(In My Hand) The Golden Bough

by Chandri

Summary

There are a lot of things Stiles has forgotten. Some of them by choice, because some memories are too painful and that’s what you do to survive; some of them because they were taken from him.

Notes

This story’s original title was “Stiles’ Mom Was Probably Also A Wizard (aka: NO STOP WHAT NO HELP FUCK YOU TEEN WOLF).” It remains so in my heart.

I’ve noticed that most of my stories in the last year or so come with a disclaimer of blame. A blameclaimer, if you will. In this case, those to blame include:

Everyone who laughed at me on Twitter/Tumblr when I first told them the original title of
the story (including fiddleheadsalad, youinthebushes, tinyclaps, and the Laurens).
Honourable mentions to hufflepuffia and sisygambis, who were probably enormously entertained by my suffering.

Special merit award to Lauren, who not only (along with Kim) betaed this story but after the initial rambling Tumblr post helped me name Stiles because apparently she keeps a list of unpronounceable Eastern European boys’ names (I didn’t ask) and encouraged me in the matter of Aunt Pearl because she is a shameless enabler.

And of course the ladies of Slash Report (especially MK) who are 120% to blame for dubconning me - and by extension most of my immediate RL social circle - into this fucking fandom in the first place.

I hope you’re happy.

(You’re all terrible people, so you probably are. :P)

I’ve tried to tag for warnings, but see the end of Chapter 1 for details and spoilers.
Chapter 1

In the dream, it’s a warm, yellow day.

He’s small, and content, and unafraid. He can smell something baking - fruit and sugar and pastry, inside the house - and the forest, beyond the edge of the porch. He’s in someone’s lap; he can see his hands, small, shredding broad blades of grass. Somebody is stroking his hair.

Mom is sitting on the porch, bent over something with concentration. In her hands is something silver that flashes.

Not far away, people are laughing.

It’s a good dream. He’s been having it a long time.

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Aunt Pearl comes back to town on a Friday afternoon.

From the look on Dad’s face, she was not expected.

Stiles wasn’t expecting her either, but he still grins wide enough that he feels the stretch, drops his backpack and nearly trips over his own feet in his haste to get across the living room to where she’s standing in front of the sofa.

“Holy crap! Are you real? Did you bring presents?”

“Stiles,” Dad says, low and aggravated, but he’s just rubbing his temples. Aunt Pearl always brings this out in him.

“Who do you think you’re talking to, smart boy? You think I forgot your birthday?” Never mind graduation, of course; probably too mundane for her to remember. Aunt Pearl hugs him, strong arms holding him close, squeezing him until he imagines his ribs creaking, but he’s gotten used to this kind of handling, being part of a werewolf pack.

“My god, you’re so tall!” she exclaims, holding him at arm’s length. Somehow Aunt Pearl is still both taller and broader than him, but she’s always been an Amazon of a woman and remains one at seventy-five. She claps hands on his shoulders. “And muscles! Where did these come from?”

“Clean living,” he says soberly, before cracking another grin. She eyes him, something shrewd in her expression when she nods, and then looks at Dad.

“Well, John? I don’t want to impose. I really would have called but I had to get on a plane in a bit of a rush. I really can find a hotel room. It’s no--”

“Of course you can stay,” Dad says, looking tired. “You know where the guest room is.”

Dad turns and walks into the kitchen, and Stiles hears dishes clanging around.

“Well,” says Aunt Pearl. “Your dad’s mellowed.”

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Aunt Pearl was really his mother’s aunt, but Stiles has always just called her Aunt Pearl. Throughout his childhood she was a series of whirlwind visits and real-life adventure stories about her travels all over the world; travels that sounded a little too adventurous for a veterinarian. But she and Mom had always been close, and she’d always come bearing presents, and she drove Dad crazy.

This last point is something that has not, apparently, changed.

Stiles hasn’t seen her since the funeral, but she’s never been a constant presence. They’ve gotten postcards at Christmases and birthdays. Sometimes she sends weird packages. Once a crate of plantains; another time, incense that sent Dad into a sneezing fit for two days.

This time, the first thing she pulls out is a huge tin of macadamia nuts. Stiles won’t let Dad have any until he’s Googled them.

“Just give me a minute,” Stiles says, munching a handful of nuts as he types on his phone with one hand and clutches the tin protectively to his chest with the other. “Okay,” he says at length, “good fats only. You can have some. But only in moderation!” he adds, as Dad takes a handful and retreats grudgingly to the kitchen. Aunt Pearl regards him fondly.

“Still watching his diet?” she says, tossing a nut into her mouth.

“Forever and always,” Stiles says, putting the tin down on the coffee table and ignoring the sad look on her face that says she understands exactly why Stiles does it. “So Hawaii, huh?”

“Mmm.” She nods her head. “Birds,” she says, cryptically, and doesn’t seem inclined to add anything else. Stiles rolls his eyes and stuffs another handful of nuts into his mouth.

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Derek gives him a weird look when he shows up to the pack meeting that evening, and not because he’s late. He nodded off at his desk after dinner and had to scramble.

