoed in the growing silence as they walked closer to the centre of the corruption.

Stiles wasn’t too proud of the squeak he let out. Lena lifted a hand to cover her mouth.

“Stiles,” Julia called, voice wavering. Stiles lifted his hand, beckoning her closer. She latched onto him, tension draining from her frame as she let Stiles’ own magic mingle with hers. “Thank you.”

“Always.”

Talia glanced back. “Your druid seems to be more sensitive than Alan.”

“Her name is Julia,” Stiles said. “And I would argue that’s a strength rather than a weakness.”

“It was just an observation,” Talia said, giving him a look. “Not an accusation.”

Stiles blinked. Which was… true. Shit. He was already expecting the worst of Talia. He could say that was for a reason, but-

“I don’t take well with people disrespecting my pack,” he admitted. He squeezed Julia’s hand when she tried to apologise. This wasn’t her fault.

“Not a necessarily a bad trait,” Talia said mildly, almost enough to tickle Stiles’ temper. “Certainly one I share myself.”

And, oh.
Neither of them really trusted each other.

Message received.

Instead of answering, he chose to focus on sharing the necessary information. He could act like the bigger man too. Lena asked a few surprisingly sharp questions – and this wasn’t the first time he wondered how someone like Kevin had come from her – as did Deaton. Even Talia was listening in, sharp lines and all. Despite the trust issues, they were all invested in solving the problem – or at least seeing if Stiles was lying to them and then ripping his head off.

Perhaps the Hales accompanying them wasn’t all a horrible mistake. He hoped.

“Where did you unearth all this knowledge?” Deaton asked. Of course he would want to know. Kate smirked.

“From the Tribunal library.”

The Hales looked mostly confused except for Talia whose jaw dropped the slightest bit.

“No,” she breathed. “Peter, you didn’t.”

“I swear to you, I did,” Peter said lightly. “And look, I came out just fine.”

Which, of course, didn’t say anything about having been safe and, if the flashing of Talia’s eyes said anything, she realised that as well.

“What’s a Tribunal?” Kevin asked.

Yeah, this wasn’t going to end well.

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“I don’t believe it,” Kevin mumbled. “There’s actually something governing hunters? Yeah, right.”

“It does work, maybe, on theoretical level,” Stiles said but even he didn’t really believe his words. “There are a lot of glitches though, and I mean a lot. Someone should reprogramme the whole thing before it corrupts the whole file.”

He gained a bunch of empty and confused looks for his efforts.

“Come on, computers aren’t that new invention,” he protested. “Even phones glitch!”

Kate wrinkled her nose at him. “Stay away from me, nerd,” she said. “I don’t want any of your germs.”

“So rude.”

“How long is it until wherever we are going?” Lena asked. Stiles shrugged.

“I don’t know,” he said. Talia’s brows shot up. “It’s not like it’s exact science. The Nemeton reveals itself when it wants. If it does want us to wander around for days, well, then we’ll walk circles around it for days.”

“Hasn’t done that for us yet,” Talia said. There was a smug undertone on her voice. Stiles scoffed.

“Well, good for you. Now, how about you channel that goodwill you have with the sentient tree
stump and we’ll just be on our way.”

Talia did take the lead then but after another quarter of an hour it became apparent that the goodwill didn’t reach them now. Stiles could see the knots forming in her shoulders. They were probably getting on par with the ones he was sporting himself.

“You need to relax.”

Stiles rolled his eyes. And there it was. “Thanks, Yoda. Learned more mind tricks?”

“I can read you just fine without any,” Peter answered. “But you’re going to work yourself into a pretzel and then where will we be?”

Stiles hated when people read him like an open book, even more than when people patronised him. At least then he had the opportunity to attack. “Thanks, I hate it,” he just said. “And not in a good way.”

“How do you even get a ‘good way’ out of that?” Julia whispered a step behind him. To Kate, apparently, as she murmured something back.

“Love you too,” Peter said airily. Talia choked on air next to Stiles. She turned around and stared at Peter who Stiles could picture feigning his signature unreadable serenity that actually screamed sass.

“Yeah, yeah.” Stiles waved his hand and a small smile worked its way onto his face. “And then what?”

“Relax,” Peter repeated. “You’re useless right now.”


“You don’t actually want to find it.”

Stiles stiffened. The smile disappeared as his lips thinned. “What did you say?”

“You’re afraid. You don’t want to find the Nemeton. You just picture us walking, and walking, and walking-”

Stiles turned around, pointing at Peter. “Listen here, mister-”

“Ah, there it is,” Peter said. He patted Stiles’ head. “Thank you, sweetheart.”

Stiles whirled around and, yeah, there it was. He scowled.

“Well fuck you too,” he told the stump. “Your sense of humour sucks.”

Kate snickered. “Well, if you were mean to me like that, I wouldn’t want you to visit me either. Oh, wait.”

“You live with me, Kate.”

“You’re right,” Kate said, taking a wondering tone. “Why do I allow this abuse to happen? I need to call the cops.”

“And get a restraining order?”

“Yep.”
“A free holiday for the rest of my life,” Stiles said. “Accepted. When’s the paperwork due?”

“Aww, but you love meeee,” Kate whined. Then she danced in front of him and the grin that reminded Stiles of sharks spread on her face. “Besides, I’m the reason you’re not broke.”

“Correction, Gerard is,” Stiles said. He made a face. Julia giggled weakly.

“Tastes bad, doesn’t it?” Kate said. “Don’t worry, when I hit eighteen, I’ll be dangling you on a hot-wait, you’re no longer an Argent. Fuck. Fuck.”

“Ha!” Stiles crowed. “And now I’m broke again!” He paused. “And now I’m broke again. Fuck.”

“Just don’t expect me to fund all your crazy ideas,” Peter said. Stiles flung an arm at him, middle finger ready.

“And who was the one who got me to pay for all those clothes? Not to mention half of Kate’s weaponry. Fuck that, the only thing I’ve got for myself is curly fries and I’m getting sick of them. Sick. Dude, that’s such a travesty! You all owe me so much.”

Peter rolled his eyes. “So dramatic.”

“Ugh!” Stiles twisted around and dragged Julia with him. He ignored Talia and her pack completely as he made his way to the stinky stump. “Help me figure out which ritual to use.”

Pale as she was, Julia nodded, determined. Stiles made a face at Peter who had followed them at more leisurely pace. “I’m leaving you for Julia.”

“Such a pity.”

Stiles stuck his tongue out but it was captured alongside with his mouth as Peter gave him a quick, open-mouthed kiss. The bastard had the gall to smirk as he pulled back.

“Still leaving me?”

Stiles merely stomped away, Julia on one arm and Peter chuckling behind them.

“Gross!” Kate yelled somewhere in the background. Stiles flipped her the bird.

They walked around the remains of the tree, feeling out the lines of power underneath the ground. Talia and Deaton walked with them on the opposite direction; Talia with her connection to the lands, Deaton as her emissary. Stiles attempted to ignore Talia’s eyes burning him but he had to admit, it was pretty difficult.

“The lines truly are bending towards the Hale house,” Julia murmured, distracting him. “It looks like the Nemeton grew from where four currents crossed one another… and since that would mean that they would be divided into eight and—”

The soft sound Talia made drew Stiles’ attention on her. She nodded, a strange wonder on her face.

“I can feel them now. Three? No—”

“Four,” Stiles said.

“Four,” they agreed. Deaton stared at the tree thoughtfully.

“The southern lines. The northern are more… frigid.”
“There is one for each approximation of direction,” Julia said. She drew Stiles along as she marked the exact spots where the lines pulsed.

“It’s almost as if the purer strands are coming from east, feeding the Nemeton power, while the western currents are choking with- are decaying.” Her hand hovered in the air. “The strands are weaker than they should be but the little that there is…” Julia shuddered. “It’s awful.”

“Interesting,” Peter said. He crouched, trying to see what the others were sensing. “That would explain the directional shift as well. This has to be the most western Nemeton on the continent. The weaker lines would look towards another concentration of power, like the generations’ long supernatural influence. If the western currents were starved as was suggested-”

“Then the weaker strands would also attempt to fuse! That’s it, Peter!” Stiles exclaimed. “No wonder the effects could be so disastrous. If the block was removed or damaged, it would flow towards the leak, the power void, uncontrollably. The Nemeton would rot inside until the concentrated corruption became strong enough to overcome the power it’s being fed from scattered directions!”

“And together, they would resonate twice as strong and could spread the corruption twice as fast, perhaps even more,” Julia said, just as enthused as she was horrified by the idea.

“Nerds,” Kate muttered but she did sound impressed.

“We need to stop the flow of the corruption, cage it all in, as we remove the nogitsune,” Talia said. Her tone accepted nothing but agreement. Thankfully they were on the same side, for once.

“A barrier. Of course.”

Talia motioned her pack to her. They followed her orders without hesitation, standing by her like the epitome of bulwark. “And that will be us. Preferably with Peter on… the northern side?”

Stiles examined the pattern. He wasn’t so sure of that…

Deaton cleared his throat. “If I may?”

Stiles turned to him, motioning him to continue.

“We will be working with the cardinal ritual, yes? With the eight parts?”

“Yes, it would be the wisest,” Julia answered.

“Then I would suggest that Peter goes on the south-east point,” Deaton said. “The corruption seems to catch on the warmer currents first. With miss Argent’s ties to the northern clans, she would make an excellent stand-in for north-west, and with Peter’s bloodline, he cannot be one away from the Hales.”

Stiles turned to Julia. She shrugged.

“He makes a good point,” she admitted. “And I will need to go to east-” she flushed, the implication of her suggestion making her embarrassed, “-and Bobby north.”

Bobby nodded mechanically and started wandering to where he thought the north was. Spoilers, it wasn’t. Stiles watched as Peter dragged him back to the group. He felt his concern reflect back at him. Stiles shook his head. He would have to ask Bobby later.

“Will you chant the ritual?” he asked Deaton. Deaton bowed ever so slightly.
“It would be my honour.”

Yeah, right. Whatever rocked his boat. As long as he did a better job out of it than the fake drowning.

“Then I will go under,” Stiles said, even as the thought gave him chills. It would make put him in the centre of the power struggle and give him the job of releasing the nogitsune. Again.

Funny how things turned out.

“With the Hales focusing on stalling the corruption and us pushing the pure power at it, with Deaton guiding the process and me reaching for the source…” Stiles trailed off. That did sound doable. Were they becoming pros at this? This, whatever this hunting and doing things shit was? He thought they were. Professionals. He liked the sound of that.

Go team!

“We need to push the compressed power back to the currents,” Talia said grimly. She crossed her arms. “We are merely stand-ins, not leeches.”

“The balance,” Deaton agreed. Stiles wanted to scoff but, in this case, he was actually right.

“Yes, yes. Be the filter, not the tank.”

“How motivational,” Kate drawled. She stalked over to her spot. She looked utterly unimpressed. “Am I in the right place?”

“Um,” Julia said. “Just… a little bit left?” Kate moved. “Sorry, my left. Yes, that’s good.”

With her guidance, they all found their places - even Bobby - with Deaton standing on top of the Nemeton and Stiles-

“The purifying is a go,” he said and did one last circle around the tree, feeling out the currents underneath his feet. “When I come up with the nogitsune, I want all of you in a tight circle. We’ll hit it quick and hard. If all goes well, then it’ll be weak enough for us to weaken it further and trap, maybe even kill.”

“Or banish,” Deaton said.

“Or banish,” Stiles repeated, but he wasn’t holding much hope for that. The nogitsune would fight until clear defeat and even after. They would just have to make sure it didn’t possess anyone, and it would all work out.

He hoped.

“Alright then,” Stiles said. His hands shook. He took his place where the opening to the cellar was, his pack bonds a comforting warmth inside him.

“Let’s begin.”
Hi guys! So, I have a few things to say before we dive into this.

One, I love you all. Two, based on my notes, the next few chapters may be quite cliffhanger-y (and after you start the chapter, you'll notice I was very kind to end the previous chapter where I did). Three, you can't kill me because then you'll never know what will happen next.

:) 

Enjoy!

Peter felt like pacing. He wanted to move, to do something, even if he knew he couldn’t. Julia had marked the currents’ exact spots and if he moved even a step in either direction, due to the fluctuation, he could throw off the ritual. He knew that.

Yet he still wanted.

He wanted to follow Stiles down those treacherous stairs. He stared at him, watched him do the last-minute check, before he went to stand by the cellar opening. He could feel Stiles’ apprehension, see the sweat glister on his skin. If he could have, he would have switched places with him. He could have maybe even made it faster, just dipped in and out, come and gone within a minute.

He also knew why it had to be Stiles.

The rest of them were needed here, all in their special ways. It was either Deaton or Julia who had to stand upon the Nemeton, and it was Deaton who knew it the best while Julia was part of their pack. She was needed with them, and as back up. The Hales – and Peter with them, as the connection between their packs – were necessary because of their blood ties to the land. Kate as well. Finstock-well, he could have gone down, maybe. Peter looked over to where Finstock stood, swaying from one side to the other, but with feet digging to the ground. Their northern rock, supposedly unmovable in the tides of time.

Yes, he knew why it had to be him.

Peter’s eyes drifted to Stiles’ disappearing back. He clung to their bond ferociously while Deaton started his chant. The words flowed like a river on a clear day, sure and steady. Julia joined in every once in a while, strengthening the chant in its places of need.

He closed his eyes as he felt the power flow through him. It was strong, hungry. The telluric currents washed over him and curled around his very being before moving on, leaving behind an emptiness like a calling card, just to fill him up again. It would be so easy to ask for the power to stay, to grab it and never let go.

Peter heard Deaton’s voice break for a moment, but Julia picked up where he left off without even a second having passed. Deaton recovered fast and, together, the chant grew to what almost sounded
like a song with the rush of power as its background, seduction whispering in his ears.

It grew, grew, grew. Peter felt powerful. He didn’t think he had ever felt this strong, unstoppable. He could have anything and everything he wanted with this. Their pack could have everything. The song got louder, three voices forming the perfect symphony. The currents answered.

He opened his eyes.

The only thing he saw was light.

***

It was dark.

The little light that peeked through the Nemeton’s roots didn’t make it any easier to see where Stiles was going. He could hear Deaton’s chant, calm as he was, and the parts where Julia joined in, empowering his. Stiles could feel how they all clutched at their bonds, confident in them, but wary of what might become. Even Kate, reckless as she used to be, the last one he saw before the darkness swallowed him up, was alert and ready to act.

And then there was Peter, who almost felt like he was there with Stiles.

Stiles sighed and rolled his shoulders. He tiptoed forward. It felt like he was trespassing and that- that wasn’t a good feeling at all.

The Nemeton he knew was insane; this Nemeton was on its way there.

They could make it or break it, despite their preparations, despite-

They would make it.

Stiles thought he could vaguely recall being down here before. It was when Julia had been Jennifer but- it was hazy. He knew what had happened, of course he did, but like with everything else prior to his possession, it wasn’t all that clear. It hadn’t been important enough for him to learn about. The only thing that he had cared to know back then was that his dad had been fine.

Did he get into a crash that day or was that just some other day that ended with a y? Poor Roscoe, rest in peace, you poor soul.

Stiles couldn’t hear the chant anymore. He could, however, feel the power flow through his pack and filter out, cleaner than before. The headstrongness of Kate, the gentleness of Julia, the loyalty of Peter- all their good qualities were enhanced. They were enhanced.

And with them, so was Stiles.

Their bonds shone through him and, suddenly, it was like the sun had walked down with him. The roots fell away with creaks, almost afraid, and the ground solidified under his feet. He looked around and saw tragedies where there would be none – not anymore, never again.

The corruption had a heart and Stiles was in it, breaking it apart.

The firefly in the jar was buzzing. It was clutched by the Nemeton’s roots but, also, being washed over by the telluric currents. In the strange light it looked like the little jar was the mightiest of dams.

It was the worst place to hide it. It was also the only place to bind it.
Stiles doubted Noshiko had cared about the consequences, not after everything. He could certainly understand-

But he didn’t have to forgive.

Stiles drew on the light against his back and pushed his hands into the waiting darkness.

He bit the inside of his cheek. It was cold, unforgiving. The chill attacked him like a threatened snake but its venom couldn’t penetrate his shell. Stiles smiled through his bloodied teeth.

They would make it.

His hands wrapped around the jar and he pulled. The Nemeton shuddered and he suddenly felt how Julia took over Deaton, voice clear and bright, hollow in the way only a vessel could be. The sentient tree fought against Stiles but also called for help through Julia. It knew the darkness was poison, but it was as if it was addicted. It didn’t want to let go.

They would make it.

The firefly buzzed louder.

Julia’s chant got higher, Deaton backing her, Talia adding her power behind it-

The chant broke.

All the compressed power surged, driving his pack into new exhausted heights, and then fizzled back into the currents it belonged to. The Nemeton groaned and the jar slipped from its grip-

--but not before it gave it one last desperate squeeze and the glass cracked.

All too early.

Stiles’ eyes widened even as the firefly did one last twirl and then the jar was filled with liquid darkness. The cracks spread faster and faster, the tar-like shadows seeping through-

Stiles rushed out, dragging the darkness – the nogitsune – with him.

“Is that it?” he heard Kate ask and she was standing right by the edge of the opening and- no, get away from me, he screamed mentally, throwing the need at Kate. She faltered, stumbled, and her eyes widened-

All too late.

Because then Stiles blinked, and his hands were bleeding, pieces of glass biting into his skin, and she was on the ground, hair spread around her head like a halo, thrown by a mass of emerging fireflies and a shadow slowly taking shape.

***

The nogitsune looked terrible as ever. It was wrapped in the same bandaged form that had made home in Stiles’ nightmares for years. The only change Stiles could see was its posture – it was slumping down more than it used to, shoulders hunched where they once were relaxed but coiled to strike.

Julia rushed to Kate’s prone body, stumbling as her gait was, but the relief that burst through her warmed Stiles all over.
“Oh thank god.”

“Ahh, the famous fresh air,” the nogitsune said, inhaling loudly. “And the ominous silence. Perfect.”

Stiles stiffened. Even its voice was the same. Cold sweat broke on his forehead even as his rage surged. The nogitsune tilted its head.

“Interesting. I can sense the fear that consumes. How sweet of you, coming to me with such a gift.”

But, instead of Stiles, the nogitsune crept towards… Samantha?

The woman was pale and trembling, her eyes wide as saucers. She took a step back.

“Afraid of everything, aren’t you?” The nogitsune tilted its head. Its cheeks darkened with every breath it took. “Hiding it well, so deep, but you know it inside – you are weak.” It grinned, eyes flicking towards where Talia lingered. “A failure. What would your alpha say?”

Before the nogitsune could advance more, Lena and Kevin stepped in front of it, claws out.

The nogitsune smirked. “Such displeasure, such hate,” it cooed. It extended its arm, tracing invisible lines before Kevin. “Such envy. A delicacy. I would love nothing more than to rip into that flesh and see what makes that heart bleed.”

Kevin bared his teeth. “Just try it,” he spat out. “You’re not touching her.”

“Why not both?” the nogitsune asked. Lena attempted a strike when its attention was on Kevin, but it danced out of reach before she could.

It cooed. “Oh, but what is this anger you hide! Quiet, so solemn, but inside hiding the storm of doubt. And look at who it is directed to! You hate your alpha. And with what passion. It’s beautiful.”

Talia flinched like she was hit. Lena’s mouth twisted into an ugly snarl. “It wasn’t her fault,” she spat out, baring her neck for Talia in the smallest of movements, as if to reassure her of the truth in her words.

“But that’s a lie, isn’t it?” the nogitsune said. “You really don’t think that. Perhaps you think you would have made a better alpha?”

Lena snarled. The nogitsune looked elated.

“I was right, wasn’t I? Oh yes, a better alpha, hiding all that resentment until it would boil over-”

Lena slashed forward but the nogitsune blocked her and threw her at Kevin. He didn’t move away fast enough and they both fell into a heap.

“What a temper,” the nogitsune hummed, staring, as Kevin rolled from under his mother and helped her up. Both of their eyes were shining a bright gold. “Perhaps the spark realised how unworthy you were of it.”

Kevin spat at it. The nogitsune just laughed, stance screaming overconfidence.

Neither of the wolves tried to approach it anymore, just circled a little and tried to look tough.

Stiles stood there, mind screaming at him to move but body refusing to even twitch. It was the same, all over again. The nogitsune was playing with them, playing them, tasting the secrets from the air,
all their insecurities-
-and it was Stiles’ fault.

He had let them there. He should have made an attempt at trying to deal with this himself. If the nogitsune tries to do anything at his pack-

“Oh, the guilt.”

Stiles’ reverie broke and he took several steps back when the whisper reached his ears. Peter was there immediately, holding him close, and growling at the nogitsune that was closing in on them, carelessly showing its back to the wolves behind. It tutted, smirk visible on its face.

“The determination is adorable,” the nogitsune drawled. Its eyes slid on Peter. “And the disgust, the injustice. All towards your alpha – or, no, family, isn’t she, a sister perhaps? Oh, how you hate her. Everything you ever wanted, isn’t she? But everything you cannot have. You hide behind your new pack, don’t you, because you aren’t strong enough to take her on her own.

“Not strong enough to protect those you ‘love’,” it breathed out, mocked, as it lingered in their space.

Peter grinned sharply.

“Not quite.”

That gave the nogitsune a pause. The shadows underneath it flickered.

Peter’s grin turned a tad darker. “She was everything I ever wanted. Someone who was loved, very much so; someone I grudgingly respected. That much is true. But that’s just it, isn’t it?” He leaned forward and smirked. “You dig into our ugliest sides, the fragments that linger, and present them as facts. Nothing but a fraud, aren’t you?”

The nogitsune hissed. “Mutt.”

“You try to bring chaos where there is none,” Peter said, tone turning serious. “Talia’s pack adores her. Whatever there was is only the past and what happened then is not what is now.”

“But she destroyed your life,” the nogitsune whispered, seductive. “And everything you stood for.”

Peter looked on, fearless, and Stiles felt all his doubts vanish.

“And yet here I stand,” Peter answered.

The nogitsune let out an enraged shout and was on Peter in a flash. Despite attempting to evade the coming blows, Stiles got thrown into a tree in the scuffle. He saw stars. The moment he managed to recover his wits, it was Talia and the nogitsune who were circling each other, and Peter was the one bleeding nearby Stiles, muttering something about ‘power’ and how ‘he should have just taken at least some of it’. The gash on Peter’s thigh was wide but already knitting together as he held the cut close.

“Not my brother, you sick fuck,” she growled. “You do not get to threaten my pack, my family, in any way.”

“And you think you can stop me?” It laughed. “You have brought me the perfect little sacrifices. I’ll just take one of you and destroy this little town and then – then – find the traitor who bound me there until I withered and died.”
The Yukimuras.

It really was going after Kira the moment it had dealt with them.

“Talia-” Peter said, trying to move past her, but she snarled and blocked his way. Not a moment later she was on the nogitsune, ripping into the bandaged body. The nogitsune let out a hiss of what sounded like pain and then Talia staggered with a rush of- oh. Oh. The pain. The pain that strengthened the nogitsune was still its most powerful weapon.

It was using Peter’s pain against her.

Stiles heard a retching sound and his eyes were drawn to where Julia was on the ground, clutching at Kate’s prone form. She looked pale, sick, and Talia’s words about her sensitivity hit him like a train. Bobby was next to her, holding her hair, hazy eyes on the nogitsune.

The nogitsune who was now staring at Julia with a wicked glint.

Talia took the opportunity and the nogitsune was thrown on the ground, Talia on top of it, holding it down. Stiles’ fingers wrapped around his bottle of mountain ash and threw it at the demon. Deaton shot what looked like a mixture of mistletoe and something else at it too. The two collided and Talia was forced to retreat as the poison clouded the air.

The nogitsune spat and rolled away, barely touched. It grinned viciously.

“I’m no mere mongrel,” it said in disgust. “As if you could defeat me with such primitive methods. I am a thousand years old, you can’t kill me.”

And then it kicked the advancing Talia, watching her hit the ground before Peter, and took determined steps towards…

Julia.

“No!” Stiles yelled and pushed himself up from the ground. His head was swimming and he found himself standing guard over Julia, Kate and Bobby. With nothing but his will against his personal demon, he would not lose, could not lose. He could faintly hear Peter call his name, could see the slow-motion of his movements, but his attention was taken by the dark creature before him.

“Interesting,” the nogitsune hissed, mocking, hateful. Stiles shivered. “You have been touched by one of us – no, been created by us, your body is. How interesting.”

The nogitsune took a step forward. Stiles held his ground even as his fear started to creep on him. He couldn’t fail, wouldn’t fail. He wouldn’t lose anyone anymore.

He held on.

“The pain,” the nogitsune stated. It walked closer, almost crawled, and grinned. “Hidden inside. Healed, maybe, but the scars linger. They could be cut open. Taste them. Feel them again, like they were fresh-”

“No,” Stiles said. It was a weak protest but it was enough. Because if there was one creature in the entire world that terrified him, more than anything else, it was this one, the one that flayed him open until he decayed inside. Because before he didn’t have a say in his fate.

Now he did.
His end of the bond he shared with Peter washed with everything they held between them. Respect. Irritation. Wonder. Grief. Determination.

Love.

And Stiles pushed back.

His back straightened, and his eyes lit with fire brighter than ever before. Because while the nogitsune was his personal demon-

“You are tied to darkness but no longer bound by it.”

Stiles bared his teeth, entirely wolf-like, at the nogitsune’s statement. Its grin dimmed a notch, twisting in something like disgust.

“A boring, worthless puppet.” The nogitsune turned its nose away from him, spitting as if Stiles was something awful, like years old leftovers.

Which he technically was.

“Maybe,” he said, grinding his teeth. “But this worthless being is the one between you and the rest of us and I’m going to hold the line. You will not touch any of them.”

The nogitsune blew its decay-filled breath at him but Stiles didn’t move.

“We shall see.”

It moved, and Stiles moved with it. When it hit, Stiles blocked. When it reached, Stiles leaned back. When it moved away, Stiles moved in. It was a deadly dance, especially with Stiles reaching Kate’s fallen knife. The nogitsune hissed, enraged, as Stiles cut it with the blade. It couldn’t understand how Stiles was able to read its movements like this. Because, after all, neither had ever been in the other’s head, seeing everything there was to them.

Except, that wasn’t strictly true.

Stiles had spent weeks sharing the driver’s seat with the nogitsune, and then left with the body it had created for him.

Stiles might hate the nogitsune for it, for taking what was rightfully his and created by his parents, for messing with his mind until everything but what it had caused were just behind a veil – but he could admit how it was proving to be extremely useful right now. Silver lining and all that.

“Why won’t you just die?” the nogitsune raged, anger spiking. It ruthlessly threw a kick in Stiles’ direction and, had he not seen it coming, could have broken at least a couple of Stiles’ ribs. He smirked.

He swiped over his runes and disappeared from sight and senses.

The nogitsune blinked rapidly and crouched, snarl playing on its face. The bandages had come loose over its face, revealing what was a scarred and burned mess. There was barely any skin to speak of.

Stiles prowled around the spirit turned flesh before him. It seemed that some instincts the nogitsune had were even higher as the werewolves’. Whereas their audience was confused about his whereabouts – except, it seems, for Peter and maybe the now barely conscious Julia, – the nogitsune was following Stiles movements after a fashion. Its head was tilted, and it turned along with Stiles’
movements – but always a second late.

Stiles struck, quick and true, and Kate's knife found home in the nogitsune’s ribcage. The noise it let out was booming and when Stiles tried to withdraw the knife, the nogitsune grabbed at his still invisible hand and twisted. Stiles kicked forward and was forced to let go. The twist caused a sharp pain to flash through his body and his focus slipped. He fell to the ground with a thud and groaned.

“Stiles!” Peter called his name, worried.

"'m okay!” he mumbled and rolled away, rising to his feet.

“What the hell is he?” Stiles could hear Kevin ask but no one offered him an answer. He searched for the nogitsune and found it-

-reaching for Kate and Julia.

“Don’t you dare!” he yelled and scrambled forward.

He wouldn’t be fast enough-

“Not her, you bastard,” Kate rasped, barely conscious to Stiles’ surprise, and kicked the offending hand away. The nogitsune hissed. Its bandaged hand was burning. It snatched its offending limb away.

“What is that?” it asked, angry at its inability to touch Julia whom Kate was heavily leaning against. Kate’s necklace shone from underneath her shirt. Relief washed over Stiles.

“Something that won’t allow you to touch a hair on either of them,” he said, grinning. Then he was there, shoving Julia towards Peter who reached them as well, and who quickly grabbed her, dragging her away from the fight. The moment they stopped, she vomited, the sudden movement too much. Kate stumbled after them with Stiles keeping guard and managing to gain another two hits on the nogitsune while evading the ones aimed at him.

“What are you?” the nogitsune asked. Its form was trembling. With each Stiles’ successful attack, the fear around the clearing had lessened, and- it was weakening.

They were winning.

“No one of consequence,” Stiles replied. “Just a survivor.”

The nogitsune turned its head, clearly looking for an escape route. Stiles advanced-

“Alexander,” Bobby suddenly piped up. His eyes were wide, and his pupils enlarged. “It’s Alexander.”

Stiles paused in his step, muscles taut, coiled to strike.

“Bobby, this is not the time-” he began but Bobby wasn’t listening. Stiles glanced at him and, no, he was standing far too close to them, to the danger. “Bobby-”

“Nonono, it’s happening, Alexander, it’s happening-”

“Bobby-!”

“What is this?” the nogitsune asked and-
-it sounded fascinated.

Oh dear lord, this was bad.

It ignored Stiles completely, not even mindful of the threat he possessed, and stared at Bobby who was now walking towards it with dream-like determination. Talia was suddenly there, holding him back, but Bobby just- slipped past her hands. She tried again-

Bobby turned to her, eyes glazed.

“September 27th.”

Talia reared back, suddenly pale. Peter’s eyes widened.

“That far-?”

Stiles’ moment of distraction meant losing sight of the nogitsune. It was suddenly out of his reach, closer to Bobby than the rest of them. It reached into the air, mismatched hands beckoning, and-

Stiles had never seen such pleasure on its face.

“Chaos incarnate,” the nogitsune murmured. “The fate and suffering of humankind in flesh. A seer.” It licked the air and moaned. “All the chaos, the strife, the despair, hidden in one fragile body-

“I will have you.”

Stiles’ eyes widened. “No!” he thundered and rushed forward. “You will not touch him!”

“It’s all red,” Bobby mumbled to himself. He didn’t move out of the nogitsune’s path. “Everything is hazy. Death in the air. Happened before, happened again. Fate, unmovable.”

“And who is going to stop me?” the nogitsune laughed. It was an ugly sound, raspy and cutting. “The pack this land holds, that were forced to kiss the ground they stand on? You, who don’t even have a bond with- with him.

“And your loss will be my – our – triumph.”

Stiles yelled. There were no words, just rage, as he pushed all his might at the nogitsune. It stumbled, forced from where it was reaching to trail Bobby’s skin, eating his emotions. Bobby snapped out of it, expression clearing for the barest of moments.

“No!” he screamed, and it was full of desperation and desire that it broke Stiles’ stride.

“Bobby?” he asked, unsure. Bobby didn’t even glance at him, crawling to where the nogitsune was sprawled on the ground.


The nogitsune stared, intrigued, wonder evident by its slacked jaw.

“An us,” it whispered.

“One. One. Two. One,” Bobby didn’t even pause once as he rambled. His breath hitched. “You will take it away, all away, like the promise-”
His voice cleared.

“You will never leave me.”

And then Bobby was on the nogitsune and they both screamed until the clearing was filled with it and the echoes in relentless onslaught. Stiles clapped hands on his ears and his eyes watered. The air shifted, twisted, turned. He could barely see straight-

And then it was over.

Stiles blinked the tears out of his eyes. Kate groaned behind them.

“What the hell was that?” she said, hoarse, and promptly turned around, retching into the same pool Julia had made. She squinted. “Whose breakfast is this?”

“Mine,” Julia said weakly. Kate rolled away.

“Sisters for life,” she said, holding out her fist.

Julia thumped her head against the ground, chuckling in exhaustion, in relief.

“The air is clearing,” she whispered.

And it was.

Stiles had thought that purifying the Nemeton had done its deed but somehow-somehow it was even better now. He shook his head and looked over where Bobby was-

-and he saw two of them.

The nanosecond Stiles was frozen didn’t even register before he was scrambling forward.

“Bobby? Bobby? Finstock, coach?”

“I’m no one’s coach,” the one on the left rasped. The one on the right groaned.

“What did you do to me? What about us?”

“Us, no, we, yes,” the left one – Bobby – said and coughed. He slumped and slurred, “Alexander.”

“Oh, that’s divine,” the nogitsune said. It clasped Bobby’s hand and dragged in air like it was its lifeline. “Oh, oh, oh-so good.”

“Tell them, tell them, tell them-”

“I don’t want to-”

“The lake needs to happen,” Bobby mumbled. “The lake in danger. We need the lake. We need the lake.”

“Oh, fine.”

Stiles found himself looking at the face that wasn’t Bobby’s. It was similar, yes, but not like the mirror image that had caused them so much grief in the past. It was longer, maybe more angular, with hair less wild and eyes in a shade of green, very unlike Bobby’s dark ones.

“Oh, the Argent is attacking the foreign Alpha tonight,” the nogitsune said, bored. “There, I said it.”
“Alexander-”

Stiles paled.

“Yes, yes- oh, that was delicious.”

How could he have forgotten?

“Talia,” he asked shakily, compartmentalising. Talia, who was still in wary battle mode, cocked her head.

“The guests you have over… is one of their names’ Deucalion?”

***

They ran.

Stiles was bundled up on Peter’s back while Talia and her wolves ran with her, Kate barely clinging to her shoulders. Kevin and Lena were already shifted, sharp teeth gleaming in the falling sun. Samantha had volunteered to stay behind, face red in shame, to watch over the mess that was Bobby and the nogitsune, and Deaton was helping out Julia who wasn’t really recovered from the onslaught of power.

Kate gasped for breath and looked slightly green as Talia jumped over a root.

“You should have stayed behind,” Stiles said, loud enough for his voice to carry. Kate scoffed, even if she still looked slightly green.

“Yeah right!”

“You have a concussion!”

“You are not a doctor!”

“You hit your head!”

“Still no licence!”

“Kate,” Stiles started but Kate interrupted him before he could continue.

“It’s Gerard,” she said behind gritted teeth, her face pale but determined.

And that said it all, didn’t it?

“You really think he’s going after Deuc?” Talia asked. The moment Stiles had realised what Bobby was talking about, he and Peter were already taking their leave. Kate had quickly grabbed onto them and refused to let go until Talia had snatched her up and then they were off with everyone still able – physically or emotionally.

“We knew Gerard was planning something,” Stiles revealed. “Last time we were here, we were keeping low profile and stayed at the Argents-”

“What?!?” Talia demanded.

“-and there were clearly things amiss. Kate said it was possible that he murdered his own wife.”
“The last matriarch,” Kate added. Her breaths were a little less laboured right now. “And my mother. He gave me her pendant and basically admitted it.”

“But not in as many words?” Talia asked sharply. Stiles bobbed his head.

“Yes,” Peter answered instead. “He’s working either alone or with a select group of loyalists. The rest of the main family, namely Kate’s brother’s family, are on our side.”

“What have you dragged yourself into, Peter?” Talia asked but it sounded more like a rhetorical question than anything else. Then she added, “how do you even know these things?”

“Connections,” Stiles said. It was sort of true, even. His heart wouldn’t reveal it as the half-truth as it was. “You must have heard of us by now. The Quartet.”

Kevin barked a laugh. “That’s you?” He sounded like he didn’t believe them.

Unlike him though, Talia’s eyes narrowed.

“I should have known,” she said. Kevin choked.

“You can’t be serious!”

“Kev, think,” Lena said. She avoided the tree in her path and with a powerful kick was back at their side. “We are the enforcers. Think.”

Kate snickered, then looked green again when Talia jostled her. Stiles couldn’t say if it was on purpose or not.

“When you said pack Steele, I should have known. Despite Alpha Steele’s words, your reputation is surprisingly… fair.”

“Well, she wasn’t as generous host as she could have been. Negative out of ten, would not recommend.” But Stiles’ mind was elsewhere. He would really like to know what rumours were spread about them. First Shannon, then Chris…

“Are you rude just to packs then?”

Stiles blinked. Talia quirked her brows at him – still in her unshifted form – so it was even somewhat effective.

“Sorry, what? You were the one doubting us!” he argued. Peter shook him a little, and Stiles bit his tongue. “We were cordial enough before you arrived,” he said instead. “You had already decided we were the bad guys. Come to think of it, your whole pack was. I mean, Peter was hitchhiking, and we just took him in. We weren’t at fault with whatever was going on behind the scenes!”

Talia looked like she had swallowed something very sour.

“We were… both at fault then,” she said haltingly.

“Let’s hash things out later, yeah?” Stiles suggested, to which Talia readily agreed. Moving on, he asked the question that had been bothering him since they rushed off. “What was all that talk about that Alexander guy anyway? I don’t think I’ve ever heard of him.”

“I can’t say that either,” Peter said. Stiles frowned. If even Peter hadn’t heard of him…

“There are a few residents with that name,” Talia suggested. “One even works in the mayor’s
office.”

“What’s his last name?”

“Travis.”

Stiles scrunched up his nose. “Doesn’t sound familiar either,” he admitted. He tilted his head at Peter who just shook his head.

“I- maybe-” Kate pursed her lips.

“Gerard?” Stiles asked. Wouldn’t surprise him, considering.

“Maybe.” Kate frowned. “There was talk- my mother told me about our history and, naturally, recent history as well. Gerard was born to the Ridgewells mainline, but he had a brother too. Half-brother, I mean.”

“I didn’t know that,” Stiles said. The slightest trace of a smile hinted on Kate’s face.

“No one does. He was illegitimate, the brother. Born to a distant Argent cousin.”

“Ah.” Hunter politics. Yay. “Why is he important now?”

Kate shrugged but it could have just been the bouncy ride. “I’m not sure if he is. But, his name was Alexander. All I know of him is that he died way before I was born. And that he’s part of the reason why the Argents and the Ridgewells thought better to align themselves in a more… legitimate way.”

“That could be it,” Stiles mused. “If only because of his relationship with Gerard.”

“Would make sense,” Peter said. There was something in his tone that caught Stiles’ ear. “Talia.”

Talia glanced at him before jumping over a bush. Kate gripped at her tightly. She looked like she had started chanting under her breath.

“Yes?”

“I know that none of us expected the crash to happen.”

Talia’s mouth twisted. “Yes?”

“And I know we all know why you became the alpha and not someone else.” Peter side-eyed Lena, who nodded once sharply. Peter squeezed Stiles’ leg. “For those that don’t, the story goes that our parents and our uncle Matthew – that’s Matt’s father, don’t let the name confuse you – were attacked by hunters some years ago. My father transferred his alpha spark to Talia and told her to run as not to weaken our pack. At the time the popular way to destroy a pack was to take the alpha hostage while slaughter the rest.”

“You were with them?” Stiles said. This was definitely something he hadn’t expected. He grimaced. “Sorry. I mean, I’m sorry for your loss.”

Talia resembled stone, albeit one that could move. “It’s fine.”

“What I don’t understand is why, Talia?” Peter turned to his sister. “Why? I could have helped you.”

“You were a child, Peter,” Talia said, tone stiff and tired. “Still in high school, and no matter what you think that means, you weren’t ready to take on the world.”
Peter frowned. "I'd like to think I know myself better, thank you very much."

"I am not arguing with you about this," she said, and then sighed. Her voice grew smaller but despite the rush of the wind and rustle of the leaves, it could be heard crystal clear.

"Our father may have told me to run… but it was our mother whose last words to me were to take care of you."

"I-" Peter's words died out, silenced in shock. "I didn’t know."

Talia glanced at him before turning back again.

"I didn’t tell you. You would have felt guilty."

"Talia-"

"Don’t," Talia cut in sharply. "Maybe I could have done things differently, I can agree to that. But I will not apologise."

And then, added softer, "and I understand if you want to stay with those you love. Mind, I don’t agree – you are not safe – but I won’t force you to stay."

Peter was quiet. "Thank you," he answered, voice equally soft.

"But if you are in trouble, I expect a call post-haste."

Peter snorted. "As if."

Talia gave him a glare which only caused Peter to flash a grin. Her shoulders loosened ever so little.

"Your car is fixed, by the way."

Stiles had remained silent during the exchange, but something tickled his mind at that. "Didn’t you say she crashed your car?" he asked.

"I crashed your car?" Talia looked suddenly aghast. "You crashed it into me."