“What?” Stiles asks, because by now he recognizes that weird crinkle between Derek’s eyebrows as the quasi-territorial, something-has-upset-the-delicate-balance, you-got-your-chocolate-in-my-peanut-butter one. He’s been wearing it on and off for weeks, though he hasn’t said anything out loud. Stiles has been writing it off as worry about the coming Fall.

But Derek twitches as if trying to shake something off. “You’re late,” he says, though it’s obviously not what he meant to say.

Stiles glances at his phone. “By like, forty seconds. Chill out, sourwolf.”

“You smell weird,” says Erica, coming up behind him and sniffing at his neck in the loud, obnoxious way she does when she wants to be annoying. She wrinkles her nose. “Like cookies. And... medicine.”

“Oh,” Stiles says, comprehension dawning. “My Aunt Pearl - my great-aunt. She’s a vet.” It would not surprise him at all that the smell of a vet might have unpleasant associations for his packmates, despite the number of times Deaton has saved their various asses.

“Aunt Pearl is here?” Scott calls from the door, where Allison is toeing off her boots. Derek is really uptight about shoes on the carpets. Scott bounds up to Stiles, excited. “That’s awesome! Did she bring presents?”
Scott loves Aunt Pearl. When they were really little it was Aunt Pearl who helped them build the
treehouse in Scott’s back yard, who told them scary stories about travelling in jungles and
mountain ranges and fighting monsters. Also she used to give Scott candy even when Mama
McCall said he’d had enough for the day. Stiles had nothing on Scott for hyperactivity back in
kindergarten.

“Books and pictures, mostly,” Stiles tells him. “Also something that may or may not be a shrunk
human head.” It’s totally a dehydrated gourd, but Scott’s eyes widen anyway.

“Come to dinner. She asked about you. Practice your everything’s-fine face first though, maybe.”

Scott gives him a wounded look. To be fair, he’s gotten a lot better lately at acting as though they
didn’t have a secret supernatural double life with people who aren’t involved in it, but Aunt Pearl
can spot bullshit a mile off and Stiles can admit to being a little worried about her smelling a rat
this time.

Not that it would matter if she did. They have so many layers of bullshit contingency plans for
stuff like this, and anyway, secrecy is generally assured by the simple fact that no one would
believe the truth, even if they found out about it.

Aunt Pearl is a ruthlessly practical woman. She’d probably just think it was drugs. Or that he and
Scott were doing it (ew); she is, to date, the only adult in Stiles life to take him aside and give him
The Talk with special addendums for hypothetical bisexuality, and she always did think he and
Scott were a little closer than normal.

(Repeat: ew.)

“Be careful,” Derek says, needlessly, and he has a weird look on his face, the scrunchy-
eyebrowed one that means he’s worried, not mad. Stiles stares at him.

“Yeah, of course,” he says at length, “but seriously man, Aunt Pearl’s cool. Also awesome. Like...
Indiana Jones and Jessica Fletcher rolled into one.”

Lydia snorts, and Stiles valiantly does not whirl around and point a triumphant finger in her
direction. He totally would have pegged her for a Murder, She Wrote fan.

Jackson’s snort is somewhat less delicate. “Shut up man, I used to watch it with my mom,” Stiles
says, but Jackson just rolls his eyes.

“Training Sunday,” Derek says at last, and pins Stiles with a look that makes him hang back as
everyone else files out; as Isaac wanders upstairs and engines start up outside.

“What?” Stiles asks, when Derek just stares at the closed front door, hands on his hips, brow still
furrowed and Concerned.

“I... don’t know,” Derek says at last. “It’s just a feeling. So be careful.”

Stiles takes a few steps closer, which he has found is remarkably effective at making Derek ditch
the reflexive Scary Alpha shit he puts on during meetings and lapse back into more reliable body
language. Stiles doesn’t even know if Derek knows he does it, but it works: Derek turns to face
him and drops his hands to his sides.

“An impending doom feeling or a huh-so-apparently-mermaids-are-a-real-thing feeling?” A real
thing that Scott is apparently allergic to; that little adventure still holds the record for stupidest
mishap in Stiles’ notes.
Derek looks at him, frowning, thinking. “Neither,” he says. “I don’t know how to describe it, okay? It’s just...” He shrugs in a way that on anyone else would look like “helpless.” But not freaked out or scared or angry, so Stiles mentally downgrades it from “Danger, Danger” to “Disturbance in the Force.” Occasionally Derek will sense things that he detects purely by virtue of being a werewolf. Stiles has never seen the others do it; maybe it’s something to do with being born rather than bitten. Maybe Derek just trusts his instincts more. He’s usually right, though.

“A feeling,” Stiles agrees, pressing his lips together. “Sure thing. Eyes open.” He tosses off a little salute and heads for the door.

He’s feeling pretty good about the world as he turns the Jeep onto the road back into town. No threats to their lives lately, the hell of high school very nearly behind them. His very last final ever is in seven more days, and his eighteenth birthday in thirteen, at which point the double-edged sword of Can Legally Buy Porn and Can Be Tried as An Adult comes clanging down. And everybody else was in a good mood tonight too, even Derek, despite being all twitchy over his werewolf radar ping. A couple of times during the meeting he even actually smiled, which is something that’s been happening a lot more over the past year or so. Stiles doesn’t know how he’s supposed to feel about Derek smiling, especially given the way it seemed to kick him right in the chest the first time he saw it.

Okay, every time he sees it. Whatever. He’s not made of stone.

He can’t even imagine how Derek would react if he found out he was the catalyst for Stiles’ journey of bisexual self-discovery last summer. He definitely can’t even think about Derek and the possibly worrying amount of porn he watched without thinking it would probably be better to actually die than face that embarrassment. There were a few close calls with prolonged staring and other related crush symptoms that an alpha werewolf could probably pick up on - and Stiles tries not to remember the mini-panic attacks invoked by his sudden realization that werewolves can smell arousal, but in hindsight Stiles is pretty sure that any signals he may have been putting out were safely hidden in the ambient funk of teenage hormones.

He’s got a handle on it, these days, he thinks. Their relationship has progressed from “holy shit, that’s Derek Hale, possible serial killer” to “oh, hey, it’s Derek.” Which is where it is now, with the occasional sexy daydream. Derek is undeniably hot, but he’s also... well. Derek. Stiles likes him as an actual person. He thinks they might even be friends, beyond the weird, inexplicably visceral sense of affection/belonging that comes with being Pack.

So it’s a good thing Stiles has a handle on it.

Anyway, it’s really no worse than zoning out over hot actors. Though okay, Jeremy Renner hardly ever strips down to nothing but a pair of worn jeans and engages in half-naked sweaty wrestling matches with all of Stiles’ friends.

Shaking his head, Stiles focuses on the road and tries to remember what’s in the fridge at home. He hasn’t gone shopping this week, so it’s probably down to moldy bread and wilted broccoli, but he can’t actually remember. He decides to check at home first and then go shopping if necessary; Dad shouldn’t be home from work for another hour at least, which gives him some lead-time if he wants to head off the “but this is why pizza delivery was invented!” train at the pass.

He’s surprised and pleased to find Aunt Pearl in the kitchen and two pots on the stove, the woman herself pulling a casserole dish out of the oven.

“You’re home!” she sets the casserole dish down on top of the stove. “I thought I was going to have to do the vegetables myself.” It’s unquestionably a command, along with a pointed finger in the direction of the bag of zucchini sitting on the counter. Stiles takes a detour to sniff the pots on
top of the stove - he has no idea what it is, but it smells amazing - before dropping his stuff in the hall, toeing off his shoes, and getting to work.

A small mountain of peeled and chopped vegetables later, Aunt Pearl hands him a glass of juice and tells him to stand down. He pulls out his chem homework instead. Watching her cook in their kitchen makes him think too much of Mom, and it’s better to have something else to focus on.

“I went through your box,” she says, stirring something with a wooden spoon. “Very organized.” She gives him a look, eyebrows raised, mouth pursed, and he knows she’s making fun of him. Dad makes fun of the colour-coding too.

“Look, my system works.” Not to mention brings a 65% guarantee that Dad will actually eat what he’s given. He tried sorting the recipe box by ingredients, or mealtime, or type of cuisine, but the traffic-light system is a lot simpler. Green’s a guaranteed hit, orange is edible and filling and best not used as a main dish, red’s healthy but only to be used as a punishment when Dad goes off-book with curly fries and take-out meatball sandwiches.

Aunt Pearl looks at him, and her face softens into a smile. “You’re a good boy,” she says.

“Not that he appreciates it,” Stiles jokes.

“He does,” she says. “He’s never been good at letting other people take care of him. It’s not in his nature. But you’re like your mom. You’ve got her spark.”

Stiles is ducking his head and smiling before his brain catches up to the actual words, and he looks up again. For a moment, he’s seeing double, Mom standing where Aunt Pearl is standing, but in the present Aunt Pearl has got her back to him and hasn’t obviously noticed anything off. It’s just a word, he reminds himself, as she nods to herself and continues.

“Your mom had such a spark in her, Zim. You’ve got it too. It makes me miss her less.”

It makes me miss her more, Stiles thinks, but says nothing.

Half an hour, a delicious meal that he didn’t have to cook and a plethora of Dad’s dubious faces later, Stiles is full, tired and content. He sits at the table and watches Dad and Aunt Pearl clear up, load the dishwasher, and bicker pleasantly about the food, which Dad loved, even the cucumber zucchini salad, which was just vegetables, hah.

He’s glad she’s here. It’s nice, having someone else cook a meal, set the table, be the nexus of family togetherness for the evening; Stiles doesn’t mind that it’s almost always him, but it gets tiring sometimes. Having Aunt Pearl here is like... like...

...like when Mom was alive.