"You were in my way," Peter defended himself but then snorted. "It was clearly your fault."

Talia looked like she wanted to say something but seemingly decided to just shake her head ruefully, like she was missing him while he was still there.

"He won’t come to any harm," Stiles said. He hugged Peter tighter with his arms. "I’ll promise you that."

Talia gave him a look, knowing and far too old for the thirty-something she was.

"No, you won’t."

Her face suddenly shifted, and she looked more terrifying than Stiles had ever seen her.

"We are here."

***

The shed seemed to be in a state of eternal disrepair. The walls looked just as grimy and old as ever, despite how Stiles had expected it to be in a better condition than twenty years in future. Why…
“…people keep meeting in such a place is mystery,” he muttered.

They had stopped at a safe distance, creeping closer instead of storming in and perhaps causing chaos.

“Remote location, awful condition, less likely that people interrupt,” Peter whispered back. He was steadying Kate who was still a little wobbly on her feet.

“I knew that,” Stiles said. “It was a rhetorical question.”

“Naturally.”

Stiles pouted.

“I can’t hear much,” Lena said, hairless brows furrowed. “I can’t make out any heartbeats either.”

“Or smell,” Kevin added. He attempted to inch closer to the treeline, but Talia lifted her hand to stall him. Her eyes narrowed in concentration.

“This is very disconcerting,” she muttered in thought.

Stiles agreed. “I wouldn’t be surprised if Gerard had taken precautions.”

Kate grimaced.

“There’s this hunting procedure,” she said, “where sometimes a druid is… convinced to help them out. Or, even less often, a hunter learns them themselves but that’s… frowned upon.”

“So, they did what, a similar thing to how we hid Peter?” Stiles asked. Kate shrugged.

“Maybe, I don’t know.”

Peter looked serious. “Did we ever remove the runes?”

Stiles’ swore his heart stopped for a minute. “I don’t think we did,” he said slowly. “Do you think…?”

“That they might have found them?” Peter’s lips formed a thin line. “Maybe.”

“But didn’t you say they were unnoticeable?” Kate asked.

Stiles ran a hand through his hair. “We did make them that,” he agreed. “But…”

“…That’s no guarantee,” Peter ended grimly.

“And we left in a hurry. Because of me,” Kate said. Her tone lowered. “Sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” Stiles said. He sighed. “If it’s anyone’s, it’s-”

“If you say yours, I’ll hit you,” Peter said. “Besides, do you really think we could have pranced around and removed them without anyone noticing? You and Julia barely managed to add them in the first place.”

“And you weren’t throwing blame around, yeah?”

Peter scoffed. “You did them for me. Do you really think I’ll admit to any?”
“But you weren’t-” Stiles blinked. “I see what you did there. I admit it, you won this round.”

Peter flashed him a smirk. “Of course I did.”

“Would somebody be kind and explain this to us too?” Kevin asked, irritated.

“We hid Peter by using runes that disrupt senses the last time we were here,” Stiles said.

“The same way you disappeared during your fight?”

“Yes,” Stiles admitted.

“But wouldn’t Alpha Blackwood know that his senses were being messed with?” Lena asked.

“Not necessarily,” Kate said. She gestured at the treeline. “Just put them where the trees end, and you will think you just didn’t hear them. Far enough from the hunters to think you just missed them with all the background noise.”

Sometimes Stiles was still surprised how sharp Kate was, making connections like that.

“Hypocrites,” Kevin mumbled.

“But magic users are ‘human’,” she said, using air quotes. “So they have different criteria. Namely, you can use them to your own ends.” She paused. “And maybe ask first.”

“Sometimes,” Stiles added. Kate shrugged but didn’t deny it.

“Anything on what we can expect inside?” Talia interrupted. “I’m sure that the dynamics are important, but I would like to know about the immediate threat.”

“Of course,” Kate said quickly. “Gerard is especially proficient in firearms of all kind, and he’s decent with martial arts too but I think you have that covered. He favours his shotgun, often armed with bullets filled with wolfsbane.”

“And his company?”

“He has a few trusted men; some are my former ‘mentors’, and I use that term lightly. They are reasonably skilled, but none are known with other tricks than using poisons against supernatural… and protective runes, ones etched onto jewellery or things like that.” She dug out her own pendant. “Like this one but probably weaker.”

Talia took a step closer and examined it. “I see. Thank you,” she said.

Kate inclined her head and hid her necklace again.

“What about Deucalion?” Stiles asked.

“He was here with a few of his betas and his emissary, a druid,” Talia replied. “Someone had killed wolves from Alpha Ennis’ pack. The tracks led towards our territory. Deucalion came here investigate at Ennis’ request.”

“Right,” Stiles said. He squared his shoulders. “Whatever the case, we are stopping anything untoward from happening. We don’t want any *innocent* blood spilled. Clear?”

The answers came in varied forms of affirmations.
“Will they know if we approach?” Lena asked from Kate. She shrugged helplessly.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’m not even sure if the runes are being used. It’s likely but- I’m not… familiar enough with Gerard to make an educated guess of what his strategy here is.”

But Stiles, on the other hand, was.

“He’s gone in with plans A, B, and C, with B and C making sure A is fulfilled,” he said. “And for some reason, he has decided to target Deucalion.”

“But it was Alpha Ennis’ pack that was attacked,” Lena pointed out.

And how could Stiles explain that?

“Because Ennis’ pack isn’t strong enough to challenge the Argents over it,” Peter said, coming to his aid. “But his alliance with Deucalion is relatively well-known.”

“He was probably counting on that,” Stiles agreed. “And if it happened that it was Ennis who came, he could just wipe him and his pack out, and Deucalion would come after him personally.”

Kate wiped her face with the hem of her shirt.

“I don’t want to think we are that corrupted,” she said.

Stiles pulled her against him in a one-armed hug. “Not all of you are.”

“I know that,” she snapped, and then sighed. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“We should approach from different sides,” Talia said. “I told Deuc of this place when he asked for a remote spot. The shed has two entrances. I want Lena and Peter with Stiles, Kevin and Argent with me.”

“Defend the humans?” Stiles asked, brows raised.

“Argent is hurt, and I can cover her better than you.”

“That’s fair,” Kate said. The hint of her smile was lacking in humour. “You want to cover your bases.”

Stiles’ eyes narrowed. “Kate is not a bargaining chip.”

“No,” Talia agreed. “But it will look that way.”

And-

Stiles suddenly realised why Talia and Peter were siblings indeed.

“Fine,” he said. Better Lena than Kevin with them, if they were to attack. She was more adaptable- and Talia probably counted on that too. One team to attack, one to defend, and she had placed herself to defend their weakest link.

“Fine,” he repeated. “You go in through the main door?”

“We move at the same time.”
“Cool.”

Stiles lifted his hand for a shake. Talia stared at it for a brief moment before following his example.

They parted ways.

“See you on the other side.”

***

This happened way too early, Stiles thought as they crept towards the back. It set him on edge. He could barely recall the details of the blinding of Deucalion but what he did know was that it happened when Derek was in middle school – and he was still clearly in elementary school.

Was it because Stiles was messing with all their affairs? Had he accidentally sped up the timeline?

What was happening?

“Things don’t add up,” Peter murmured.

“You too?” Stiles asked. Peter kept his eyes on the door they were approaching but the way he slowly shifted said it all.

“I don’t think it’s just the runes she was talking about,” Lena whispered. Her eyes shone gold. “We are barely a few feet from the door and I still can’t discern how many are inside.”

“Could it be Deucalion’s emissary?” Peter asked. Lena lifted her shoulders before leaning against the wall.

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe the runes were activated after they entered?” Stiles suggested but even he doubted his words. “That way they could do it without warning Deucalion.”

“But wouldn’t he sense it?” Lena questioned and, yeah, that’s what he had been thinking about. “It can’t be just one way, blocking the world.” She tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “It doesn’t make sense. Something is off, very off.”

Lena pulled at the door lightly. She frowned and pulled again with more force. The door cracked, and she backed away quickly.

“Something’s blocking the way in.”

Stiles felt something in the air and, seeing that Peter and Lena stiffened, they felt it too.

“Deuc!”

Talia’s scream caused Peter to grab the other door, and together they pulled them open, Lena even wrenching the other off its hinges. They rushed inside, only to be washed over by the stench of blood.

Deucalion was kneeling, surrounded by bodies. By the strangely twisted features and missing weaponry Stiles concluded that they were his pack. The bodies were all slashed up and bloody, half-healed wounds still leaking like there was no tomorrow.

With the sightless eyes in full view, for them, there was none.
Gerard was nowhere to be seen.

“Deuc!” Talia said again, moving towards the wounded alpha. Deucalion snarled at her, spitting blood, and she took a quick step back to not be in his range.

“What did they do to you?” she asked, horrified.

“Talia,” Deucalion rasped. He stood up slowly, the body of a man falling from his lap. The man was missing an arm and one eye, skull visible from where hair and skin had been pulled off. “Talia.”

“Yes?” she said, hand lifting as she involuntarily reached towards him. She cut herself off, forcibly pulling her arm back.

“Talia.”

And then he was on her, clawing where he could reach. Talia yelled.

“You did this to me!” Deucalion growled and bit her on the arm. Kevin was suddenly there, pulling him off, but it took mere two seconds for Deucalion to throw him off and into the wall. The shed groaned under the abuse.

“You did this to me,” he repeated, and then Stiles saw it. The blood trail on his cheeks and the healing wounds.

He was just as blind as the rest of his pack, only breathing.

“You set me up!” Deucalion roared. Talia snarled back, and this time she was ready when Deucalion reached for her. They tumbled to the ground and for a moment Stiles could only see claws glint in the fading sunlight. However, it was clear that Deucalion had the upper hand. He used Talia’s momentum against her, forcing her to the ground, one hand closing on her throat and body focused on keeping her down.

Peter yelled, throwing himself in, Lena not far behind. Kevin, having recovered from his hit, was advancing as well but forced himself to stay away due to the chaos. He kept a close eye on them, seeking opportunity to attack.

Stiles rushed forward to where Kate was leaning against the wall. She was pale, pallor sickly, as she stared at the bodies on the ground.

“Did father do this?” she asked, sounding lost. Stiles opened his mouth but chose to swallow the words that tried to slip out.

He had known what Gerard was capable off; Kate had been too.

But it was only him who had seen it in person.

“We’ll get him,” he only said. He turned around to see Deucalion forced back, Lena holding Talia up while she held an arm… over her sliced stomach. Jesus.

The mad glint in Deucalion’s sightless eyes were directed at them though – or Kate in particular.

“I knew it,” he said, and spat out blood. The scratches and cuts Talia had left on him were bleeding sluggishly but the others were already healing as they stood in standstill. “I knew it. That’s an Argent, I can smell it. You did this to us. You killed them.”

“You killed them yourself,” Talia growled even as she tried to keep her intestines in. “They were
“You killed them,” Deucalion repeated, but he was staring straight at Kate. “Murderer. Murderer. You killed them.”

Kate watched, eyes wide, as Deucalion tried to force himself through the wall made of Hales. She was trembling under Stiles’ arms.

He snapped.

“She did nothing!” he yelled. “Neither of them! It was all Gerard! We were only coming to help you!”

“I will tell them,” Deucalion continued, like he didn’t even hear Stiles. “Tell them all. I’ll get my revenge, I’ll kill every single one you, all of you hunter lovers, the Argents and especially that bitch of his!”

“Deuc!” Talia raised her voice above his. “Listen to yourself!”

“Every single one of you!” Deucalion swore, dark and full of promise. He kept backing away, kicking away the only body in his way that wasn’t even partially shifted, the one he had been holding. It had to be the emissary, Stiles realised.

Kevin darted up, but he was no match for the alpha who had absorbed all that power from his dead betas. He found himself flung back again. Deucalion used the chance to rush forward but Peter was before him.

Stiles yelled as Deucalion brought down his claws. The crazed alpha faltered, slashing air. Peter snarled, eyes glowing, and rammed into Deucalion. He quickly traced his steps, returning to a safe distance.

“What witchcraft is this?!” he growled. “The same as before! What did you do to me?!”

“What?” Stiles frowned.

“Traitors, all of you. I'll get you, I'll get all of you! Talia!”

Talia’s eyes shone red, face twisted in what could only be pain.

“Traitor,” Deucalion snarled, one last time, before he turned around and ran. Kevin and Peter rushed after him. Talia lifted her head and howled. It echoed in the shed, past the open doors.

In the distance, another answered.

“What the hell happened here?” Kate asked. Her body convulsed. She quickly turned her head and was violently sick on the floor. Only bile dribbled from her mouth. Stiles twisted her in his grip, trying in vain to stop her hair from being stained in it.

“I don’t know,” he answered. He met Talia’s gaze and could only shake his head.

“I honestly have no idea.”

Chapter End Notes
:(

Find me on tumblr.
In which everything is a mess, but family is not always the worst

Chapter Notes

Here I was, planning for the least awful misery to inflict on you lot (cliffhangers, I'm talking about cliffhangers), until I found myself writing scenes that demanded to be written. Well. If anyone I scared away last time (saw the drop in numbers, LOL, am I that awful?) wants to come back, here's your chance!

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Talia’s howl was answered relatively quickly. Marcus and Laura arrived faster than anyone else, with Lena’s children following closely behind. Laura paled the moment she stepped inside the shed, a hand rising to block the stench of what had to be the death itself.

“Oh my god,” she said weakly. “Oh my god. Mom?”

Talia rose carefully, holding her still knitting together stomach, and smiled tightly. “We are alright, Laura. None of us is… gone,” she said. Marcus was immediately at her side, placing a hand on her shoulder. Black lines made their way up his arm and Talia slumped ever so slightly.

“Thank you, love.”

“Always.”

As he took in the arrivals, Stiles noted absently that the wound looked to be healing quicker as the pain lessened. Perhaps the proximity-

“I don’t see the… Felicity or the other woman with you,” he said. “Sorry, I forgot her name. Matt’s mother?”

“Felicity and Willow stayed back with Dave to watch over the kids,” Marcus answered gruffly, still leeching Talia’s pain from her. The name tickled Stiles’ memory and he realised that had to be the grandfather. “I sent Rick, Matt and Milly to where Samantha howled.”

Milly? Stiles racked his memory. The only woman still unaccounted was… the twins’ mother. He shook his head. Unimportant. He searched for Peter through their bond and could only find pain and frustration at his end. It was also steadily coming closer.

“Deucalion got away,” he said. He turned to Talia. “I’m sorry.”

She grimaced. “You couldn’t have known.”

But he did, he thought, but didn’t say out loud. Kate pushed against him and he let her go as gently as he could. She sat down to the ground, breathing heavily.

“This day sucks,” she whined.

Laura shuffled on her feet like she wanted to come closer but couldn’t. “You look like shit,” she said
instead. Kate glanced at her darkly.

“Fuck off,” she said.

Elsa crouched by the bodies, checking them all over. “These were inflicted by an alpha,” she said, grim expression clouding her face. “Mostly. One of them has a half-healed bullet wound.”

“We are going to have to burn the bodies,” Marcus said.

Laura gagged, paling further.

Stiles walked around the shed carefully. He couldn’t see what had blocked their way before. His eyes narrowed as he took in the scene. Deucalion had been basically in the middle of the shed, the bodies of his pack littered around him but more on the left side, towards the door they had come from. That meant the main entrance had been…

He stalked over, ignoring the ruckus around him. He noticed Lena’s third child kneeling on the ground. He met Stiles’ gaze as he neared him.

“Find any tracks?” Stiles asked. The wolf inclined his head.

“They lead in and out,” he said. “Light, measured.”

“Hunters,” Stiles agreed. “You, uh-”

“Jared.”

“Jared,” Stiles repeated, trying to commit the name to memory. “Can you sense anything from them?”

Jared turned back, lightly tracing a footprint. He rumbled thoughtfully, crawled and hopped until he reached the door way. Stiles followed him, avoiding messing the tracks.

“One set of the prints is smaller than the others,” Jared said, pointing one dent out. “Either a child or-”

“A woman,” Stiles ended, thinking back to Deucalion’s words. “Has to be a woman.”

Jared sent him a look but nodded. “Most likely.”

“How many altogether?”

“Six.”

“Five men and a woman,” Stiles mumbled. It said nothing, of course, about how many were on Gerard’s side in total. However, if he only took five people with him…

He might have lackeys but the five were probably the most loyal of the lot.

“Kate,” Stiles asked. “How many mentors did you have again before me?”

“Four,” she answered. Her hand was tangled in the mess that was her hair. “Callahan, Evan, Darius and Dick.”

Stiles snorted. Dick. “All were men, weren’t they?”
“Yeah.”

“These are probably them then,” he said. “And one extra. Were there any women you could claim were super loyal to him?”

“Are you saying this was done by the Argents?” Jared asked in disbelief. Stiles nodded, attention on Kate.

“Orchestrated by them,” he said and waved his hand dismissively. “No doubt about it.”

Kate frowned in thought. “Well, there is Sandra. She followed me around last time we were here. She didn’t seem like his biggest fan, but I could be wrong. The rest too, women I mean, were more of my mother’s hunters than his. I don’t know, some could have converted.”

“You make it sound like you are part of a cult,” Laura said. She tried for levity but it fell flat when she still looked sick and avoided watching the bodies. When Elsa rose to drag her out, though, she refused to move.

“You are the ones who live in the middle of a forest, away from civilisation,” Kate replied. Laura shrugged. “At least we are not spending gas to go for a run. Think of the environment.”

“So… a hippie cult.”

“Kate?” Stiles asked. Kate hugged her legs, hair deemed a lost cause.

“I honestly don’t know.”

Stiles bent his neck backwards, staring at the ceiling. “This blows.”

“Yeah,” Kate said, just as glum.

That was the moment Peter and Kevin jogged back into the shed, clothes torn, and slowly healing wounds painted with blood on skin.

“He got away,” Peter said. “Too hyped up on power to stop.”

Kevin let out a growl of annoyance but didn’t contradict him. “He was running towards the west, fast. Probably out of the territory by now even.”

“No one can run that fast,” Elsa scoffed, brows furrowed. Kevin snorted.

“You didn’t see him. He was like an animal.”

“Kevin,” Talia said sharply. Kevin shrugged, even if his head dropped.

“It’s the truth.”

“Unfortunately, I have to agree,” Peter said. “I don’t want to, but I do. You didn’t see him, Talia. He lost words soon after we started chasing him. He might be going feral.”

“No,” Laura said, horrified. “You have to be lying.”

“He could collect himself,” Peter said, glancing at Stiles, “but he won’t be the same person he was yesterday.”
Talia nodded. There were lines on her forehead that weren’t there before.

“Did you find anything?” she asked. She looked around, as if she wasn’t directing her question to anyone in particular.

Elsa – a nurse, apparently, when questioned – launched into describing her findings. There were signs of mild poisoning, but it wasn’t life threatening, probably just wolfsbane residue in the air. The half-healed bullet looked like it was made by a shotgun – Kate scowled at that – and there were signs as if some had been clawing at something before they died. There was nothing underneath the nails to confirm that, but the state of the fingers and malformed claws claimed so.

“Could it be magic?” Stiles asked. “Some sort of a barrier.”

Or a trap.

Deucalion’s words plagued him.

Elsa nodded. “That would make sense.”

Stiles closed his eyes and felt for Julia. She was approaching fast, werewolf fast. She, others too, were probably carried to their location.

“We’ll have our experts here soon enough.”

Talia glanced at him, then Peter, before nodding slowly.

“Anything else?”

“The tracks lead inside and outside from the main door,” Jared said.

“And only inside from the backdoor,” Peter added. “Not counting ours, of course.”

“Of course.”

Stiles chimed in on it, pointing out possible culprits despite Kate’s doubts. They were the people Gerard offered his only daughter to, just before he was going to swipe her for himself. If that didn’t scream guilty, he didn’t know what did.

And even if they weren’t, at least it gave them people to start with.

Stiles was pretty sure his hunch was right though.

Julia nudged them. She sent a feeling of weariness and confusion that caught Stiles’ attention. He walked outside, only to see wolves run from the forest with the humans and – Stiles wrinkled his nose – the nogitsune on their backs.

The look on Matt’s face was all but happy as he dumped the leech on the ground and stalked inside. It immediately gravitated towards Rick who let Bobby slide off his back much more gently.

“Are you all right?” Stiles asked. He directed his question at Julia even if he eyed Bobby and his new weird twin critically.

“Nothing happened.” Julia said as Milly set her down. She stumbled a little but managed to stay upright. “It’s a bit… weird though. I realised that Bobby hasn’t drunk any… substances… since last night and he’s… well…”
Stiles kept his eyes on Bobby as the nogitsune draped itself on him again. It almost looked a little... drunk. Bobby, on the other hand-

“This place needs to go,” he said, staring at the shed. “If it stands, misery will find its place here. Tainted, it has been. More than before.”

He turned to Stiles and grinned.

“Howdy, bro! How’s it hanging?”

He seemed almost sane.

Stiles blinked slowly.

“How am I? How are you?” he asked incredulously. Bobby boomed a laugh that startled a few birds from the nearby branches.

“I haven’t felt this good since before I was fourteen!” Bobby exclaimed. He threw a hand over the nogitsune’s shoulders and squeezed. “All because of my shadow here!”

“You planned this?”

Stiles jumped as Peter’s voice came from right by him. Peter flashed him a quick grin before going back to watch Bobby and the nogitsune.

Bobby shrugged. “Might have.”

Peter’s brows twitched. “Is that why you were so against forming bonds with us?”

Stiles’ gaze flickered back to Bobby.

“Is that true?”

Bobby shrugged again.

“I would have drowned you in the storm inside me,” he merely said. “I needed a void to suck the excess out of me, someone to... tip the balance back to the safe middle ground when the visions would come. If that someone also manages to catch my rambles, well, I count that as lucky.”

Stiles couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“And that’s why you went for the nogitsune?” he asked, questioning Bobby’s sanity for the nth time. The least trustworthy being in the world, acting as an interpreter? A balance? As if to enforce Stiles’ doubts, the nogitsune hummed, “delicious,” and rubbed its cheek on Bobby’s arm.

“There are other entities that are capable of such deeds,” Bobby answered serenely. “Most have died from this world, and seers with them. I looked, saw. But the nogitsune, they are tricksters, void, still here even if rare on this plane. Sort of kin.

“It was either this or death. And I chose this.”

Stiles stared. He couldn’t help it. To choose a nogitsune-

He just couldn’t understand. He would rather die than be possessed like he had been.

The smallest of smiles spread on Bobby’s face. “Now, don’t be like that,” he said like he had heard
Stiles’ thoughts. “I’ll never be alone now. He’s even wearing my brother’s face. It’s… sort of nice, being around him. He was never listed as dead, you know? Jerry’s just missing. Now he’s back. Aren’t you?”

The nogitsune just nodded, eyes glazed.

“Oh yeah,” Bobby said, as if he hadn’t just spouted the most bullshit Stiles had ever heard. “He’s a little high now. It’s kind of the trade.”

Yep, bullshit. All of it.

Stiles couldn’t contest it though, especially with Bobby being… sane. Saner than he had ever seen him before.

It was blowing his mind.

“He’s sooooo confused,” the nogitsune said, eyes slitting open and focusing on Stiles minutely. “It’s funny. He’s funny. I wanna keep ‘im. Even if lef’overs.”

“I need a drink,” Stiles whimpered.

“Will you… stay like this then?” Peter asked. Bobby spread his arms, jostling the nogitsune. It pouted.

“They’ll never go away,” he said. “But at least now I know I won’t die before I hit thirty. It was always awfully likely. Like, happened in at least 80 percent of the visions. Now it’s down to 30!” he cheered.

“Also, you need me for the lake. Won’t be your pack, no,” the nogitsune hissed as Bobby said this, curling around even more possessively, “but I’ll be there. Because lake. Let’s fist!”

“What?”

Bobby stuck out his fist.

“Fisting!” he said cheerfully.

Stiles stared at it. “That’s a fist bump.”

“Fisting!”

“Oh my god.”

“It… does seem to be good for him,” Julia said quietly. Her gaze flickered on the nogitsune before settling on Stiles’. She added quietly, “at least for now.”

At least for now.

Stiles inclined his head.

They would have to look into it. Just in case.

Because he didn’t trust the nogitsune as far as he could throw it.

Stiles and his pack followed Deaton and Talia’s betas inside. Julia stiffened then, turning her head in alarm.
“There are traces of something very dark in here,” she whispered, horrified. Stiles sighed. Bobby's words made more sense now. Because of course there was. Life just couldn’t be simple.

“We are looking for similar runes that we used on the Argent house,” he said grimly.

Julia’s hand rose over her mouth. “No,” she said. Talia looked up at them before turning back to where she was pointing at the walls, Deaton nodding along. He wandered to the nearest one, looking at it with that infuriatingly calm look of his.

“Unfortunately, yes. Do you think you could find where they might be? The wolves—” Stiles looked around, but everyone seemed to be scratching their heads “—don’t seem to have such luck.”

“I can try,” she said, determined despite looking ill again. Stiles felt a spike of regret at forcing her into another hot spot of corruption so soon. Head held high, Julia walked to the opposing wall, closing her eyes and fingertips brushing the wood. She walked one tiny step at a time, minutes crawling, until she finally stopped. She opened her eyes.

“Here’s one.”

The beta that had carried Julia – Milly, her name’s Milly – jogged to her, acting as a mark. Julia flashed her a quick grin before doing the same for the three other walls. Deaton watched her move, fascinated.

“Beautiful,” he admired, unconsciously walking closer to her to see her work.

Stiles wasn’t sure if he was referring to Julia or her talent. He sure hoped it was for the latter because otherwise he would have to punch him.

Hard.

Peter snickered next to him and Talia sent him a bewildered look. Stiles forced the flush down that threatened to crawl up his neck.

Fuck, he hated when that happened.

In less than fifteen minutes all the walls had someone acting as a mark. Julia and Deaton were bent over one of them, mumbling and pointing at the runes. Elsa looked downright confused standing next to them.

Stiles went to the one where Peter was standing. He pressed his hand against the wall, trying to feel out the magic.

Nothing.

“I can’t sense it,” he said, tilting his head and squinting his eyes. “I thought I would but… no. I can’t. There’s just nothing there.”

“Hmm,” Peter hummed, considering. “Is it because the power’s gone?”

“Could be,” Stiles agreed. “I’m not all that big on sensing but the wendigos, telluric currents… even I could feel those.”

“And Julia’s desperate call for help.”

“Alive magic,” he said, mouth forming an ‘o’. “Makes sense.”
“With your gift always in motion…”

“Yeah.”

Kate pulled herself up from the ground where Laura had slumped in solidarity, still covering her nose, and wandered over to them.

“What’s up?”

Stiles gestured at the runes. “Just looking at these. Can’t sense them like Julia.”

“She’s a badass,” Kate said matter-of-factly and, well, Stiles couldn’t disagree. “And weren’t runes and rituals kind of like her thing?”

“Mm-hm.” Stiles tapped the wall. The runes were kind of faded. He wondered if… He reached over and touched one of them, the one that looked most familiar to him.

Peter twitched next to him and more than one of the wolves cried out in confusion.

“Stiles!” Julia yelled from across the room. Stiles winced.

“Sorry!” he hollered back, taking back his hand. The rune continued to glow but, with him withdrawing his magic, it started fading again.

Kate let out a startled gasp.

“That handwriting… that’s Shannon’s!”

Stiles twirled around to completely face her.

“You’re kidding me,” Stiles said. Kate shook her head, dazed.

“I wish,” she said, leaning closer. "I know her handwriting even better than my own, with all the letters she used to send us.”

“But runes?”

“She liked to draw, okay?”

Stiles bit his tongue. He inhaled in and out, slowly, deep, and asked, “Shannon has magic?”

Kate stared at the still faintly glowing rune. Stiles lit the rest of them up, ignoring the yelps from the wolves. Kate rested her hand on them, tracing the lines.

“I don’t know,” she answered softly.

“Didn’t you say it was frowned upon? Is the Tribune working with Gerard?” Stiles asked but immediately added, “no way. There’s no way that’s true.”

Despite the genocidal attitude in twenty years, they couldn’t change in a matter of months, especially since the Nemeton had been purified. They wouldn’t come down on one specific pack because of one clan, it wouldn’t make any sense.

Stiles' brows knitted together. “Has she gone rogue?”

“But why?” Kate asked. There was an edge to her tone. “We told her about Gerard.
“There’s no way she would do this!”

“Are you sure?” Stiles asked, touching her shoulder. “Are you absolutely sure?”

“Don’t look at me like that!” Kate snapped. “With everything going nuts, of course I’m not sure! But it’s Shannon, Stiles! I can believe that from Gerard,” she spat out, “but not from her, no way!”

Stiles sucked in his lips.

“There was once a guy I knew,” he said slowly. “Who put poison in a man’s medicine and almost killed him. The medicine was filled with wolfsbane and the man, with the help of the guy, forced a wolf to give him the bite. He was a bad man, of course, but the guy was someone whom I couldn’t believe had done it. He wasn’t like that. I was the one with all these schemes – not that I’d have done most of them, I like to think – but not him. He believed the best in others. But he still did it.”

Stiles sighed. He loved Scott, but it wasn’t that the guy was always an angel. Neither was Stiles but-

“He apologised years later to the wolf. He became a better person, grew up from the stupid teen he had been, that we both were. But he still did it.”

He met Kate’s eyes.

“You don’t know what goes inside people’s heads, especially when cornered,” he said seriously. “No matter how well you think you know them. Even with our bonds we get a whiff and no more. I’m not trying to be mean but are you absolutely sure Shannon wouldn’t support Gerard?”

He paused, memory tickling the back of his mind, and then added softly, “even when she admitted it?”

Kate scowled hard, the bond between them flashing in anger, but she closed her eyes. She rolled her shoulders and leaned forward.

“I can’t be certain,” she said finally. “Yes, she said she’d follow him – for now – but,” her eyes flew open, “but Shannon isn’t like that. She’s… Shannon is like a rock, you know? You can chip pieces off of it but in the end you’ll only be left with the pieces and no soft centre, with something dead. I can’t believe she was manipulated into anything!”

Kate looked like she had swallowed a lemon. “Unless…”

“Yes?”

“Did- Shannon- didn’t she say something about Gerard finding evidence on mom’s murderer?”

Stiles’ eyes widened. “You think he framed Deucalion?”

“It would make sense!” Kate said, and hastily added, “imagine! Alexander died before I was born. An Argent. What if Deucalion was the cause of that death? Then suddenly someone killed my mom, another Argent.”

“Two is a coincidence,” Stiles breathed. “Or was her death already past the third?”

Kate spread her arms.

“Deucalion was once involved in a scuffle with a group of hunters, led by an Argent,” Talia said. They turned around to face her. She sat on her haunches, now mostly healed, but with Marcus refusing to move away from her. They were both crowding Laura who was leaning against them,
back turned towards the dead bodies.

Everyone in the shed were silent as they listened to her.

“They got out mostly unscathed, both sides, but it was done nearby enough that it shook our treaty with the hunters. It was years ago though, back in the 70s, when Deuc first came overseas. I remember how our dad was so angry about it – a young, foreign alpha, visiting us, talking about settling somewhere in the USA due to his studies, and suddenly attacked on our soil. I don’t know the details, but something could have happened.”

“I don’t remember that,” Peter said. Talia huffed in amusement.

“You were a toddler. I wouldn't think you did.” She leaned back, and mused out loud, “it’s been… maybe twenty years?”

Twenty years.

Holy fuck.

“Has he been plotting mom’s murder for that long?” Kate whispered. Stiles reached for her and she didn’t resist him pulling her in, head dropping on Stiles’ shoulder. She didn’t move, didn’t even shake; she just leaned against him like dead weight.

“Are we done here?” Peter asked Talia. She, in turn, looked around, her pack giving her affirmations. Deaton even procured a notepad from his bag, showing her the sketches of the runes Julia had discovered.

“We are,” he said.

Talia sighed and stood up.

“Then let’s burn this place down.”

***

“You never let me burn anything,” Kate whined. She had a huge overexaggerated pout on her face but Peter could hear how her heart wasn’t into it.

“Their property, their business,” Stiles answered. His arm was around Kate as they walked, steps synchronised. “You say we burn your house down, we’ll do it.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll just go to get my flamethro- wait, I don’t have one.”

“Still too expensive.”

The pout grew even larger. “But Stilessss!”

“Nope, just be glad I’ll let you have matches. Oh wait.”

“I don’t want to know,” Laura mumbled. Kate stuck a tongue at her.

“You don’t understand anything.”
“The smell of it gets everywhere,” Laura argued. She twirled around even as she walked up the porch. “It’s like when people smoke cigarettes!”

Stiles nodded. “I get that.”

“But what if I-”

“No, Kate.”

“You suck.”

“Not nearly enough,” Stiles said, winking at Peter. Peter leered in return. Both Kate and Laura made faces at them.

Laura stumbled then, a high-speed missile hitting her legs. She picked Cora up and hugged her crying sister. Derek was in Talia’s arms, looking distraught as well. Talia held him close and mumbled comforting words into his ears. Derek just clung to her, but his grip became less tight over time. Laura walked over to them and, together with Marcus, they went upstairs.

Stiles glanced at him, head tilting towards upstairs. Peter nodded, and then Stiles was dragging Kate up with him. Julia traced his shoulder, giving him a tight smile, before following them. The rest of his family dispersed as well, family units making their ways into their dens inside the den.

He slumped on what had been his favourite seat growing up, with a view both outside and inside depending how his head was turned. It was just as comfortable as he remembered. He looked out of the window but couldn’t see where Finstock and his new shadow had gone.

“Life isn’t so clear cut now, is it?”

Peter turned to his grandfather, still sitting in that same spot as always. Peter still remembered how he used to listen to the tales of his misadventures as a young man.

“No,” Peter said. “It isn’t.”

His grandfather croaked a laugh. He shifted and the chair creaked under him.

“It’s normal not to agree with your alpha on everything,” David said. “I didn’t always agree with Viola or her mother. Neither did I always think Benjamin knew what he was doing, nor that Talia is always right. It is natural to be different and have different opinions. That’s our strength as a pack.”

“If you are trying to say I should have stayed-”

“Oh no,” his grandfather said, waving his hand. “I’m certainly not. Joe once left the pack as well.”

Peter reared back. “Granduncle did?”

“Mm-hm. Stubborn guy. He was the older brother, you know. Should have become the alpha if asked him, not Viola, not someone years his junior. Alas, their mother said she had known the first time she held Viola that she was her heir. Something about carrying her kid, said a woman always knows.”

“But he came back, didn’t he?”

“He did,” David said. “But he also left. He didn’t cut his bonds, but, like you, he left to study on the other side of the continent too; probably the only reason he didn’t enlist. Fancied joining another pack, tangled with the wolves there. He’s the reason I even met Viola.”
Peter leaned forward. “In college, right?”

“Oh, I heard everything about Viola and their mother, all the ways they had done him wrong. Joe was always so angry! But with every curse he also said something nice. ‘Viola is such a self-important drag, I hate her! Viola makes the best breakfast foods, god, I miss her.’” David shook his head. “Later I decided to follow him here when he eventually realised he loved them despite all their flaws.”

Peter sighed. “And then you never left.”

“I took the bite, yes,” his grandfather said. “But it’s not like I always stayed. I was quite a traveller as a young man.”

A smile made it onto Peter’s face. David reached over with his gnarly hand and patted Peter’s knee.

“You do you, Petey-boy,” he said. “Your lover seems like a good lad.” Then David grinned slyly.

“Reminds me a bit of Talia.”

“Stiles is nothing like Talia,” Peter said immediately. David laughed, loud and hoarse.

“No? Headstrong, protective, makes decisions based on what’s best for the pack, but not necessary for themselves,” Peter’s grandfather listed. “Fiercely caring. Different in many ways but similar enough that they butted heads the moment they stepped inside the same room – and both because of you and what they consider theirs.”

Peter’s arguments died before they even saw air. His gaze followed as David rose slowly from his chair.

“Love. That’s why Joe came back. That’s why you won’t. No matter our choices, it’s love that keeps us together.” He patted Peter’s head twice. “You’ll work it out, kid.”

Peter watched as Joe left the room. He saw Talia come out of the dining room – when had she come downstairs? – and she smiled at him awkwardly.

“Would you like some juice? Mama’s recipe.”

Peter felt words gets stuck in his throat. He nodded instead and followed Talia. There were a few cookies on the tray on the table and glasses half-full. Talia silently collected them by the sink. Must have been left when most of the pack came to help them out. She gestured him to sit down. Peter did as she asked, a little wary still.

Talia set down a couple of clean glasses and poured them full of the berry mix Peter still couldn’t create himself. He could taste elderberry but not distinguish the rest. Perhaps raspberry and…

They sat and drank in silence. There was some noise upstairs but most of the pack were cuddled with each other, reaching for the comfort only kin could provide. If the calm that resonated between him and his pack, he would be seeking the same reassurance himself. He would soon too.

Just not yet.

“I imagine we have a few things to talk about,” Talia said finally. Peter took another sip and set his glass down.

“I imagine we have,” he agreed. “The past days have been certainly… something.”
“Something,” Talia echoed. “I meant what I said. I won’t stop you from leaving.”

It was more than Peter had expected honestly. A lot more.

“What changed?” he couldn’t help but ask. Talia grimaced ever so slightly.

“Like grandfather said… love.” So Talia did hear their conversation, at least the end of it. “You love him.”

“I do,” Peter said. Talia nodded at the confirmation.

“I heard it in the forest… couldn’t believe it really. But then you showed how you all move like a born pack. I can’t – won’t – dismiss that.” Talia’s face twisted a little, but she added, “I’m sorry I couldn’t be that alpha for you.”

Peter smirked. “Hurts, doesn’t it?”

“So much!” Talia exclaimed. They both chuckled until the humour died down. Talia sighed. “I won’t apologise for my actions though.”

“I won’t ask you to,” Peter answered. “I just want to clear the air at this point.”

“Fair enough. I have a few questions myself.”

“Naturally. About Malia-”

“I will add to her guard.” Talia said immediately. “And if your information is correct, I will inform the Tates of the danger. But if she really turns out to be a coyote…”

“They are solitary creatures,” Peter agreed. Malia had always been mostly uncaring of blood relations, only interested in the wellbeing of those who’d been kind to her during her transition period. “But they do care.”

“I will keep that in mind. She won’t touch her, not under my watch,” Talia swore.

Peter stared into her eyes. He could hear the truth in her words but he was looking for the determination to follow through.

He found it.

“I believe you,” he said at last. Talia nodded once, sharply.

“Thank you.”

“I can’t forgive you for tampering with my memories though.”

Talia winced. “I understand. But you know you never would have stood for the protective measures.”

“I do. I still don’t – and won’t.” Peter paused. “How did you convince Corinne to follow through with the pregnancy anyway?”

Talia sighed. “Not one of my most admirable moments,” she admitted. “You don’t remember her coming to meet with us?”

“No,” Peter said. They weren’t apparently important enough for him to do so – and Talia’s meddling
still applied, mostly. He wouldn’t let her anywhere near his neck to remove the block though. It would reveal a whole lot of information she should never be privy to.

“Right,” Talia said, but mostly to herself. She drank the rest of her glass and poured some more. She tipped it towards him, so he slid his own to her to fill too.

“Right,” she repeated, and set the jug down. “The Desert Wolf came to us when we were on a patrol. Lena had found coyote tracks at the outskirts – in hindsight, obviously a set up – and I left to investigate with her and Marcus. You followed us. We only caught you when we arrived at the site, and then she was there.”

Talia sighed. “It was a tale as old as time. She had sought abortion but there were complications. She never explained what those were, but then she thought, well, that she could milk us with it, with Malia. In the end, I did promise her money and to take all responsibility. But I knew. Coyotes aren’t totally unheard of. Marcus knew two when he still lived in New Mexico, a mother who lived for her kid despite the complications. And he knew what that woman gave up and he told me, before we even mated.”

She licked her lips. “You shouldn’t blame Marcus,” Talia said. “While Lena was silent, he argued for you. That we should keep her or give her to the coyotes. But I knew of the Desert Wolf and recognised her. She would come for them or for us. And I swore them into secrecy and took your memories when you wouldn’t.”

Peter sat in silence and listened. He watched as Talia retold what happened years before, grim but unrepentant. He could certainly admire her and her convictions, the way she held her head up and back straight. But…

“Marcus wouldn’t talk to me for days. The kids were all confused; they couldn't figure out why we were fighting. Lena acted as the messenger between Alan and I not to raise any suspicion. We didn’t even know if the Desert Wolf would keep her word. Evidently, she did. She left the newborn at Alan’s doorstep, as per agreement.”

“She didn’t know, did she?” Peter said. Talia shook her head.

“I don’t think so,” she said. “Probably her own mother tried to murder her as a kid, so she never learned. It’s not common knowledge so unless she met with other coyotes- and even then, maybe not. So we gave Malia up. Kept her under watch. She never showed any sign of being a shifter so we thought, maybe…”

“That maybe she was human, against all the odds,” Peter muttered. He tapped the table before realising what he was doing. He huffed in dry amusement.

Stiles was infecting him.

“Who knows?”

“Marcus, Alan, Lena, Jared and Milly.”

“I can’t imagine Milly would’ve been happy with your decision.”

Talia rolled her eyes, little grin on her lips. “She wasn’t. But she was even less likely to leave her unprotected. That’s why I chose her and Jared.”

With how protective they were of the twins, Peter could see that.
“I can see your logic,” he said, and then sighed. “I still can’t forgive you.”

“As long as you see it,” Talia said. Her hands, resting on the table, were relaxed. Peter realised she wasn’t just saying it. She had accepted that, due to her actions, Peter might hate her forever. She still stood by her decision, deeming it the best she could have done.

“Oh, Talia,” he only said, shaking his head. Talia’s lips twitched.

“My turn.”

Peter gestured her to go on.

“What happened with the nogitsune and your pack member?”

Peter sighed. “I don’t know if I can answer you because I don’t know everything. Finstock is a seer.”

Talia’s brows knitted together. “The nogitsune said the same. I thought they were myths.”

“They’ve apparently mostly died out,” he said. “Due to the hunt of creatures that have acted as their… go-betweeners? Maybe.”

“Why didn’t he see what happened with Deuc?”

“He did, I think,” Peter replied. Talia’s gaze darkened but Peter shook his head again. “But there was no one to hear.” He spread his arms. “How could anyone connect the name Alexander suddenly to what would happen to Deucalion?”

Talia scowled harder before she sighed. “It’s no use to be angry at him, now is it?” she said.

“Probably not,” Peter agreed. “He is rather invested in our pack though. Keeps telling us we are some sort of instruments for what he insists is the best of the worst, at least in his opinion.”

“And that’s obviously skewed.”

Peter shrugged. “I can’t disagree completely,” he said. “I will say, though, that in hindsight many of his rambles have made a lot of sense, perhaps guided us more or less subconsciously. He told me to watch Stiles’ back because of a ‘shadow’ could destroy him. I did, and he defeated the nogitsune until Finstock himself rushed forward to… I don’t know, claim the creature?”

Talia took a sip and the glass clanked against the table. “What happens now?”

“We don’t know,” Peter said. “Deucalion blindsided us – pun not intended,” he said quickly when Talia flashed her eyes at him, “and if Kate’s right, we may have rogue hunters of some major influence after us. So not all things are looking good.”

Talia looked like she wanted to say something but was biting her tongue not to. Peter could guess what she wanted though.

“But we have also now purified the Nemeton and the telluric currents are free once again, so that’s one major victory,” he continued. “That’s not nothing.”

“It isn’t,” she agreed. “It definitely isn’t.”

“Today we rest,” he said. “And tomorrow we start again, a new problem in sight to solve. We’ll be fine, Talia.”
Talia stared at him and said nothing. In the end, she just inclined her head thoughtfully. Peter rolled his eyes.

“Be like that, then,” he said and stood up. “I’ll go look for the freak twins.”

“Alright. Howl if you need anything.”

Peter scoffed. “Like they are anything I couldn’t handle.”

He turned around.

“Peter.”

He stopped by the door but didn’t turn around.

“Be safe, brother.”

Peter recognised the tone. It was the same he had heard when he was a kid, when their parents were still around, when Talia still-

“I will.”

Perhaps his grandfather was right after all.

***

Stiles gasped awake. He stared at the ceiling, heart rate going crazy. The whispers, the mockery, the hate. All the blood on his hands. The heartbroken wail of a banshee.

Allison.

Stiles turned his head. The light was still on, he noted absently. Kate was spread on the bed, hand beneath her pillow. Julia had cuddled to her side, clinging in her sleep. There were dark circles around their eyes.

Stiles’ gaze travelled around the room. He listened closely but heard nothing.

Bobby was nowhere to be seen, neither was the… nogitsune.

Peter was gone too.

He closed his eyes, tentatively feeling out the bonds, but for some reason Peter was trekking quite far from the house. At least Kate and Julia were fast asleep, thankfully. He shrugged the blanket off him and stood up. Taking hold of it, he spread it over the girls since the other one was buried somewhere underneath them. His touch lingered on Kate’s cheek. She looked so young in her sleep. Vulnerable. He could almost see the tear tracks that never fell on her cheek today.

Sometimes Stiles couldn’t believe that her 17th birthday was still half a year away.

He left the room quietly, closing the door with just a soft click. He tiptoed downstairs. There was no one in the living room but there was still light coming out of the kitchen’s direction. He peeked in, only to be met with Talia’s curious look.

“Do you know where’s Peter gone?” he asked.

“He went to look for your wayward pack member,” Talia said. She sat by the dining table, two
empty glasses in front of her. She cleared her throat. “I would like to tell you something… Stiles?”

“What is it?” Stiles asked tiredly. If she wanted to pick another fight this soon after what had been their moment of truce…

Talia rose from her seat and bowed her head ever so slightly. Stiles blinked, taken aback.

“I wish to thank you, Alpha Finstock, for what you have done for my pack,” she said formally. Stiles’ eyes widened in shock. “Your pack’s actions saved us from a danger we did not know. According to Alan, if left unchecked, the Nemeton could have brought much misery to all of us. For all of that, I, Alpha Hale of the Hale pack, thank you.”

“I- you are welcome, Alpha Hale,” Stiles said, perplexed. Talia smiled slightly.

“Alan also wishes good fortune for your- Julia, because her sensitivity is a thing he admires but he cautions her to be careful. It could easily drive anyone mad if given the chance.”

Stiles nodded. He was well aware of that.

“Also, I would be happy to offer an alliance between our packs,” she said. Stiles’ grip on the door frame tightened momentarily. “It would be advantageous for both of our packs, especially considering the past twenty-four hours… and, knowing how close you are with my brother, it would also show the world a united front, clear the air from the… misunderstanding that was clearly the only thing that happened between us.”

Talia offered him her hand. Stiles stared at it, unable to believe what he was hearing.

“You’re willing to throw it all in. With us,” he said slowly. He narrowed his eyes, and corrected, “for Peter?”

Talia didn’t look away from his scrutiny.

“For all of us,” she said. Then she smirked. “But yes, Peter may have played a part. He is rather taken with you.”

“You do know that we might end up going against plenty of foes, both human and supernatural.”

“Then you’ll need all the allies you can get.”

Stiles’ mouth quirked upwards the tiniest bit.

“It would be my honour,” he answered, stepping inside the room and reaching for her hand with his own.

For the second time that day, they shook hands. There might be negotiations later, or discussions at the very least, but…

This was something far better than a truce, and far more than Stiles could have ever hoped for; a guarantee that Beacon Hills – and everyone inside its borders – was in good hands.

“How is your pack?” Talia asked. Stiles sighed, rubbing his neck.

“Kate and Julia are asleep, as they should be. I- woke up and thought I would find Peter but you said he’s gone looking for Bobby?”

“Yes.”
“Right, good, good,” Stiles said, but it was more to himself than to Talia. He cleared his throat. “How is your family doing? And you,” he tackled on.

Talia grimaced. “Things could be better,” she replied. “What happened today was… difficult. Deucalion was a dear friend to my parents – and to me too.”

Stiles was quiet for a moment. He glanced at the clock. It was nearing ten. Late but not too late.

“Could I borrow a car?”

Talia merely blinked at the request. “I have the keys to Peter’s. Would that work?”

“Perfectly.”

***

Within ten minutes, Stiles was on the road towards the sleepy Beacon Hills. The forest was quiet and unassuming, like nothing big had happened today. The roads were clear. The sky wasn’t but it wasn’t raining, so that was something.

Something small ran past the headlights but Stiles couldn’t even identify it before it rushed away. He exhaled deeply, fingers uncurling where he had gripped the steering wheel hard and his heart resuming the calm – calmer, at least – beat from before. Even though he could see no lights, he used the turn signal.

Some things just were ingrained somewhere deep.

He drove parked by the only store open until midnight and grabbed things everyone liked from salty to sweet and drinks. They had earned their snacks. The cashier looked bored, even as he wished him a good night before returning to mindlessly rocking on his heels. He didn’t even react when Stiles wished him the same.

Stiles bit into his chocolate bar and crossed the street to the park. It was quiet. Just like he wanted. He slumped on a bench, staring at the clouds above.

Not even the stars were out tonight.

“I thought it was over,” he whispered, finally allowing his melancholy surface from the tight hold he had on it. “I thought I was over it. Why aren’t I over it?”

His pack forgave him. Scott forgave him. He forgave himself. They were all alive and well again. There was nothing to forgive, so why did the past still haunt him?

The clouds didn’t answer. The nearby tree creaked in the wind, but Stiles didn’t speak tree. If he didn’t even fully understand the Nemeton, then ordinary trees were impossible. They weren’t even sentient. Who knew if the leaves created an orchestra he was deaf to, trunks sang songs humankind had long forgotten?

Stiles sighed. He felt Peter nudge him, worried, but he just sent him a feeling of reassurance. The bond between them grew more subdued but Stiles knew that the moment he came back, Peter would be all over him. His lips twitched.

He lifted his arms, idly reaching for the sky.

“I guess the past never completely leaves us,” he said to himself. Perhaps he would never get rid of
the nightmares. Perhaps they would only lessen in number, in frequency.

Perhaps the trigger was now living in a weird symbiosis with the person who had claimed him family.

He didn’t really know what to think of it. Bobby seemed to think it was a great idea, to bind himself to the nogitsune, but Stiles wasn’t so convinced. Not with everything the nogitsune had stolen from him. However, it brought up a similar question he had asked himself before.

If someone hadn’t done something yet, were they still guilty of it?

The nogitsune wasn’t the same as Kate or Julia or even Peter. It was a dark creature, designed to do dark things, and had caused much tragedy for Noshiko and probably many others. Yet Bobby saw its potential for good too – a guardian spirit, in a sense. Like Kira. Both were kitsune, both had a sense of obligation to do what their nature deemed. They weren’t so much bound to a single place but rather to the people, to protect or otherwise be near. Not that Stiles was certain the nogitsune could even care, just claim ownership of those it found… fun, at the lack of a better word. The level of possessiveness it felt… it wasn’t healthy for anyone.

Yet Bobby seemed to crave it.

How lonely was it, to see everything and then feel it slip from your fingers? To know secrets of the world yet nothing concrete? To feel loss before it would happen?

Could the nogitsune be the salvation for someone, when all it had spelled for Stiles had been doom?

Stiles had come to change the past. He did. He had already succeeded in what he had wanted to achieve. Beacon Hills was safe from the rotting Nemeton. The Hales would never be murdered by Kate. The future was not a living nightmare.

But it felt like he still wasn’t done. He knew he still wasn’t done. He had changed things but Deucalion seemed more crazed than he was before. Who the fuck knew what was going on with the Argents? Or Shannon, fuck, Shannon. He didn’t even know the person well, only knew that she was someone very important to Kate and had tons of influence, maybe even more than Gerard.

Why was she suddenly there, in the midst of things? Where had she been in the future? She hadn’t been with the Tribunal forces, coming down to judge and destroy anyone left alive whom Stiles cared about. Had she even been alive? Had she been dead? Killed?

Murdered by Gerard like his wife, her best friend?

Maybe she had uncovered the truth, confronted him, and gotten killed. That sounded like her – the part about getting revenge – but it would put too much faith in Gerard’s competence. What Stiles knew about Shannon and Kate’s mother, they sounded like badasses like no other. Gerard probably had to resort into trickery to murder Kate’s mom. He might have used something similar- wait, it was Shannon, according to Kate, who scribbled the runes. Which explained absolutely nothing more than that Shannon had to be more competent than Gerard. How on earth could he have killed her then? She probably knew to expect Gerard’s tricks.

Or maybe she just died in a boring, ordinary hunt. Or some simple assassination to spice it up!

Yeah right, with the odds like his, that would never happen. Better start with the most outlandish explanation and go down from there.

“I hate this already,” he muttered to himself. He wished he had his murder board and all the strings. It
always helped him to collect his thoughts. Stiles sighed and reached for his pocket and pulled out his loyal red book.

“Time to write,” he told it, stuck the rest of the chocolate bar into his mouth, and clicked the pen attached to it. He opened the journal on an empty spread, wrote ‘Elizabeth’s murder’ in the middle, and started drawing lines. What they knew, what they didn’t. Speculations. Shannon. Gerard. Kate herself. Deucalion possibly causing Alexander’s death and Gerard framing him in revenge. Revenge seemed to be some sort of trend here. That, and being all suspicious of – read, hate – all supernatural.

“Hunting is such a pain in the ass,” Stiles said. The pen slipped and accidentally smudged a line. Shit.

“Shit.” He tried to make it legible again but there was little space left on the page. Fuck. “Why am I doing this again? I should have run to Mexico the moment Gerard was forced to give me all that money, not have existential crisis after crisis and solving murders. Maybe I could have eloped. Peter wouldn’t have minded. Who cares about what in-laws think anyway?”

“What was that about a murder?”

Stiles flailed. The pen flew from his hand and he slammed his journal shut. He wildly turned around to see Claudia slump down next to him.

“What are you doing here?” he blurted out. When she glanced at him, unimpressed, he backtracked, “I mean, it’s late, isn’t it?”

“Midnight,” she agreed. Stiles blinked. Shit, that was late. Had he really been at the park for over an hour already? Peter was going to kill him.

“Even more so.”

“I just had a feeling,” she said and kicked the dirt, leaning back at the same time. “Noah was kind enough to stop by the park when I asked.”

Stiles peeked past her and, sure enough, there was a patrol car loitering by the street.

“Do you hate me?”

Startled, Stiles blinked at her owlishly. “What?” he asked in pure confusion. Claudia tilted her head up.

“Do you hate me?” she repeated louder. “You don’t want anything to do with me. Did I do something wrong?”

“Wha- no!” Stiles said quickly. “I just- Claudia-”

“There it is again,” Claudia sighed. “Claudia, not mom. I wasn’t a good mother to you, was I? I read about the frontotemporal dementia… it wasn’t pretty.”

“You won’t get it,” Stiles reassured her. “You won’t. Not this time.”

“Even if that were, that’s a little too late for you, isn’t it?”

Stiles paused. He stood up from the bench, only to kneel in front of Claudia, taking her hands in his own.
“It’s never too late,” he said. “If I’ve learned nothing else these past months, it’s that. Not everything happens the way we want but until we are dead and buried, we have time to act.”

“But you won’t give me that chance,” Claudia said bitterly. “I just- I just wanted to be there for you.”

“And you were. You are,” Stiles corrected himself. “It’s just better if you focus on Stiles, your Stiles. Because, Claudia, you are a fantastic mother. Just not mine. And, despite everything that may have transpired between her and I, I don’t want to replace her with anyone.

“Not even you.”

Claudia’s eyes swelled with tears.

“I didn’t mean to do that,” she whispered. Stiles lifted his hand, wiping the stray drops away.

“We will be great friends. The best, really. I’ll always know I’m welcome here. But I have my pack and I am not broken, not your responsibility to fix. I should know, you gave me that drive, and then Dad forced on me his stubbornness too and look at where I am now, twenty years in the past and fixing all things broken like you would have, given the chance.”

Claudia laughed, broken sob hitching. She raised her arm to wipe her eyes on her sleeve.

“You never give up, do you? Not with the genes you got.”

Stiles smiled gently.

“Never when the people I care are in question.”

“They raised you well. Your parents,” Claudia said quietly. She traced the moles on Stiles’ cheek, the same constellation that decorated the cheek of her own son. “I’m sorry I didn’t see it before. I took it personally when I really shouldn’t have.”

“You helped me when I was lost,” Stiles confessed. “In the beginning. You gave me support when I had none. I’m sorry I made you think you were somehow inadequate. You are not, believe me. You are perfect as you are.”

“Stop it!” Claudia laughed again, and this time it was a happy sound. “You’ll make me blush!”

“Does that mean I can’t steal you away?” Stiles winked. Claudia swatted at him.

“Don’t make me get my husband! He’s an upstanding deputy, jaw-dropping in his uniform! And out of it.”

“Aaaand that’s officially too much information,” he said, flopping down on the ground. Claudia’s giggles were like wind chimes on a clear day. A light breeze tickled Stiles’ neck, causing him to shiver.

“I can’t risk you, you know,” Stiles continued. “None of you. You are not equipped to deal with the things like my pack is. Things are… pretty volatile right now. I can’t keep you safe without staying away from you. And if there is something I never want to see repeated, it’s you dying.”

Claudia nodded, silent and solemn.

“And he has potential, Stiles does. More than I do. Because I know too little and too much and have experienced even more than that to ever regain complete faith in myself.” Stiles sighed deep. “I’ve come to a realisation that I draw my belief in miracles from the people around me. They are my
miracles, thus granting me mine too.”

“Our strength comes from the heart,” Claudia said, smiling gently. “It’s no wonder, from what I know, that you would do everything you could for those close to you, even bend the laws of physics and the back of time.”

“But Stiles could do much more than that.”

“Perhaps,” Claudia said. “The question is though, should he? What is power if it’s not used for others?”

“And that’s why he needs you there, to guide him.”

“I think we’ll do alright then,” she said and squeezed Stiles’ hand. “If he’ll be anything like you, then he’ll be magnificent. He already is.”

Stiles flushed. Claudia let out another of those wind chime giggles.

“Where are your friends now?” Claudia asked. “You are out here alone.”

“Resting,” Stiles said. “I needed some time to go through the mess that made home in my mind.”

“Anything I could help you out with?”

Stiles considered her question. He didn’t want her involved but there was one thing he needed a second, unbiased, opinion on.

“You could,” he said slowly and sighed. “One of my friends is now… involved with a supernatural being.”

“Romantically?”

Stiles barked a laugh. “I seriously hope not!” he said. “It’s a dark creature, one that revels in fear and chaos.”

“Well, that’s not nice.”

“Yeah,” Stiles agreed. “The creature wronged me once upon a time and killed one of my friends and many others while… in possession of my body.”

Claudia nodded, eyebrows disappearing into her hairline.

“However, this other friend is now in a weird… symbiotic relationship with it and says that’s how the best outcome of things is going to become reality. Sort of.”

“Sounds complicated.”

“Yeah. But the thing is… should I do something about it? This version of the creature hasn’t wronged us yet – attempted, yes, but didn’t manage to before we stopped it. It has history of evil, yes, but my friend claims things will be fine now. I just- I don’t know if I can just trust his word on that. I don’t know if I can move past what happened to me.”

“Just because certain things haven’t happened yet doesn’t invalidate your experiences,” Claudia said. “You know that right?”

“Yeah, I- yeah.”
“Is your friend also a, well-”

“He’s a seer.”

Claudia hummed and tapped Stiles’ hand in thought.

“Your experiences are valid,” she repeated. “Just because something happened once doesn’t mean it will happen again. However, there is always a chance for a repeat. Your friend, has there been a change in his behaviour?”

“He seemed… more clearheaded,” Stiles said. “So the little I’ve seen has been sort of… positive. But-”

“But you aren’t sure if that’s just another scheme.”

“Well, I- yes,” he said, surprised. “That’s exactly it.”

Claudia nodded in thought. Stiles let her muse on it, looking around them while she did. They were alone in the park – not a surprise considering the time and season – but he did see a man stand against the patrol car. Noah. He was watching them.

Watching him hold his wife’s hands.

Stiles startled and quickly dropped his hands. Claudia huffed in amusement when Stiles flailed until reaching balance again.

“Does your friend know he’s still welcome, even with the tagalong?”

“Yes,” Stiles said immediately. Then he scowled, “wait- I’m not sure. He’s said some pretty shady stuff about not really belonging to the pack. Christ, now I know how the others felt when I refused to open up. What a dick move that was.”

“Pack,” Claudia repeated. “You’ve used that word before. Are some of you werewolves? From the pack here, perhaps?”

“Well…” Stiles drawled. Claudia looked at him expectantly, but Stiles refused to say more. She narrowed her eyes.

“I will find out who they are,” she threatened, but couldn’t quite manage to muster enough menace for Stiles to even think about covering. She burst into giggles. “What a trip you are having!”

Stiles blinked before joining in. “Imagine all of us walking in a bar…”

“Geez, that makes me want to join the party. Or wait until Noah is called to bust it and demand a ride. My camera is the latest technology, you know!” Claudia said, standing up and thrusting her hand towards Stiles. He took it, pushing himself to his feet.

She stared directly into his eyes, countenance switching to seriousness within a fraction of a second. “You need to be straight with your friend. Be clear, repeat it as many times if you have to, until he realises you are serious. Show that you care and are willing to accept him no matter what.”

“But- I thought I have,” Stiles said slowly.

“Then be louder. Yell at him if that’s what it takes.” Claudia smirked. “That’s what kids do. The one who yells the loudest wins. You just have to drown the other noise.”
“With his thick head, it’s going to take a while,” Stiles muttered. Claudia slapped him lightly on the arm. “Ow.”

“You are being rude.”

“Sorry, teach.”

“Better. Now go apologise to your friend or it’s detention with you, mister.”

Stiles laughed until his eyes felt wet.

“Will do.” He smiled at Claudia, lifted her hands and placed a kiss on them before dropping them altogether. “Thank you,” he said sincerely.

Claudia answered his smile with one of her own, large and bright.

“Anytime.”


“I’ll wait.”

With one last smile, Stiles turned around, this time with a lighter heart.

They would be all right, he knew, and smiled through the tears in his eyes. He wiped them on his sleeve and walked until he ran to where he had left Peter’s car.

In the end, they all would.

The words tasted like truth in his mouth.

***

Claudia bounced to where Noah stood by his car, looking dapper in the whole deputy getup. While one of the most handsome men in the world, he would charm himself into the Sheriff’s office through sheer competency, she just knew that. She leaned forward to kiss him.

“Not leaving me for a younger model?” Noah joked. Claudia giggled and fluttered her lashes.

“I’m keeping you around for more than just looks.”

“Not my cooking though.”

Claudia let out a laugh. “No,” she agreed. “Not your cooking. You compensate in other fields though.”

Noah smiled and glanced in the direction Stiles had disappeared to. “He’s grown well.”

Claudia blinked. “I thought you said you met him only once,” she said. Noah inclined his head.

“Yes, that I did,” he said. The gentle curve of his mouth sent her heart into an overdrive even after all these years she had known him. He rubbed her cheekbones and kissed her forehead. “But, Claudia, only one other person has these eyes of yours, these eyes I love. There is nothing to guess.”

Claudia couldn’t help but stare at Noah who just gently pulled the door open for her.

“Natalie’s waiting for us to get Stiles.”
A low smile spread on her face.

“[I love you],” she said, leaning in to kiss Noah over the door.

“I love you more.”

“And Stiles the most,” they whispered in unison. Claudia climbed in and Noah closed the door behind her, and in just a few seconds later they were on their way to the Martin’s.

She was the luckiest woman in the world, Claudia thought, and squeezed Noah’s hand over the gear shift. He laced their fingers together.

The luckiest indeed.

***

Stiles drove back to the Hale house, the road just as silent as it was when he left. It was still dark outside, middle of the night as it was. He could feel Peter’s presence linger in one place though, near enough to Kate and Julia to know he was back. Stiles hummed to himself.

He parked the car and jumped out, immediately marching towards where he felt pulled. Peter stared at his approach when he turned around the corner. Stiles saw him sitting on a log with Bobby and the nogitsune sprawled on the ground next to him.

Stiles ignored them for the moment and just sat on Peter’s lap and pulled him into a kiss, pressing his mouth against Peter’s. When they parted, he whispered, “I love you. I’m sorry I always worry you. Met Claudia. I’ll tell you everything, let you in, show you everything you want.”

He dropped the bag of snacks between them.

“All the Reese’s are for you. Just save at least one Hershey for Kate or she’ll murder you.”

“No promises,” Peter said, and leaned in again. His lips were hard against Stiles’ and more responsive than they were a moment ago. Stiles answered with just as much force. He wrapped his arms around Peter and pulled him even closer.

“The bag is going to get crushed,” the nogitsune said. Stiles scowled but when Peter pushed his hand inside his shirt and traced his spine, well, all thoughts were wiped from his mind. When he was finally allowed to breathe, he noticed how dizzy he had gotten. He slumped against Peter, pushing the bag of snacks to the ground.

“Disgusting,” the nogitsune mumbled, glaring balefully at Stiles and Peter. Stiles wondered if it could also feel the positive emotions in addition to the negatives it used to – and still did – eat. He hoped so, because fuck yes, torturing the torturer with all the PDA.

“Bobby.”

Bobby didn’t react, only stayed silent and watched the sky. Peter sighed.

“He was in the middle of a pretty intense vision when I found them. Even with the nogitsune… consuming… the chaos inside him, it drained Finstock until he passed out. Even after he woke up, he hasn’t uttered a word.”

Stiles licked his lips and nodded. He pulled away from Peter’s lap, missing his warmth immediately, and sat next to him, sticking right by his side. He nudged Bobby with his foot.


The nogitsune groaned and curled around Bobby.

“Make it stop,” it whined.


“Stiless,” Bobby said. He bent his neck and swayed a little. “Hiiiiii. You are upside down.”

“Hello to yourself,” Stiles answered. He nudged him again. “I’m going to say something to you and I want you to really listen. Can you do that?”

Bobby twisted around, pulling the nogitsune with him. His eyes were hazy bit there was spark of the wit Stiles knew lived inside, attempting to gain control.

Stiles inhaled deep, leaning in. “I’M SORRY!”


“Right, now that yelling’s out of the way,” Stiles said, coughing. He straightened again and announced, “you are pack.”

The nogitsune hissed. It wrapped itself around Bobby’s arm, glaring at Stiles like he was trying to take its favourite toy away.

Well, fuck that.

“I say fuck all those things you’ve seen, thinking that it’s better if you are not part of us. You are. You may not share our bond, may not even be able to now with your… service fox,” Stiles said. The nogitsune’s glare was now full-blown murderous.

“But don’t ever think you aren’t pack just because your circumstances vary. You are one of us and that’s it. End of story.”

Bobby’s jaw looked unhinged from Stiles’ point of view.

“But- but-” Bobby spluttered. “Lake. But lake, it’s- I’m just at the shore. I’m not in the lake. Shore.”

“And while I still don’t have a single idea what that ‘lake’ thing is,” Stiles said, shaking his head. “It doesn’t mean you still aren’t one of us. Maybe you’ll just be our corner stone, a place to return, I don’t know, be our lighthouse. Because despite… things… we’ll never- gah-”

“What Stiles seems to be trying to say,” Peter interjected, “is that while you may view yourself as separate from us, we certainly do not, with you guiding us in the dark.”

Bobby stared at them, eyes wide.

“…Bobby,” Peter added.

“You called me by my name!” Bobby suddenly yelled and rolled over, scrambling up until he could topple over dramatically, clutching at his chest. Peter looked pained as he watched the theatrics. “Is this… marriage?!”
“What?” Peter and the nogitsune asked simultaneously. The nogitsune then threw him a scornful look, those grabby hands grabbing at Bobby. Stiles closed his eyes and slowly counted to ten.

He could do this.

Stiles opened his eyes when the commotion died down. He found himself the recipient of the undivided attention, belatedly noticing how the hand he had used to count was held up like a sign for silence. The nogitsune rested its – _his_ – arm over Bobby’s, in silent dare.

Stiles would do this.

“You can be pack without a bond like ours. And we will support you even – or especially – because of your choice of company. Because you are one of us, Bobby. Now and always.”

Bobby stared at him. His hands shook as he dropped them to his lap.

“But it’s not the same,” he mumbled. “It won’t ever be the same. The only time it is, it’s no good, always wrong.”

Stiles nodded. “Maybe,” he said. “I don’t know what you have seen, what you may have missed. But, Bobby, even without bonds like that, you _are_ part of our team. The Quintet just has to catch on.”

“Sextet,” Peter said.

Stiles turned to Peter. “What?”

Peter smirked. “If we are going all noble, then you might want to consider… Jerry there.”

The nogitsune’s eyes widened. “Don’t call me that,” it – he – said, mortally offended. “I have a name.”

“Do you?”

The nogitsune snarled. “Like I would be telling it to a _mutt_ like you.”

Stiles’ temper flashed, and his grin reflected the malice he felt.

“Jerry it is then.”

“Wasn’t that a hamster?” Peter asked innocently.

“A mouse, but who’s counting?”

The nogitsune sat up straight, hair just as wild as Bobby’s. “I am not a Jerry!”

“Also, a Sextet is never going to catch on,” Stiles said, ignoring the hissy fit. “Too sexy. The elderly will have a collective heart attack the moment we arrive. Wait, that’s something to consider, that would solve _so many problems_. I’m ordering us full leather getups, skin tight and all, when I have the money, I swear to god.”

Bobby smiled a tiny, heartrending smile.

“Keep it as the Quartet,” he said. When Stiles turned to face him to protest, he continued, “just having a place is… is enough. I see it now. Lighthouse, yes, the brighter the light, the stronger the shadow. Shore is just fine. _Thank you._”
Then he threw himself into Stiles and wrapped his arms around him, starting to bellow in tears.

“I HAVE THE BEST COUSIN EVER!”

The nogi- Jerry hissed, hands curling like he wanted to launch himself at Stiles too, in a far more violent way. Peter flashed his eyes in threat.

“Didn’t you say they were brothers?” Talia asked, peeking from the upstairs’ window, undoubtedly attracted by the noise.

“Of a sort. Cousins work too. Stiles is adopted.”

Talia stared at the bawling mess that was Bobby and Stiles who tried to do his best to contain the hurricane keeping him in place and backed inside slowly. Peter could still hear her sigh of relief, much to his amusement, before the window closed.

“Oh, thank god.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so I had a tentative name for Bobby’s brother’s but SomeoneFallenAngel left such a hilarious comment that just cemented the choice. Everyone, say hi to Jeremiah “The Hamster” “The Nogitsune” Finstock. The only thing the pack missed was their own version of Grumpy Cat.

Find me on tumblr.
Hi all! It's been a while, my bad. In my defense, I had a lot going on. In spark notes, two months ago I actually got a fucking awesome job opportunity (300 kilometres away, 5 days before the job was supposed to start) which meant complications. Happy complications! But yeah. You can probably see why my spare time has been minimal these past couple of months. I'm mostly done settling in, so hopefully I can manage at least a chapter a month from now on.

In any case, here's a new chapter for you to enjoy! <3 And can I just say thank you so much for your support (the loveliest comments, almost 3k kudos, everything)! They've literally fed my soul whenever I was too tired to even look at my laptop.

TLDR; I'm hopefully back on track, I love you all, and enjoy the new chapter!

Stiles woke up after Kate slumped on top of him with the sound of a dying whale. He groaned.

“Get off,” he whined. Kate mumbled something incoherent, hair frizzled into a large mess. “Get off me. Kaaaaaate.”

“I don’t want to,” she said petulantly. Peter made a soft ‘oomph’ next to him. Stiles tilted his head enough to see Julia imitate Kate.

“You left in the middle of the night,” Julia accused. “And you never even came up.”


“Where did you go?” Kate asked. She wriggled on top of Stiles, kneeling him on his stomach by accident. Stiles wheezed.

“I went to get Bobby,” Peter said. Julia frowned, lifting her head enough to glance around. Stiles saw Peter’s face, no longer smothered by Julia’s hair.

“Is he okay?”

“He’s fine,” Stiles said. “Planning his marriage to Peter probably.”

“Why do I always miss all the drama?!” Kate exclaimed.

“More like you always start the drama.”

“Says you.”

“She has a point, you know,” Peter said, smirk tugging on his lips. Stiles made a face at him.

“Rude, so rude.”
“What’s with the nogitsune?” Kate asked.

“He’s has been put in his place for the moment,” Stiles said. “We can only hope it lasts.”

“With our luck? Geez, Stiles, if you jinx us any harder, we’ll never see the sun go down.”

“Didn’t you just want all the drama?” he drawled. Kate slumped on top of him harder, constricting his airflow. He wheezed again as Kate’s bony chin pressed against his windpipe and her breasts definitely weren’t the fluffy pillows trashy romance novels for middle-aged women made them out to be as they pressed him deeper into the mattress. Also—

“Your hair can’t be this full of secrets,” he said, words muffled. “Move.”

“I’m not fat!” Kate protested but obliged just enough for Stiles to be able to draw breath.

“I thought you were a hunter and not a princess,” Peter said.

“Oooh, someone is getting snarky,” Stiles snarked. Peter bared his teeth at him playfully, slightly obscured by Julia’s hair. Stiles rolled his eyes and deadpanned, “Oh no. What big teeth you have. Someone save me from the love of my life. Help. Police.”

Peter twisted under Julia to fully stare at him, shocked. Stiles blinked.

“What?” he asked. Peter shook his head, dazed, and then surged forward to capture Stiles’ mouth with his own. Kate groaned on top of them while Julia squeaked and scrambled off them. Stiles felt overwhelmingly warm.

“Disgusting,” Kate mumbled. “Do it where we don’t have to see or feel your grossness.”

Stiles’ quip was muffled by Peter’s lips but he found he didn’t mind. Kate rolled over them and pulled off their pillows, effectively breaking the kiss with the movement.

“Someone’s starved for attention,” Peter said. His face was suddenly filled by what looked like Stiles’ pillow. He flopped down again, stretching leisurely. “How weak of you, Kate. Victory is mine again.”

“I’ll show you weak!” Kate declared before letting out a battle cry and smacking Peter with his own pillow. Peter’s eyes narrowed, and Stiles quickly found himself falling off the bed in an effort to avoid the third world war.

A brush fell onto his lap and he looked up to see Julia grinning at him. He felt for his hair and, yeah, that was some bedhead right there.

“Thanks,” he said as he attempted to tame his overgrown curls. Julia watched him, smile too wide for her hands to hide. When he gave up, he quirked his brows at her and she shrugged, smirking. Good enough then, he decided, and tossed the brush back.

“You know,” Stiles said as he stood up, stretching. “Synonyms are so weird, man. Like, if someone invites you to their cottage in the forest, that just sounds nice and cosy. But if that person invites you to their cabin in the woods, you’re going to die.”

“What the hell, Stiles?” Kate said, pausing just long enough for Peter to steal her pillow and double smacking her so hard that she bounced on her back.

Peter grinned viciously. “My favourite is ‘butt dial’ versus ‘booty call’,” he said conversationally.
“Also ‘forgive me, Father, for I have sinned’ and ‘sorry daddy, I’ve been naughty’.”

Stiles choked on his spit as he laughed far too hard. Julia flushed red but she laughed as well.

Kate scowled from her position, seemingly having given up. “Great news,” she said. “Language is now cancelled.” Then she moved to sit, extending her arm to Peter. “Also, nice one.”

Peter preened. He reached for her hand, only for Kate to grin and then he was twisted on the bed with Kate towering on top of him.

“Got you, peacock,” she crowed and then she was running to the bathroom, Peter hot on her heels. Stiles and Julia could hear shrieks and running water, and eventually see splatters that reached the floor past the door. Then there was a loud thump and Kate groaned.

“What was that?” Stiles asked, in the middle of changing his clothes to something cleaner.

“My shirt fell,” Kate said. There was a distinct sulky quality in it that caught Stiles’ ear.

“That sounded a lot more than just a shirt,” Julia pointed out.

Kate came back, soaking wet and pouting.

“I was in it.”

Julia burst into a delighted little giggle and Stiles followed her easily. Kate huffed, turning up her nose, but Stiles recognized the makings of a grin on her face.

“There should be some Hershey’s in the bag by the door,” Stiles said and, yeah, that was a blinding grin that Kate directed at him.

“Only after breakfast,” Peter called out.

“Mom gave me a permission already!” Kate said hurriedly and rushed for the bag. Peter still had a werewolf’s speed and the probability of having anticipated her move probably didn’t help her either. The bag was held far higher than Kate’s reach.

“Mom!” Kate yelled. “Dad is being mean again!”

“I’m too young to have a kid!” Stiles only said as he breezed past them. “Also, I’m eating all the pancakes.”

“The chocolate chip ones are mine, Stiles!” Peter called after him.

Stiles grinned at Julia who had followed him out and, together, they took off running, giggling all the way.

“Not for long!”

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“Be thankful you have me, you can’t even shoot straight,” Kate said as Stiles unsuccessfully threw a muffin at Peter’s face, having it end up in his eggs instead.

Stiles sniffed. “Excuse you, I have a hundred percent shooting accuracy. You just don’t know where I’m aiming at.” He took a look at the now soggy carotty mix of eggs and muffins and declared, “I’m calling it California eggs.”
“That’s avocado,” Peter said helpfully as he attempted to remove the muffin remains, wrinkling his nose.

“Canadian!”

“Maple syrup,” Kate and Julia said in unison.

“Finstock!”

“You called?” Bobby said, flopping down next to them. He had something furry on his neck that kept hissing at them all. Stiles blinked.

“That Jerry?”

“What’s a Jerry?” Kate asked.

“The nogitsune.”

“Its name is Jerry?!” Julia exclaimed, shocked. The hissing got louder, and Stiles could have sworn he spat at them.

“Yes,” Bobby said cheerfully. He eyed the mess of Peter’s plate where he had given up on separating the different breakfast foods and just decided to just get a new one. “You eating that?”

“Help yourself,” Peter said dryly, and Bobby happily did, gorging on the leftovers before tackling the still towering pile in the middle of the table. His hunger was so visible that Stiles feared for the lives of his fingers as he hastily grabbed a few before they disappeared off the earth.

Bobby hummed in bliss. “Wha’s ha woh fo’,” he started and then swallowed. “For horny but like, not in a sexual way? Like, I’m horny for Christmas, but I don’t want to fuck a Christmas tree. You feel?”

Stiles stared at him. “Do you mean ‘excited’?”

Bobby snapped his fingers in a grand gesture, jostling that furry collar of his and earning a disgruntled huff for his efforts. “Exactly!” he grinned. “Life is looking up! I haven’t been this happy since I didn’t have to lose my left testicle and, let me tell you, in all the visions I’ve had, I only retained both in, like, maybe three of them!”

He reached down and Stiles suspected he patted his crotch but he wasn’t about to check.

Bobby’s smile turned dreamy. “My life is complete.”

“You actually checked that in all the visions?” Kate asked, face twisting in her attempt not to straight up laugh.

“I could feel it,” Bobby said gravely. “The void is always unmistakable.”

Peter rolled his eyes. “We are in the middle of what amounts to the chaos theory and you feel right at home. Why am I not surprised?”

“That’s a really… good comparison,” Julia said, bemused, while still staring the nogitsune. Her expression spoke of longing.

“What’s a chaos theory?” Kate blinked.
“It’s a mathematical—”

“Okay, bored already,” Kate announced, cutting off Julia’s absentminded explanation. Julia just shrugged and then reached to touch Bobby’s arm, gaining his attention and a baleful look from the nogitsune.

“Could I—” she hesitated but apparently decided to soldier on as she added, “Pet him? Maybe?”

The hacking noise Jerry let out was alarming but not as alarming as the demented grin that spread on Bobby’s face.

“Sure!”

Julia brightened immensely and lightly petted the fur on what appeared to be the nogitsune’s back. He growled and Julia almost withdrew her hand but Bobby just smeared a piece of his pancake in maple syrup and stuffed it in Jerry’s mouth.

“He’s so soft,” Julia said, whisper quiet, almost reverent. Stiles had to wonder if that was because she had never had a pet in her life or what. Kali probably didn’t count. “And beautiful.”

“I’m not beautiful!” Jerry snapped, fur sticky with syrup. “I’m—!” His voice was cut off with another piece of the pancake.

Kate and Stiles sneaked a look at each other and then had to quickly look away. Their giggled couldn’t completely be muffled, however, and the nogitsune’s growls only grew in volume.

“Terrifying,” Julia said, nodding. “Absolutely horrible.”

Jerry gave her a suspicious look but didn’t say anything when a third forkful neared his mouth. He hid his face underneath his tails instead. Tails.

Stiles blinked before leaning forward. He squinted but—no, he could only see one. Strange.

Had his eyes deceived him?

“What are you saying?” Felicity’s voice, high-pitched and disbelieving, echoed from the kitchen. “You can’t just decide that by yourself!”

“I’m not a good fit for a mother!” Samantha argued, just as loud.

“Not a good—do you even hear yourself? We’ve been planning this for years!”

“You didn’t see me out there!” Samantha screamed, effectively silencing the whole house. Stiles could have dropped a needle and it would have echoed like the largest of rocks. “I couldn’t even—they had to protect my ass, the kids and Peter, Fel, Peter. He’s my nephew, and I hid like a coward!”