The passage of time and the undiscussed but mutually-agreed-upon silence that he and Dad practice mean that he and Dad practice mean that he’s out of practice guarding against it, so it’s a bit of an adjustment; something that keeps catching Stiles flat-footed. He hasn’t seen her since Mom was sick. Since Mom died. Long enough that the memory is fuzzy around the edges; thinking about it for too long makes his head hurt.

It’s weird. He’s glad to see her. Her presence is grounding, a shock of warmth, but at the same time he hasn’t felt this lost in years.

But Dad is smiling when he turns to look at Stiles, so Stiles smiles back. Aunt Pearl gives him a knowing look and places a piece of cake in front of him.
“Eat,” she says, in a tone that brooks no argument.

Stiles eats. It’s easier than thinking about it.

Chapter End Notes

SPOILERS:
I am taking liberties with the details of canon here, i.e. ignoring the things that make me sad, which probably makes this more or less a canon-divergent future AU with random differences before the branching point (somewhere around but not at the end of season 2; Boyd and Erica, for instance, are still around). Certain elements from the end of season 2 are omitted, and other details (some character names) are taken from pre-season 3 spoilers. Season 3, however, is ignored altogether, as I haven’t seen it yet. So, spoiler-wise, assume that if you haven’t seen all of seasons 1 and 2 you might be spoiled, but don’t expect perfect canon compliance, either.

WARNINGS:
There is little or nothing that I would describe as violence in this story, nor even anything I would consider very traumatic, but this story is rated Teen mostly because of emotional trauma due to past events; looked at from a certain angle it is ultimately the story of the aftermath of a string of murders (as is, okay, Teen Wolf in general). There are a couple of non-explicit references to past what-I-would-personally-describe-as dub-con or statutory rape and emotional abuse (i.e. 15/16-year-old Derek with Kate Argent), as well as references to past (I would classify it as heavy, though it’s never described) violence (perpetrated against Stiles). Also: it’s often not something considered in these matters, but I’m going to go ahead and mark down a warning for descriptions of the event of/the pretty detailed emotional fallout of witnessing a parent die from a terminal illness (cancer).

(Obviously if there’s anything I’ve missed, please let me know.)
Chapter 2

Once a month the pack spends a whole Sunday “training” - which usually works out to about 50% actual training and the rest fucking around and enjoying each other’s company. Somebody brings breakfast or lunch and they spend the day chasing through the woods and beating each other up in a companionable way.

Today’s an early day, which means Stiles is the first one there. He knocks, but when there’s no answer he figures Derek’s still on his morning run. He considers jogging out to join him - he’s dressed for exercise and everything - but he finds he doesn’t have the energy. He doesn’t know why he’s so tired. Maybe he’s coming down with something? He feels achy and mildly nauseated, a state of affairs that’s been persistent the last couple of weeks, even though he got a solid seven hours last night.

He could let himself in, but it’s a nice day, warm and looking like it’ll be sunny, so instead he pulls out his phone and plays Temple Run for ten minutes until he dozes off sitting on the front porch.

He doesn’t wake until he hears Derek’s footsteps coming up the rise on the east side of the house, and even then he’s still half-asleep when Derek comes into sight, blinking vaguely in the sunlight spearing down through the trees.

“Hey,” Derek says. When Stiles doesn’t respond, Derek comes to stand over him, rubbing his palms on his sweatpants. “Stiles?”

Stiles pushes himself straight and rubs at his face. “Yeah, sorry, hi.”

Derek leans in a little, eyebrows conveying Vague Concern. “You look like shit.”

Stiles laughs. “Thanks, man, that’s always nice to hear.” He shakes himself, trying to wake up. “I’m just tired. Studying, probably.”

Derek sits down next to him, and he’s quiet for a minute, studying Stiles in profile. “You sure?” he asks, and Stiles waves a dismissive hand, about to reassure him when he hears an approaching car, and then another, and Derek gives him one last frowny look before getting up to greet the rest of the pack.

It’s Lydia’s turn to bring breakfast, which means it’s not just a box of Krispy Kreme and a to-go box of Starbucks coffee like when it’s Scott, Jackson or Erica’s turn. Instead Lydia and Allison show up carrying three brown paper bags full of breakfast burritos from the place on the other side of town, and coffees from the pretentious hipster roastery.

“Oh my god, you are angels among men,” he tells them, accepting the huge cup of Italian roast and sipping it gratefully while Allison laughs at him. He probably doesn’t actually feel the caffeine hit his bloodstream, but it feels like he can, and the mild headache and nausea seem to vanish almost instantly. “Nectar of the hipster gods,” he murmurs worshipfully into his cup, and Derek, watching him, laughs quietly.

After breakfast the others disperse into the woods and Stiles pulls bottles and jars from his bag, then the notebook he uses for casting, and gets up to circle the house. He’s been planning this for a while, and while his plan extends over most of the town including the homes of everyone he likes even a little, he figures that Hale House is a good place to start, since it’s already got his wards on it.
He walks around the house once one way, and then the other, and then moves out towards the edge of the property to circle it again, dropping a pinch of ash here, a drop of oil there, concentrating on his belief in the wards, the strength of the lines of power springing up in his mind’s eye like a net around the house, extending out into the woods. He’s got months to get the basic structure in place, to expand it out into town, and there are later stages to consider; ones that require the cooperation, knowing or not, of the people whose homes he’s protecting. The sounds of the forest fade into the background, the bright tracery of the wards stark against the insides of his eyelids.