“That doesn’t mean—!”

Samantha cut her off. “That doesn’t mean everything, Felicity, and you know it. What if the same happens years forward and I couldn’t protect our children? They’d be dead because of me! I am a disgrace—!”

“Shut up!” Felicity screamed. Their harsh breaths could be heard in the resulting silence. “Just—Sam, you got to—you have to know just one day doesn’t define you. It’s—a freak accident, alright? A fluke! You’ve protected us for so many years and just one—”
“But it was right,” Samantha said, laughing hollowly. “I couldn’t—I was so afraid. I couldn’t—I let children fight when I couldn’t. I—I am ashamed. How could I ever protect a child, have one of my own, when I can’t even protect anyone but myself?

“No, Fel,” she said. Her voice was voice clear. “I won’t subject any child to a failure like me. You should—consider maybe—”

“Don’t you dare suggest what I think you are suggesting,” Felicity threatened. “I may be a human in the midst of a wolf den but I am just as capable as the rest of you.”

“You are more a wolf than I am right now,” Samantha said. Something shattered. “Perhaps always have been. And you don’t deserve someone like me.”

“Don’t you dare, Samantha Evelyn Hale!” Felicity yelled. There was another crash and a yelp that sounded like Samantha. “If you take one step outside that door—!”

A door slammed in the kitchen once, twice, and twin footsteps rushed away. No one spoke, eyes staring in the same direction.

Jerry moaned in pleasure. Stiles’ eyes narrowed but Bobby absently stuffed the forgotten forkful somewhere past the bushy tail. The resulting hacking would have been hilarious under any other circumstances but—

“Fuck,” Stiles breathed out. The sentiment was echoed by Talia who had slowly walked to the room while the rest of them were distracted.

“How close were they—?” Peter trailed off. Talia’s somber expression spoke volumes.

“If everything went as planned, three months.”

Stiles’ heart skipped a beat before it started racing. Peter gave him a look that looked both knowing and long-suffering. Stiles made a face at him.

“We should do something,” he said. Talia sighed, shaking her head.

“It’s something they have to do themselves,” she said. When Stiles looked like he wanted to protest, she flashed her eyes. “This is their life and their decision. The events… led us here. And—” a smile curled on her lips.

“If there is someone who can make her see sense, it’s Felicity.”

“You have Marcus watching over them, haven’t you?” Peter said.

Talia shrugged. “Always have a plan B. Wasn’t that what you always used to say?”

“Wasn’t it more like ‘always have a plan XYZ’?” Kate pointed out.

“That’s Stiles,” Peter reminded her. Kate paused, considering, before conceding the point.

“It’s not like you don’t have plans either,” Julia said. “It’s just that Stiles usually shares his, and then we build on them and then you make new ones in case they still fail.”

The tension broke somewhat when Bobby let out a braying laugh, saying, “She got you there, buddy.”

“She did, didn’t she,” Talia mumbled, tilting her head and staring at Peter. Peter actually ducked
down to avoid her searching look.

“You didn’t come down just to tell us that, did you?” Stiles said. The look on her face froze and then tightened.

“I didn’t,” she said, anger creeping in. Her eyes bled red.

“We’ve sighted Gerard Argent.”

***

“He didn’t even flee his scene of crime?” Julia mumbled to herself as she attached her seat belt. It hadn’t taken them longer than five minutes to grab what they needed and board their van. She was sitting between Kate and Bobby with his furry collar, grabbing at her inks and brushes, and redrawing her runes even while Peter sped them off the Hale yard. Talia followed them with a few of her pack mates but they were taking a detour to get Deaton, so Stiles had just told her they would meet with Lena and Elsa where they were staking the Argent house.

“Hubris,” Stiles said, clicking his pen and frowning at his red journal.

“I don’t even know what’s going on in his mind anymore,” Kate declared. Her frustration bled into her voice. “He’s not following any protocol I know or have been taught. It’s like he’s given up all pretence and just gone rogue!”

“Maybe that’s exactly what he did,” Stiles said. It’s earlier than it was supposed to be—Gerard probably didn’t even know about his budding cancer yet, and even Deucalion’s fate had been messed with—and Stiles couldn’t understand why that was. “But what drove him to this? It can’t have been just losing Kate, can it?”

“Why not?” Peter asked. “He doesn’t have an heir anymore.”

“Chris—”

“My brother is too soft,” Kate interrupted, frowning. “That was his main complaint, Chris said. That’s why they chose Victoria for Chris from all the options; that and the alliance she brought with her.”

“That was arranged as well?” Stiles asked. Kate shrugged.

“As much as any, I guess. They did like each other from what I know but they knew that unless they got the green light from their families, well…”

“Let me guess, Victoria’s family was very strict and controlling?” Stiles said, thinking back to what he remembered about the woman before she died. Kate blinked.

“Yeah. Very old school, that side. Even more so than the Argents.”

“Huh.”

That actually explained a whole lot. Gerard’s influence probably only strengthened those inherited biases and traits.

“I still don’t see what that has to do with them staying in Beacon Hills,” Julia said. She checked over her runes one last time before drawing one last swirl and activating it. Kate shivered and leaned against the window.
“Christ, woman!” she said. “You’re freezing cold!”

“They dry faster this way,” Julia said, packing away her equipment.

“Cold,” Bobby said. He squinted into the distance and shivered. “Cold is right. Right is cold.”

“A cold one would be nice,” Peter said.

Bobby mumbled to himself. His tone grew more and more urgent as the seconds passed, repeating the litany of “cold is right, right is cold”. Julia reached for him. Not even the ice cold brush of her fingertips pulled Bobby back from where he had disappeared to.

Stiles opened his mouth to—

“Take left the next turn,” Jerry finally said, bored.

The bustling in the car stopped for a second.

“Excuse you?” Peter said. Stiles peered at the nogitsune from the mirror and saw him roll his eyes, surprisingly clear even in the fox form.

“Take left the next turn,” he merely said, waving his tail dismissively. “I’m not repeating myself again.”

Every cell in his body told Stiles to ignore what the nogitsune was saying. He and Peter shared a look, knowing the gamble. However—

“Cold is right,” Bobby said again. His knuckles were white, Stiles noted, worried.

“…Take the left turn,” Stiles said slowly. Peter gave him one last look before complying. It only took several yards before Bobby slumped, exhaling loudly.

Stiles licked his lips.

“We know the layout of the house,” he said, ignoring the implications—confirmation—for now. He wished he had more time to actually go back to the uncomfortably growing list of things left for later. “Where will he wait, Kate?”

“As if I know,” she muttered mutinously before the lines of her mouth tightened. “Upstairs, nearby his office. He took if because of its—its…” her voice trailed off. “Oh my god.”

“What?” Stiles asked sharply. “What did you realise?”

“It’s a last stand,” Kate said and rushed to explain. “Think about it! He must have known we would see his hand prints over everything and follow up on that! That’s why they are going to the Argent house, it’s a fortress, and his office is the vantage point, it has the best view over downstairs and outside!”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Peter argued. “He wouldn’t have known we were here.”

“But Shannon was there,” Kate pointed out. “She could have told him.”

“That’s still not confirmed—”

“I know I’m right!”
“—And even if that was, it still doesn’t explain—”

“She’s right,” Stiles said, pieces falling into their places. The puzzle wasn’t perfect yet but— “Kate is absolutely right. It is a last stand.”

“See!” Kate said at the same time that Peter’s eyes narrowed and he said, “Bullshit.”

“It’s not Gerard’s last stand though,” Stiles said and this time he had the attention of the whole car. His gaze was still focused on the name he had circled three different times while going through the evidence. His gut told him he was right even if he still hadn’t pieced the whole puzzle together.

“It’s Shannon’s.”

***

“Where is Talia?” Elsa demanded to know immediately after Stiles and his pack met her and Lena at their hiding spot.

“Coming,” Stiles said, gaze flickering to Lena. She was still facing the Argent house, head tilted slightly in their direction. “They are picking up Deaton.”

Lena nodded once sharply.

“Run the perimeter,” Stiles said. “And keep watch. We are going to storm through the front door. Follow our steps when you can.”

“You can’t do that!” Elsa said immediately. “You’ll be shot on sight!”

Kate smirked darkly. “That’s why you have me,” she said.

Elsa froze, hate and fear flashing before she could take control of her emotions. Peter subtly changed his leg but the slight rustle made Elsa give him a startled, disbelieving look.

“We know what we are doing,” Peter said. Lena stayed quiet, calculating, even as Stiles knew she was looking for any sign of lie. Even if he couldn’t hear Peter’s heartbeat, he knew it would be steady. After all, they knew what they were doing.

Perhaps it wasn’t the wisest step to take but they knew the risks.

“Fine,” she said shortly. “Backup?”

Peter merely smiled.

“Let’s go, Elsa,” Lena said. Her gaze didn’t leave Peter’s. “Don’t die,” she added, and then she was off, silent as the predator she was. Elsa snarled silently but then she turned to run after her mother.

Julia tugged at Stiles, silently asking him if he was sure this was the right way to go. He could feel her doubt. Stiles smiled slightly.

“Keep your runes ready,” he told her. She nodded.

“Always.”

He glanced at each of his pack and the serious looks they shared.

“Everyone ready?” he asked.
He got nods and quiet agreements for his trouble. His lips twitched and he made a grand gesture, spreading his arms and bowing his head, eyes on Kate.

“After you, Heir Argent.”

Kate tilted her head up, showcasing her upbringing; high enough to show pride, low enough not to leave any visible weak spots. Her gaze fixed on the door and then she was off, marching towards the front door. Stiles immediately found his place one step behind her while Peter took the spot next to him. Julia and Bobby took the rear.

“I hope the joke ends well,” Peter murmured. Stiles blinked.

“What joke?”

“A hunter, a werewolf, and a spark walk into a bar…”

Stiles’ lips twitched. “Kate did say the house had a wine cellar.”

“Hunters haven’t been known for their taste.”

“It’s better than nothing?”

Peter considered that. “Maybe,” he allowed. “Still, the tiles in the bathrooms were a pale yellow against the blue floor. Even if the cupboards were from IKEA, we don’t necessary need to live like in Sweden.”

“Neither of you are invited to my birthday party anymore,” Kate said tightly as they reached the threshold while Julia piped up with a question, “Would that be such a bad thing?”

Kate visibly steeled her back before kicking the door in, cutting any answer Julia might have gotten. The door even bounced back with the force Kate had used but its steam ran out midway, staying ajar.

Well, if they hadn’t gained the residents’ attention yet, there it was.

“You had a key!” Julia’s whisper was more like a yell. Bobby cheered behind them.

“Stiles will pay for that,” Kate said. Stiles spluttered.

“It’s your house!”

Kate flashed him a smirk over her shoulder, the tight line loosening just a pinch.

“But you love me,” she sang. With a whip of her hair, she marched inside the building. Stiles hastily grabbed Peter and pulled him with him. As they stepped over the threshold Peter suddenly tugged their joined hands. When Stiles glanced back at him he could see Peter just barely suppressing his shift.

“What?” he asked quickly. Peter’s end of the bond twitched uneasily.

“There’s no mountain ash barrier.”

“What?” Stiles said, Julia echoing his question behind them. She traced the walls with her hand and then urgently added, “There are no intact protections!”

“What the hell?” Stiles hissed again. They had been counting on that only they would make it inside
and not the rest of the Hales. He hurried after Kate who was already entering the living room, Peter right beside him. He barely managed to avoid hitting her back when she halted right in front of him. The move forced him to twist around her and gave him a full look over the room suspiciously empty of people.

It didn’t look like things were out of order, he thought as he spun around. The couch was where it had been before and the infomercials of the shopping channel were on, the woman on screen insistently preaching about either God or a slow cooker. Stiles wasn’t really certain which it was, but she was very passionate about her newfound light of life in any case.

His eyes narrowed.

Things weren’t out of order, no. However, the longer he looked, the clearer it became that the original setting was set to slow potential enemies down. The furniture—the couch, the tables, the shelves, the decorations on top and the whole plethora—were placed so that it was impossible to jump over them or use them to their advantage.

“There are strange smells inside the house that weren’t here before,” Peter commented, voice low. “Herbs, inks; they remind me of Julia.”

“Shannon?” Stiles asked. Peter shrugged but the way his presence darkened just a shade agreed with Stiles.

“Does it feel like… a darach?” Julia asked quietly. Her hands were twitching, and she crossed her arms around her to hide her unease.

Peter’s nostrils flared the slightest bit and then he shook his head.

“I don’t know,” he said finally. “Just… ingredients. I haven’t met a darach so I wouldn’t know the difference.”

Stiles gave Peter a look. Peter grimaced back at him.

Apparently Jennifer didn’t make it back with the memories although, to be honest, Stiles didn’t think she was a key point in Peter’s life anyway. With the horrors that came before her and after, the only reason Stiles himself had any recollection of her was due to her role in the kidnapping of his father.

While they were talking, Kate had made her way to one of the shelves. She eyed the gathering dust there critically.

“The hidden weapons are gone,” she murmured. She turned back to them. “He’s preparing for something.”

“A move?” Stiles asked. Though running away didn’t sound like Gerard. “California is still under your supervision, is it not?”

“Yeah…” Kate said slowly but her tone was also sceptical. “We’ve been in Beacon Hills for decades. Even my—the previous matriarch grew here. Makes sense, with the way the Nemeton had been acting, but—Gerard didn’t know we fixed it, right?”

“He shouldn’t,” Peter agreed. His brows were knitted together. “If you didn’t even know it existed—but the change in the air was abrupt. If that really was Caldwell back at the shed—”

“She was,” Kate said. Peter rolled his eyes at her.
“We do believe you,” he said. “However, we don’t know what she might have told him. She did know about Stiles’… inclinations.”

Stiles grimaced while Kate’s eyes widened. “Shit,” she said. “I had forgotten about that!”

Something crashed. Stiles’ head whipped around and he saw Bobby stand over a side table. There were pieces of a vase by his feet.

“Come oooout!” he sing-sang loudly. “You little circle jerk fuckers! We know you are heeeeeeeereeeeee!”

He paused, squinting at the bookshelf. “Also, why’s the rum gone?” he asked. Stiles sighed.

“Because they’ve taken the hobbits to Isengard,” he answered. Bobby nodded seriously.

“The white guy was a fucker,” he said. “Typical entitlement.”

Stiles blinked once, twice.

Right.

“Hi, Gerard,” Kate called out and, shit, Stiles was going to break his neck at this pace. He found Gerard standing over the room exactly on the spot Kate had pointed out earlier—not all of his habits broken, he thought—and he was not alone.

There, right beside him, stood Shannon.

“Kate,” Gerard said. “You are back.”

Kate cocked her head to the side. “What, no warm welcoming for your only daughter?”

“You left,” Gerard answered. “I don’t think I have any left.”

“Father of the year award,” Stiles said, unable to help himself. Peter sent him a look, but Stiles didn’t have time to appreciate it when Gerard directed his next words towards him.

“I’ve heard many things about you too, Stiles.”

“All lies, I assure you,” he quipped back. Gerard huffed, almost amused.

“All of you,” he said. “The four that became five.” The little humour in his voice died as he continued, “And you let a mutt into my house, Kate.”

Kate’s end of the bond flashed in rage.

“That’s my decision, now wasn’t it?” she said, smile all teeth. “As the future matriarch.”

“What kind of a matriarch let’s the scum get into her head?” Gerard spat at her. “You have changed, Katherine. You are no longer the person who was named the Heir.”

“I’ve been an Heir since I was born, Gerard,” she replied. “It was not your decision, it was your well-loved tradition. And if I decide to make new ones, then that’s my business, isn’t it?”

“Not while I’m still in charge!” The anger in Gerard’s voice was palpable.

“It’s raining, it’s pouring,” Shannon said next to him, muted and somehow gray. There was almost
nothing left of the vivacious, determined woman Stiles had met the day he arrived to the past. She was even colder now than she had been just weeks ago in St. Louis.

“I agree,” Gerard said, eyeing them in distaste. “Filthy rabble, all of you.”

Two men stepped from the direction of the dining room and one—shit, it was Dick, Stiles had been right—appeared on the second floor, walking down the stairs towards them. All of them had guns out, still thankfully directed towards the floor.

Which would probably change in a matter of a second, should Gerard call for it.

Stiles’ senses tingled, and he grabbed the thing closest to him—a small ornament—and threw it to his left. His eyes widened as he watched it hit a man in his forties to the forehead. The curses were loud, and Stiles could see red crawling down the man’s face.

The glinting metallic silver caught his attention. His heartbeat sped up as the realisation dawned on him.

Someone had just tried to shoot at their backs.

Peter stood still, his nails curling into claws. Julia rubbed against her arms. Bobby was quiet now that he had drawn out the confrontation, his fur collar nowhere to be seen.

“Love is a disease,” Bobby mumbled but the rest was quickly drowned by yells on the outside. Someone even roared—it sounded like Talia.

“What is happening?” Kate demanded. “What are you doing?”

Gerard didn’t do anything but grin, but Stiles was watching Shannon from the corner of his eye even when he tried to keep the now murderous-looking man in his sight. He wished he had a third eye because it was—fuck, he swore inwardly, focusing completely on the murder man.

“I’ll give you one more chance, Katherine,” Gerard called out. “Turn back, and—”

“Fuck you!” Kate screamed, and Stiles could hear the tell-tale swish as a knife was thrown. By the resulting whack, it unfortunately sounded like it hit wood instead of flesh.

“Thank you, Shannon,” Gerard said. Stiles’ mouth formed a thin line. He still couldn’t see what her end game was. She wasn’t stupid, she had to see that there was more to Kate’s mom’s murder than supernatural, see Gerard’s hand all over it.

Then why…?

“Thankfully we still have Allison,” Gerard commented, and—no. Gerard’s voice tightened. “Kill them!”

Vines sprout through the floor, twisting and turning around until they formed a living shield against the storm of bullets. Stiles burst through before they could cage him in, engaging the man he had hit in combat and—

The man fell forward in what seemed like too good to be true, but Stiles was there, taking the chance and burying the enchanted knife into the man’s chest.

He fell down, twitching a few times, before falling still. Stiles blinked.

How on earth did one of Gerard’s elite just die—that fast?

The shadows underneath the man moved and glared at Stiles before flickering and dispersing.

“Get it, Scrappy!” Bobby cheered. Stiles blanched.

“He is totally not Scrappy!” he protested, drawing out the blade, now stickier and somehow muddily shinier than before. He wasn’t their anything! “He doesn’t need a character!”

“Awww!” Bobby whined before pausing. “True. That’s Kate, isn’t she?”

“I’ll smother you while you sleep if you don’t take that back, Shaggy!” Kate yelled, diving to avoid a blow and rolling, only to stop in mid-motion and kicking the feet from under from who might have been her mentor number two. Stiles remembered the blond curls from one of her stories—

He could see through. The vines. His head snapped back to Gerard and Shannon and—yes, there it was. Shannon was holding her hand up and her mouth was moving. Julia gasped and rushed out of the way before the floor caved in where she had just stood a second ago.

“Can we just forget that stupid show for one minute?” Peter shouted from the midst of the chaos.

Bobby grasped at his shirt for a brief second before taking cover, bullets hitting the cabinet instead of him. “Never!” he declared.

“Then perish,” Stiles mumbled. He swiped over his runes and disappeared from sight, rushing towards the stairs where he could see Gerard take aim. He bared his teeth in anger, entirely wolf-like. Before he could jump up the stairs, the step right in front of him blew into bits and pieces. The used cartridge spun in the air past Stiles’ cheek as he stumbled and fell to his back, his control over his spark slipping from his fingers.

“You… you know magic,” Gerard breathed in disbelief. Stiles shook his head, trying to clear his head and calm his racing heart. He found Gerard’s weapon aimed at him.

“So you didn’t know all about us, huh?” Stiles groaned. He attempted to slowly sit up but the pipe snapped to point from his general direction to his head. He immediately paused in his movements.

“No,” Gerard said slowly. “I knew there was something sinister about you. You stumbled into my life, took my daughter, and made sure I couldn’t even protest. Attempted to protest to deny your part in all of it.”

Stiles blinked, and he suddenly wanted to groan again.

“First Peter, and now Kate?” he said. “I don’t use my magic that way! I can’t.”

“No wonder she left us so easily,” Gerard said. It seemed like he was talking to himself but—with the staring in Stiles’ direction and Shannon’s matching movements to his—it could be that he just wanted to monologue. Stiles hated villain monologues.

Could someone just—?

Bobby’s scream broke out, deafening Stiles’ thoughts. Without any care for his own safety, he twisted around, only to see Bobby lying on the ground and Jerry hissing, shadows turning into a form of a fox, tearing into Dick’s flesh like it was paper.

Dick screamed, loud and shrill as blood poured from his wounds, and fell to the floor. Bits and
pieces of his muscles were torn from his body and hit the floor as the fox—nine tails and all—bit into him, leaving only bones with some sinew holding on.

“Oh my god,” Stiles heard Julia whisper and gag. The whole room had gone silent as they watched in sick horror.

Dick gurgled. His eyes bulged and then he was silent, tongue ripped from his mouth. The sickening cracks of his now broken rib cage were loud as gunshots. From the hole in Dick’s chest, Stiles saw the nogitsune pull out his heart and place it inside Dick’s mouth.

Jerry said nothing as he stepped away, leaving Dick to lie in his own blood and torn out flesh, his still beating heart in his mouth. Dick’s muffled sobs and whimpers died suddenly and, if it wasn’t for the visible beat of the heart, Stiles could have sworn he had died. But no, he was still alive, merely passed out... for now.

The nogitsune wasn’t a creature known for his mercy.

Jerry—he still called the creature Jerry, Stiles thought almost hysterically—surrounded Bobby just a few steps away and his stance screamed daring them to come any closer.

“What the fuck is that?” one of Kate’s former mentors, the one without blond curls, grunted in disgust.

“That is a kitsune,” Shannon said, her monotone voice breaking the silence inside the room. Stiles could vaguely hear fighting from outside through a broken window, but it seemed so faraway in comparison. “No… not an ordinary kitsune. A dark fox spirit.”

“The Hale pack has summoned a demon to aid them,” Gerard said. “First the witch and now the demon. See, Caldwell? These are the beasts that slayed Elizabeth, that aided the bastard Deucalion!”

Shannon’s stare turned icy.

“He’s lying!” Kate’s voice rang through the room. She attempted to move towards the stairs but the hole in the floor stopped her march. “Shannon, can’t you see? He’s spouting whiter lies than… than… he’s controlling you!” she pleaded.

Shannon didn’t even look in Kate’s direction, stare directed towards the nogitsune.

“We need to remove them all,” Gerard continued. “Remember? I promised you we would get them all. They are all here, even the alpha is outside. We can end everything tonight.”

“Tonight,” Shannon repeated. She turned towards Gerard. “Do you promise that? That I can end everything tonight?”

Gerard’s smile was grotesque in its triumph.

“I promise.”

Shannon spread her arms and Stiles could see the watery illusion break and runes appear on her body where he could see in the now half-broken lights. The house moaned as it shook, and Stiles fell back to the floor from where he had attempted to rise back up. He saw the blond hunter jump on Peter and stab him. Peter howled, tearing the knife away, and attacking the man. Julia stumbled, and she was muttering increasingly fast, pouring everything she had into battling against Shannon’s spell. As the ground shook a little less, sweat pouring down Julia’s forehead for the effort, Kate threw herself with a yell against the other mentor left, locking them in combat.
Pieces of the floor fell into the hole, causing multiple crashing sounds beneath them. The sudden pungent smell made Stiles’ eyes water.

“There went the wine,” he whined, rolling onto all fours and climbing up quickly. He was starting to sound like Bobby.

Bobby.

The ground suddenly stopped shaking and Julia fell to her knees, gasping as the strain lifted. Shannon wiped her forehead as well, her breathing laboured. Gerard lifted his shotgun again, aiming straight at Julia.

He fired.

Stiles watched almost in slow motion as the cartridge flew across the room. His arm reached towards it, willing to stop it, but he knew he wouldn’t be fast enough. Fear spiked through his very being.

He was only human.

But Peter wasn’t.

Tackling Julia to the ground, the shot flew past them only to reach Bobby and Jerry. One of Jerry’s tails caught the cartridge and the ear-grating yowl pierced through the air. Stiles winced and he saw even Gerard twitch as the hate-filled glare found him.

Stiles spun around and threw a long-forgotten book at the hunter Peter had left behind. It hit the back of his head with a smack, even forcing him to take a few steps to the side. It was enough for Peter to find his way back up and stand half-crouched over Julia, preparing for anything the hunters would attempt.

Stiles swiped over his runes again and appeared behind the hunter who was answering Kate’s blows by blow. Kate’s eyes widened and, almost as if expecting it, she dropped to the ground and Stiles kicked the hunter on the back. It forced the hunter to roll forward and then he was trapped by the greenery Julia had coaxed back to life.

“Thanks!” Stiles yelled, rushing past Kate again as he more felt than saw another shot fly past where he had just been. Kate rolled to her feet as well and there they were, standing, waiting, for the pair who were slowly walking down the stairs towards the rest of them.

“It’s raining, it’s pouring,” Shannon repeated her words from before.

Gerard glanced at her and huffed.

“Perhaps,” he said.

Peter howled and Julia shrieked, drawing Stiles’ attention like a beacon. Julia was desperate trying to hold onto the vines, but they were breaking apart, the hunter trapped in them having made a couple successful lunges towards them as well as the other one still circling them. Peter grit his teeth next to her, sharp red claw marks around his middle.

The trail of his blood led to near the slithering tails of the nogitsune.

His distraction was costly.

Stiles felt searing pain and his breath escaped him. His shoulder burned. His shirt was immediately
wet as blood started pouring from the wound there.

The echo of the gunshot pulsed alongside the rush in his ears.

Stiles stumbled around, staring at the gun aimed at him. Gerard’s grin spread with malice.

Kate stood half-way to Stiles, half-way to Peter and Julia. Her terror made her unable to move either way. It broke when the vines finally broke and the two hunters tag-teamed the still wounded Peter and increasingly exhausted Julia. She threw all she had on the blond hunter, kicking and screaming her frustration, gaze distractedly trying to keep Stiles in her sight.

“No need to finish it off so quickly?” Stiles said. His voice trembled with the strain of trying to keep himself focused. The hand that was pressed against his shoulder shook.

“You are a thorn I will enjoy destroying,” Gerard agreed. He quickly lowered the weapon and only the adrenaline saved Stiles’ knee from exploding. As it was the shot grazed him and he couldn’t help falling on one knee.

A fierce, angry yell sounded behind Stiles, followed by a masculine yelp, and then Gerard had to twist around to avoid another knife thrown at him.

“That aim is beautiful,” he commented like he was talking about the weather. His gaze locked on Stiles. “As soon as we kill you, your spell will break. I’ll have my Kate back again.”

Stiles couldn’t help laughing.

No matter the timeline, Gerard was batshit insane.

“As if that would help,” he chortled. Gerard’s eyes narrowed, the grip on his shotgun whitening.

“What have you done to her?!” he demanded again. Stiles shook his head—or more like lolled it around. He could feel numbness slowly spread around his body as the blood loss was starting to hit him.


“You little—!”

Stiles could only watch as Gerard’s gun pointed straight at his face. He felt his heart stop as he watched Gerard pull the trigger.

It clicked. Once. Twice. Three times.

Stiles couldn’t help it; he only laughed louder.

Gerard swore, fumbling for his shells. When he couldn’t find any, he threw the gun away and grabbed the knife Kate had thrown at him and pulled it out of the staircase railing.

“No!” Kate yelled, echoed by Peter’s furious roar of a howl. It was answered by multiple others, but they were far, too far.

Gerard took a step closer—

—Only to stop as Shannon stayed his arm.

“What now?!” Gerard barked.
Shannon didn’t even blink at the tone directed at her. “You promised me,” she said. “You promised that I could end it all tonight.”

Gerard’s eyes widened momentarily and then he laughed in mad glee.

“Be my guest!” he said, victorious grin spreading on his lips. He even took a couple of steps away to clear Shannon’s view of Stiles.

“No!” Kate yelled again, and this time Stiles could hear the sound of someone heavy falling down the hole on the floor. Three, four, five long strides later Kate was there, near again, but with Gerard stepping in, she was still too far.

“Don’t you dare!” she screamed. She tried to look past Gerard at Shannon who had reached for a gun of her own, slowly directing it toward Stiles. Stiles could hear the effort she put in her blows but, as it was, Stiles was twenty years in the past. If Gerard at sixty-something could kick his skinny ass, then the Gerard now was in top shape.

With the sound she made, Kate was knocked down for her effort, her emotions getting over her—and Stiles as well. He was momentarily overwhelmed by the desperation felt by his whole pack, alongside Peter’s pain and feelings of impotency, Kate’s rage and fiery hate, and Julia’s spiking exhausted anxiety.

Stiles’ world slowed as he watched Shannon raise her gun one inch at a time.

Peter roared again from where he was being held-off by the last remaining hunter. Julia tried swiping over her runes, panic manifesting on her features as she found them messed up by the cuts over her skin; and Jerry kept circling Bobby’s prone body in his animal form, hissing and spitting at anyone who got too close—ally or enemy.

Shannon smiled. Suddenly it was like a veil had been lifted from upon her, from doom and gloom to a bright and angelic manifestation of bottomless joy that made her seem years younger, almost as youthful as if she had been merely a teen. It nearly blinded Stiles with the pleasure she radiated. As her gun halted, her face twitched, flashing the dark, twisted look she had born earlier.

“It’s raining, it’s pouring,” she hummed, her words like honeyed wine. If possible, her grin got even wider—and sharper.

“The old man is snoring.”

She cocked her gun with a click, the firing almost deafening despite the general noise level, and the bullet hit home.

***

Stiles’ world sped up as he twisted around, enough to see, not enough to show Shannon his back; he had learned his lesson. Gerard fell on the floor with a gurgled gasp, clawing at his stomach. Kate stared at him as he fell to his knees, sprinkles of blood dotting her face. It made her look paler than she was.

Shannon let out a twinkling giggle and she almost bounced to where Gerard was already trying to turn to see his attacker.

“A bullet to the back?” Gerard rasped. Blood trickled down his chin. Shannon’s smile dimmed a little, the dark edge fighting its way back, but it was still eerily pleasant. It reminded Stiles of a circling predator—less like Gerard and more like the nogitsune. “The Tribunal would be appalled.”
“Oh, I’m sure,” Shannon said. Her boots clacked on the floor as she kicked the legs from under Gerard, leaving him sprawled on the ground. She sighed dreamily.

“I’ve been dreaming of this for so long,” she said reverently. Her fingers caressed the glinting silver of her gun.

“For you to hit the pa—patriarch—”


“You won’t survi—ve,” Gerard rasped. He attempted to get up, but Shannon kicked his arm and crushed it under her boot. Gerard howled in pain. Stiles swore he could hear a crack.

“I’m sure,” Shannon repeated. Her bright smile was back. “I don’t care.”

She cocked her gun again and Gerard’s eyes widened.

“For Elizabeth,” Shannon said, her words a prayer, and then Gerard’s head snapped back under the force of the bullet now lodged between his eyes. Shannon didn’t stop until her gun clicked multiple times in vain, announcing its emptiness to the whole room.

Stiles couldn’t help but stare at the disfigured face of the man he had once hated—and probably still hated—the most in the world. One of his eyes had popped under the assault and there was brain matter decorating the side of his head. His left arm was curled above his head, just shy of Kate’s frozen foot.

“He bumped his head on the top of the bed…” Shannon sang under her breath, the children’s song twisting on her tongue like a lullaby. Her shoulders cracked as she stretched with slow and careful movements, the empty gun falling from her limp grip.

“…And couldn’t get up in the morning.”

Chapter End Notes

:D

Find me on tumblr.

PS. Is there a tag I should be using? Because if there is something you feel like is missing or needs to be tagged, I would like to know. I've been trying my best but I'm pretty blind with my own writing. It's a curse, really.

PPS. Synonym game heavily inspired by a tumblr post I can no longer find but which helped to kick my ass into shape!
In which the gravity hurts

Chapter Notes

Managed to fight this chapter into submission, finally. There have been many a midnight duel until unconsciousness, let me tell you. The mistakes found inside are my battle scars.

Just kidding. Somewhat. Maybe. What I'm not kidding about is that one poor soul took it upon themselves to translate this monster into Russian. And asked a friend to make a cover for that which they allowed me to use as well :D If interested, check out Hisaribi (translator) and ctrkun-i-raduga (the wonderful artist), both of whom have made my day many times over! I'm adding the picture to the beginning of the story sometime soon when I'm not dead on my feet and posting it on tumblr if you are interested in that as well :) (You should be, it's so pretty!)

However, without further ado, enjoy the new chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

If it wasn’t for the dying echoes of the lullaby and the little wheezes behind them, one could have heard a pin drop. Well, Stiles thought dazedly, you probably still could. Mostly. Probably. He barely heard anything past the rush in his ears.

“You killed him,” Kate said. The expression on her face was frozen; dumbfounded and drowned in disbelief. “You actually killed him.”

“And you wouldn’t have?” Shannon asked.

Kate’s mouth snapped shut.

“That was such a cliché,” Stiles blurted out and winced. That wasn’t what he meant to— “And creepy. Definitely creepy, oh my god. A kids’ song, really?”

Shannon gave him a look and sneered, “It was Elizabeth’s favourite, not that it matters to you.”

Stiles had a sudden image a faceless woman singing Kate about death and murder.

It would explain so much.

Except—no, not really.

Not anymore.

“And, what? You did it all for the dramatic flair? I have so many issues with that that I don’t know how to count that high.” And Stiles really should know how to bite his tongue but in for a penny—

“All this for revenge.” It wasn’t even question, the way Kate said it. Her gaze slowly fell from Shannon to Gerard, the little pieces of the adrenaline-filled warrior that she was slowly fading from view, leaving behind only an untouched canvas. “Did you act that way to fool Gerard too?”
The silent ‘to fool me’ broke Stiles’ heart.

Shannon’s expression was carefully blank before she painted a carefree smile on her face. It didn’t outward but Stiles could feel the inner flinch Kate made.

“He really fell for it, didn’t he?” Shannon leaned back enough to assume a less confrontational pose—and to move closer to Stiles. He slowly inched backwards and fumbled until he was standing. Fuck, his shoulder hurt. “Are you criticizing my plan? You were the one to walk in what could have been essentially a trap, little K.”

Kate’s eyes widened the barest bit. “Don’t call me that,” she said.

Shannon frowned, and she pursed her lips, eyes narrowing.

“And it worked, didn’t it?” Stiles hastily tackled the issue, drawing Shannon’s attention.

“You could have killed her,” Shannon said. She kicked one of Gerard’s legs off her path and took a step towards Stiles and then another. “He could have killed her.”

“And now you show care for her wellbeing?” Stiles wished he could project his derision. Shannon scoffed.

“Don’t speak like you know anything.”

Stiles drawled in response, “Yeaaah, no. I don’t dare to think I know what goes in on that head of yours. Except that your plan was just as stupid and harebrained as ours. More than, I would say.”

That was something he could say with confidence.

After all, he really didn’t know Shannon at all—in the past-future.

It could also be argued he knew shit about her now either. Other than that she was batshit—

“Besides,” he continued, his voice hitching as his shoulder moved painfully. “Living for revenge? Yeah, let me just change the channel. ‘Living well’ as the ultimate fuck you is a far superior deal in my opinion.”

But if it came with spilling tea and cold dishes, well, who was he to deny the delicacies?

Shannon took a couple snappish steps towards him but then Peter was there, covering Stiles, and Kate was at Shannon’s back. Shannon froze.

She reminded Stiles of a cornered predator.

“Kate, little K,” Shannon said. “You don’t really want to do this.”

Kate’s knife flashed in the flickering light where it was pointing at Shannon’s back.

“That’s my mom’s nickname,” she hissed. “Not yours. You don’t get to use it.”

Shannon hissed, “Elizabeth would’ve wanted her death to be avenged. She didn’t want to die in a ditch, betrayed by her husband.”

“No,” Kate said resolutely. “No.”

“Oh, she would have.” Shannon turned around, unafraid of showing Peter her back. Stiles had to
wonder what was going on in her head.

“Mom didn’t like unnecessary deaths!”

“These weren’t unnecessary,” Shannon spat. The muscles on her back flexed and Peter let out a low growl only Stiles could hear. “These useless, spineless pieces of shit don’t get to prance on her grave and declare themselves kings. Their days were numbered the moment they even thought of turning on her.

“Don’t say you wouldn’t do the same, Katherine.”

Kate stiffened and her grip on her knife tightened even more, a feat Stiles didn’t know was possible. Shannon tilted her head the tiniest bit, her hair cascading on her other shoulder. It was messy and tangled and probably needed scissors rather than a comb.

“You and I are very similar, Kate. We could do great things together, burn it all to the ground and build upon the ashes.”

Bobby’s words rang in Stiles’ ears, matching the alarm that zapped between Peter and him.

“Wouldn’t that be perfect?” Shannon continued, oblivious—or pretending to be—to the thickening air around her.

Kate’s mouth was a narrow line.

“What have you done?” she asked, her ashen face matching her knuckles.

Shannon smiled, and her tone reminded Stiles of the dreamy smile when she killed Gerard.

“I am going to destroy everything,” she said. Stiles’ heart skipped a beat. “The whole system is corrupt. No one cares about anything but themselves, no one would even look an inch deeper if it might cause harm to one of their own—this world is rotting inside out, and I will see it that they all get their just rewards!”

Her words reverberated around the mostly destroyed room.

Kate’s blade was steady even as her voice wavered, “You’re mad. You are madder than Gerard.”

Shannon hissed and stepped forward. Kate’s eyes widened as she stared where her knife pierced Shannon’s shirt and was resting against her chest.

“Don’t. Compare me to. Him.”

And Kate—

Kate took a step back.

“You’re—you’re going after the Tribunal,” Kate said flatly despite the shock filling her features.

And that was when Stiles understood.

“War,” he said, dread drowning him. “You’re waging war between the hunters and the supernatural. You aren’t just going to attempt to kill one or the other, you’re going to—shit. Shitshitshitshit—”

He—
The war was back.

Oh god, Shannon had triggered events that weren’t supposed to happen at all.

“How will that solve anything?!” Stiles yelled. He could feel a panic attack coming. Oh god, he had messed up big time, what had he done wrong, where had he gone wrong?! “You are sending the whole world into chaos!”

He could feel something—someone—pounding his bundle of bonds but he couldn’t—he—

“Like it isn’t one already!” Shannon snapped back, head thrown to glare at him, the whites of her eyes more pronounced. “Dirty creatures against self-righteous sons of bitches! Better they are both destroyed and this rotten world with them!”

“You loved her, didn’t you?” Julia said suddenly, words clear and cutting through the tension. Shannon froze. Her head twisted around slowly to look straight at Julia.

Julia swallowed uneasily. “I’m right, aren’t I?” she asked, voice trembling. “Everyone—everything—that had something to do with her—they have to go, don’t they? It wasn’t just—you were—”

Kate didn’t wince, but her face lost the little colour it had tried to gain. Shannon stared at Julia. Peter inched closer, reaching Shannon’s line of view, attempting to draw her attention, but Shannon’s eyes didn’t even flicker, so set on Julia she was.

She praised her with a dark, “Clever girl.”

Julia wasn’t too taken with the compliment. She raised her shaking hands, the only runes she had left shining and ready to protect—

“Everything needs to burn,” Stiles stated, mind whirling. “That’s why you removed the mountain ash line and destroyed the wards. When the Tribunal made their way here, they would find evidence of a fight and immediately point fingers at the Hales—the same Hales who are outside, no doubt making more evidence against themselves.” A thought flashed, almost too fast to catch, but with everything and, dear lord, Bobby why—he swallowed.

His voice was hoarse when he said, “We didn’t trigger the trap, did we? They did. You left people outside. A little further down the road, the main roads, to watch and burn. Knowing they could die tonight, no doubt trying to follow your orders to—”

“The Tribunal will find werewolves, druids and a spark,” Shannon said. She finally moved her eyes to meet Stiles’ again. “They will know that the Clan Argent was wiped out by third-class rubble. They will hear more and more about attacks against the mundane. They will burn themselves in the process of burning the world and whether I live to watch that happen or not, I will reunite with Elizabeth with my head held high and her praise as my eternal thanks.”

The air was as dead as the bodies around them.

“You are wrong,” Kate said. Her voice wavered for a moment, but it gained strength as she burst out, “You are wrong!”

Kate was on Shannon before Stiles could react. Her low swipe of a kick forced Shannon off-balance, but she was quick on her feet and locked on with Kate on her next hit.

“You are so wrong!” Kate repeated. “My mom would never want anything like that! You—you should know that, you should know better than anyone.”
“You don’t see it, Kate,” Shannon merely replied with an impatient huff. Her arm rose towards her, as if offering her a hand, and continued imploring, “You will. Come with me. We’ll make the world the way it should be.”

Kate blinked, her jaw dropping the slightest bit, eyes hazing a bit before clearing again as Julia’s runes flashed and died for the final time. Something akin to an inner alarm sent shivers down Stiles’ back. Kate let out a giggle that died off the moment it sprang to life.

“No,” she said, disbelief and hurt written on her face. “You don’t see me, do you?”

Shannon’s brows furrowed, confused, and she said, “I can see you just fine.”

Kate slowly shook her head.

“No. You—no, you don’t. You’re just like Gerard, aren’t you?” she said. Shannon’s face morphed into a picture of outrage. Kate continued, her words weighing in the air like they were made from iron. “You only see what you want to see. He wanted a perfect heir to his genocide… and so do you. The only difference is that you want to see me as a copy of my mom instead of—one of yourself.

“I was never anything to you, was I?” Kate took a step back, intentionally this time, and stopped there, even when it looked like she wanted nothing more than to flee. “An afterthought. A token that was created in mom’s image. Blond hair, brown eyes. You never saw past her. You couldn’t. She’s your world even now, isn’t she?”

Kate looked straight into Shannon’s eyes. Stiles immediately hated the dead look in her own.

“All you ever wanted was a weapon,” she said.

And that’s all I ever was to anyone.

The air around Shannon electrified and she reached—

Stiles would never recover the memories of the following seconds. One moment he was standing slightly to the side, his shoulder aflame and his world cracking under him, and the next he was standing behind Shannon’s crumpled body on the floor. His fist hurt even more than his shoulder did, numbing the pain, but it was nothing next to the devastation that surrounded Kate.

“Kate?” he rasped. Kate blinked.

And then she rushed off.

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Kate ran outside. She felt awful, sick, ill in a way she never had before.

Her—Gerard was dead.

Shannon was insane. She had tried—tried to—

She was—Kate was—

She could see Liam on the ground, still as the dead. Sandra—she was there, keeping up with what looked like Peter’s aunt. There were bodies littered on the ground, mostly moving and groaning, eyeing the opposite side distrustfully.

Simon, Reaver, Fred, Nat, Sofia, everyone—hunters Kate had known since she was a child—lodged
in combat with the wolves of Beacon Hills.

“Stop it!” she yelled, stopping at the edge of the battlefield. Feet skipped to a stop next to her and she could feel the heat radiate from Peter.

No one heard her.

No one ever heard her.

“Stop it!” she tried again. Nothing again; no one even spared a look in her direction. “Stop it, stop it, stop it, STOP IT—!”

Peter howled, loud and deafening, as Kate felt her vocal cords chafe under the litany of her scream. It was enough for a momentary halt, stopping Talia in mid-lunge and Nat from stabbing a wolf with long hair in the side. Kate took it as the sign that it was and rushed forward. She stopped only as she was in the middle of it all, facing the hunters as Peter did his blood family.

“Heir Argent,” Sandra said, gritting teeth. “Step aside.”

Kate dug her heels to the ground and glared. She knew what she looked like. Hair wild and messy, scratches and torn clothing, stature short in comparison to most hunters that were at least half a head taller than her. She knew her skin was pale, blotched with red, and dirty, and that she looked nothing like the ‘respectable’ figures in her life. She knew that most of the respect she had gained was due to her lineage and deeds of her mother and—Gerard.

“That is no longer my title,” she stated, voice flat. Sandra’s eyes widened as Kate continued, mouth living a life on its own and spilling words she didn’t know were hers before she heard her own voice, “From now on, you will call me Matriarch Argent, as Gerard Argent has been stripped from his position due to the revelation and then execution over murder of the previous Matriarch Elizabeth Amelie Argent.”

“What?!” Reaver stepped forward. His brows met in the middle, forming a deep crease. “Is this true?”

“It is,” Kate said. She took strength in the knowledge that Peter was right behind her, back against her back.

She had to get them to stop.

She met Sandra’s eyes straight on, knowing she was the de-facto leader in most regular missions. “And I have proof.”

“Very well, Matriarch,” Sandra said slowly, as if she was just humouring her for the moment. Her weapons hadn’t lowered an inch and her gaze strayed back to the Hales. “We will deal with that later then. Please, step aside. The beasts have invaded the Argent lands and broken the treaty.”

“What was left of it,” Talia said. Kate couldn’t see it, but she was sure her eyes were as red as Kate’s hands. She had killed her own hunters— “Your former leader murdered an allied pack in our territory. You murdered one of our own. That was a clear breach of the agreement. We demand justice.”

“Lies and slander—” Sandra glared but Kate interrupted her.

“Alpha Hale isn’t wrong,” she said. Sandra’s eyes snapped back to Kate’s. Kate raised her chin. “Gerard Argent, along with Shannon Caldwell and a few Argent hunters, plotted and executed the
plan. The full scope is—unknown as of now,” her heart stuttered at the half-truth, as she was ashamed, so ashamed, “—but it can be deduced that they were attempting to bring down a war between us.

“Step down, Hunter Sandra Moran,” Kate’s voice bore no room for insubordination. “Your Matriarch orders you. Disobey, and you shall abandon all your ties to the Clan Argent.”

Sandra stiffened before bowing. She took a few steps back, weapons lowering although not completely disappearing. Kate gave her a look but didn’t force her to completely forgo them. If she had, she didn’t think a revolt was far behind for her to side so fully in the supernatural side.

She had no control over her life. If she could do at least one good thing before the last blow to the card house she lived in—

She finally tuned in to the heated discussion Peter was having with his sister. Kate tilted her head back just a bit but didn’t turn around from facing her regrouping hunters.

Liam and Elise, she counted, eyeing the bodies. She would have to send a word to their families.

“—they hurt us and killed Matt,” Talia argued, furious. “You can’t expect us to—!”

“And you killed two of theirs,” Peter hit back. His back was stiff, and Kate could feel his grief twisting inside, sharing the pain that was inside her and she that was inside him. “Do you think I’m happy with how things turned out? Do you think I wanted anyone to die?”

“No, of course not—!”

“They followed you to a fight,” Peter said, quieter this time, as the commotion was dying around them. “Matt followed you. I know it hurts—god, do I know that—but it wasn’t their fault. They were misled. And you knew how things could turn.”

Talia snarled. “You went to the Argent house head first, with no cover,” she spat out. “What happened to the multiple plans you were boasting earlier?”

“You’ll find that it wasn’t him who said that, if you aren’t too deep into your fury,” Kate said. Her heart skipped a beat when Talia’s bloody eyes fell on her, but she kept her stance relaxed not to rouse another bout of fighting. She could handle no more. She was filled almost to the brim. Just a little more and she would— “And I am sorry for your loss.”

“What would a hunter know about loss?” Elsa growled from where she was kneeling next to Matt’s prone body, tear tracks staining her shifted features. Kate pursed her mouth.

“Don’t fling your anger at the innocent,” chided Peter. Elsa’s eyes widened.

“Innocent? Innocent?!”

“Gerard Argent is dead,” Peter announced, repeating Kate’s earlier words. “Shannon Caldwell has been taken into custody. There have been lives lost but also wheels set into motion. We need a united front to face the future.

“United front? With the beasts?” Nat questioned in disbelief. Kate turned back to the hunters under her clan.

“Yes,” she said tightly. “With the supernatural people and the ones aware of them.”
Nat wasn’t deterred though. “But they deserve—”

“And I will be cutting you off now, because I don’t want to hear what I think you are trying to say,” Kate said. The woman’s eyes narrowed, and Kate crossed her arms, daring her to continue.

She didn’t.

“Elena is fine now,” a calm voice sounded from behind the wolves. Deaton rose to his feet, Lena standing wobbly as well with his help.

“She could have been the second death,” Talia said, voice low with threat.

“And she wasn’t because we stopped things from escalating further,” Peter said. He tilted his head as if listening to something—or someone—and Kate knew her guess was correct when he added, “Caldwell has been secured. The inside of the house is messy, but we should move there anyway before we are caught. It’s a miracle we haven’t been found yet.”

“That would be Alan.” Kate saw Deaton bow his head to Talia. “And inside? Back to the trap?”

“The mountain ash line has been broken and there are no wards except the ones Julia is making and Stiles is currently powering,” Peter said, conveniently leaving out that it wasn’t their particular doing. “And only to ensure Caldwell is contained.”

Talia’s eyes flickered on Peter’s chest. Peter’s brows rose but his voice was more amused than offended.

“Do you not trust me?”

“I don’t trust your judgement,” Talia snapped. A brief flash of hurt before it was contained, that was all that Kate felt from Peter.

“In that case, if it’s too much, then we’ll discuss later. I’ll be following my pack and you can lead yours,” Peter said, turning his back to Talia and starting his way back to the house. Kate motioned the Argent hunters to follow her, ignoring the wolves.

“I want you on stand-by,” she said as they were walking. “The three of the least injured will join us to guard Tribunal hunter Caldwell until we can explain the situation to the Tribunal. The rest, I want you to go rest. Since the house is in ruins inside, check in a motel and forward the bill to me. Schedule the guards, eight-hour shifts, three a day.”

Sandra scowled.

“Reaver, Fred, with me. The rest of you, follow the orders.”

With glances and scowls, the hunters dispersed. Kate pursed her lips.

“Before…” she said, and then sighed. “Please cremate the fallen and hide the evidence. We’ll stand guard until then.”

Sandra schooled her features and bowed.

“Yes, Matriarch Argent.”

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“What on earth were you thinking!!” Talia screamed at Peter. They had relocated to one of the
rooms not particularly affected by the previous fight. It was a bedroom of some sort, with just enough personal touch that Stiles wouldn’t count it as meant for guests. He didn’t have any idea whose it was though.

He sat next to Shannon’s prone body. She was still unconscious—or rather, still in her enforced sleep. He had decided with Julia that it was the best to keep her asleep as long as they could. They had seen the traces of her magic, the influence she had tried to inflict on Kate—and who knew how many hunters had been given subtle hints over time as well—and it was overall the best decision. They didn’t know her, not really, as the evening had proved. “Prancing through the front door to a trap! Our parents would be horrified!”

“There wasn’t a choice, Talia,” Peter said calmly, or as calmly as he could. Stiles felt the tension tingle between their bond, the ‘this was about us before it was about you’ lingering unsaid. Because, while that was absolutely true, the reverse was too.

And now—

“He’s right,” Kate said. Stiles gave her a look, but she didn’t acknowledge it. He was worried. He had felt her devastation and how it had been condensed into this simmering ball inside her. He was worried what it would do to her when it finally erupted. “The door was the only entrance. I should know, I lived here for years.”

“You can’t say there’s no other ways out of here,” Talia said, eyes narrowed. Kate shrugged.

“Out, yes—and only out. And no, I’m not telling you where they are,” she said. “Trade secret, I’m sure you’ll understand.”

Stiles watched as Talia had to swallow her retort. Because, yes, she did understand. Just like she wouldn’t tell anyone where their escape routes lied.

“That still doesn’t explain the recklessness of your plan,” she insisted.

“Kate was our front,” Stiles piped up. “They wouldn’t kill their precious heiress. I admit, it wasn’t the smartest choice—especially with the taunting.” He sent a look at Kate. Kate huffed, the attempt at normalcy hitting all the wrong notes.

“I told you, they knew we were there the moment we took a step towards the house.” Kate snorted darkly. “Besides, Bobby.”

Fucking Bobby.

Stiles let it go. It wasn’t like he wanted Talia to witness this, to gain even more ground against them. “It was too close to personal hubris and I hate to think I was a boring ass villain even for a moment.”

“You were to Gerard,” Peter said calmly. Julia took that moment to enter the room.

“Bobby’s stable now,” she said. “And Deaton and I managed to stabilise the hunter as well… Evan, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Kate said. She bit her lip. “Di—Richard didn’t…?”

Julia shook her head.

“I’m sorry.”
“It’s not your fault,” Kate assured her, her voice growing flat. A shadow flashed across her face, causing her to sigh. “The Ridgewells are going to kill us. With both Gerard and Richard gone…”

“The rest aren’t going to bring us trouble?” Peter asked.

“Callahan and Darius’ families were civilians,” she said. “In the know, yes, but they didn’t have background in hunting before, well, before the revelation.”

Peter leaned against the wall. “How would you recommend we move forward?”

“We—sorry, I—”

“We, Kate,” Stiles piped up. Kate blinked and flushed, the first sign of life on her cheeks.

“We,” and now she put the correct emphasis on the word, “Need to quickly spin this to our best. We have luckily gathered the whole inner circle here, or at least most of it. Gerard’s influence is wide, though, and Shannon’s even wider. Questions will be asked soon about their whereabouts.”

“Then we need to announce it,” Julia said. She blinked as they all turned towards her. “What?”

“You want to force a confrontation?” Peter asked bluntly. Julia reddened under the attention.

“No!” she exclaimed loudly. Her hands twitched as if she wanted to start fiddling something but forced them behind her back. She couldn’t help shuffling her feet though. “No, of course not! But well, that would work in our advantage, yes? For once we could determine where to meet and when and not be, well, led like the blind…” her words trailed off.

Stiles smiled at her gently.

“I couldn’t have said that better.”

The red on Julia’s cheeks deepened but the grin she threw his way was bright with pleasure.

Talia had been quiet for a while and Stiles could see her steaming where she stood. He walked to her and said when she turned to him, “I am sorry for your loss.”

She looked like she had to swallow hard.

“Thank you,” she replied stiffly. Stiles nodded. An awkward silence fell between them. The rest of them looked at them, going quiet as well.

“I—” Stiles licked his lips. “I know something about losing pack members. It’s… never pretty. I don’t know what you’re going through as the alpha, but you have my condolences, in behalf of us all.”

Talia’s mouthline tightened until it was a mere line.

“Grant me one request and I’ll consider it.”

Stiles halted for a second before inclining his head. “I’ll hear it at least.”

“I don’t want Peter anywhere hear this house ever again.”

Peter suddenly straightened where he had been pretending not to hover over Kate.

“Excuse me?” he said. “You don’t make decisions for me anymore.”
“Don’t fight me on this, Peter,” Talia said tightly. “Please.”

That gave Peter a small pause, but it didn’t last long. “Talia—”

“Please,” she repeated, the word harsh in the otherwise quiet room.

“You are not my Alpha,” Peter said, eyes briefly flashing gold and refusing to bow to her, hearing the order between the lines. Talia grit her teeth.

“I know,” she said, and the words fell out of her mouth like they were poison to her. She refused to let her eyes bleed red and merely said, “I want you safe.”

Peter looked at her incredulously.

“I am safe,” he said. “I’m always safe with my pack.”

“I could have lost you today!”

“But you didn’t,” Peter insisted. Talia abruptly turned her back to him and punched a hole in the wall, leaving it now only mostly intact.

“I could have lost you,” she repeated, voice deadly calm. “And I wouldn’t have even known.”

She turned to him, her eyes dark with her pain.

For once, Peter was left speechless.

Talia gave one last cursory look at the rest of them behind Peter before she stalked out with a clipped, “Two of us will be here for the watch duty along with your hunters. I will not lose anyone else to these crazy hunters. I’ll be waiting for you at home.”

Or else.

The threat lingered in the air longer than the echo of her steps had vanished into the air.

Stiles gripped Peter and he watched the exhaustion fall on his features. He said nothing but, between them, words weren’t always necessary. The corners of Peter’s mouth twitched but it resembled a grimace more.

“Were you close?” Julia asked quietly, shifting on her feet again, unsure of what to say.

“Matt was… Matt,” Peter said, deliberatively not looking at where Talia had disappeared. He sighed. “He was a well-respected member of the pack and a good man, with wit that had eluded his father.”

That tickled the back of Stiles’ mind—he was certain he had heard something similar before—but he knew that was the wrong time to ask.

“But no, we weren’t particularly close. He was family though and will be sorely missed.”

“Of course,” Julia murmured. She gave one look at the still unconscious body of Shannon’s and then continued with, “I’m worried about Bobby.”

Stiles groaned. “What’s he done again?”

Julia shrugged, uncomfortable. “It’s just… he woke up, twice, as we were patching him up, healing what we could. Both times he had this very… wild look on his eyes. And the grin—it was like he
was happy. Giddy even. Choking on his own laughter. Even the—Jerry was circling us.”

“Did he say anything?”

Julia turned pensive. “He—did, yes. Nothing intelligible though,” she said. “I don’t think—Stiles, I think he thinks he’s expendable. He has little to no regard of his own life! It’s like he’s playing this elaborate game with stakes he knows are stacked against him and he’s drowning. Stiles. This is killing him.”

Stiles knew Julia hit the jackpot even without trying. He smiled humourlessly.

“A game indeed,” he murmured. Peter narrowed his eyes at him to which he nudged him mentally.

Later.

“I’ll talk to him,” Stiles promised. Julia gave him a look but nodded. It was why she had come to him anyway.

“Is your shoulder alright?” she asked.

He smiled. “Yes, thank you. Your touch worked wonders.”

The grin he got as a reward was blinding. Stiles wasn’t kidding though. He could still feel the pain, but the makeshift cast and the healing theory Julia had brushed up on was better than just having an untreated hole in it. It would keep him whole until he could either go to a hospital or have Deaton look at it.

He didn’t like either of his options, but beggars can’t be choosers.

Truth to be told Deaton had offered already but Stiles had rather ushered him to the ones that needed him and Julia the most. He could wait.

Stiles frowned.

“Where’s Kate?”

***

Stiles found Kate sitting on the doorstep to the Argent house. She stared in front of her morosely. He slumped down next to her.

“How are you feeling?” he asked. He had a feeling but—

“Like shit,” she said bluntly.

And, yep, the hunch was right.

Stiles pulled her to him, hugging her close. It warded off some of the chilliness of the evening. They sat in silence for a while.

“…do it,” Kate murmured, too quietly for Stiles to hear.

He leaned closer, pressing his cheek to her blond strands.

“I don’t know if I can do it,” she said, just a tad louder than before. The whisper was swallowed by the gust of wind.
“Mm?” he hummed, waiting for her to gather her thoughts. It didn’t take long before she exhaled explosively.

“I know shit about being a matriarch,” Kate said, hugging her knees close.

“You did well this afternoon,” Stiles pointed out. Kate snorted.

“Yeah, right.”

“You did,” Stiles insisted. “I wouldn’t lie to you.”

Kate shivered. Her breath was mist in the air.

“No, you wouldn’t,” she said finally. “But—I don’t know. I just—it feels like others could do better. That I’m not ready. I’m not ready.” Her voice didn’t waver when she said it. Stiles leaned back enough for her to face him.

Her eyes were as clear and fierce as her tone.

“I can order people like nobody’s business and come up with—with plans or input or whatever. I know I can, I’m capable and I’ve been trained to be the best self I could be since—since.” She bit her lip before licking it. Stiles wondered if she had picked the nervous gesture from him. Her voice faltered. “I can put on a strong front even when things aren’t going my way.”

“You are very tough,” Stiles agreed. Kate bumped her shoulder into his.

“Knock it off!” she said. Stiles widened his eyes, the picture of innocence.

“What did I do now?” he exclaimed. “I just agreed with you!”

“I’m serious!”

And I’m Black, was on top of Stiles’ tongue but Kate’s frustration bled through and he bit it instead, smothering the words before they could find their way out. His hand trailed her shoulder in a soothing gesture, apologetic.

Kate sighed and her front wavered.

“I—I can’t,” Kate whispered. “I can’t put hunters first anymore. I can’t even imagine putting the Argent clan before you. Before Julia, Peter, Bobby, I—” she confessed quickly, as if afraid of being judged for being human.

“A matriarch needs to think of her people first and foremost and I can’t do that. I killed one of them while protecting you.”

Stiles frowned. “Kate, they were Gerard’s—”

“It doesn’t matter, Stiles,” Kate said, her eyes piercing through Stiles. “They were Argents. I should have aimed better, disabled and not gone for the throat. I acted like Gerard would have acted towards the Hales, only with you as—as my pack. If I lead them, I’m no better than how he was!”

Kate drew a shaky breath and a single tear fell down her cheek, eyes tellingly reddening.

“More so—I don’t want to do it.”

That’s when the waterworks broke.
“All they ever wanted was just another weapon!” she screamed at him, at herself, at the world. “I’m not—I’m not even a person to them! I don’t want anything to do with them, I hate them, I hate them, I hate them all, I just want them all to die—!” Her breath hitched, and she leaned forward and yelled her hurt into Stiles’ chest. The vibration was strong enough that he had to lean on one of his hands not to fall on his back. She hit his chest with her fists, white-knuckled and deafening in the storm of her anger and frustration. Stiles grimaced and bore the pain that came with it, his shoulder tingling with pain as the spells Julia had woven got weaker with each strike—yet the pain paled in the face of Kate’s grief.

“I hate them,” she sobbed and chanted. “I hate them, I hate them, I hate them—”

He brought his arms up and circled them around her.

It was ugly, the way she cried and raged. The was no finesse, no grace, only unreleased pain and bottomless misery that couldn’t find an outlet.

“Even Talia—even she cared for Peter, was so worried she wanted to kill him, but Gerard—Shannon—I—I hate—” she hiccupped, and her hits grew weaker and weaker until they eventually stopped. Her forehead leaned against Stiles’ shoulder.

“She killed him, Stiles,” she murmured. “She killed the only parent I had left.”

In response, he only raised his hand and pet her messy hair. They sat in silence for a moment before Kate spoke again.

She whispered, “I’m not my mom, Stiles. I can’t live up—up to her. She’d—she’d—h—hate—”

Stiles forcefully crushed her against himself. They sat there, under the dark windows and cold sun grazing them with the last of its rays, as if it had lost its hope with Kate’s dying gold.

“She’d love you,” Stiles murmured when Kate’s voice had gone hoarse. She shuddered against him.

“You can’t know that,” she rasped.

Stiles pressed his head against her hair and hoped she would feel the comfort and care that radiated from the other conscious members of their little family.

“No,” he agreed softly. “I can’t. But that’s what I believe. Maybe things would be different if she were alive but, Kate—you did nothing wrong. Whether they were your clan members or not, your father or your ‘aunt’, they tried to kill you. Physically, mentally, it’s all the same. Your mother couldn’t fault you for protecting yourself.

“And if she did—” Stiles pressed a soft kiss on her forehead, “Then she wouldn’t be worthy of your loyalty.”

Kate’s breath hitched again.

“Thank you for choosing us,” Stiles said. “And I promise, we’ll stay with you until you no longer want us to and even further.”

“I don’t want to be alone,” she whispered, her grip pale in the darkening light.

“To death and beyond,” Stiles swore. Kate’s fits tightened their hold on Stiles’ shirt for a moment before she simply spread them around him in a gentle but strong hug.
“To death and beyond,” she said, and Stiles was sure he could feel the smile he couldn’t see. She sighed.

“I need to call Chris and Victoria.”

“The first thing tomorrow,” Stiles said. Kate shuddered again and nodded, her only answer.

Tonight was for them.

Tomorrow…

Tomorrow they would take on the world.

***

“Where are Peter and Julia?”

“Your lackeys came back just as I left looking for you. They may be restarting the war at the back.”

“Oh fuck.”

“Mmm.”

“Do you think we should… move?”

Stiles watched as a car parked on the street and out came Marcus and Lena’s husband, stiff shoulders and scowls to rival Derek’s in addition to brawn only a werewolf could have. He sighed.

“Probably.”

***

Stiles stared at the ceiling. Kate was dead asleep, exhaustion weighing down her bones, with Julia half on top of her. The spellwork she had wrought had sucked all juice from her, particularly the ones she had created to contain Shannon, even with using Stiles’ spark to power it.

(He knew they would hold. They needed to.)

He turned his head and found himself watching Peter. Peter, who was just as awake as he was, who was watching him back. Kate whimpered in her sleep and they both reached for her, with Peter gently combing her hair and Stiles massaging her arm. She settled eventually, going boneless while Julia rubbed her cheek against her back in her sleep.

They watched each other before Stiles rolled to his other side and up. The floor was cold. Peter was there with him when they reached for their discarded shirts. He even helped him into his shirt, holding it for him as Stiles carefully avoided touching the wound Deaton and Julia had dressed that evening.

The Hale house was silent, judging, unwelcoming. When they had returned—there was no way they could have stayed at the Argent house, with parts of its interior destroyed and holes in the walls. Kate had instructed her hunters to keep an eye on Shannon and treating her as the enemy and not the Hales. Peter had merely given his family a grim nod and what looked like a very manly hug that involved the Hales spreading scents on him. It seemed more about seeking comfort than an attempt to own, which Stiles was increasingly happy about.

Peter wasn’t property, after all.
The positive side to the silence was that since Talia hadn’t rained doom on them yet it seemed that the peace was holding—weak and fragile, yes, but holding.

There was still hope for the world.

In any case, Stiles was surprised they didn’t have a guard posted on their door. He voiced the thought as well, musing on the implication.

Peter just gave him a flat look.

“We are in a house of werewolves,” he said mildly. “A pack house at that. Why would we need something like a guard?”

A good point.

“Soundproof walls?”

“They are not absolute.”

“Guest rooms.”

“Aren’t separate.”

“Magic,” Stiles pointed out. Peter rolled his eyes.

“And we have an emissary.”

Another good point. Stiles really wanted to know how protected the Hale house actually was… considering it was still burned down with the wolves inside.

Or was that why Kate had turned to fire and mountain ash in the first place?

They soon found themselves in front of the room that housed Bobby and his new freak twin.

Peter snorted, amused.

“‘Later’?”

Stiles shrugged. “It is pretty late,” he simply said and pushed the door open. He could see an unsettling set of glowing eyes on the dimly lit bed.

“I would consider it early.”

“That’s because you’re a heathen. Morning is only when you wake up and decide to get up.”

“Stiles, I hate to tell you, but we are up.”

“Don’t be such a Scrooge.”

Peter scrunched up his nose. Stiles didn’t think it was adorable at all. Nope. Not at all.

“Stop that,” Peter said, feigning disgust at Stiles’ mushy feelings. Stiles stuck his tongue at him and smirked. The smile fell off of his mouth though when he looked back to Bobby. He was pale under the cold moonlight peeking past the window, curtain uselessly hanging on the side. Stiles couldn’t see his wounds with the blankets covering him, but he had seen him when Peter had carried him to their car, Jerry doggedly following them.
The nogitsune in question bared his teeth at him when Stiles neared them. Stiles gave him an unimpressed look and reached to touch Bobby, hearing the door click behind him. Bobby’s eyes flew open when Stiles’ hand hovered over his chest and he almost jumped up from where he was lying. If it weren’t for Stiles pushing him down—and Jerry having made a nest on top of his feet—he probably would have fallen off the bed altogether.

“Bobby?” Stiles asked carefully.

Bobby stared at him like he didn’t recognise him or his surroundings. He started babbling. Stiles scowled. He tried to move but Bobby grasped his wrists, intently describing him something that Stiles couldn’t understand. He tried to meet Jerry’s eyes but the nogitsune just yawned and looked bored.

Stiles jumped a little when Peter pressed against his side, a bottle in hand. Stiles grimaced but nodded, so Peter popped the cork off, pressing the tip against Bobby’s mouth. He swallowed on reflex, taking a small sip that turned bigger and bigger until Peter yanked it back again, now half-empty.

The glassy look slowly faded from Bobby’s eyes, but the wildness never left.

“My head,” Bobby rasped. “I hate hangovers.”

Stiles snorted.

“Alcohol or vision-induced?”

“Both. Definitely both.” Bobby fell on his bed, groaning. He broke into a grin.

“No one died, yes?” he said, eyeing Stiles and Peter. “You would look sad if it had. Yessss, points for the home team! Homerun! Go Dodgers!”

Bobby’s hands hit the bedframe behind him and he groaned again.

“That hurt,” he whined.

Stiles licked his lips.

“Matt died,” Peter said, a touch of coldness in his tone.

“Matt. What’s a Matt?”

What’s a Stiles?

Stiles’ lip unintentionally curled.

“Peter’s cousin,” he said. “A Hale. A person.”

Bobby blinked again, several times.

“But not… Not little fire, not forest woman?” he asked, tentatively. Stiles sucked his cheeks in and released them with a smack.

“No, Kate and Julia are fine.”

“So no one died!” Bobby said again, his grin returning. It wavered when neither Stiles and Peter joined him. Stiles felt Peter’s bond shifting unlike his physical body which was frozen against him.
He knew Peter had caught up on what Stiles had realised earlier that day.

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about,” he said. “You can’t treat people as expendable.”

The smile on Bobby’s face died.

“But I—” he said and then cleared his throat. “I’m not?” The notes in his words rose, making his statement seem like a question instead. He looked lost, his confusion doubling down on him.

Stiles sighed in the face of the child-like inability to understand consequences of his actions.

“He lives in the future, you know,” Jerry hummed, smirk playing on his snout if that was even possible. Stiles flashed a glare at him.

Peter said, “We are aware.”

“And that’s… bad?” Bobby asked. Hurt. Stiles sighed again, inwardly this time, and settled on the bed. He gripped one of Bobby’s bandaged hands.

“No,” he said gently. “It’s not.”

“Then—”

“But you seem to have—” Stiles searched for the right words. “—Lost focus on the… important parts, you could say.”

Bobby’s expression turned incredulous. He turned to Peter and demanded, “Do you hear this?”

Peter’s brows rose, but his voice was carefully flat though Stiles could feel the spike of emotion behind it.

“I did. And I agree with him.”

The nogitsune hummed behind them, enjoying the sprouting chaos.

Stiles decided to nip that at the bud.

“The thing is, Bob,” he said, “Is that while you are looking for the best possible outcome, you are overlooking the present. The casualties. The hurt.

“Not everyone thinks that the ends justify the means.”

Bobby opened his mouth, but nothing came out. His hands clenched.

Jerry started to purr.

“But you see why it’s important, right?” he asked hurriedly. “We can’t—the lake is important. We need it, need the lake, the peace—!”

“I’m not saying we don’t!” Stiles cut Bobby’s rant off sharply. He pried apart the fist underneath his hand. “We do, don’t worry. But you need to understand that, sometimes, we need more than just haphazard goals and running blindly into things. And I understand that there are times that’s not possible. Your sight is… too wide for that,” he said carefully.

“But we would like to make these decisions ourselves too. You don’t deserve to shoulder all the blame, Bobby.”
Stiles’ words seemed to cut somewhere deep within Bobby. Jerry’s head sprang up and he hissed again.

“We can’t save everyone,” Stiles continued. He was slowly accepting that. It was—and wasn’t—his failure that Deucalion still got blinded. It was and wasn’t that Matt met his fate years too early. But—
“But if you follow that path too far, making decisions and playing god, then you’ll go insane. You know that too, don’t you?”

Bobby’s eyes fell to his lap. Stiles absently pet the now open palm.

“It could have ended badly,” Peter said finally, breaking his silence. There was a grimace on his face.
“And I can see why you might have thought this was the best outcome. Matt was never going to expand beyond the pack, he would have been proud to die for them. What’s one loyal beta in the name of the future?”

Peter sighed. “But he meant a lot to the pack. It will be a loss they—we—can get over, but had we known—”

“You would have been distracted and Stiles would have died,” Bobby said distantly. “Kate would have driven the Tribunal down and exposed the supernatural to the wide world. You would have been the first to go. You can’t form the lake with just one puddle left.”

Shivers ran down Stiles’ back. Peter suddenly gripped his shoulder almost painfully.

“There’s no right answer,” Stiles said quietly. “But you are not expendable either, Bob. If you really think that… It just, I don’t think you are the person who adopted me anymore.”

Bobby stiffened, and the whites of his eyes grew more pronounced than before. Stiles continued, “Or rather, you are, but like you got lost and never could find your way back.”

Jerry whined from where he was curled around Bobby’s feet. Stiles barely even gave him a cursory look before he focused back on the man in bed.

“You are playing all of us like a fiddle and forgetting life’s a symphony and not a solo. Do you think we could just go on with our lives if you just decided that you needed to die in the name of the greater good?” Stiles’ tone was gentle, but his words got stronger with each new one. “I’m not saying I’m not grateful for all you have done—I am. With everything you’ve done, things you’ve told, I can only give my sincerest thanks. But I think there’s one thing you’ve forgotten, no matter how many times we’ve spoken the words, how loudly I’ve yelled. They clearly haven’t reached you.”

Stiles tapped his chest right above his heart. Bobby’s gaze followed the movement before flickering back to meet Stiles’.

“We are pack,” Stiles said simply.

“You are no longer alone.”

Bobby stared at him for a moment, another, before lowering his eyes to where Stiles’ feet were. He said nothing, merely nodded, but Stiles took it as the heart-breaking beg for forgiveness it was.

“Rest, Bob. We will handle things, with you on the speed dial while waiting for your recovery.”

Bobby’s head snapped up again, wonder filling his face. Stiles smiled warmly.

“And after you’re back on your feet, we’ll all find our way back to the lighthouse. Isn’t that right?”
“Beware the willingly blind and seeping poison of the false promises,” Bobby warned quietly.

Stiles blinked before he chuckled. Jerry curled into a ball.

“I don’t need to translate that, do I?” he said sulkily, hiding himself with three of his tails.

Stiles smirked and replied, “No, you don’t.” He tipped his imaginary hat at Bobby before he traced his steps out of the room. He didn’t see the way Bobby stared at his retreating and ultimately disappearing back, eyes glossy.

Peter did. He reached over, covered him again with his blanket and made sure Bobby was comfortable. He left the half-empty bottle on the floor next to the bed before taking his leave. He closed the door behind him.

Jerry snorted beneath his tails, attempting to leech the little chaos left Bobby’s hopeful heart had still hidden inside, the forever shackles he couldn’t shake off.

Bobby lied underneath his covers and smiled, for once beginning to see himself at peace with his gift—sometime, somewhere, in the future.

He could wait for the waters to clear, wait for the ice to melt, for the shores to connect with each other. For the first time he saw himself standing in an island, waiting, for the bridges to be created; light the way but not blind the builders as he had mistakenly attempted.

He could wait.

He reached down and carded his hand through the darkness curled over him and took him under into the peace only dreamless sleep could offer.

He would.

***

“You have a plan then, Stiles?” Peter asked as he walked to where Stiles was waiting for him. Stiles took his hand on his and swung them gently as they walked through the silent corridor.

“Half a one,” he confessed, smiling. “I thought you might want to brainstorm me with this one. You’ve always liked the sneaky ones best.”

“I hate to agree with Talia, but our latest plan wasn’t up to my standards.”

Stiles rolled his eyes at him. Peter smirked briefly before his expression was clouded by melancholy. They passed a door quietly.

“I would have…” Stiles trailed off, craning to give the door one last look before they descended the stairs. Peter sighed.

“So would have I.”

They sat down and watched the frost creep on the window panes. The living room was just as silent as the rest of the house. Stiles didn’t think he had ever been there alone. There was always someone there, holding the fort so to speak.

Not now.

Not when people were mourning together.
“I really am sorry,” Stiles whispered. Peter leaned over and kissed him lightly. There was no tease there, just warm comfort.

“I know. He would have understood.”

A faint smile twisted Stiles’ lips. “So you’ve said.”

“Do you think you’ll go to bed tonight?”

Stiles shook his head. His thoughts were flying a mile a minute and with everything—no, there was no way he would be getting any sleep tonight.

Peter nodded and settled in, leaning back while watching snowflakes dot the ground and melt away just as fast, just like a cover of innocence lost.

“Let’s start then.”

***

“You are doing what?!” Talia barked loudly. Stiles held back a yawn. They were still sitting in the Hale living room though most of the Hales were up already. Most of those had gone out, preparing for the final rites for their lost family. Talia would have been there with them had Stiles and Peter not asked her to stay behind for a moment. They wanted to be upfront with their plan. Talia deserved that at least.

Peter widened his eyes, faking innocence.

“I’m going with Julia to meet Deucalion and his allies,” he repeated. “Stiles and Kate will stay here and take care of the hunters.”

“You can’t, it’s too dangerous! You don’t have the experience! I’ll send—”

The corners of Peter’s mouth curled down.

“Matt?”

Talia’s broken expression made her sudden silence all the more powerful. Stiles’ skin tingled with her hurt.

“We are going to make sure this will never happen again,” he said, swore. Talia startled, her eyes flying wide and jumping to stare at Stiles’ chest and how his heart didn’t skip even one beat.

Why would it?

It was why he had come here.

He knew this was going to be the ‘make it or break it’ part of the fight. Everything that led to this point, every person he had met, every shadow he had made peace with. The enemy was different than he had thought it would be. Christ, he hadn’t thought he would make allies—family—with most of them! And make enemies with people he had never known, that had been dead for years on end.

Stiles wondered about the karma. He had always assumed he had the worst luck in the world. However… With everything he had gained, coming here, even with his past…

If someone asked him whether he would change anything if he could, again, he probably wouldn’t
be able to answer. On one hand, he could save a lot of people from a lot of pain. On the other, he could also cause a lot more. And—

He really didn’t want to give up everything he had managed to gain.

Scott was alive. So was everyone else he had once cared about. He had Kate, as weird as that had been in the beginning. He had Julia, he had Bobby—

He had Peter.

Stiles beamed at his lover, boyfriend, partner. He was certain he wanted to add one more title to that list once everything had settled but, in the meantime, they had work to do.

“Talia, Peter is the person best suited for this job,” Stiles said. Talia waited, quiet, observing. He inclined his head as a silent thank you. “He is a Hale but not bound to you. Deucalion has been led to believe you were one of the culprits in his blinding, or worse. He will be angry but there will be others who will see Peter as the person he is—a negotiator.”

Stiles took a deep breath and continued, “Which is why Julia is going with him. Her ties to the east coast, as badly as they ended, give her credit. Together, they will be an alliance of both east and west packs while belonging in neither. There is strength in that.”

“But also weakness,” Talia said. Her temperament nor emotions were nowhere to be seen as calculation had settled over her features.

This was the Alpha Hale people respected, Stiles realised. Not the woman who cared like a hurricane, ripping apart everything but those it held closest; no, it was this woman who saw and understood the cues, who could pick out a weakness and exploit it.

“But you see why they are the ones who must go?”

She was quiet, mulling over his words.

“Yes,” she said at last. “But they should bring a representative from another respected pack to bear witness. Uninvolved people.”

Stiles tilted his head, humming. Considering. “You know someone.”

Someone who would not let them be walked over—which Peter would never have allowed to begin with, but it would be nice to have some back-up.

Talia levelled him with a look he suspected was an identical one to his. “I suspect you’ve heard of Alpha Ito?”

A realisation dawned upon Stiles. He couldn’t have grinned wider.

Christmas was never over!

“I would accept a representative of either Alpha Ito’s pack or an ally of theirs.”

Talia quirked her brows at his addition. When he didn’t elaborate, she just nodded.

“I’ll pass on your message.”
“Tell them to arrive as soon as possible.”

Talia actually rolled her eyes before asking, “And you and Argent?”

“There is no doubt that the Tribunal is on their way here, one way or another,” Peter said. Talia pursed her lips like it was the last thing she wanted. Stiles could relate. “So we will stay and do damage control. We’ll call back-up as well—sane hunters, I swear,” he added when Talia’s expression turned into a grimace.

“Basically we’ll hold the fort until we can gather them all into one big group and—”

“That sounds like begging for trouble,” Talia murmured. Stiles rolled his eyes the Hale way. Peter looked positively proud.

“—And we’ll make them see sense,” Stiles ended with a flourish.

Talia scoffed at him. “And that sounds so naïve I don’t even know where to start.”

“That was the abridged version, darling sister,” Peter said, smirking.

“Is there a way to get the complete version then, brother dearest?” she retorted with just as much lip.

Stiles hid a smile.

These were the moments that reminded him they were actually siblings.

“Pay the subscription fee.”

“My house, my rules.”

“You ordered.”

“Alpha who?”

“Oh, touché.”

“Not even with a long stick,” Talia said, crossing her arms.

Peter sniffed. “I would hope not. We weren’t raised in a barn.”

“Just in the woods.”

“Precisely.”

“Savages, savages, savages,” Stiles chanted underneath his breath. The Hales answered it with identical eyerolls. Talia sobered quickly after that.

“Please be careful,” she told him. Her words from yesterday echoed between them.

Peter nodded, just as serious.

“Of course.”

Talia stared at him for a moment before sighing.

“I could never get you to do anything you didn’t want, could I?”

“We just weren’t meant to be,” Peter said surprisingly gently. Talia nodded, a resigned smile on her
face. When Peter answered it with one of his own, Stiles knew that they had finally reached the balance that had been lost between them for so long.