Derek finds him as he’s on his third counterclockwise turn around the edge of the property, the house just barely visible through the trees. Stiles didn’t hear him coming, but then again, he often doesn’t. He can usually... for lack of a better word, sense Derek and the others, even at a distance; even Lydia, with her odd resistance to magic, is notable as a sort of space where something ought to be. But most of the time he has to be paying attention; registers them only as a presence.

If Derek shines just a little brighter than the others, well. Stiles is keeping that to himself. It sounds stupid, anyway.

This time, though, he was sunk too deep in the working, and he startles when Derek appears in his peripheral vision, flailing. Derek catches him by the elbow before he goes over. It wouldn’t be the first time.

“You know, most people announce themselves when coming up behind someone in the wilderness,” Stiles says, wiping his oily fingers off on a rag.

Derek raises an eyebrow critically, but his expression is soft, amused. “Most people don’t go wandering through the woods with their eyes closed, muttering to themselves,” he observes. “On a city street everyone would think you were a homeless person.”

“You’d know all about that,” Stiles mutters, and Derek just shakes his head, letting go of Stiles’ arm. He raises his head then, scenting the air.

“You did something. New wards?” He looks down at the ground, curiously.

“I don’t know why you do that - the sniffing thing,” Stiles says, waving a hand. “You know you can’t actually smell magic. You just think it looks cool.”

Derek makes a face. “Are you going to tell me what you’re doing, or...”

“Walk and talk,” Stiles says, tucking away the last bottle and turning back towards the house. “I need coffee.” He’s been working nearly an hour and a half with no break, and he’s feeling a little drained; more than he usually is after this kind of thing.

Derek falls in beside him, and Stiles can feel Derek’s gaze on the side of his face. “Okay, so,” Stiles says, “you already have wards on your house.”

Derek nods. “You re-did them when we finished the remodel.” And wasn’t that a fun weekend; crawling around in the woods for two days with Deaton criticizing his every move. Stiles hadn’t wanted to leave the new house unprotected for too long.

“Well... you know, they don’t last forever. Or at least, they don’t last without someone around to... you know, believe in them. And I...” he sticks his hands in his pockets, not looking at Derek. “I won’t be here.”

The change in Derek’s posture is almost imperceptible, but Stiles sees it anyway, even not looking
“Right,” Derek says, softly, and there’s something in his voice at the reminder that his pack is scattering, and Stiles, as always, feels driven to fill the quiet.

“I mean, I’ll be back. Like, often, even. Someone needs to make sure Dad doesn’t fall off the bacon wagon, which means constant vigilance.” Stiles points a stern finger into the air, as though Dad were standing in front of him. He lets his hand drop. “But I don’t like the idea of leaving you - the town, I mean, and like, the people I like who are still going to be here, vulnerable. To, y’know, evil.”

“Right.” Derek sounds amused now, which is at least something. “So?”

“So I need a more lasting method of putting protections down,” Stiles says. “I mean, it all still works the same way, but it will last longer. And it can be... okay for lack of a better word, and don’t tell Deaton I said this because he starts yelling at me over terminology, but it can be *recharged* by someone other than the original worker and doesn’t have to be done over from scratch if something happens.”

Derek doesn’t ask “*like what?*” but there is a certain rise in the air of menace emanating from Stiles’ left. The casual violence with which Derek regards any threat to his pack is, frankly, sort of endearing, but Stiles knows that if he ever brought it up, Derek would try to rein it in, and he kind of doesn’t want that. It’s... weirdly nice.

“Bigger battery,” Derek volunteers, eventually.

“Basically.”

Derek is quiet for a while, as the trees thin out and the house comes fully into view. “So what do you need?” he asks. In the distance, Stiles can see the Betas romping in the brush. Lydia and Allison are standing on the old picnic table in the middle of the yard, flinging beanbags into their midst with vicious precision and laughing at the yelp of pain whenever one finds its target.

“To tie it to the people in the house,” Stiles says. “With um, a physical token? Which is, okay, technically blood magic but Deaton says it’s not evil if there’s no intent to harm—”

Derek halts the flow of words with a hand on Stiles’ shoulder; warm and firm. “What do you need?”

Stiles finally looks at him, and sees - well, something. It’s hard to tell, with Derek, even with the amount of practice Stiles has had. On anyone else Stiles would call this expression *fond*, but there’s also certainty there. Expectation. Trust, even.

Stiles swallows back the sudden flood of affection and nods. “A couple of drops of blood?” He shrugs. “Or hair. Hair works, too.”

Derek looks at him for another long, unreadable moment, and then nods, moving past Stiles and heading for the house. Stiles stands staring after him for a long moment, and then hurries to catch up. “Wait, what, *now*?”