Sometimes distance made everything better.

Peter’s smile turned lopsided, even boyish. “Do not underestimate us,” he said, to which Stiles continued, automatically,

“Our team motto is ‘maybe we’ll get lucky this time’.”

Talia snorted.

Their turned their heads when they heard noise from the staircase. After a loud yawn, Kate appeared, rubbing her eyes and looking tired even after the hours she spent lost in dreamland. Julia followed behind her, barely looking any more awake than her friend did. They both blinked slowly as they found the trio watching them with differing states of amusement.

“What did we miss?”

Chapter End Notes

Find me on tumblr, whatever that's worth anymore.
In which separations happen

Chapter Notes

So last period was hell on earth! Thankfully for the next few weeks my workload has lessened by a half; three courses less to teach. Hopefully that sticks. Still, I hope you enjoy this chapter! I quite like it myself.

(Also, over 50k hits? Holy shirtballs!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It took two days for Alpha Ito’s representative to arrive.

During the wait, Kate had called Chris; he and Victoria were on their way. Stiles didn’t know whether they were bringing Allison or not, but a part of him hoped they weren’t. Even with Talia’s slightly reluctant permission, they were already inviting trouble to Beacon Hills and he wasn’t sure how things would turn out.

He had given a warning to Claudia to, well, take a short holiday—he may have used the word ‘evacuate’ to emphasize his point—but she had just dismissed it with a cheerful, “I believe in you!” Which, to be honest, did make Stiles feel better. One spark wishing the best to another, partnered with his own desire for everything to end well, gave him a sort of a good feeling about things. He thought.

Maybe.

That was the point of being a spark, wasn’t it?

Not for the first time he wished there was a manual for these kinds of things. He had thought of a name for it as well: ‘How to Wish for a Happy Birthday—And Every Other Occasion Up Until Apocalypse.’ He might have to shorten it to make it catchier but mentioning apocalypse should get the attention of the reader. When did anyone need a book before the shit hit the fan, yeah?

Still, it turned out that Alpha Ito’s representative was exactly the person Stiles expected them to be, so at least he got something out of the Jedi mind tricks.

He followed Talia outside when the car drew to a halt. A feminine figure stepped out, saying something to the driver while retrieving her bag, before the car left the way it came. The woman watched as it left, waving slightly until it disappeared from the view. When she turned around to look at them, despite expecting it to be her, Stiles’ breath hitched the smallest bit. Talia threw him a look before she took a step forward and offered her hand for a shake.

“Welcome to Beacon Hills,” Talia said formally. “I am Alpha Hale, but you may call me Talia. This here is Stiles Finstock, an alpha in his own right, and an invaluable ally of the Hale pack.”

Stiles didn’t show it, but he could admit he was pleasantly surprised with how their relationship had taken a turn for better. The past couple of days they had tentatively let go of their disagreements and found that, while they were prone to butting heads, they were also similar enough to also find a common ground. He somehow felt he was proving someone’s point there. The petty side of him
hoped it was anyone but Deaton.

“Just Stiles, please.”

“Thank you, Talia, Stiles,” Noshiko Yukimura said, looking as unchanged as ever. “I would be pleased if you called me Noshiko as well.”

“It is an honour that a kitsune of your esteem was willing to come to help us,” Stiles answered. Noshiko’s eyes flicked on him, taken aback, while Talia just continued to look welcoming; there would probably be questions later, however. Stiles didn’t doubt that Noshiko had hidden all traces of her heritage just in case.

Kitsune, no matter the type, were tricksters after all.

“Yes,” Noshiko said slowly. “Of course. It is an important cause.”

Talia gestured behind them. “Please, come inside while we wait for your companions. It’s getting cold.”

“Thank you.”

Peter and Kate were waiting for them inside, as were Laura and Lena. Laura didn’t look particularly well-slept, but she had insisted on being there, returning to the routines. Stiles supposed part of her stubbornness was the alpha potential inside her. The air inside the pack house was still morose; Stiles wondered if it had been anything similar when Peter’s bond with the Hales had snapped.

He was glad, though, that Cora had stopped crying. Her wailing had been awful to listen to; she was too old to be ignorant of her surroundings, but too young to understand the hurt she was going through.

Noshiko’s mouth thinned as she took in the atmosphere. It reminded him of Kira when she tried to steel herself.

Stiles walked to Peter. He lifted his hand and traced the nape of his lover’s neck gently. “How quickly are you ready?”

“Julia’s just taking one last look at Bobby.”

He nodded. His fingers twitched but the movement itself didn’t stop. If he was honest, he didn’t want Peter and Julia to go anywhere without them. Yet he was also sure that if Kate went with them, the meeting would be a disaster, no thanks to Gerard. Stiles himself was probably not someone who should be going either.

Holding the fort sounded like a plan.

“Will you fetch the bags?” he asked but he was reluctant to let go. Kate rolled her eyes.

“You guys are disgusting,” she said and twirled around, heading towards the stairs. “I got it.”

“Thanks, boss!” Stiles yelled after her, to which she only replied with an “ewwww!”

Talia eyed their Public Display of Affection, looking like she wanted to smile at them. Noshiko, on the other hand, glanced around before giving the window a look.

“I was hoping to have some time to have a look outside,” she said. “It’s been a while since I was last in Beacon Hills.”
Peter drew Stiles closer, inhaling his scent. It sent pleasant shivers down Stiles’ back.

“I don’t think you have any need to,” Peter commented idly. “The nogitsune has been dealt with.”

Talia and Noshiko both stiffened. Stiles stuck his elbow into Peter’s side. The bastard didn’t even have the sense to look ashamed.

“Excuse me?” Talia said. There was a somewhat polite tone to her voice, but it sounded forced and fake. The hint of a smile was gone. Lena had also straightened her back and her hands were suspiciously hidden behind her back.

Noshiko followed that with a confused, “What do you mean?” It was almost as if she had no idea of what they were talking about. It was very convincing, Stiles thought, if not for her cheeks; they had paled ever so slightly.

“Didn’t you have enough drama two days ago?” Stiles questioned. Peter shrugged, unapologetic.

“Yesterday was boring.”

Stiles’ forehead hit Peter’s shoulder.

He was in love with a drama queen. He had almost forgotten.

“Jerry’s upstairs,” Stiles explained, muffled. He peeked at Noshiko. She looked very unimpressed.

As he did, Talia asked a question of her own, the chilliness of it almost frosting the windows. “Do you mean that the nogitsune was poisoning my land because of her?”

“Eh, he’s fine,” Peter said, jostling Stiles a little as his shoulders moved.

“Fine? Him?” Noshiko asked, voice climbing higher than before. The colour was quickly returning to her face, starting from her neck. “You named it?”

“Well, he prefers spending time in a male body right now so.” Stiles threw an arm around Peter before facing her again. “And he hasn’t complained. We’ll change the pronouns if he so desires.”

Peter’s brows rose. “We will?”

“With everything else going to hell, at least we can be politically correct.”

“True.”

It was at that moment that Kate and Julia came down with the bags. Julia gave them a bright smile despite the chilly atmosphere.

“Bobby’s doing well,” she said. “And Jerry just started practically purring out of nowhere. It was kind of calming.”

“ Weird though,” Kate added. Julia reached for the bag in Kate’s hand, but didn’t manage to grab it before Kate threw it down by Peter’s legs.

“Are we going soon? I feel like we should be going soon.” It was then that Julia noticed Noshiko. Her smile brightened. “Oh, hello! Nice to meet you. Are you part of the Ito pack?”

“The quicker we get there, the quicker we can come back,” Peter agreed before Noshiko could get a word out. He pulled Stiles into a soft kiss that filled him with such joy he couldn’t believe it. A stupid
smile made its way on Stiles’ face. Peter snorted, though there was warmth in his gaze.

Stiles whispered, “Come back soon. And try not to get another tomahawk stuck to your chest.”

Peter blinked. “That happened?”

“Yeah. Hashtag. Apparently you were very affronted about it.”

“Clearly. Probably ruined a good shirt.”

“A tomahawk, Peter?” Talia questioned, her brows raised. Peter shrugged.

“In another life,” he said breezily. Talia looked even more confused. Peter picked up his bag and walked to the door. He glanced over his shoulder. “Are the keys in the car?”

She nodded. “They are.”

“All right then.”

“Stay safe,” she said, and Stiles added, “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“So free hands and don’t die, got it.” Peter gave them one last look, waved the phone he had finally retrieved from where he had left it all those months ago, had recharged it even, and disappeared out the door. Julia kissed Stiles’ cheek quickly and hurried after him.

Noshiko didn’t move, her eyes on the ceiling.

“We’ll talk when you return about leaving your trash in my yard,” Talia said. Noshiko’s reverie broke and her lips pursed. Still, she nodded grimly and left so fast it was like she had never even been there. When the door swung shut, Stiles raised his hand in a high five.

“That was brilliant.”

Talia slapped it and answered, “You have some explaining to do as well.”

Stiles shrugged.

“I didn’t expect anything less.”

***

The only reason why Talia didn’t go after the car after Stiles’ abridged explanation was that nothing serious had happened with the Nemeton in the end and that the nogitsune was currently dealt with. Yet the fact remained that the two had been a threat despite the mostly fortunate ending. Talia still promised to rip Noshiko a new one when she returned. She said it in a way that bore no objection. Stiles just nodded and left it like that.

She would find no opposition from him. It was long overdue in his opinion.

Stiles sucked on the straw in his milkshake. He and Kate and decided to take their planning to the same coffee shop they had made their truce in all those months ago. The Hales were saying their goodbyes to Matt today and they had felt like they were intruding. Unfortunately, Peter couldn’t be there with them today; he had paid his respects prior to leaving.

He had claimed that Matt would have understood.
“Has your brother sent any news yet?” Stiles asked. Kate glanced at her phone and shook her head.

“They must still be on their way.”

“You did send them a message to—”

“Meet us downtown, yes, I did. I’m not braindead.”

“Not what I meant.”

“It’s the thought that counts,” Kate said mockingly. She glared at her offending cup. “So think really hard why you got me this terrible drink.”

“You wanted something with sugar.”

“It’s a black coffee with a spoonful of sugar.”

Stiles hid his grin in his drink. Kate gave him a murderous look and kicked him in the shin.

“You are not funny.”

“Correct. I’m a delight.”

Kate pushed up from her chair, holding out her hand and wiggling her fingers. “Wallet,” she demanded.

“Nope.”

Kate’s glare intensified. “Give me your wallet!”

“No. Want to hear it in Spanish? No.”

“You are not cute.” Kate placed her hands on her waist in a huff. Stiles lazily pointed towards the counter.

“And you’re the one with all the funds, my lovely matriarch. Pay for your own drink. Oh, and get me a muffin too!”

“Your face is a muffin soon,” she said before stomping over to the poor girl manning the front and ordering the sweetest drink they had and more. While she did, Stiles reached over and took Kate’s coffee. A little sweeter than he usually liked, but it tasted like victory, so Stiles wasn’t complaining.

“What are you going to tell your brother when he arrives?” Stiles asked when Kate returned with her monstrosity. Kate shrugged, mood lighter now that she was able to satisfy her craving. Stiles suspected it was a bit more than that but who was he to complain? Her way to deal with her grief was healthier than his had been.

Kate inhaled a third of the drink before answering, “The truth.” Her eyes snapped on Stiles. “Shannon deserves nothing more.”

Stiles nodded. “It’s a good thing we’ve already established things weren’t all they seemed.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you think the hunters are on the move already?”
Kate pursed her mouth in thought.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “We have no idea what sort of a failsafe Shannon had—if she had any.”

“Probably did,” Stiles inserted.

Kate bopped her head. “I didn’t see her righthand man anywhere.”

“Dawson, right?”

“It could be that she had him making waves,” Kate mused. “He was there when we met Shannon in St. Louis. It would be strange if he knew nothing.”

“True.” Stiles leaned back in his seat. He took another sip of the cooling coffee. “But if he didn’t, then we need to prepare for that too. In any case, I doubt it’ll take them long to arrive either way.”

“True,” she echoed. Her phone lit up in an incoming call. Kate snapped it up and answered with a quick, “You here?”

She hummed something agreeable after the answer she got and then told the exact address of the café. She took another huge gulp of her drink. “See you in thirty minutes.”

When Kate put down the phone, Stiles tapped the table. “They landed safe?”

“Yeah. Allison was a bit fussy, but it was her first flight so.”

Stiles blinked. So they had decided to take Allison with them after all. However—

“First? I would have thought they’d travelled more.”

Kate shook her head. “They arranged things so that they wouldn’t both have to travel at the same time.”

That sounded vaguely familiar. Also explained why they hadn’t left their daughter behind.

“Then we just wait,” Stiles said. He eyed the empty table between them. “Now, where’s my muffin?”

Kate kicked him again. He would have another bruise forming, he just knew it, but the rant Kate launched into was worth it. Her eyes looked just a tad brighter when she berated him and Stiles snarked back. It didn’t feel the same without Peter’s quips to fan the flames or Julia’s words to calm them; even Bobby’s sometimes crazed comments were a thing that Stiles found himself missing.

It hadn’t even been a full day yet.

Stiles smiled and threw a napkin at Kate. She retaliated with her extra packet of sugar.

From then on, it was a full-out war.

***

It was surprising that they hadn’t been thrown out the café before Chris and Victoria arrived. When they did, with Allison in tow, it reminded him of St. Louis. This time, however, Kate whirled around to sit next to Stiles while the rest took seats across them.
“Matriarch Argent,” Victoria said stiffly, balancing Allison on her lap.

Kate made a face at her. “Stop it,” she ordered. “It’s not like I wanted this either.”

“What happened?” Chris asked. He had worry lines littered on his forehead, now more pronounced than before. “You just said that Shannon had… you know, father,” he ended lamely, glancing at his daughter.

Stiles nudged Kate and she made space for him to get off. He spread his arms, grinning at Allison.

“Hey, princess!” he said cheerfully. “Let’s get you and your parents something to drink, yes? You must be hungry after a long trip like this!”

Allison peeked at her mother, hesitating. “We ate,” she said. “Paninis.”

“But did you have any dessert?” Allison shook her head. Stiles pretended offence, gasping and clutching at his chest. “Sacrilegious! We have to make up for this mistake!” He winked at her parents. “With your parents’ permission, of course.”

Victoria’s expression didn’t change a bit, but Chris gave him a faint smile. “I think she’d like that.”

He wasn’t wrong. Allison looked ecstatic.

“Can I have cake?” she asked eagerly, already moving like she would climb over her father in her hurry. “I want some cake! Marshmallows! Frosting!”

“Chocolate?” Stiles asked, grinning. Chris lifted her up and set her down on the floor. Allison nodded rapidly, jumping to clutch at Stiles’ hand.

“Chocolate! And st’awberries!” she demanded. Stiles threw his head back and laughed.

“Follow me, princess!” he declared. “The glass treasure chest of baked goods awaits!”

He left the Argents alone with that, letting Allison drag him with her. They hemmed and hawed at the display case, pointing at different pieces of cake with Stiles reading her the descriptions. They even went over the muffin and cookie selection after he glanced over and saw that Kate was still in the middle of her explanation.

Allison looked troubled. Her head turned around the selection of three cakes that had made it into the final round. An idea formed in Stiles’ mind.

“What if we get multiple pieces?” he asked. Allison’s eyes almost bugged out. “We could get some for all of us! And then we can share!”

“Yes!” Allison said, stars dancing in her eyes. Almost immediately after the corners of her mouth drooped. “But mom doesn’t like sweet things too much.”

“We can get her something less sweet then. Does she like apple pie? There’s a very good piece right here,” Stiles said and pointed. “They even give ice cream with it!”

The girl manning the register smiled at them. She looked decidedly less tired now that there was a child there. “We also have a very good pecan pie just out of the oven,” she said. “Does your mother like nuts?”

Allison considered that and then nodded decisively.
Stiles grinned, ruffling her hair lightly. “Then one piece of that and some green tea with it. Then we’ll have…”

“Strawberry cheesecake,” Allison listed. “Chocolate-orange cake and merengue cake.”

“Which goes for whom?”

Allison’s frown deepened in concentration. “Cheesecake for Aunt Kate, chocolate for you, and merengue for dad.”

“What about you?”

Allison beamed. “I get a half of all of them!”

“And a milkshake?”

“And a milkshake!”

Stiles turned back to the girl. “You heard the princess,” he said. “And add a black coffee to that as well.”

The girl quickly tapped her register, tallying them up. “Cream and sugar?”

Stiles didn’t remember how this Chris liked his coffee. The one he had known had enjoyed life as it was; cold and bitter.

“Put them on the side just in case.” Stiles pulled out a twenty and a fiver and slid them across the counter. “Keep the change.”

The register chinked happily, and the girl’s answering grin was just as bright.

“Coming up!”

They waited for her to finish the plating and Stiles gave Allison two pieces to balance. She took them carefully, tongue stuck between her teeth in concentration. The cashier girl helped Stiles with the rest and together they came back to the now quiet table. Allison ordered them around, showing to whom everything belonged to. Victoria smiled faintly and thanked her, as did Chris. Kate’s own grin looked a bit strained, but Allison didn’t seem to notice it.

“And here’s a plate and a knife for the princess,” the girl beamed as he handed them to Stiles. He thanked her and then the door chimed, signalling another customer, and she hurried off again.

When Chris was cutting pieces off to Allison’s plate of growing sugar rush, Stiles leaned towards Kate and asked lowly, “Everything good?”

“Mostly,” Kate answered, just as quiet. “It’s a lot to take it, of course, but they are on our side.”

“What about the…?” Stiles let his words trail off. Kate’s mouth pursed and she shook her head quickly.

“Not yet.”

“But you are sure…?”

“Yeah.”
“Alright then. As long as you don’t regret it.”

Kate shoved at him, fondness bleeding over their bond. “I’m sure, worrywart.”

“I have no warts, thank you very much!”

Allison looked over to them in a hurry, little frown on her face. “He’s right, Aunt Kate!” she said. “No warts!”

“Are you sure?” Kate turned to her, smirk on her lips. “He could be hiding them underneath all that plaid!”

Allison looked Stiles over, concerned, but then she shook her head. “No, no he isn’t,” she said.

“Can we switch these two? I like your model better,” Stiles quipped, earning yet another shove to his ribs. He groaned. “At this rate I’ll be blue when Peter and Julia return. I’m no na’vi! It doesn’t go well with my complexion!”

“Anything is an improvement with your face,” Kate said. Chris coughed across the table, hiding it into his coffee. The cream and sugar stayed untouched on his plate.

Stiles harrumphed. “I rest my case.”

“We were thinking about coming to see the house,” Victoria said. “But with…” she gave her daughter a significant look that she didn’t see. Allison was happily munching her way through her collection of cakes.

Stiles licked his lips. “The both of you…?”

Chris and Victoria shared a look and nodded. Stiles inclined his head as well. He understood that very well; one of them had lost a father, another was the head of their unit and his support.

“Would you be willing to leave her in someone else’s care?” he asked. Victoria turned to him. Kate rested her now finished drink on the table.

“Not the Hales, surely,” she said. Stiles rolled his eyes.

“Not an idiot, Kate. No wolves, I promise,” he told the two parents. “I know the county sheriff’s family. His wife is a teacher and they have a son Allison’s age. They would be happy to let her stay at their place for a while.”

And he couldn’t think of a safer place to be in Beacon Hills than that house; while he had hoped Claudia and her family had taken an impromptu vacation, he knew that she’d keep them safer than even he probably could.

Victoria gave him a piercing look. He nudged his mostly untouched cake towards Allison, who took it with glee. Chris’ expression turned pained as he mentally counted the amount of sugar she had just consumed.

“I want to meet them first,” she then said. Stiles’ smile was sharp.

“I wouldn’t expect anything less,” he said, echoing the words he had spoken earlier to another woman of power. He couldn’t help but wonder whether Talia and Victoria would kill each other or take over the world instead if—and when—they met. He silently placed his bets.

He couldn’t wait.
He needed to eat his words again.

Claudia was home when Stiles called and so was little Stiles. So was Lydia too, actually, and what looked like a miniature Danny that was probably the real Danny too. Allison seemed to fit in like they were old friends. She was shy at first, especially seeing that there were two boys inside, but when she saw Lydia her expression had brightened.

She had whispered, louder than she probably thought, “I love her hair.”

After that Lydia did what she knew best. She preened as much as a kid her age could and pulled a blushing Allison in and then they were off, talking and giggling like it wasn’t the first time they met.

And while all that was happening in the background, Claudia and Victoria exchanged pleasantries, veiled compliments and who-knew-what which ended with them exchanging phone numbers.

Kate leaned towards her brother, asking quietly, “What did just happen?”

Chris smiled at that, the one that meant he was happy about something. “She found a kindred spirit.”

Stiles’ own smile froze on his face hearing that.

They left soon after, promising to pick Allison up in a few hours. As the car pulled on the street, Stiles couldn’t help but think that the odds for world domination rose like a rocket with the addition of one Claudia Stilinski, née Gajos. If they indeed added Talia to the mix now…

“We are doomed,” he muttered to himself. “But for the better or worse, I have no idea.” Then again… “With the way things were, the only way is up.”

“Stiles, you do know you’re talking aloud?” Kate said. Stiles shrugged, hitting the turn signal.

“Just humming to the music.”

“Nothing’s on.”

“In my mind.”

“Again, nothing’s on.”

Stiles stuck his tongue at her. “Rude.”

“So Shannon’s still inside the house?” Victoria asked, back to the business. Stiles nodded.

“Yeah, unconscious until woken up. Everything seems to be going well enough on that front since Kate hasn’t gotten any calls. The bodies are locked in some sort of stasis as well in the cellar. The local pack’s druid and Julia made sure of that.”

“Since we don’t have a mortuary at hand,” Kate said dryly. Stiles finger gunned in her direction.

“That. And suddenly appearing suspicious bodies are suspicious.”

Victoria continued to look unimpressed. Stiles turned his attention back on the road.
Can’t win them all.

They arrived at the Argent house in silence. Stiles could see how the yard had been cleaned up like nothing had happened and the hole in the wall shaped like Talia’s fist was, thankfully, not in direct sight. A bush of some kind had been moved there to cover it. The interior damage was covered by thick curtains on the windows. Stiles saw two of the Hales outside though they were far enough that he couldn’t identify them; the hunters guarding the place had to be inside then. It made sense that they wouldn’t mix, given what had transpired.

Once inside, Chris asked to see the lost hunters. Kate took him, wanting to see the others as well. When Victoria moved to follow them, Stiles motioned for her to stop. Her expression didn’t change but Stiles felt the demand for an answer.

“Shannon is upstairs,” he said. Victoria suddenly straightened. He turned to the stairs. “We decided to put her in Gerard’s old room; easiest to ward, and most intact.”

They made their way there, finding one hunter there. He bowed and, with Victoria’s orders, went downstairs to meet with Chris and Kate, leaving them alone.

Shannon looked like she was sleeping. There were bags under her eyes due to the fact that she wasn’t really resting, just spelled, and her skin was just as pale as it had been before. She wasn’t gaunt, per se, her features just seemed slightly… worn. Stretched even, if a person could be described that way. It wasn’t a long-term solution, clearly, but the stasis rune on her slowed down her bodily functions enough that they could wait until they had decided what to do with her.

“I’m pretty sure Kate didn’t tell you what Shannon did to her,” Stiles said quietly. Victoria’s sharp gaze snapped to him when he spoke. “She used her, same as Gerard. Or tried to.”

“What did she really want?”

Stiles stepped closer to Shannon though he didn’t go over the drawn wards. His own energy hummed from them and he imagined, wished, for them to be stronger. A satisfying resonance tickled his skin.

“To destroy both the supernatural and the hunters.”

Victoria inhaled sharply. “That would have—”

“Revealed us? Yes, she didn’t care.” Stiles sighed. “She’s the one who killed Gerard too. Revenge for Kate’s mother.”

“Kate mentioned that. So it was Gerard then, in the end…” Victoria muttered to herself. Stiles quirked his brows.

“You truly believe us?” he inquired, wanting to make sure.

“The evidence is heavily stacked in your favour,” was the only thing she said before she crouched down, inspecting Shannon’s prison. “Scapegoats, right?”

She was sharp, Stiles had to admit.

“Yes.”

“No wonder then. Last time we met she seemed… bitter, for the lack of a better term.”
“She took it hard,” he said. The understatement of the century. Victoria seemed to agree with him if her answering snort was any indication.

“If it had been proper, Chris would have taken Kate with him when he left.”

Stiles blinked, surprised. “Really?”

Victoria didn’t elaborate. She moved to Gerard’s desk, shuffling with his papers. Peter and Kate had already gone through them but if there was someone who could make out any missing pieces of information Victoria was probably that person.

It was then that they heard steps from the stairs and a few seconds later Kate and Chris arrived at the door, skin tight around their eyes. Kate’s lips suddenly twitched, a small smile making its way to her face, and she said, “Stiles will pay for the renovation.”

“Excuse you!” he snapped back immediately. “This is your house! I’m a Finstock now, not an Argent.”

Kate looked contemplative. “D’you think Bobby would adopt one more cousin twice removed?”

Chris looked as alarmed as Stiles felt. “You just want to get out of the bill,” Stiles said lightly.

Kate shrugged but didn’t deny it.

Victoria straightened the papers into a cleaner pile than they were before, loudly thumping them against the hardwood desk. “You would give up your name?” she asked directly. Kate winced.

“It, uh, may have crossed my mind once. Or twice.”

That was news to Stiles. He knew this had been hard on her—Christ did he know that—but to give up her identity? That was something he hadn’t thought she’d considered, despite—

“Why?”

Victoria’s simple question proved to be the hardest to answer. A flush gathered on Kate’s cheeks as she tried to articulate her thoughts. No one spoke up nor tried to help. Stiles thought none of them even could.

“I’m… not a good Argent,” she said in the end. The deep sigh she let out was heavier than the world itself. “You would do much better as one than me. Which is why I want to pass on the mantle of the Argent matriarch to you, Victoria Anne Argent.”

“Kate!” Chris gasped, shocked. Kate’s gaze flicked on him but only for a moment. Her attention was on Victoria.

Victoria’s mouth pursed. “Have you thought this through?”

“I… have,” Kate said haltingly, and then she added, “it’s not something I say lightly. You have Allison and your own territory to watch over and— this would effectively make your life more difficult than necessary. But my priorities have shifted. These past few days, even months, have shown me that there’s too much here for me to just—” she trailed off,shrugging. “The Argents deserve better than me. I think they might even want someone better than me.”

“That’s mutiny,” Chris said, frowning. Kate leaned against the bookshelf on the right wall.

“No, just common sense. They’ve been following Gerard probably longer than even mother knew.
He was her second, for better or worse, and when she was busy with me, he was in charge. And after— it just wasn’t the same with me. They don’t trust me the same. And I don’t trust them the same. It’s a bad equation and the result doesn’t come up to a positive.”

“You…” Chris cleared his throat. “You have completely given up on our way of life, haven’t you?” He sounded a little sad about the fact.

Kate hesitated, but shook her head. “Not completely,” she said. “Just… mostly. The experiences—they’ve been harrowing. I can’t—if I stay, I fear I’ll turn out to be someone like him. Or Shannon. Think I’m right all the time and turn out to be a monster.”

Victoria’s gaze was piercing. “That mindset usually makes perfect leaders,” she pointed out. Her lips quirked briefly at Kate’s incredulous look. “Not the way Gerard apparently turned out. But when you know you are not invincible and acknowledge your faults, the decisions made are more often the best in each situation. You turn to the people around you for advice rather than go off on your own.”

Stiles wondered if Victoria was always this wise under all her cold exterior or if Gerard’s influence had turned her into someone like Shannon. Yet, despite her words, Kate’s smile turned into a grimace.

“I don’t want to chance it,” she said. She looked out of the window in thought. “I think… I think I’ll do better as the one helping to make decisions and working them through. And from us, I’m too quick-tempered while Chris is too even. Neither of us would make good leaders. I don’t even think you alone will do a good enough job,” she said bluntly, turning back to Victoria.

Victoria merely blinked. It was the only outward reaction they got.

“But Chris will help you and, together, I think you could raise a good leader for us. Allison is already a better person than I could ever be—”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” Stiles interjected before he could stop himself. Kate flashed him a quick smile that suddenly brightened Gerard’s former office.

“—And I think she’ll do a good job. Just… don’t force her. Raise her like you would without any of the expectations they put on me and let her make the decision herself. If she doesn’t want it, I wouldn’t even mind if—if the Argent name disappeared. With how we’ve made a mess these past years, it might even be a good thing. And—”

“Kate.”

Kate paused when Chris called her name. She turned towards him and was quickly engulfed in a hug so tight Stiles thought he would hear her ribs crack.

“When did you grow into an adult?” he heard Chris mumble into her hair. Kate’s surprised peel of laughter echoed in the room.

“You haven’t been around much, brother.”

“Clearly my mistake,” Chris said. He drew back, his blue eyes misting. “You look—no. You have found your place, haven’t you?”

Kate nodded, her hair moving along with the movement.

“I think so.”
“She makes an exceptional right hand,” Victoria said finally. When Stiles looked at her, he found her eyes already on him. “Take good care of her.”

*Or else,* Stiles heard the silent threat. He offered her his hand.

“I will.”

“You are the leader,” Victoria continued, eyeing him critically. “You have a wolf and a druid with you. And that fifth person, the seer. The wolf has to be the left hand; you need both sides represented. The druid… she’s your emissary, correct? You need someone stable in a position like that. Which is why you sent them away.”

Kate must have mentioned their recent split to them, Stiles thought absently as he tried to process Victoria’s words. She—

“I—” Stiles started, but he was at a loss of words. Victoria narrowed her eyes once more, pursed her lips in thought, before nodding decisively.

“I don’t have to like it to know where the lines have been drawn,” she said. She stepped up to Stiles and clasped the hand he had forgotten was still up and shook it. He belatedly gripped hers too instead of just letting it stay as a limp day-old noodle. “And Kate has shown some impressive growth as Chris said. Your meddling and tripping into things you shouldn’t might do more good than harm, given the chance.

“Very well. I will accept the offered position, effective immediately. As the new Matriarch of the Clan Argent, I will offer alliance to the group officially known as the Quartet. We will stand with you when the time comes for the meeting Kate mentioned earlier. Speaking of which,” she said, eyeing Kate, “when will that be?”

Kate’s mouth had fallen open, but Stiles would bet his own had hit the actual floor. Victoria’s easy acceptance and words had struck a chord inside him. She had spoken into words what everyone else had hinted at and he himself had only begun to accept in his mind. He—

“Thank you, Matriarch Argent,” he said, his throat dry and his voice coming out hoarse. “I couldn’t be gladder to hear your decision.”

Once more Victoria nodded, regal, a queen in her own right.

“Enough with the pomp and circumstance,” she said. “The meeting?”

“As soon as both sides arrive,” Kate answered quickly. “We anticipate within a week.”

“But you don’t know for sure. Very well.” Victoria picked up her phone. “I will be calling them in that case. I assume you haven’t?”

“Not… yet,” came the grudging admittance.

“Kate,” Chris merely said. Kate made a face at him.

“You make a call and try to explain this shit and not want to leave it till the last minute.” She sighed, and then added, “I wanted to wait until you arrived. They may’ve not taken me seriously, given the, you know.”

Her brother nodded solemnly. Kate waved at Victoria, gaining her attention.
“We need to announce Gerard’s death,” she said. “And that Shannon has been compromised. Your word has more momentum than mine. We need them here, but on our terms.”

Victoria nodded, and then she was distracted, a too quiet voice echoing from her phone. She raised her hand and they fell silent, watching and waiting. While they did, Victoria answered questions and asked some of her own. She had to wait for a bit after telling the people about Gerard, but when she continued she was speaking with grace and kept her voice even, revealing nothing but the necessary pieces of information to keep the people in the line satisfied. When she didn’t know something, she’d mask her question into a leading sentence and either Stiles or Kate would fill her in quietly, which she then relayed forward.

Curiously, she didn’t reveal her new title to the people on the line.

It was admirable, Stiles could admit, the way she wove her tale without once falling on lies and half-truths. He patted his jacket over his little red book, wondering if she should take notes.

“When can you be here?” Victoria asked with calm that belied her tight expression. She raised her hand, motioning for them to listen as if they already weren’t. “Within four days, you say? Five at the latest? Yes, I just wrote it down.”

Three days, Stiles translated. More if they were lucky, but he’d bet all Kate—or, well, Victoria and Chris—owned that they wouldn’t be. He whipped out his phone and sent a quick message to Peter. He hoped they were making headway because time was quickly running out.

“—I am in charge of Beacon Hills for the moment, yes. Katherine? She gave me her blessing. She is still underage and the situation, while not volatile per se, required her to ask for me to step it.” She paused, and then looked at the ceiling, longsuffering expression on her face. Miraculously, it didn’t colour on her voice and it was just as steady as ever. “I don’t know what you may have heard, but I have assessed the situation. Do you doubt my word?” She waited for the answer, before adding, “Thank you. I am glad to hear I haven’t let you down and will endeavour not do so in the future either.”

Stiles shared a look with Kate. Someone had left a safety net just in case, just as they thought. It made Kate’s decision to wait until Chris and Victoria arrived more than sensible after all.

Victoria ended the call swiftly afterwards, with politeness but none of the pomp, and turned to them. The look on her face was sharp and hungry; she had the eyes of wolf—no, a bird of prey—eyeing her target. He suddenly understood why she had taken to the bite all those years ago.

“Strategy. Now.”

***

Stiles stared at the white creature roaming the edge of the Hale property. It was grazing calmly, eating the flowers it could find there, and just being a genuine nuisance. However, no one there even attempted to drive it away.

“A unicorn,” Stiles said dumbly. Kate was right there with him, eyes wide as saucers.

“The currents are clean again,” Talia said, smiling. “And the Nemeton is healing. This is great news. A good omen.”

“Knock on wood quickly, or you’ll jinx us.” But even the edge of his sharp words couldn’t destroy the wonder he felt. The pure white coat and the gentle curve of the horn were one of the things he
had never witnessed in his life. He wanted to take a step forward, to touch, but he felt like he’d just drive it away, tainted as he was. But—

“A good omen,” he repeated, hope climbing in his chest and making home in his throat. It felt tight and he wished Peter and Julia had been there to witness the wonder he was. Or that he had a smartphone again. Either or.

When he finally could tear his eyes from the sight before him—he had to turn back twice, just to check he hadn’t been seeing things—Kate and he made their way upstairs again. It had been a long day and Stiles felt like he needed two showers to feel clean again… although the unicorn had lifted part of the weight off his shoulders.

“Hey, Stiles! Katie-girl!”

“I’ll kill you!” Kate announced, flouncing to Peter’s old room. She rummaged through her bag, swearing as she couldn’t find what she was looking for. Stiles couldn’t even fathom what that was.

Bobby didn’t even blink and invaded Stiles’ personal space. A very pungent smell came with him and Stiles scrambled back, gagging.

Bobby scowled. “You too?” he demanded. “What on earth is going on with you? I’ve tried to ask all these people and everyone just—runs away or something!”

Stiles noticed the nogitsune stand a few steps behind them, hacking. Either he was laughing or slowly being strangled. Stiles hoped for the latter even as he reached to pinch his own nose.

“When did you last have a shower?” he asked.

Bobby shrugged. “I don’t know, before I was stuck to the bed?”

Stiles stared at him. The only thought that flashed through his mind was that Julia was a fucking saint and they didn’t deserve her.

“You… smell,” he said. To put it mildly. Politely. Delicately.

“Like a dumpster!” Kate called out.

She wasn’t wrong. Jerry hacked again.

Bobby sniffed his armpit, brows knitted. “Do you think I have issues?”

“Well, I wouldn’t call it an issue…”

“An issue is something you can fix,” Kate said, blunt as the baseball bat Stiles used to have. She peeked from the doorway, nose wrinkled. “And you, sir, have garbage in your soul.”

Stiles and Jerry snorted in unison while Bobby gave his pits another sniff.

“It’s called charisma,” he then stated. Stiles gathered all his courage and went to push him back towards his room.

“Shower, now! Or you’ll drive off the unicorn!”

Or make it mad, Stiles thought privately. Kate hid in their room, slamming the door shut when Bobby closed in on it.
“Oooh, a horny horse! Can I see it?”

“After you shower.”

“Pleaseeeeeease?”

“Shower.”

The man who had strong-armed Stiles into getting adopted muttered some curses that weren’t particularly attractive but stomped away again. Jerry didn’t follow him this time, hacking twice as Bobby passed him.

Stiles crossed his arms. Jerry looked like he was smirking though that could have just been his resting face.

He hated foxes.

“I want in when you discuss the hunters,” Jerry said. It was only then that Stiles realised how weird it seemed. The fox’s mouth wasn’t particularly open and neither was it moving, but noise was still coming out of somewhere from its general direction.

“No,” Stiles replied quickly. There was no way that he wanted the nogitsune anywhere close the decision-making. Jerry rolled his eyes. That at least was a motion he could do.

Stiles hated foxes.

“Don’t be obtuse. You don’t like me and I’m not particularly fond of you either,” Jerry said, voice dripping disdain. “But I am a thousand years old and have seen more than you have or ever will. If you want to break their wall or find the cracks, you need someone who can do that.”

“What’s in it for you?” Stiles snapped back. “I’m not letting you into something for the ‘fun’ of it.”

The nogitsune bristled, tails swishing.

“While I will enjoy the uproar and confusion this will cause,” at least he didn’t deny it, although he did sound annoyed, “I am… bonded, for the time being. And I get enough of gratification from that fool of a seer. For now. I want to enjoy him while he lasts and if this goes south, it’ll be earlier than I desire.”

Stiles’ brows knitted together. He eyed the small form that hid inside so much chaos and potential for terror but that could, perhaps, under the right circumstances, be even of use. He cautiously considered the suggestion.

“This is not my decision alone,” he said in the end. “But I will bring it on the table.”

Jerry let out something that seemed like a sneeze. Stiles had no idea what to make of it.

“Keep me waiting for long and you’ll find out why people have feared me for centuries,” it threatened. Once, that might have made Stiles quiver on his feet. Once. He still didn’t like the idea, wasn’t a fan of it or the nogitsune, but it had… merits.

Stiles heard Kate’s loud exclamation and thumping steps. The bathroom door slammed shut.

He inclined his head.

“Tomorrow.”
The nogitsune considered him in turn, looking for the lie that wasn’t there, and then turned around, melting into the shadows left by the waning sunlight.

When he stepped into Peter’s—their—room, Kate pulled the door open again. She grimaced at him.

“Where’s the chocolate?” she asked. Stiles pointed at the half-eaten bag and Kate dove into it, rummaging through it to get to the treats she liked best. She seemed to decide any would do as she just picked it up and jumped into the bed and under the covers, still in her day clothes.

“Get me a hot water bottle. The hottest you can make. Now,” the order came. Stiles blinked and then paled, the implication hitting his face point blank.

“Uh, yeah, do you need…?”

“The hot water bottle,” Kate repeated. “Now.” Then she considered something and added, “Tell Laura to come up too.”

“Laura,” Stiles repeated. When Kate narrowed his eyes at him, he whirled around, yelling, “Going! I’m going, sheesh! Don’t pull your—nope, didn’t say anything, hot Laura and water and a bottle, no, hot bottle and Laura water—shit, no, don’t throw the lamp at me I’m going I’m going—”

The door slammed shut behind him. Stiles stared at the wall in front of him before shaking his head, groaning.

What was his life and where could he get a refund?

Chapter End Notes

Find me on tumblr.
In which grief howls like a wolf

Chapter Notes

Happy Monday! :) Enjoy! While you are at it, have a great rest of the week too!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter wasn’t fond of silence. He had never been. Silence was something that ate the air around him, poked holes into carefully woven tales, and ushered in questions that no one liked the answers to. He knew how to use it to his advantage and, yes, there were times he could appreciate it and find it comfortable. He rather enjoyed just sitting with Stiles, for example, doing nothing in a way that meant everything.

Yet silence always reminded him of the times when no one paid much attention to him. It didn’t always have to be a concrete one—he had long since learned how tight a silence could feel in a room full of chatter. He also didn’t like silence when there were people he didn’t trust near his skin. This silence was one of those.

Julia was chattering the way only she could, kind and gentle with a bubbly flair. It was genuine in a way that the rest of them couldn’t imitate. But silence clung to her words and she grew more and more desperate when Yukimura didn’t answer, only continued to stare at the passing surroundings.

“In which part of Oregon does the pack we are visiting live?” Julia asked, seemingly giving up trying to include Yukimura in the general discussion. Ironically, that was also when Peter saw her perk up. His lip curled.

“Near the southern border. The Miller pack is one of the closest to us,” Peter said. “Ones that are major at least.”

“You really think Deucalion would run back to his friend?”

“That’s the hunch.” Peter watched as a car sped past them, filled with teenagers and loud music. How cliché. He would roll his eyes at them, but they weren’t worth the effort. "He wants revenge. He needs people for that. Alpha Ennis belongs to the people.”

“I hope they can help him,” Julia said. Her hands were very still on her lap, unnaturally so. “Not to kill, obviously, but—it didn’t—I didn’t see him, clearly, but what I heard—”

“It was bad,” Peter agreed. “I would’ve doubted his words if Kevin and I hadn’t followed his steps north. I don’t think he was sane enough to think of covering his tracks.”

“Oh.” Julia paused, and then sighed. “I don’t want things to escalate further.”

Peter peered at the road sign. Still at least thirty miles until they had to turn. “That is why we are going to meet them.”

“Why take the risk?” Yukimura finally piped up, speaking up for the first time since she sat down, although she kept her eyes on the window. “You could have done anything else and it’d have been a better choice.”
“Says the person who literally bottled up her mistakes and let them overflow,” Peter said. He kept his voice neutral like he was just making a casual observation. With the way her eyes sought him immediately after, he knew she had picked up on his disdain.

He hadn’t worked particularly hard on that though. What he could remember of the woman—which, admittedly, wasn’t much—didn’t paint the prettiest of pictures.

“You let it out.”

“Correction, we declawed him.” Peter considered his statement and amended, “Well, clipped his nails. Better than you did at any rate, postponing the inevitable.”

Yukimura abandoned any pretence of being aloof. She leaned forward, hand on Julia’s backrest. “There are no scissors sharp enough to do that.”

“A good thing then we didn’t use any,” Peter said. He glanced at the upcoming sign again. Twenty miles. “He has surprisingly caused us less trouble than those we have to call people.”

“But they are special cases,” Julia added hurriedly. Peter sent her a small smile.

“Naturally.”

Yukimura didn’t look convinced. “So you are willing to leave a threat behind to confront… another one?”

“You are being purposefully obtuse and I am not interested in obliging you,” Peter said. Fifteen. He switched lanes. “Nothing we say will change your mind. I get it, you are worried the past repeats itself. What you don’t get is that we are the same. So sit back and relax, we still have hours of driving left, and you can check on your mortal enemy when we get back.” Peter rolled his eyes at that. “Just don’t get mad when I’ll laugh and say, ‘I told you so’.”

Yukimura’s back hit her seat again. She was too dignified to let her displeasure show in huffs and crossed arms, but the daggers she glared into his back were evidence enough that she was, in fact, mad. Whether it was his unwillingness to bend down to her will or his words, he couldn’t say.

He had bigger things to worry about than another hissy kitsune.

“Deucalion’s had a big head start,” Julia said. “Do you think we can convince them?”

Such as that.

“We are driving,” Peter said instead. “So I don’t think it will be as big as it first seems. But no, I’m not sure. Talia couldn’t get in touch with the Miller pack, which doesn’t spell good, but Alpha Ito did. They know we are coming.”

Julia bit her lip. “That doesn’t sound so good.”

Peter shrugged. He finally turned the car away from the highway, leading to a smaller road that’d take them faster to the Millers’ side of Oregon.

“It is what it is. They cannot ignore an alpha as old and respected as Satomi Ito. Talia, maybe, since she was the ‘offending party’, but Ito? Unless he wants bad blood all over the west coast, Ennis has to at least hear us. Hopefully that extends to non-violence too.” Peter waved his hand in Julia’s direction before grabbing the gear stick. “Take out the map, would you? It’s been a while since I’ve visited them.”
“You’ve been there before?” Julia asked. She obediently opened the glove compartment and pulled open the map she found there. “We are…” she trailed off, peeking at the road signs. She had to wait for a couple of minutes before one appeared. “Ah, right. Yes. The big red circle?”

Peter nodded and agreed, “The big red circle.”

“Right. Continue straight on for… fifteen miles, turn left at the next intersection, and then it’s straight for another thirty. We should be going over the state border soon.”

“Got it. And yes, I’ve visited once or twice. The last time was more than five years ago though—I think I was in middle school?” Peter said, thinking back. “Or it could’ve been the last year of elementary.”

“Oh. So you don’t remember the place?” Julia asked.

Peter smirked. “Never said that, did I? I can’t say much for the Miller pack, but their address is still the same, so the pack house at the very least is the same. It’s not as big as ours but they do have space, so, if anything, it’s possible they’ve built on the land. Talia said that they’ve grown in recent years. They may be bigger than the Hales in numbers by now.”

Julia’s brows knotted together. “Bigger than the Steeles?”

“Probably not.”

She tapped the map as the road divided. “Turn now.”

Peter did. The trees looked all the same to him.

“Oh yes, and Julia.” She hummed. “Remember to call the Miller alpha Ennis,” Peter said. Julia blinked at him, confused, so he elaborated, “He prefers his first name.”

“Curious,” Yukimura said instead, butting in and interrupting her own pity party. “Why is that?”

“There are only rumours. Still, the last person who called him Alpha Miller got thrown into a tree and broke his back. It took a while to heal.”

Yukimura nodded, thoughtful. “Curious, indeed.” She fell quiet again after that, focusing on the view passing them by. Julia focused on the map as well, worrying her lip, and Peter groaned inwardly. The silence inside his mind grew louder as the distance between them and the rest of their pack grew with it.

He traced the line of a phone resting against his thigh, making sure it was still there. It was just as quiet as the air but more comfortable a weight. Even the bonds resonated with so little frequency that it was almost like they weren’t there. Peter missed the initial shock of them, bleeding over every little thing they did. Now they were letting past only a few emotions in comparison; the stronger the better. He supposed he should be glad he didn’t feel much; it meant that Stiles and Kate were safe and sound.

He was just… missing them.

A hand covered his as he went for the gear stick again, preparing to move past the car in front of them. He tilted his head, raising his brows at Julia.

She said nothing, only smiled at him, her brown eyes deepening into something like warm chocolate.
When Peter turned back to the road, the silence let go off his throat and he could breath easily again.

***

They arrived when the afternoon sun had risen and travelled with them for the past couple of hours. Peter sent a quick message to Stiles, announcing their arrival. With that he turned it mute and pocketed it.

The pack house was the same as he remembered. Red paint on wood, making it shine in the middle of the green forest. There was the pond there too, with the small beach Peter remembered longing for when he was a child. They had built a couple more houses but not nearly as much as he would have thought.

No one had come out to greet them, but Peter was certain they knew they were there. He could sense the eyes on his skin. He forced his breath to stay even and heart rate steady, nipping the startling burst of panic at the bud.

It took him a second to realise the anxiety wasn’t his.

He leaned against the wheel, the picture of calm, and turned to Julia. She looked green around her edges.

“I’m going to fail,” she said. Her voice didn’t reveal the depths of her nervousness and it stayed surprisingly even, but the skin around her eyes was tight.

Peter quirked his brows and drawled, “Now now, where did little miss positive go?”

Julia made a face. “I’m positive I’m going to fail.”

“Oooh, snappy. As if Kate was here.”

“Kate wouldn’t let this get to her,” Julia said under her breath. She rubbed her eyes and Peter could see the tremor there.

“What’s wrong, Julia?” he asked then, reaching for her. He grabbed her hand and dragged it away from her face. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t—I—” Julia stuttered and then sighed in frustration. “Something is nagging at me and I don’t know what,” she admitted finally.

“Are you afraid?”

Julia’s head hit the backrest and she closed her eyes.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Before we left, Bobby told me that while too late to much and too early for many, we are the ones making sure we can reach the next step.”

Peter snorted. “Let me guess, he was babbling about the lake again.”

Julia smiled faintly. “He was, is, right of course, but… this is hard. A misstep can cause the house of cards to just… collapse.”

“So why do you think it’ll be you who’ll do that?”

“Because who else would it be?” she asked, her eyes finally opening and meeting Peter’s before she quickly looked away. “You—you always know what to do, what to say. Kate can get past anything,
and Stiles is…” she trailed off. Peter’s lips quirked.

“Stiles.”

“Yeah.”

“It could be Yukimura,” he pointed out. He could feel the kitsune’s disdain hitting him, but he didn’t let his gaze wander to make sure it was there.

“It won’t—she won’t.” Julia sounded certain of that. This time Peter did glance at the backseat, finding Yukimura giving Julia another of her odd looks. “I don’t have any of your experience. This is too much pressure. I’ll mess up something and then—then—”

“Hey.” Peter tightened his hold on her hand, forcing her to face him. “I’m not like Stiles, sentimental and full of sudden, unintended inspirational bullshit that takes you back and makes you think.”

Julia let out a startled little laugh. Peter half-smiled, a little self-deprecating.

“And while you won’t ever hear me repeat this, neither am I the greatest at many other things. I am, however, full of confidence that I can make people think I am. So,” he turned her hand around and held it between his. “I want you to pick yourself up, convince yourself you can do it, and take that bravado and show it down the others’ throats. Because if you let them see inside your insecurities, they will take advantage.”


“Told you.”

“But,” she grinned a little and took hold of Peter’s other hand so they were both holding each other. She jiggled their hands up and down like it was a game. “Bravado, you say?”

“Fake it till you make it.”

The giggle she let out was more like her again.

“You can just let me do the talking and back me up,” Peter said gently. Julia’s smile turned a bit watery at that and the breath she took trembled. Her exhale was steadier and she quickly took her hand back and wiped her eyes, her expression clearing.

“Thank you, Peter.”

“Anytime,” he said, telling the truth. There was a time he didn’t think he could say that to anyone and mean it. He was happy to be proven wrong, time and again. He let go of Julia completely and looked at Yukimura, who had kept quiet the whole time. “We are done now.”

She inclined her head. “Good. Because the front door opened a couple of minutes ago and someone’s been waiting for us.”

Peter turned back and, indeed, a woman was there, watching over them like a hawk.

“Do you think she saw—” Julia said, but Peter held up a finger to silence her.

“Fake it,” he said. Julia sighed, when he didn’t continue, and huffed a laugh.

“Till you make it.”
“Good girl.”

Peter drove a little further down the yard until he saw a row of cars. A too big of a row for just one pack, no matter how numerous. They had guests over. Probably packs over. He wasn’t too surprised at that—they had had a few days to collect themselves and call allies over. He had no doubt that the slaughter of Deucalion’s pack upset the careful balance between the hunters and supernatural. Especially if they took his claims about Talia’s responsibility to heart.

One pack couldn’t win over another without big losses; multiple, however, could.

“He said quietly. “We are not alone here.”

Yukimura nodded sharply and Julia swallowed once, but that was it. They followed Peter out of the car and slammed the doors shut. Peter contemplated letting the doors stay unlocked, just in case they needed a quick escape, but who knew what might be tampered if he did. Sighing, he locked them, and turned towards the Miller pack house.

When they reached the porch, the woman waiting for them spoke.

“We were wondering if you intended on coming out or not,” she said. The once-over she gave them said she didn’t think much of them. Peter gave her his best grin.

“We came as quick as we could,” he answered. “I’m Peter Hale.”

“I know.”

Peter waited for her to continue but she didn’t even offer them her name. Instead of letting that discourage him, he tilted his head at the cars that were lined up by the house. “Have the rest of the guests arrived?”

The woman emitted more chill than the winds of winter.

“Yes. I’ll show you to your room.”

“Our bags are in the car.”

The chill seemed to get even more biting. “Well,” she said slowly. “Then go get them.”

“Of course, just a—” he looked back, only to see Yukimura walking towards the car. He called her name and threw his keys to her. “Well, that situation seems to be handled.”

The woman didn’t reply. Julia shuffled on her feet.

“When can we meet with Alpha Ennis?” she asked. Peter had to give it to her, she didn’t even flinch when the woman’s glare was directed at her.

“Soon,” the answer was bit out.

They certainly wouldn’t be getting any recommendations for hospitality from Peter. Yukimura made her way to them, carrying three bags with ease. Not that they were heavy, considering they had only packed for a few days’ worth of clothes to go.

The moment she reached them, their welcoming committee of one whirled around and walked inside. She didn’t wait to see if they were following before disappearing upstairs. Peter hated scurrying after anyone—it gave them far too much power over him—so while he did hasten his steps, he didn’t run after her.
Julia glanced at him anxiously but followed his lead. They met with the woman by a door near the staircase. Peter considered the location and how conveniently it was situated where they could be monitored from every angle—and where they could do the same.

“You are all in the same room,” the woman said. Peter had expected nothing less. “I’ll come to fetch you when Alpha Ennis will see you.”

“I’m the representative of Alpha Ito,” Yukimura stated. Her brows were raised. “Shouldn’t I have my own space?”

The woman didn’t answer. Her expression was enough. Peter gave another cursory look around the second floor. “When do you think he’ll be ready for us?”

Just then a piercing howl penetrated the air. It was hard and unforgiving and so full of unrestrained anger that Peter was chilled down to his bones.

It didn’t seem like the few days had made Deucalion any less mellow.

The woman was already making her way back downstairs, sniffing as she passed Yukimura. “Soon.”

And then she was gone, disappearing into wherever one of the nearby doors led.

“Well,” Peter said, warmth slowly returning to his limbs. Julia looked even more spooked next to him. “Let’s go in, shall we?”

The room was big enough for the three of them, with one bed for two and what could be a sofa-bed but was otherwise sparsely furnished. Peter tried to see if he could find out any convenient holes to listen through, but the instant Yukimura closed the door behind her all noise ceased. It was like they were encased in a dome of silence with only the clock on the wall making any sound other than their breathing. It was a little unnerving, Peter could admit, but he had experienced worse.

The one other door inside led to a small bathroom which Yukimura claimed as soon as he finished the inspection. He sighed, sitting on the lone couch.

“I can take this. You two can share the bed.”

“Do you think we need to wait long?” Julia asked. Peter shrugged.

“Maybe. I suspect at least an hour. If it was me, I’d have either made them meet us the moment they entered or made them sweat for it.”

And with Deucalion apparently not being in the best of shape, it might take them even longer than that. Perhaps with Yukimura there they weren’t just taken to the slaughterhouse.

“That’s not nice.”

“They are not here to make friends; we are. Or at least make them believe we weren’t at fault with what happened to the Blackwood pack.”

Julia frowned. “But… we are not. Shouldn’t they be able to hear it?”

“It’s not fool-proof,” Peter said. He tapped his chest where his heart beat. “Even if magic is useless on it, you can train yourself not to show signs. It is difficult—I haven’t mastered it yet myself—but possible.”
The bathroom door opened. “I couldn’t help but hear you,” Yukimura said. “It also depends on the willingness to believe. Signs can show differently to others.” She walked to the bed, picking up her bag on the way, and started rummaging through it. “Imagine this. You are accused of theft. Your best friend is the judge. They’ll be more likely to believe you even if your heart trips in anxiety.

“However, if it was your worst enemy, they would take it as a sign of lying—or use it as such.” She pulled out a bottle of lotion which she immediately opened. A whiff of something coconuty tickled Peter’s nose.

“She’s right,” Peter agreed. “Which is why we need proof to our words.”

“Oh,” Julia repeated. Her frown deepened and then she mumbled, probably to herself, “…why they never believed me.”

“Hmm?” Yukimura hummed, capping her bottle. “Did you say something?”

“What? Oh! No, just thinking.”

Yukimura glanced at her, brows raised, but with Julia’s back on her she didn’t see it. “Sure.”

Julia ignored her and took inventory of their bags. “Hey, I had a small blue bag with me as well. Did you take it from the car?”

“No, just these three.”

“My toiletries were in there,” she mumbled. She looked indecisive, glancing between the door and her bag, before her back straightened and she turned to Peter. “Do you think they’d mind if I went to get them? I want to wash my face but…”

“I’ll come with you.”

“No!” Julia said quickly and Peter paused in the middle of standing up. She flushed and grinned a little sheepishly. “I just thought… it might look weird if we all went, right? One person can’t do much trouble. Right?”

Peter swore he could sense Yukimura’s amusement. He leaned back again. “Just don’t attempt to eavesdrop,” he said finally. Julia shook her head earnestly.

“I’ll just run out and come back straight away. Promise.”

“I don’t think you’ll have to go that far. We are still guests.” Although he had his misgivings, Julia was, unfortunately, right. They might lose face if they all went; implied no trust was alright but a concrete sign of it? He could’ve just stayed in Beacon Hills and it’d have been a better option. Hell, it probably would have been the better option, no matter what he had said to Yukimura.

Still, he doubted she would be their first choice of a victim. He was rather sure it was reserved for the nearest person with the name of Hale; specifically, him.

“Don’t forget the keys,” Yukimura said. She tossed them to Julia who managed to snatch them from air.

“Thank you. I’ll be back soon.” With that she hurried out and Peter could hear her quick steps downstairs and her apologising to someone and quickly explaining herself before the door clicked
shut again. He sighed.

“Are you certain it was wise to take her?” Yukimura asked. When Peter met her gaze, she didn’t look judging, just concerned. “She seems… young.”

“She’s an adult.”

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

“I know,” Peter said. His arms were spread on the large cushions. “But she has connections to the east coast. Have you heard of the Steele pack?”

“She’s a Steele?” Yukimura looked aghast. “They certainly have a reputation.”

“She’s not… exactly one of them,” Peter admitted. “Rather, she had the ear of the future alpha until the… events separated them. So to speak.”

“Need to know?”

“Irrelevant, I hope,” he said. “And better for us if you don’t know.”

Yukimura nodded slowly. “I can’t react if I don’t know.”

“Exactly.” Especially now that they were clumped together like conspirators.

“Fine. But I hope you know what you are doing.”

“She’s strong, Julia is,” Peter said. “It might not seem so from what you’ve seen, but she is. Kind even more so.”

“Kindness won’t convince Ennis,” Yukimura warned him.

“No, it won’t,” he agreed. “But it may be enough for Deucalion.”

“That’s a big gamble.”

“She may be the only chance we have.”

“Does she know?”

Peter gave her a look. She huffed, a small smile curling on her lips. He could see how she could be considered a looker if he was so inclined. But he wasn’t, and he was spoken for anyway. Speaking of. He fished out his phone, seeing a message from Stiles. Arrived just a few minutes ago. He tapped it open quickly and—

3 dax proa tribshits, read on the screen and he had to blink several times before the message made any kind of sense. He rubbed the skin between his eyes.

Noted. Waiting for audience. Learn how to type, he wrote back. A moment later he sent one more —love you—before pushing it back into his back pocket. Yukimura had a curious look on her face when he lifted his head again.

“The Tribunal will be in Beacon Hills in three days, probably. That’s our timeline,” he said. Yukimura sucked in her lips.

“That’s not much,” she said carefully. He nodded and sighed.
“I know. Thankfully I wasn’t expecting a holiday.” He checked the time, frowning. A feeling of unease was eating him at his very core.

“What’s taking her?”

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Julia tried to hurry her steps but almost tripped on the stairs and crashed on the person on the ground floor. She apologised profusely—she might have even bowed, she wasn’t sure.

“I just forgot something in the car!” she explained. She tried to convey how much she wasn’t trying to cause trouble. She might not care about looking dignified, not like Peter did, but she knew the way they presented themselves was a thing he considered important and she really didn’t want to be the reason the talks failed. That was basically the only reason she wasn’t running. Yet. She really felt like she should.

…Would it look so bad? She thought it might. She wasn’t trying to run away, she just—didn’t want to cause any trouble.

“Just toiletries. I mean, I could do without, but when you don’t have to it’s all the better. Right? I mean, you understand, right?” She gave the person a better look and decided that, no, he probably wouldn’t. Not with those baby cheeks. The look he gave her was almost confused if not completely bemused. She felt like she a fish imitation herself.

“I’ll just—uh. Go? For my bag? Stuff?”

The man—boy?—nodded. He silently pointed in the direction where she knew the door was.

“Thanks!” she said and removed herself from the situation. When she was far enough—meaning the front door was shut behind her—she mumbled to herself, “Great going there, Julia. Show everyone you’re a nutcase, will you?”

She hurried to the car and popped open the trunk, trying to see where her little baby blue bag was.

“Come on,” she said. “Where did I put you? Why didn’t I put you back inside? Why did I need you—oh. Bobby’s dry cheeks. Yes, that was it. She still could’ve put it back in. Julia of the past was an idiot.

Something blue caught her eye and, yes, there! Somehow it had wedged between the backseat and the trunk. Victoriously, she leaned forward to grab it and pulled it free.

“I did it!” she exclaimed happily. She leaned back and reached for the car door. Why was it so high? She wasn’t short, so she should be able to just—

An arm reached past her and pulled it down for her. She turned around, tucking her hair behind her ear, to thank the person when her mouth suddenly ran dry.

Behind her, just a few inches apart, stood Kali.

It hit her how much she didn’t seem changed when so much else had. She was just as beautiful as she had been just a few short months ago with her dark hair and tanned skin. Julia had not gained an inch in height so Kali still had those few on her—the decisive few—but it only served to remind her of how she had always been that way, always been there for her, except—

Except when Julia forsook her.
She stood there, frozen, under the dark brown gaze she knew better than her own. There was something—Kali quirked her brows and Julia just knew she had made herself look like an idiot yet again. Yet her mouth refused to work and words just wouldn’t come out.

“Are you here with another delegation?” Kali asked. She moved back a step and another, giving Julia room to breathe. She nodded mutely.

What could she even say? That she was sorry? If she did, she didn’t know if it would come out as a lie or not. She was genuinely sorry about everything that had transpired between them the last time they saw but she also wasn’t for the sole reason that it was the only thing that she could have done in that situation.

It was to either give herself completely to her or save her own soul.

(She still didn’t know if she made the right decision.)

“Which one?”

“I—Hale,” Julia said.

“Hmph.” Kali eyed her critically. It made Julia feel smaller than she had felt in ages. “I see. So they finally arrived.”

“We came here as soon as we could!” Julia protested. “And—what are you even doing here?”

“I don’t think that’s any of your business,” Kali said sharply. Julia pressed against the trunk. The unimpressed look sent at her killed her a little inside. “If the rest of your delegation is anything like you, I doubt the success of the talks.”

That… hurt. A whole lot more than she was ready to admit. She had thought she was over this. Mostly. During the daylight. When she wasn’t alone. The little voice she had locked away shouldn’t have found itself free. She had tried so hard to just let it go—

“What are you even bringing to the table?” Kali asked.

“I—” A small spark ignited within Julia and she blurted out, “It’s not like it’s any of your business,” unintentionally sending Kali’s words back at her.

Kali’s brows lifted and it was like she appraised her again. She smirked. “Didn’t think you had it in you. Maybe there’s something in you after all.”

Julia felt something akin to a shock run down her spine. “Thank you?”

Kali laughed. The sudden delight in it sent another burst of adrenaline through her and she couldn’t help but watch in amazement how the entirety of Kali just… glowed. There was no other way to put it. Unwittingly she found herself leaning towards her.

She was so beautiful it hurt.

“Kali.”

And just like that the moment was broken. Julia’s head snapped to the spot filled by the devastating figure of Georgia Steele. Just like Kali, she didn’t seem any different but that didn’t mean she wasn’t just as terrifying as ever. There was a distinct sense of superiority surrounding her that never went away but it felt more suffocating now than she recalled it ever being. As she noticed Julia there, next
to Kali, she looked surprised for a moment before a smirk unlike any other deepened the age lines on her face.

“Well, well,” Georgia said. “What have you found here, Kali? Aren’t you going to introduce us?”

The little warmth left in Julia died with the colour that escaped her features.

“I’m sorry, Alpha,” Kali said, bowing quickly towards her aunt. “I didn’t get to there yet.”

What?

Kali turned back to her. She stuck a hand to Julia which she instinctually grasped. The grip was tight as their hands shook and her hand felt so warm against Julia’s skin—

“My name is Kali Steele, the heir apparent to the Pack Steele of South Carolina.” Kali flashed her a smile that was more than charming but now, to Julia’s horror, she could recognise the odd look in her eyes from before.

“What’s your name? You look familiar. Have we met before?”

And there, under the eyes of her what-could-have-been, Julia couldn’t help but feel her world crumbling under her feet.

***

Peter stood up immediately when Julia made her way in, but she could barely register it. Instead she slumped on her part of the bed and stared into nothing and unable to hear anything but the rush in her ears. Kali’s words plagued her mind over and over again, replaying a broken record.

You look familiar, her voice whispered to her, tightening its stranglehold on her throat.

She didn’t—she didn’t—

Have we met before?

She didn’t remember her at all.

A glass of water appeared before her eyes and she almost wasn’t able to process the sight. If it wasn’t for Peter’s voice calling her back to reality, she might have thought it was an impossible vision itself.

“Julia,” she heard Peter say. She turned to him. He looked misty, somewhat ethereal, until she realised it was her eyes that were unable to see clearly. She rubbed her eyes with her sleeve that came out wet. Suddenly the wetness was everywhere; in her eyes, on her cheeks, her lap, her soul.

She was bleeding inside.

“Julia, darling,” Peter said again. “You need to drink.”

Why did she have to drink when she was already so wet? She opened her mouth to say it, but nothing came out, only a hoarse cry for something—someone—that would never be there again.

Peter raised the glass on her lips and lifted it. Water filled her dry mouth and she drank like she was the desert itself. She still didn’t feel the relief the water should have brought. It disappeared inside her into the depths she was drowning in.

He set the glass down and sat next to her, hugging her close. Julia couldn’t feel the warmth she
rationally knew he emitted. She was just… so cold. She was lost, drowning, and she didn’t know if she could find the strength to swim to the surface anymore.

Where was the surface anyway? She didn’t know. Everything was just so dark.

“No one wants me,” Julia whispered, and she couldn’t even recognise her own voice. “I knew it. I’m expendable. I always was.”

“No,” Peter said. “No, you aren’t. You are perfect, Julia.”

“Then why—why?” She couldn’t bring herself to say the words. “She—”

Her soul screamed. Her heart broke. She bled.

She felt like she was dying.

“It’s my fault,” she said as the horrified truth dawned on her. “I never should have left. I did this to her.”

“Julia, what happened out there?”

“It’s Kali.” She felt Peter stiffen beside her. “They are here and… Peter, she doesn’t… she doesn’t remember me.”

“Steele?” a voice asked that Julia recognised as Noshiko’s. Peter nodded shortly against her.

“They are really here?” he asked but didn’t wait for a confirmation before he continued. “I haven’t—no, they didn’t even attempt to eavesdrop. They tried to isolate us. No wonder no noise could be heard and there was no change in scents! Damn them,” he cursed.

Her insides were strangling her within. “How could that happen?”

“Whatever happened, it was Georgia Steele’s fault; not yours.” His arms tightened around Julia. “She must have dug her claws on the back of her neck, erasing—”

“She doesn’t—I know why Kali doesn’t—” Julia interrupted. “I know that—I know. But how could—how could she do that? To her own niece? Her heir? I can’t—she—” She choked on her words. “It’s my fault. If I hadn’t left—”

“Julia!”

She suddenly turned in Peter’s arms and she pushed him away with what little power she had. Peter went willingly, almost like he was afraid of her. For her.

Stop it, she wanted to scream. Stop looking at me like that. Don’t look at me like that. I’m not worth it, I’m a monster, I’m a monster! I left her there, with her, all alone! It’s all my fault and I’m a selfish monster!

Only when she saw the way he paled did she realise she had said it all out loud.

“You are no such a thing,” Peter replied, voice quiet, but tone reverberating inside the emptiness that was her.

“But I am!” she shouted— or tried to. The only thing that came out was a hoarse whisper, something that was quickly lost in the desert.
Wait, claws—

“Can you help her?” Julia asked. “Do what you did to remember.”

Peter sighed, regretful. “I don’t think my method will do you any good.”

And why not, she wanted to yell, to scream, because that’s what Talia did to him, didn’t she? Why could he snap out of it, why couldn’t Kali? What made him so special?

Her breath hitched.

No. Nonononono, she couldn’t think like that. He saved her, Stiles, Kate, all of them, they saved her and took her away when she needed it. They took her in. They gave her a home.

But so had Kali so long ago and look at what happened to her.

Her breath quickened and she couldn’t calm it anymore.

Everything died around her. She didn’t deserve—she—all she ever did was make everyone, everything, miserable. The only thing she was good at was breaking everything around her.

Even her own heart.

But. Even so—

They had no right.

***

The girl next to him suddenly stiffened and awash of emotion, all tangled together, burst through their bond. If Peter could feel it this strong, it meant that the echo of it would spread from both of their ends to Beacon Hills. They didn’t know what distance did to their bond, but he was certain something this strong wouldn’t thin to nothing even across the entire continent.

“Julia,” Peter said quietly. She hiccupped. “Julia.”

“What?”

The hairs in the back on Peter’s neck rose. There was something there. Something different. Grief, and anger, yes, but also—

Hate.

His eyes narrowed. Something had given. There she was sitting, back straight and hands clenched into fists. She didn’t even look like she realised it herself.

“You do know you are no monster.”

She nodded, just once, curt and short. Her hair snapped with it, her mouth drawing a line. “But Georgia is.”

“You won’t find me arguing against that,” he said. Her flat tone, the way she spoke, concerned him.

“I need to—” she started and stopped. “I will. Do something. About it.”

There it was.
“And what would that be?” he asked. She shrugged delicately.

“I don’t know yet. But something. She had no right to do that to her.”

“Clearly.”

She didn’t continue, however, only stewed in whatever was going on inside her. Peter watched over her and he felt himself detach from the situation, if only because it reminded him of… himself. How he had been isolated. How he had been treated so differently than the rest. Every and each time he tried to make a difference he had been rebuffed.

It was a dangerous game that he could now acknowledge could have gone so very wrong. It had gone very wrong once a whole lifetime ago. Now he feared he was witnessing the very thing that had once killed him inside—that might have killed Julia as well.

Or might get them all killed today. As much as he wanted to let her rip into Alpha Steele, he didn’t think he could.

Stiles was better at this than he was. He didn’t do emotions; not like he did. He used them, he made sure they wouldn’t hurt him or the people he cared for, unnecessarily, but he wasn’t an expert at any rate at handling them and he could admit that. Why did the Steeles have to reappear now?

There was a hurricane inside her just ready to burst, he thought. It would grow and grow until it wasn’t satisfied with her insides anymore and bled into her very core, ripping it apart and putting together the shambles it left behind. She would be just a shallow version of her the same way Peter had been once. He remembered the sad echo that warned him to keep close the things guarding his sanity… for it was very easy to lose in the end.

“You once said that you didn’t want to stay with them,” he found himself speaking. She froze next to him and he knew he couldn’t stop there. He needed to know himself. “Did you mean it?”

“I—yes.”

“But you are upset that she doesn’t remember you.”

Julia stayed silent.

His mouth formed a thin line. “This would make the problem go away, wouldn’t it?”

Julia’s head snapped at him and Peter would be worried about whiplash if she didn’t immediately continue with a, “It’s not right! She had no right!”

“She didn’t,” Peter agreed again. “But that’s not the point, is it?”

“Of course it’s the point! She—she’s tampering with Kali, her own heir—”

“Regardless of her reasoning, she did offer you a way out with her meddling,” Peter said calmly. Julia stared at him, shocked, mouth open and gaping like she was a fish on dry land. “I’m not pretending that what Steele did was right, but, Julia.

“You made the decision to remove her from your life. Why are you this mad if they only did the same?”

Julia’s eyes welled up. Tears started trailing down her cheeks, one at a time until they formed a waterfall that couldn’t be contained.
“I—I—” she sniffled, voice wavering, words stuttering. “I—”

Peter took pity on her and pulled her down so that her head was comfortably against his shoulder. She didn’t resist, now pliant under his arm, and Peter could feel his shirt getting wetter by the moment.

They sat there, silent, staring at the wall that stared back at them. He didn’t like the place, hated it in fact, with how each wall seemed to have more eyes than the Argent house altogether despite how he now knew nothing was there. It was just his imagination, his instincts, that were going wild. Acknowledging the reality didn’t stop the feeling that they were being watched under a microscope.

“It’s not fair,” she whispered, barely audible even in the silence strangling the room. Peter hummed. “Life is not fair,” he said.

“I don’t know what to do.”

“Mm-hm.”

“What should I do?”

Peter sighed. “Just because you have history with them, doesn’t mean you have a future with them too. Do you want a future like that?” Silence. “With Kali?”

Julia’s breath hitched. The ugly feeling that had bubbled in his chest revealed itself.

“You love her.” Julia was stiff, like she was ready run at a moment’s notice. “Even after all this.”

“It’s not fair,” she repeated, something dark in her voice again. Peter suddenly remembered the potential she had, who she could become if given a chance, even if his grasp on the vague memories was thin as always. “It’s not fair that she doesn’t remember when I do.”

Grief could lead to anger. Anger could lead to hate.

And hate—

“Do you want your memories taken away?” he asked casually. “You know, they don’t have the right to live in your mind rent free. You should evict them while you can.”

That seemed to break her reverie as the only thing she could utter was a confused, little, “What?”

“She had her memories taken away. If you do the same, then you are at equal footing, are you not?”

“Wha—no! No, I do not want that!”

“You want her to remember just because you do. You want her to suffer the same way you do, because now you are the only one with the feelings. Abandoned, that’s how you feel, isn’t it? But tell me, who was the one who did the abandoning in the first place? Why are you suddenly deciding that, because you were hurt, that you are now in the right?”

Julia suddenly stood up and faced Peter. There was lightning in the air and storm on her face. “Because she didn’t want it!”

“How do you know?”

“How do—she would never!”
“You left her, intending on never going back. Now that you can’t, you are mad.” Peter stared at her, at her wild look, her angry countenance. She was spitting fire in a way he had never seen her before. Calm, gentle, peaceful; those were the words people described her as.

Only she was not.

“You said you were better off without her. Now that you are, you are not. Life isn’t fair, Julia. People do things that are not right. It could have been forced. It could be that it was not. We just don’t know, and I wouldn’t trust Georgia as far as I could throw her, so asking won’t be the right way to go.”

“Then—”

“Ask yourself this: why do you want her to remember you?”

Julia opened her mouth, something scathing on her tongue, and Peter raised his hand to silence her. Surprisingly, she obeyed, even if she looked like she wanted to bite his finger off.

“I want you to sit here and think. Don’t go anywhere, just sit and think. I’m going to contact Stiles; we need to re-evaluate our position. I’m trusting you won’t go and cause an intercontinental war between us.” He waited for a moment and then added, “You hear me?”

“Fine,” Julia spat out. It was honestly a little off-putting, how different she was just then. Like she had pretended to be good, only to finally lose the battle and show her true colours. Or maybe she had tried to keep it all in, tried not to worry them, and then decided to try to alienate them as well because she thought she deserved it.

Honestly, Peter wouldn’t be surprised if it was the latter; it was right up the alley for guilt-complexes. He knew for sure it wasn’t the first.

But it could also be the third option.

“Do you want anything?” he asked, standing up. Julia moved away as he neared her, avoiding even accidental touching. Ouch. “I can ask if they have anything in the kitchen.”

“No.”

“I’ll bring leftovers then, or we might have something in the back of the car if the Millers don’t feel like being hospitable. Talia probably threw something in when she thought I wasn’t looking. The mother hen. We can’t have you waste away right under my eyes. Stiles would never forgive me. Bobby might even throw Jerry at me and I don’t even want to know what Kate would do. She might even get that flamethrower; I don’t fancy cooking my flesh a third time. Twice was enough. Bitch.”

Julia frowned. “You—”

“Point is, sit back, think about it, and then we’ll talk again. But remember.” Peter leaned towards her, leaving her no escape and taking her hostage. She couldn’t look away and he could see the fear and self-loathing disguised as anger.

The poor dear.

“We want you.”

And they didn’t.
There was a knock on the door. Peter bit down inside his cheek so he wouldn’t yell in frustration. Yukimura came out from the bathroom where she had apparently sequestered herself during their talk and opened the door. Peter didn’t move but he recognised the voice anyway.

“Alpha Ennis is ready to see you.”

Chapter End Notes

Find me on tumblr.
In which there is a saying about anger and gentle people

Chapter Notes

Life is difficult and writing even more so. Also, 200k. Holy crap.

Enjoy :) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Julia’s blood simmered in her veins.

The heat was narrowing her focus until she could hardly breathe with the steam clogging her lungs. She could feel the mocking laugh that wasn’t voiced, the crowing of her loss and another’s triumph; the knowledge that she was the one who walked away, but that it was Kali who paid the price.

Deep within her, smothered in the burning fumes, Peter’s words resonated. The conflict it caused fuelled the flames. There were moments when she could almost disregard them, but never long enough to let them go completely. In the middle of it all, one piece of truth burned:

Had she been put at the exact same crossroads today, knowing where she’d end up, she’d choose the same.

She wouldn’t have stayed sane within the noxious atmosphere that was the Steele pack. She wasn’t a wolf and she wasn’t strong. She was an unwanted liability. Yet, admitting that bitter pill didn’t mean she had to—or perhaps could—forgive and forget.

She didn’t move her glare from Georgia and neither did she. The smug little grin on her face only heated the hate inside her only she felt like it would start pouring from her pores like the thickest tar. Julia was barely aware of the meeting happening around her; their voices were mere background noise for the blood rushing in her ears.

They were all sitting around a table, both sides against each other, with Ennis on the other end of the table as the host and Noshiko on the other as the official middle ground, even if neither was really treated as such. Only Julia and Peter were sitting on their side, facing what seemed an endless row of animosity: Georgia and Kali right opposite her; an alpha in his thirties and Ennis’ first beta against Peter; his emissary, and a few others who faded in the background behind the main cast of this hateful tragedy.

Peter was speaking, arguing, for the Hale pack. For Stiles, it seemed more like, but he never failed to mention the name Hale in his arguments. It tugged something inside Julia, where the little girl she once was lingered, wishing she had a pack all to herself. She had one now, she knew, even without Peter explicitly explaining it to her. It still didn’t remove a decade of her life she had before them. Nothing was strong enough to do that, not even—

You look familiar.

She blinked, the words hitting her and causing her to lose what amounted to a staring contest. The words kept playing in her head until they finally snapped in place.

Have we met before?
Julia’s lips twitched. The poison that almost bubbled over cooled down again as she took a breath only the two of them noticed. Georgia would hardly see why Julia might see something funny in the situation. Georgia didn’t understand feelings, love, no matter the kind. She had witnessed it the way she handled her pack, Kali, even Julia. Georgia was straightforward even when she was cunning.

And she had made a mistake.

Somehow, somewhere, Georgia had made a mistake. Because there was a piece of Julia inside Kali that hadn’t completely disappeared, something that clung on and bloomed in adversity. It was cruel, the way her blood whispered in her ears, to wish she had been too big of a part in Kali’s life to just wash away like dirty rags. For someone who had always been looked over and found wanting it meant the world. The knowledge that she had made a difference for someone—

Julia could forgive a lot. It was the way she was built. She wasn’t one for lingering hate that consumed until nothing was left. Even now when the flames licked her skin, she knew where the line was drawn.

Yet there were some things that couldn’t be overlooked.

“And that is what we found at the scene,” Peter concluded. He kept his back straight and his arms on the table, open and for everyone to see. He didn’t bother hiding his tells—if there were any for them to see—and just sat in his chair like he wasn’t set against a firing squad. Julia’s eyes finally broke the renewed match between her and Georgia, sliding to glance at Noshiko. She was positioned as a neutral ground but with the way Ennis kept trying to point out discrepancies in Peter’s story, she was forced to defend Peter for the talks to move on. It put her in a difficult position, one where she was being undermined the same way Peter and Julia were.

The room placement made even more sense now.

Divide and conquer. Julia could see Georgia’s hand at work here. She had witnessed the same strategy twice before as the Steele territory had grown. As if that wasn’t enough, the devil herself spoke aloud with almost a purr, “That sounds awfully convenient.”

Peter gave her an incredulous look. “That is what I said,” he stated slowly. “Shannon Caldwell and Gerard Argent orchestrated the events.” Not the Hale pack, was silently implied.

“And inviting us, Deucalion, back to the scene?” Ennis leaned forward on his arms, grace all but forgotten as they thumped against the hardwood, scowl in place. If Kate was there, Julia was sure she would have mentioned it being lost in the mass of muscles. Even now her voice whispered in Julia’s ear, overriding the monster inside her weakest point, causing some of her own tension to lessen. Somehow Kate could always find a way to laugh at the face of danger. It was one of the things Julia admired of her the most. “With what you’ve said—”

“Repeating what others say does not bring the discussion further,” Noshiko interrupted. She met Ennis’ glare head on but her displeasure to what she had been reduced to could be seen in the tight lines on her face. Peter nodded his thanks, but she ignored the gesture.