Derek shrugs. “You want to see if it works, right?”

“Well, yeah, but, most people aren’t quite this cool about it when somebody asks them for blood,” Stiles points out, as they reach the porch and Derek turns back to look at him.

“I trust you,” he says simply, and then nudges Stiles’ bag with his foot as though he’s said nothing
at all. “You ready?”

The thing about magic, Stiles thinks a while later, sitting on Derek’s porch surrounded by bottles and tins, discarded burrito wrappers and half-empty coffee cups, is that it doesn’t look like much. It’s one of the first things he had trouble wrapping his head around at the beginning. He always expected magic to be fantastic, to be exciting and beautiful. And it is beautiful, or at least it can be - but from the outside, it looks a lot like nothing at all, and when it looks like anything it looks like you’re mixing homemade cosmetics. So much for Hogwarts, Stiles thinks, grinning to himself as he assembles his ingredients.

Deaton told him early on that most of the technicalities of magic were subjective. There are customs, of course, and accepted method, and things that have been done for so long they’ve become traditional and work better because they’re traditional, but when it comes right down to it, the practical ins and outs are personal. Every worker, Deaton said - he never said “witch” - has their own special mix for things like wards and protection spells; a base that forms the foundation for everything else, a framework to be filled up with belief. The power is universal but the particulars are highly individualized, and without the spark a potion is just muck. Stiles pours a little distilled water into a small stainless steel bowl and adds a pinch of coriander, shreds of comfrey, sprigs of mint and vervain and a drop of St. John’s Wort and lastly, mistletoe, as the primary. He remembers the long, sombre look Deaton gave him when he reached for that, unthinking, the first time. The way he said absolutely nothing aloud.

He grinds it all down with a pestle and tests the consistency between thumb and forefinger, looks up to see Derek sniffing a dried purple vervain blossom, eyes closed and expression distant, puzzled. He sees Stiles looking, and lets out a long breath. “Mom kept little dried bundles all over the place,” he explains, in that flat, quiet voice that comes out when he’s talking about his family, which is rare enough, though more often than it once was. “Under our beds, over the doors. The smell...” He shrugs, shoulders stiff. “It’s for kids, right?”

Stiles licks his lips, wary, as always, of venturing into the emotional minefield that is the subject of Derek’s family. “Protection, yeah. Sorry,” he offers, belatedly; it never feels like enough.

Derek shrugs again: it’s okay, and there’s almost a smile on his face. A fond remembrance rather than a tragic one, and Stiles smiles.

His mom had a thing for dried flowers too, though probably not for the same reasons. He remembers the little vase on the hall table outside his room, the one he knocked over coming around a corner too fast when he was twelve, always full of little purple flowers, white ones, yellow. the little dishes of flower petals and herbs on windowsills, on the tops of cupboards. After she died, he found all those little glass containers boxed up in the attic, but it took years for the smell of dried flowers to fade from the house; at least, to Stiles’ boring human nose.

He’d forgotten that until just now.

“Stiles?” says Derek, and Stiles realizes he’s gone still, staring down into the bowl like it holds all the secrets to the universe. He shakes himself back into the present.

“Sorry.” He does a quick mental checklist and sets down the bowl. “Okay. Ready?” Derek just holds out a hand.

Stiles takes out a small silver knife and cleans it carefully with alcohol. Maybe werewolves can’t get bacterial infections, but it’s the principle of the thing.

When he takes Derek’s hand into his own, he experiences a strange moment of dislocation; like he’s outside himself, watching. At the same time Derek’s physicality is undeniable, his hand warm
and heavy, the palm and fingers soft and uncalloused. Not for the first time Stiles wonders what it’s like to be a werewolf and play the guitar, with such soft hands; he knows, though he’s never said, that Derek plays the violin. At least, played, as a kid. There are pictures in the BHH yearbook. It’s a weird, incongruous piece of reality, especially as he turns Derek’s hand over so it’s palm-up, and with a last glance up into Derek’s calm, patient face, presses the tip of the knife into the soft flesh at the heel of Derek’s hand. Blood wells up red and jewel-bright, but Derek doesn’t even flinch, turning his hand over the bowl to let blood drip slowly into the mix of herbs and oil and water. Stiles counts three drops, then presses a piece of gauze to the cut, holding it there, Derek’s hand between both of his. Derek is still watching him, his regard heavy against the top of Stiles’ head.

“Stiles,” Derek says, eventually, and Stiles blinks up at him. Derek quirks a tiny smile, flicking his eyes downwards at their hands, and Stiles lets him go, face reddening. Derek peels away the gauze; the skin is already healed.

“Right,” Stiles says, pulling in the scattered threads of his composure, trying to settle himself. “Right.”

He adds his own blood next. The blood vanishes into the mixture, and Stiles takes a few deep breaths before he gets to his feet, walks across the porch to where the foundation ward is drawn. He presses his hand to the nearly-invisible mark on the front door, closes his eyes, and suddenly the mark is fire-bright, glowing under his touch.