“I heard from Talia that the Argents attacked your pack,” Peter said, directing his words at Ennis. The massive alpha snarled suddenly, flush drawing on his cheeks, but Peter continued before he could reply.

“That is something you have to take up with them but, rest assured, I am quite certain the main mastermind is dead. In case they aren’t, they will be sussed out,” Peter vowed, and then implored, “What we are trying to do here is to make amends for what happened within the Hale lands. There
were circumstances that we couldn’t foresee and while we wish we could, naturally, go back in time and change things—"

He nodded at the empty seat next to Ennis where Deucalion was supposed to sit. “—None of the Hale pack is capable of that either. We do, however, have one of the culprits dead, as I said, and the other is confined and ready for judgement. The Hale pack and the remaining Clan Argent have come together to stop what has gone under our noses. The Tribunal has also been called to witness the scene and justice being done—”

“You would trust hunters?” the alpha whose name Julia didn’t recall said. Unlike the rest of them, he sounded more curious than ready to brawl. She still didn’t like the look on his face, malice bleeding from his pores. From them all, she hated the air around him the most. It stunk like week-old sewage left in the desert sun. “After all this?”

“Can you claim that all wolves are good?” Julia asked instead of Peter. She felt Peter press his leg against hers and took strength in it, especially since he didn’t immediately silence her. She instantly gained the attention as it was the first thing she ever said inside the room; even her introduction had been done by Noshiko. She decidedly did not look at the Steeles. “Not a single bad egg in the basket?”

“We can hear the lies, sweetheart,” the alpha answered. The pitying tone made Julia swallow her immediate reply, the one that sounded like Kate. “We are a more honest people.”

Never mind. “Honest, maybe.” Julia blinked, a pleasant smile plastering over her lips. She couldn’t feel it. “But can you claim sincerity the same way?”

“Implying something, are you?”

“I don’t think I implied anything.”

“Has the little druid finally found her claws?” Georgia mocked. Julia glanced at her and then turned away again, pretending she had said nothing interesting. She hoped she stewed and—and she had not, Julia realised. None of her words carried any weight. Not to her. The only reason they had ever hit her were because they had concerned Kali; she was a danger to Kali and not her. Even then Georgia could do nothing to harm her for the fear her own heir would oust her from the power she had built and ruled with an iron fist.

Was that why she erased her from Kali’s memories? Was… was Julia—little, human Julia—someone she saw as a threat?

Emboldened, Julia’s back straightened without her knowledge and her smile turned more genuine. “As you have already said, to you, what we have described sounds like a setup. We understand. But answer me this: how else can we prove that the Hale pack had no part in the ambush?”

Ennis looked like he didn’t know how to answer that if the look he shot at the wolves at the table. The humans stayed silent and neither did the anyone else offer a fancy word one way or another.

“Well,” Ennis finally growled. “It’s not like you are trying very hard to convince us otherwise.”

Julia gave him a look, her brows raised. Even Ennis seemed to realise how stupid he sounded, given the dark scowl on his face.

“We are here,” she said slowly. “Immediately after we heard where to go. We can’t bring the scene with us and pictures don’t do it justice. Just how do you think we should have gone about this?”
Ennis blustered and hemmed but no intelligent argument came out of his mouth. Peter quickly seized the opportunity, pushing them away from the edge they had been driven towards. “As Julia said, these things can only be proven elsewhere. We cannot move proof and there is no magic twisting our sincerity. Isn’t that right, Emissary Miller?”

Ennis’ emissary merely nodded under the sudden attention, shrinking into himself when his alpha turned to him. Julia blinked, pity filling her.

That had been her, once upon a time.

Never again, she promised silently.

Pushing forward, Peter threw the blame entirely on Gerard and Shannon’s shoulders, emphasizing the latter for she was the only one left alive to take revenge on. With a clever little trick, he turned the table around, speaking less about the Hales’ innocence and more about avenging the dead.

“—And when that matter is handled, we can make sure that it will never happen again,” Peter said. “Not just at the Hales’ expense or Deucalion’s or yours but everyone else’s too. We are gathering the powers that be to make headway towards a ceasefire and, possibly, a future where we don’t have to make it about us versus them.”

“You paint a pretty picture,” the alpha whose name Julia still didn’t recall said. “But can you back your word? Can we really expect hunters to honour a deal they have no idea about?”

“We can,” Julia said immediately. “Because we are not in this alone. We have hunters on our side as well, the ones from Clan Argent that weren’t part of the conspiracy.”

“And how,” the alpha asked, “can you promise they didn’t lie?”

Remembering Kate’s desperation and drive, her grief and fury, gave Julia the push to smile kindly towards him. The slimy grin faded a bit, taken aback, as she answered, “Because we are pack.”

Peter immediately saw where she was going with it and took over. “You must have heard from us. We are known as the Quartet,” he said. The alpha’s eyes widened, as did Ennis and Kali’s.

“What?” Ennis demanded, echoing the look on Noshiko’s face and Kali’s breathier exclamation. Noticing the lack of surprise, Kali turned to her aunt, asking, “Did you know?”

The more Julia had spoken, the more venomous had the expression of the eldest alpha gotten. “There were rumours,” Georgia settled on, sweet as decay, “of a wolf and a druid, making waves with a hunter and a spark. Based on the unlikelihood of that happening twice, it wasn’t a leap.”

“A spark?” one of the people hiding behind the big players exclaimed, surprised. Soft murmurs followed it. Noshiko coughed once, gaining back their attention.

“We are moving in circles,” she said. “And as Alpha Ito’s representative, I will have to ask you to move forward. As alphas and representatives of your packs, there is more to gain than just throwing accusations around.”

She raised her hand when Ennis opened his mouth. “Please, let me finish,” she said. Teeth clicking, their host let go with only a moderately dark look. “There is a distinct lack of trust that is understandable in the face of recent events. However, we have now only heard from Alpha Hale and Alpha Finstock’s representatives. If possible, I would ask you, Alpha Ennis, to share what happened to Alpha Blackwood.”
Wind howled outside, reminding Julia of the grief she had heard earlier. Slowly, Ennis started to speak. He told them of how three of his packmates had been killed and how he had tracked the culprits; how Deucalion had promised to go investigate. He told them how he hadn’t heard from him until Deucalion had arrived there, feral and half out of it, and how he had pieced together what had happened from the grief and rage Deucalion had broadcasted.

“I don’t know what happened between him and Alpha Hale,” Ennis admitted grudgingly. “But anytime he heard her name, he started howling and breaking things apart. It was enough to make conclusions.”

“Was that him, the one who cracked the tree at the west end?” Kali questioned.

Ennis nodded. “His strength has grown since the last time we met.”

“So he is more of an alpha now than he was with a pack intact,” the nameless alpha mused. Ennis’ sharp ‘shut up!’ was drown by a sudden crash that echoed in the room. Red eyes glinted through a cracked window before disappearing into the darkening evening. Only when it became apparent that Deucalion wouldn’t stalk inside did the alpha smile. As before, it made Julia feel like she needed a shower.

“It sounds to me,” Noshiko said dryly, “that assumptions have been made. As Alpha Ito’s representative, I suggest you think about what you have heard today and convene tomorrow. Otherwise I suspect we will devolve into unnecessary squabbling again.”

There were looks there that suggested her words weren’t appreciated but no one dared to say anything. Georgia Steele sneered but even she wasn’t about to go against the pack with the largest presence on the west coast.

“You have given us a lot to… think about,” Ennis said. His voice was subdued but his mouth was twisted into an ugly slant and his tone had a grudging edge. “It is late. As suggested, we will continue tomorrow, right after breakfast.”

Peter smiled, empty in its politeness.

“Yes. Let’s.”

***

“I need fresh air,” Julia said immediately after people started walking out of the room. Ennis had quickly disappeared after Deucalion, Kali with him after one last look at her aunt. She and Alpha Carver left together, talking quietly. Peter even kept a look on the others who had not spoken a word, but Ennis’ mousy emissary had vanished the moment his eyes had left him and then the only one there was Ennis’ first beta. She was clearly waiting for them to leave first.

“Are you sure?” Peter said. He gave Julia a look to which she only smiled wanly. He had felt bursts of anger and dawning realisation, even subtle crowing, from her end of their bond during the meeting, but—to his surprise—she seemed less focused on the Steeles as the meeting went by. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust her; he just wasn’t certain she was ready to make decisions not based on her emotional feedback.

Unlike Kate, she had always been bottling them up inside. When the dam would eventually break, it would bound to be a spectacular firework.

Julia didn’t seem to think the time for that was just yet when she said, “I need the time to think. Wasn’t that what you said?”
Peter cocked his head. “I did. I wasn’t certain you thought so too.”

The shrug he got said plenty. “I realised you were right.”

“Darling, don’t say that just to spare my feelings,” Peter drawled. He kept a careful eye on Ennis’ beta and their general guide. She didn’t seem like she was listening, but Peter knew better. Rats, all of them.

“I’m not,” Julia denied, shaking her head. The ponytail she had pulled her hair on swung with the movement. “I just… need a moment. I know you want to keep me in your sight, but I need to think.”

Peter regarded her for a moment before smiling. He felt the edge he had been on both sharpen and dull at the same time. It was a terrible sensation, going from one end to another and back. He had never been a fan of emotional whiplash.

“I’ll watch over her,” Yukimura said. She fished out her phone, tapping it for new messages. “I need to inform Satomi how things are progressing.”

As do I, Peter thought. He was just glad things hadn’t completely blown up on them; perhaps someone had managed to pray to the right power or sold their soul to the devil. He didn’t care which, as long as they could wrangle a deal and get out of there alive.

This was a mere pit stop on the highway to hell after all.

“Fine,” Julia said. Peter thanked the powers looking over them again that Julia wasn’t as argumentative as Kate. “But don’t you need to keep your distance?”

“As far as I see,” Yukimura’s tone dried further. “I have already tried my best. If I happen to enforce peace with my mere presence, wanted or not, I count it as a win.”

“In that case, don’t keep me waiting for long.” When Julia nodded, he directed his next question to Ennis’ beta. “Do you think I could snatch something from the kitchen? We missed dinner.”

She looked up from the glass shards on the floor and inclined her head. “We have leftovers. Meatloaf.”

Wonderful, Peter thought. The food of dim-witted fools with no taste buds. Showing considerable restrain, he instead thanked her and followed her out, giving Julia’s shoulder one last squeeze. He heard their steps go in the opposite direction and then the door was closed behind them and a plateful of cold leftovers shoved into his hands. He dutifully carried it upstairs and listened for the lock click shut before depositing the plate on the table.

If there was one thing that could do with sometime in the room temperature, it was cold meatloaf. He still remembered staying in the dining room long after everyone else already ate, rebelling against the unfairness of the choice of dinner.

Ah, the fond memories.

Peter pressed a hand over his phone, tracing the lines of it as he pressed call without looking if he had any new messages. He looked out of the window, opening it just a crack, and breathed in the fresh air. It had rained while they’d been inside, as if trying to wash away the hate and anger that was tainting this side of Oregon.

Peter closed his eyes. A drop of water fell on the glass and he pressed the window shut again.
On the seventh beep, the line crackled, and then the weight over his heart lifted just a bit.

“New phone, who dis?”

“Stiles.”

“Oh thank god.” The relief in Stiles voice bled through with the sigh that was more a burst of sharp air. “I thought they had eaten you.”

Peter wrinkled his nose. “If they keep feeding us what they are, I have no doubt someone will resort to cannibalism sooner or later.”

“Uh oh. Things didn’t go well on your end?”

“How did you guess?” Peter opened his eyes, looking over the yard below. He couldn’t see Julia or Yukimura from his vantage point.

“I’m cool like that,” Stiles said. “We are having a brainstorm session tomorrow. By we, I mean Kate and I, Victoria, Chris and whoever Talia brings. Bobby if he’s up for it.” He paused. That was clearly a pause. Peter frowned.

“And?”

Stiles growled into the phone. “Jerry wants to come too.”

“The cherry on top,” Peter said. “Our little Jerry is.”

“I don’t want him to come,” Stiles said bluntly before sighing. “I don’t think I can keep him out though.”

“It’s safer to take him with you. Otherwise he may start acting out.”

“I knoooooow.” Something thumped and Stiles yelped. Peter heard Kate yell for Stiles to ‘Stop whining, I can’t sleep! Also tell Peter to tell Julia I have her hairbrush’ before something thumped again, this time softer.

“Ha!” Stiles crowed. “Sucker!” And then he yelped again. “No scissors! I’m not getting you a birthday present if you cut me!”

Whatever Kate replied Peter couldn’t hear. A door clicked shut on the other end of the line.

“She’s been in a bit of a bad mood,” he said. “Laura’s been a big help but even she can’t work miracles.”

“I thought her birthday was in July.”

“It is,” Stiles said. “We need to do something for Julia though. It’s almost hers.”

“She needs a vacation.”

“Don’t we all,” Stiles groaned. Peter shook his head. Movement outside his window caught his eye and he saw Yukimura walk with one hand held up. Whether it was for her phone or not, he couldn’t tell.

“No,” Peter said. “She really needs a vacation. The Steeles are here.”
“Shit,” Stiles breathed and then asked sharply, “Is she alright?”

Yukimura moved out of his sight again. Peter scowled, trying to bend to see where she had disappeared to. “What do you think?”

“They haven’t done anything to her?”

“Not to her, per se. Steele stuck her claws in Kali’s neck. She doesn’t remember Julia at all.”

“Shit,” Stiles swore again. “How’s she taking it?”

“She hasn’t killed anyone so far.”

“That… doesn’t help as much as I think you do.”

“No,” Peter said. He opened the window against his better judgement and peered out. The rain was getting heavier and wet his hair in an instant. The less said about visibility the better. “That was just to showcase how well she was ‘taking it’.”

“Peter,” Stiles said slowly. He could feel the judgement. “How is she taking it?”

“She’s angry, more than I have ever seen her. I don’t think I’ve ever even seen her angry at all if this is the scale it takes for her to show it.” Peter thought he heard something but then it could have just been the wind. He pulled himself in again and went to look for a towel. He refused to shake his head like he wanted to. He wasn’t a dog. “I half expect her to go after Steele herself, but I think I managed to talk her down from it. Or she had a moment to calm down. I don’t know.”

And if there was a thing that frustrated Peter, it was not knowing something.

“She’s bottling things again and she doesn’t want to talk about it. She’s worse than Kate.”

“Kate doesn’t bottle things up,” Stiles dismissed quickly, but Peter knew he was thinking of her explosive temperament as well. It was quite opposite to Julia’s quieter and subtler seething. “Where is she now?”

“Outside. Yukimura went with her.” The hand towel would suffice. Peter quickly wiped himself down; his shirt was a bit damp, but he could manage.

“She’s not alone then. Good.” Stiles was a quiet for a moment. Peter listened to him breathe. It was oddly calming, just hearing the soft inhales and softer exhales. “I want you two out of there as quickly as you can manage. She’ll want to do something about Kali, won’t she?”

Peter nodded though no one was there to see it. “Her main imperative. She wants her to remember her again.”

There was an explosive sigh in his ear. “This is a mess. Fuck them all.”

“Indeed.”

“I guess we’ll just cross that bridge when it comes. At least the rest of the Argents are on our side, now officially. Victoria’s the new Matriarch, by the way. Kate gave up her right.”

Peter felt something like pride warm his cold soul. “She’s grown.”

“Yeah. She’s really something, isn’t she?” The same pride was reflected in Stiles’ voice. “Both of them are.”
“I’ll look after her,” Peter promised. “How do you think we should proceed? We have the Steeles, Ennis, Deucalion—who is, by the way, half-feral at the very least and ready to tear someone down for the smallest offence—and the alpha of pack Carver. They’re located in Montana.”

“What are they doing there?” Stiles wondered. “Even Montana’s a state over—two states, almost. Did the Steeles forget which coast they were supposed to be on?”

“I doubt we’ll get that answered even if I asked politely.”

“Yeah… Hey.”

Peter blinked. “Hey?”

“Do you think that—” Stiles paused for a beat. “I don’t know if I want to even think about that. Forget it.”

“Stiles.”

“What?”

“Finish it.”

Stiles hesitated—what on earth had gone through his mind?—before he reluctantly voiced his thought:

“Do you think Kali left Julia alive the first time around, after making her the emissary I mean, as the final fuck you to Georgia?”

“She was Kali’s—Kali was a—what am I saying, of course she was. That makes sense.” Peter hadn’t remembered that bit yet, but it rang true somewhere at the back of his head. The Julia-Jennifer he had once vaguely known—now even more vaguely remembered—had gone mad for a reason. Knowing the Julia she had once been, it made an awful lot of sense. Dedicating her life to one person only, in the midst of a pack that hated her and what she represented, only to be abandoned; it would take a miracle not to go over the edge.

Peter should know; he himself hadn’t taken the same fall gracefully either. His sympathy over Julia’s plight grew. He would stand by his earlier words, if only because she had needed to hear them. But if she decided to pursue—

Well. Peter would have her back, either way.

“I don’t know,” he said finally, walking back to the window. The rain pour was lessening again but Peter wasn’t holding out hope it was over yet. “But I don’t want to stand in her way.”

Peter heard Stiles sit down heavily. “I’m not asking you to. Just… get yourselves out of there safely. I trust you to make the right call.”

“Thank you, Stiles.”

“Hey, I don’t need a thank you for that,” Stiles protested. “You do you, Peter, and that’s all I want. I’ll try to find us some leeway with the hunters. We know we have the Hales and the Ito pack—oh yeah, they called, we are cool now, buddies even—but the more we have on our side, the better. And if we get Deucalion here, well. You know.”

“I do, Stiles,” Peter said. The impact would be great indeed. Julia’s end of the bond suddenly
dimmed and his head whipped around to where he could still sense it best. “I’m going to call you back later, Stiles.”

“Did you feel that? Where did—is Julia—?”

“Deucalion,” he said and took off. “He’s outside.”

And then he shoved the phone in his pocket and rushed out.

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Julia shivered when the cold air hit her skin. She could smell the rain; the grass was damp under her feet and the clouds were dark, hiding the sky from view. Thankfully Noshiko kept her promise and stayed further away, even if Julia could feel her eyes on her. The semblance of being by herself was not quite what she wanted but she would take it. She didn’t resent Peter for being careful. In his shoes, she was sure she’d be fretting twice over.

She turned to face the sky and the clouds brimmed with water. She wanted to feel it against her, the heavy cleanliness only rain could bring. There was peace in that which she herself lacked right now.

She needed to get Kali away from Georgia. How she would accomplish such a feat she didn’t know but she had to. She couldn’t leave her there. It would ruin her; Georgia would ruin her. Like she almost ruined Julia, only she was lucky there were people there to put her pieces back together.

The sky shattered and rain fell down on her. In just a second Julia was wet to her bones. Her clothes were clinging to her body and she felt the cold breath of winter wash down her back. She was glad it wasn’t snow that fell; rain reminded her of home. A home where her loved ones were waiting for her, when the drops would hit windows and roads would calm, when Stiles joked and Kate laughed, where Peter and Bobby watched over them—when Kali would drag her inside and scrub her clean, worry over her.

Her heart hurt. She wondered if, perhaps, Peter was in the right. It would be easier if she also just… forgot. She wouldn’t be torn in two. But that was giving up. Julia wouldn’t; she wouldn’t be her if she forgot that big part of herself. Even if it turned out that Kali wanted nothing to do with her—

The thought bit her harder than the rain against her chilled cheeks. It would break her all over again. Accepting her own faults was hard enough but to see the cracks in her sanity was quite enough to drive her mad.

“I’m clinging, aren’t I?” Julia mumbled to herself. The rain quieted down a little but continued sprinkling over her even clingier clothes. Her jeans felt especially disgusting.

They had problems, Kali and her. But this wasn’t her Kali. This Kali had most of her life torn apart and pieced together like a mismatched puzzle. Maybe that’s why erasing Julia was incomplete? They had been such big parts of each other’s lives. If Kali was taken out, then what would even be left of Julia as a person? She wouldn’t want that, ever. She’d rather be in pain than forget.

She’d rather be herself than anyone else, broken bits and all.

The sky wailed and Julia saw red. She was startled out of her thoughts when glowing dots suddenly neared, and she realised they belonged to a wolf. A wolf that was rapidly becoming clearer with a body with too long limbs and patches in its fur. There were scars around their eyes and when Julia met them a growl broke out of its mouth.

When the wolf was just a few yards away, Julia became aware of how animalistic they looked which
immediately clued her to their—his—identity, even before the sick cracking of its joints when the half-shift—if it could be called that—fell back, leaving behind a figure less a man and more a husk.

“Hale,” Deucalion rasped, like he had been yelling for hours straight. Seeing the half-crazed glimmer in his eyes, it was more than likely. As if sensing her scrutiny, Deucalion twitched, the red of his eyes glittering brighter. The shade could have been called pretty if not for how much it reminded Julia of blood; she had never seen alpha eyes have that effect. What should have been a sign of safety and warmth only screamed danger and bloodlust.


“No, it’s just Peter on me,” she said. For some reason she felt very calm in his presence. Even if he could snap her in half before she would see it coming. Even if she had work to do before she could let anyone make that decision for her. Her fingers curled, tracing the tail end of her runes. The earth rumbled beneath her, causing her to glance at her feet curiously.

Deucalion cocked his head when she looked back up. It was a bestial gesture, too wide eyes and relaxed limbs that belied the danger he possessed. He circled around her slowly. The rain was getting heavier on her brows again.

Julia wondered what he wanted. He hadn’t attacked her—yet—and he seemed content to stare at her with that unsettling, unblinking gaze. She could feel it on her skin even if she didn’t turn with him whenever he moved out of her line of sight. It felt like her very soul was being stared at.

Well, Julia thought then, wryly amused. Go ahead. I have nothing to hide. Not anymore.

This time when the earth groaned, it was with whispers, and then she could hear nothing else. Spellbound, she crouched down slowly and pressed her hand against it. The grass felt rejuvenated, the little that was left, and the pleasant rain clung to the strands. The trees shivered. The voices were louder than before; less of an echo and more of an actual sound in all the ways it actually wasn’t.

She blinked her eyes open from the half-lidded state they had fallen into without her notice. Someone, someone very dark, had sat in front of her and she felt a slender hand grip her shoulder. She blinked again, vines twining around her legs and curling around her midsection.

“Mm?” she hummed distractedly. The singing was overwhelming, threatening to swipe her with it again. The hand, however, was grounding her; nails digging into her skin, almost strong enough to draw blood.

“—with us—?” someone, a woman, said. Julia tilted her head upwards and met Asian features drowned in cautious worry. She knew her. She knew she did. It was—she was—

Hmm?

The vines spread their hold on her, tickling her hand. Only when the woman pulled her up, surprisingly strong, did they reluctantly let go. The movement made her head swim and she leaned against the woman, shorter but with admirable strength. She reminded her of snow; cold but kind at the same time.

Oh.
“Noshiko,” she murmured. “Wha’ happ’ned?”

“That was what I hoped you’d tell me,” Noshiko said. Bells chimed around them. Julia looked up. Rain. It was raining. Again. Still? She winced and forced her to focus back on the grip around her waist. There was a strange cacophony going on around them that hurt her ears.

The only thing that was entirely silent was… was the man in front of them. The dark man. With something glowing deep, deep inside him; something that had wrapped itself around him. Julia stared into the deep reds. She lifted her arm, gently reaching towards the man. Deucalion, she knew his name was. It was a nice name. Deucalion.

Still in a crouch, Deucalion straightened awkwardly, as if he didn’t remember how, and reached to touch her hand. Julia felt Noshiko’s grip tighten around her, but she didn’t pull her back.

When their hands touched, Julia shuddered. The world stilled as the howling grief confined inside the void consumed them. Gently, she reached for him with her other hand as well and wrapped them around his. She petted the bony knuckles, willing to understand the love that had nowhere to go.

She became suddenly aware of a growl behind them when she was wrenched into another’s arms. The noise returned suddenly, tenfold, and her ears rang. She couldn’t understand what was going on but, somewhere below the endless whispers, snarls and threats of wordless kind were exchanged.

Julia recognised the arms this time though. She fumbled until she gathered the attention and brought herself back to the earth. No. Above it. Only her feet were touching the ground.

“It’s alright,” she said and winced. Even her own voice sounded loud. “He’s fine. I’m fine. He didn’t hurt me.”

“Julia,” Peter’s tone echoed with worry and Julia felt like melting in his arms. He was so warm. “I’m taking you inside.”

“Oh no,” she said, blinking. “You can’t. I want to know why he’s quiet first.”

“Quiet?” Peter asked, glancing at Deucalion. It was only then that Julia realised the growling had never stopped.

“Inside.” She waved her arm at the alpha; it felt like swimming under water. “He’s all quiet inside. Sort of. Not really? Peter. Please, I want to see—”

Peter looked as if he wanted nothing less but with a quick look behind his shoulder he complied. Julia stumbled, Peter keeping her upright, and reached for Deucalion again. The moment they touched the world fell silent again except for the rootless sorrow. She petted Deucalion’s brow, smoothing the creases there distractedly.


“Pack Finstock,” she said. “Like me.”

She heard Noshiko and Peter speak behind her, but her focus was not on them. She tilted her head, eyes never leaving the comforting red. What was that glowing strand inside him? She wanted to know. She needed to know. Vines curled around her ankles again.

“Kill,” Deucalion said as Julia’s hand trailed the wounds-turned-scars around his eyes. “Hale.”

“No,” Julia said.
“Kill?”

“No.”

Deucalion’s eyes narrowed as he struggled to make sense of that. The strand inside him moved, climbing until it was strangling his neck. A weird noise broke out from his throat, an amalgamation of a croon and snarl, that almost choked out of existence the moment it was born. Julia reached for it, grazing the glow, and it snapped. He suddenly pushed his hand on her neck, rubbing it. She could feel his claws trail her skin as Peter tensed, ready to yank her away. The red in Deucalion’s eyes deepened.

And then he was gone.

Like before, Peter caught her when she was sent stumbling. She sighed, feeling safe in his arms. She didn’t even realise the rain had stopped until he brushed her brows and it didn’t immediately get wet again. Her hair was plastered against her face in a sticky fashion.

Julia belatedly realised they had gained a following. There were people from the meeting there, all staring at the scene they made as if they were rooted to the spot. Peter swept her into his arms and—oh. The world was muted again. She looked down, surprised, as the ground glittered in the gentle moonlight that peeked behind the dark clouds.

Her thoughts were clearing and she could see the trees for the forest again. She looked over to the shivering goodbye as Peter carried her inside. Shedding the last of pieces of the shroud she had bound herself in, she faced the world as it was—loud and demanding, screaming for someone to hear.

Bobby was right again, she supposed, eyes falling shut as exhaustion crept inside her bones. Within seconds, oblivion caught her in its gentle grip.

***

The morning dawned with Peter’s ever-growing exhaustion. He had barely slept a wink the whole night, the oppressive silence and worry over Julia taking away any desire to rest. Instead, he spent the night brushing Julia’s hair and gaze flitting between the window and the door, the only openings an attack could be mounted from. Even texting Stiles reassurances didn’t take up much of the time; he knew his lover needed his sleep for the planning now that Peter wasn’t there to make sure there were plans for back-up plans. Yukimura had gracefully taken the couch despite Peter’s earlier promises. He was thankful and thought that maybe, maybe, he should be less harsh on her.

The smell of slowly decaying meatloaf lingered in the air. He never got to eat a bite out of it which may have been a blessing in disguise. If he had to eat any goddamned meatloaf in this life, it was way too soon.

Noshiko woke up first and claimed the bathroom. Peter listened to the muted rush of water and wished it was him there. His clothes were a little crispy with how they had airdried on him. He didn’t even remember when he had been this unkempt; he hadn’t been this badly off even when his parents had had the brilliant idea to go camping to get closer to their ‘wilder side’.

There were times that showed they had grown in the hippie era.

Julia leaned into his touch in her sleep and mumbled so softly Peter couldn’t catch the words. When he shifted to make her new position more comfortable, she grumbled and her eyes opened into slits. The low light hit them and her grumble turned into a groan.
“Turn it off,” she mumbled and buried her head into Peter’s side. Despite himself, Peter couldn’t help his lips twitch.

“Alas, ‘tis the only thing I cannot do for you, sweetling,” he cooed. “But were you to wake, I’d bring the world for you to dine.”

Julia paused in her attempt to bury herself in Peter and the tired slits met equally exhausted blues. “Wha—” she attempted before her voice broke. She coughed and Peter leaned over her to grab the half empty bottle of water that he had managed to grab before making caging himself in the bed.

“Easy,” he shushed and made sure she drained the bottle in small gulps. The sigh she let out after finishing the last drops was more like her than anything she had said in the past day.

“…I don’t think I dreamed last night,” she said then, eyes closing again. “Did I?”

“If you mean your evening out with our resident crazy, I’d say not.”

“No,” she said, slumping against him. “He’s just… lost. In pain. Not… not crazy.” When Peter brought his hand back to comb her hair, she hummed in pleasure. “But he was silent. It was… it was strange. Unnatural.”

“Silent?” Peter encouraged after her own small bout of silence.

Julia nodded, the movement more felt than seen. “I don’t… don’t know how to explain it. There was something wrong with him. The earth spoke to me and- and I could see it then.”

“The earth,” Peter deadpanned.

“It sounds stupid, doesn’t it?”

“Maybe a little.”

The bathroom door opened. Peter hadn’t even realised the water had been turn off. Noshiko’s hair was down and her face looked less severe than yesterday.

“I think I know what happened to you. There was a miko once in Japan that was the same,” she said. She walked to her bags. “She lived half the time inside her own head, listening to the cues the world granted her.”

Peter was instantly alarmed. Even Julia frowned. “Half the time?”

“She wandered the land, fixing people’s mistakes until she was too tired to move and withered away.” Noshiko fished out what looked like a bag of make-up. She turned to them. “I can’t speak for how you will deal with it but try to find a balance. The nature is cruel in its neutrality. It will take until nothing is left to give.”

“How?” Peter’s mouth felt dry. The hand he had in Julia’s locks had stopped and curled gently around them. That sounded dangerously like the fine line Bobby toed.

Noshiko shrugged, mouth a drawn line. “I don’t know,” she answered honestly, and the apologetic sincerity rang deep. “I never thought to ask. She only said she realised her error one day and swore to never close her eyes again.”

“I—I—” Julia’s face darkened as the corners of her mouth twisted downwards, like the words meant something to her. She fisted the covers before smoothing them down again. “I didn’t—I couldn’t
think about them. Her. And it took me by shock, seeing them here the way I… did.”

“You didn’t look away,” Noshiko said, staring straight at her. Julia looked scared for a moment before it turned into resignation.

“I couldn’t.”

Sweet, innocent Julia. Peter hugged her close and she clung to him. “It’s cruel,” she whispered.

“Life is,” Noshiko said simply. “Not many are brave enough to confront everything they are and come out on top. Take strength in that, if nothing else.”

Julia hid her face in Peter’s chest. Over her head, Peter and Noshiko shared a grim look.

When they finally left downstairs, the meatloaf still lied untouched at the table.

***

“Deucalion’s missing,” Ennis said the moment they appeared in the dining room. His dark glower was steeper than yesterday with worry lines deep between his brows.

“Missing?” Noshiko asked. She took her seat at the table but didn’t touch the food despite the hunger she must feel. “ Didn’t you have him followed yesterday?”

Ennis grimaced and reluctantly admitted, “We did. We lost him.”

Peter knew how that felt. He ushered Julia to sit between him and Noshiko before he settled down himself. “He’s quick.”

“He is. Quicker than I remember.” Ennis stabbed a fork through a sausage and bit into it with vengeance. Noshiko took that as a sign and lathered a generous amount of butter onto a piece of bread. “I don’t understand.”

Peter silently disagreed. He wasn’t quite certain how to tell them Deucalion had been forced to kill his own pack members; it was the only thing he had left out of his recount, mostly because he thought they were already aware of the fact and he hadn’t wanted to cause them unnecessary trouble. Things were already difficult enough. He absently picked up the plate Julia had filled for him and took a bite out of his bacon, lost in his attempt to poke holes into his memory.

“You are being more cordial with us today,” Noshiko said. Kali, the only other sitting with them, pursed her lips. She and Ennis exchanged a long look over the cooling pot of porridge. Ennis stabbed another sausage almost sullenly.

“We can’t find him,” Kali repeated. “And Timothy is useless.”

“…And?” Peter asked. “What?”

“We want your druid to try it. She was the last one to interact with him.”

“You don’t think she did anything to him?”

Kali snorted derisively, muttering, “As if,” while Ennis said at the same time, “Kali swore that that didn’t happen.”

“Really?” Peter aimed for the appropriate level of gratitude. “Thank you.”
“Even I could see your little druid was in no condition to do anything,” Kali said around her mouthful.

“You are an expert?”

“I know enough.”

The tone was harsh enough to discourage further inquiries. Peter wasn’t one for lost battles. He turned to Ennis. “I didn’t think to ask yet, but where are the rest of Deucalion’s pack?” He rested his arms on the table. “I assumed they’d be nearby by now.”

Ennis glared at him. “They were coming here. Until we lost their alpha.” He pointed at Peter. “Don’t think I have forgotten about what happened to my pack. The Argents will pay for taking three of my strongest betas from me.”

“And as I said, Gerard Argent—”

“I don’t care if he’s dead,” Ennis interrupted. “I care that they are avenged.”

“Is that why you are more willing to listen?” Julia asked, tilting her head. “You didn’t think we would before.”

Ennis turned his rather massive frame to face Julia. “No,” he rumbled. “I did not.”

“Alpha Steele probably wasn’t helping,” Peter said. “She doesn’t seem like our biggest fan.”

“Mind what you say about my aunt,” Kali said sharply. Then her mouth broke into a small, mocking grin. “You are not wrong.”

Noshiko picked her cup of tea and took a delicate sip. “You don’t seem to be on the same page.”

“We may have our differences, but she is my alpha,” Kali said. It sounded almost as if she was reciting an overdone line. “But enough about us.” Her eyes bored on Julia who looked at her in surprise. “Could you find him?”

“I don’t know,” Julia blurted out. Tiny crease formed on her forehead. “Maybe? I can… try. I’m not…” Julia trailed off, flushing slightly under Kali’s attention.

“That’s all we need,” Kali said. It wasn’t meant kindly but, rather, a statement of fact. Her head was tilted in a regal slant, as expected of an heir of old, and she pushed off the table and walked out with Ennis at her side. The breakfast was clearly over.

They followed them to the porch where a displeased Georgia Steele sat—Peter had wondered where she was—with the Carver alpha.

“Don’t say you think they will have better luck,” she sneered. The look she gave Julia was full of filth. Kali seemed to take notice, mildly curious gaze flicking from her aunt to Julia who, surprisingly, didn’t seem to care. Instead, she marched forward until she was standing on the last step of the porch, foot hovering over the ground.

Peter, mindful of the atmosphere, nudged Julia’s end of their bond. There was hesitance there, but mostly burning curiosity, before she drew a quick breath and jumped the last step down.

Peter’s eyes flew wide as the moment her feet touched the ground the bond he had been grasping fell from his grip as if it was intangible; still there, but impossible to grasp. Julia herself drew a shaky
breath before her mouth moved with the wind, just as silent if not for the rustle of trees.

She stood there, frozen.

“That’s it?” Carver said after a moment of silence. He leaned forward over his knees. “I was waiting for more.”

“What’d you expect?” Georgia scoffed. “The emissaries these days are nothing.”

“Well, we could be asking Fran if you hadn’t—”

Steele’s glare was momentarily directed at her niece. “Mind your tone,” she said, tone chilly. Kali didn’t look pleased, but she took a metaphorical step back.

“Well?” Ennis asked, demand clear in his tone. He looked ready to go shake Julia to get his answers, none of Kali’s crippled attempts at diplomacy present. Peter knew enough about him to know that he would do that too. He quickly stepped forward until he was facing Julia.

Just like yesterday, she didn’t seem entirely present. The sheen of sweat that had been absent, or hidden, yesterday was clearly present, even if the breaths she took were even—too even. He tried calling her name, attempted to touch their bond, but again it was mere air between them. Following his instincts, he placed his hands over Julia’s shoulders gently and pushed them then with force.

She gasped as if she had been underwater until her lungs burned, eyes snapping open from the half-closed trance they were in.

“It’s too much,” she whispered. Her hands rose and grabbed onto Peter’s, tightening her grip on his arms as if they were the only things keeping her afloat. “I don’t—I can’t—”

Making an executive decision, he hoisted her on his arms, reminiscent of the night before. She choked off a gasp, hand coming up to press against her chest. Peter made a mental note to mention that to Stiles and fixed his grip on her. Their bond sang again.

“Better?” he asked. She nodded numbly.

“Direct contact,” she said. “Good—good to know.”

“Making scientific discoveries? You are turning more and more into Stiles every day.”

Julia blinked. A drop of her sweat fell of her chin. “Is—is that a compliment? I can’t tell.” She was shivering. Noshiko, far more observant than Peter had given her credit for, shook off her jacket and wrapped it around Julia.

“Thank you,” he said. She glanced at him before focusing on the girl in his arms.

“How are you doing?” Noshiko asked. She took out a handkerchief, cloth and all, and wiped Julia’s brow. Julia blinked owlishly again.

“Good? I guess?” she hazarded. She leaned back enough to see the rest of the wolves stare at them. “I, ah. I couldn’t… sense him,” Julia said apologetically. “When I—you know, I—no.”

“At all?” Peter asked. He frowned. That didn’t make sense. Deucalion had escaped here. There was no reason he should go elsewhere. He wouldn’t return to Beacon Hills, would he? Without any support? His lucidity was questionable, but he had managed to come to his allies. Why would he leave? Peter still wasn’t clear what had turned Deucalion from forming full, if misinformed,
sentences into little bites of words, but without the man present in all senses of the word, there was no way Peter could deduce it on his own.

“There was a… sense of chaos? Towards east? South-east maybe,” Julia said though her tone lilted towards questioning. She looked down again contemplatively, but Peter tightened his grip and decisively carried her back to the porch and set her down gently. He stood next to her, blocking the way out.

Beacon Hills was south. What was in the east? His pack? Was Deucalion mad enough to go after his own pack? He would like to think not, but he didn’t know for certain.

“You heard what she said,” Kali said. Ennis nodded, whistling sharply.

“Timothy. Get Harley and Devon. Scout the area again, this time more carefully.”

Ennis’ emissary, the thin little man, hurried away. Peter watched him go. He didn’t care for Deaton, but at least he wasn’t afraid of Talia. Come to think of it, he hadn’t really seen Ennis’ packmates around, except for selected few.

“What was that?” Carver asked. He stared at Julia, renewed interest bubbling under the surface.

“Pack matters,” Peter answered before Julia could. He stared the alpha down. Carver flashed his eyes, almost teasingly, but backed down with an ambiguous flash of teeth.

Pack matters.

“‘Beware the willingly blind and the false promises’,” Peter quoted, Bobby’s image floating into his mind. A spark better be believing things would turn out well. He lifted his head and met the stares evenly. “This is what a seer told me not long ago. I promise you that my words are sincere and will not make any. We just want things to end.”

“So you’ve said,” Kali said. She didn’t sound too impressed with his vow.

“Well, you can end them yourself.” Carver stood up from his perch as Steele went as far as scoff derisively. With one last inscrutable look aimed at Julia, he bowed slightly to Ennis, who answered it with one of his own. “I don’t want any part in this madness. I have twin sons and enough trouble back home to get stuck here.”

“I’ll send the contract by the end on the week,” Ennis said.

“Make sure you do. Any later and I’ll consider us done.” He bowed, slightly deeper, at Steele and then departed, muttering something unpleasant about ‘hunters’ and ‘never work’. Two wolves separated from the rest and trailed after him.

Peter coughed lightly, gaining the attention again. When he found Ennis looking over at him, he said, “I hope you’ve had time to consider our issue. Will you accept our invitation? We are… a little short on time,” he allowed, “as the Tribunal nears.”

“Do you promise justice will be served?” Ennis demanded. “Even if I can hear your heartbeat, it means nothing if your pet murderers can’t keep their hands off wolfsbane.”

With all the sincerity he could muster, Peter replied, “I swear.”

Ennis stared at him hard, glare tinting red but keeping his temper in tight chains. Kali shifted, murmuring something quietly at her aunt who snapped a harsh ‘no’ immediately back. Kali
scrunched her nose, displeased; it was a surprisingly familiar gesture, Peter noted. It reminded him of Julia.

Finally, Ennis shook his head and Peter’s mouth drew a tight line.

“Not until Deucalion is found.”

Chapter End Notes

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End Notes

I’d love to know what you thought about this if you have the time to spare :)

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