Even complicated spells don’t really need a lot of words, which is ironic because Stiles, as he has been repeatedly told, has an inexhaustible need to fill up any available silence with sound. Some workers prefer to speak things aloud, to frame their power with sound and poetry, but Stiles, to his own great surprise, discovered at the beginning that when he was here, in this half-dark, unseen place where his magic worked, that need was just... gone. Here, he feels still, and quiet, and can see every missing, necessary piece without any need for verbalizing. Instead, his will is a thing to be shaped and pressed, sometimes wielded like a blade.

Now, he dips his fingers into the bowl, and he can feel the power thrumming through him, the currents of magic rushing past, the way he is a point of stability in an oncoming tide. He traces the mark, fingertips tingling with the spark between potion and will, and the ward flares against the wood of the door, brightens, and then fades again. He knows that even Derek probably saw that; the mark appearing, glowing, and fading again into nothing. Under his feet, he feels a pulse of power, an almost audible zummmm that expands outward along the lines of the wards, flows out to the boundaries of the spell, and back, diminished.

It’s holding.

He opens his eyes to find the whole pack standing around him, staring, and grins at Derek.

“It worked?” Derek guesses, smiling back.

“As if there was ever any doubt,” Stiles scoffs.

He explains his plan to the others, after that. He collects tokens from everyone to add to the Hale House ward and promises for their own homes; most of them will be leaving families, loved ones behind after this summer, and he thinks it will be a long time before any of them feels entirely safe in Beacon Hills, feels easy about the prospect of leaving loved ones unguarded. Jackson scowls and offers his middle finger for the knife. Erica and Boyd cheerfully suffer the cut and go back to arguing about finals. Isaac flinches dramatically when the knife touches his skin, and Stiles curses himself for an idiot and cuts a lock of hair instead.
Scott slumps against him, easy and familiar, as Stiles nicks his palm, winces at the pain like a big baby. Allison is stoic through the cut, of course, but she pouts a little as Stiles tapes on the bandage afterwards. Lydia, with a scornfully arched eyebrow, pulls the elastic from her hair and lets Stiles cut a lock of hair, watches closely as he burns it over the bowl with the other offerings. Danny, who has taken to being a wolf better than any of the others ever did, is relaxed and thoughtful as he holds a hand out for Stiles to cut, watches with interest as Stiles sprinkles in more comfrey and mixes them all together. This is like a metaphor, Stiles thinks; blood and fire and things that should be terrible, bringing them all together, close and inextricable as blood. Not always cordial and rarely easy, but permanent.

The second time, the pulse of power that is the spell taking hold nearly knocks Stiles off his feet, and he laughs aloud at the sheer pleasure of a thing working as it should. He feels a little drunk with it, sways until Derek steadies him with a hand flat between his shoulderblades.

“I am awesome,” Stiles cheers, and okay, even to his own ears he sounds a little tweaked. Everything is slow-motion and a little too bright, oversaturated and edged with lens flare like a J.J. Abrams movie. He wipes his hands, lets Lydia help him clean up, and by the time everything is packed away he feels a little more like himself. The afternoon is still bright, but tolerable, and he feels a little less like he’s going to float away, untethered from the Earth like a hot air balloon.

They break for lunch. Derek comes out onto the porch with a huge platter of sandwiches: turkey, ham and cheese, and veggie on rice bread because Lydia’s on a gluten-free kick and Danny’s a vegetarian these days. Stiles eats three, ravenous, and by the time he’s finished he feels about 98% human again, though he still feels exhaustion tugging at him, just out of sight.

His state of wakefulness seems to bother Derek not at all, because once they’ve demolished the sandwiches he urges them all up and into the woods for the running portion of the afternoon’s festivities. Fortunately Stiles is good at running; was good at it even before he was running for his life instead of merely for exercise and to burn off his ever-present fount of excess energy. Granted, Derek’s version of trail-running is a little different; when he ran on his own Stiles never had special supplements on jumping fallen logs or climbing trees at speed or how to least painfully survive a running tackle from a werewolf at top speed.

By three o’clock Stiles is flagging, and Derek comes up beside him as he slows to a stop, bent over with his hands braced on his knees.

“I’m tapping out,” Stiles admits, when Derek just looks at him questioningly.

“It’s okay,” Derek says after a moment. “We’re done for the day anyway.” Stiles looks at him then, because that’s a total lie. Training days usually last well into the night, especially in early summer, when the days are getting longer. But he looks a little worried, eyes skimming over Stiles’ body like he might spot something more dire than simple exhaustion, and finally he whistles sharply, a sound that splits the air, signalling a return to the house.

With the threat of further exercise banished Stiles feels twice as tired, and he zombie-walks back to the house in Derek’s wake, rubbing at his eyes. He needs to get some sleep tonight. “I don’t know who you’re going to torture when we’re all gone,” Stiles jokes, as Derek gives him a hand over a fallen tree. When Derek takes them running, he doesn’t let them stick to the paths.

“Nobody to death-march through the forest. What are you going to do with your time?”

“I’ve got an Xbox,” Derek deadpans, and Stiles laughs.

“On the upside, I’m like 54% less likely to encounter vengeful creatures of the night on a university campus.” This is a guess, of course. Stiles remembers later seasons of Buffy. But at
least he might get to sleep in on Sundays.

“54%?” Derek eyes him. “Did you do that math on your own?”

Stiles makes a *pshhh* noise and waves a hand dismissively. “*My point* is, you’re going to need some new hobbies. I, at least, will be living it up. Sleeping in on weekends. Also, not having a curfew. Best of both worlds, plus I bet I hardly ever get kidnapped in Berkeley. I hear it has a very low kidnapping rating.”

They started making Stiles train with them for real after he got hurt; a run-in a year ago with some rogue hunters who didn’t much care Stiles was human and didn’t mind hurting him to get to the pack. They had to say it was carjackers, that Stiles didn’t want to let them have the Jeep, which sounded plausible enough to anyone who knew Betty had been Mom’s. Anyway it was close enough to the truth given that they’d kidnapped Stiles, beaten the crap out of him, and smashed the Jeep into a telephone pole as some kind of “here we are, come get us” sign to the pack, who by then had been frantically searching for him for nearly four hours.

He was unconscious for two and a half days, in the hospital for the better part of two weeks, out of school for more than a month. The scars have mostly faded, but the bones in his right hand still ache when it’s wet out.

Despite Dad not knowing the truth of everything, Stiles has had an iron-clad curfew since the Incident, one which Derek, unsurprisingly, has been enthusiastic about helping him to obey.

“I’m serious about the hobbies, though. Maybe you can take up gardening. Macrame. Not that I think you’ll be doing anything else with your evenings but compulsively Skyping us all to make sure we’re...”

Damn. Even when he’s trying not to go there, he ends up going there. Derek is looking at him like he knows what Stiles is thinking about, his whole face pinched with guilt (on Derek this looks pretty much like any of his other angry-faces, but Stiles has had a lot of practice at detecting the nuances). Stiles doesn’t think Derek ever stopped feeling responsible for Stiles being taken, even after they dispatched all five Hunters with Chris Argent’s blessing and assistance. Really, that could have turned out worse; it ended with the first formal treaty between Hale Pack and the Argents since the Hale House fire. Apparently there had been one of long standing until Kate burned it all, both literally and figuratively.

“Stop that,” Stiles says hurriedly. “That’s not what I meant.”

Derek sighs, looks away. “I know what you meant, Stiles.”

Neither of them says anything for a long moment; the only sounds are their feet crunching through leaf-litter.

“Sorry,” Stiles offers, voice small.

Derek stops walking and looks at him. He seems frustrated, but like he’s trying to hold it in. “Don’t be sorry,” he says, almost angrily. “It’s not your fault. It never was.” He holds up his hands to cut off Stiles’ objections, because some of it was *definitely* his fault, though a lot of it was down to the way that, back then, everybody was way more concerned with getting their own way rather than keeping the pack safe, whole, never mind alive. Stiles’ near-death experience went a long way towards rearranging everybody’s priorities, which is probably one of the reasons he doesn’t feel all that fucked up about it.

“I don’t-- you shouldn’t have to worry about all this.”
“But--” Stiles has been worrying about it. That’s what Stiles does.

“I want you to have a life. Like you’re supposed to. You shouldn’t have to spend all your time looking after--” Derek makes a noise - not quite a growl, but frustrated all the same. “It’s my job. Not yours.”

Stiles doesn’t know how to take that. He wonders if it should sting, because for a second he’s back in that place where everything was in pieces, where everybody was at each other’s throats and Stiles wasn’t sure of his welcome anywhere.

“That’s not what I meant,” Derek mutters, before the hurt really has a chance to take hold. “You know it’s not.”

Stiles swallows, shoving his hands into his pockets. “Then what did you mean?” he asks, carefully. “Don’t tell me you’re not going to be freaking out about us scattered to a bunch of different schools without you.” Because Stiles has been thinking about it. Jackson and Lydia on the east coast, him and Scott and Allison at Berkeley, Danny at CalTech and everybody else at Beacon Hills Community College. The puppies will be near home, at least for a while, but everybody else - they’ll see each other, but not Derek, not all the time. Stiles can’t pretend that doesn’t make him at least a little anxious, just on principle, and he can’t imagine what that’s like for the Betas, never mind for Derek.

“It’ll be okay,” Derek says, and if he doesn’t look as confident as he clearly wants to sound he at least looks a little confident. “You’ll be there.”

Then Derek freezes, staring down at his hands like he didn’t mean to say that, like it just came out, and then fortunately they’re interrupted by the others returning before it can get awkward.

More awkward.

***

Back at the house, Derek gives him a weird, constipated look of concern and takes away his keys. “Hey,” Stiles protests, reaching for them, but Derek holds him easily at bay with a palm against his forehead and hands the keys to Scott.

“You fell asleep standing up twice in the last fifteen minutes,” Derek says.

“Scott is not driving my baby,” Stiles says, pushing Derek’s hand away. This is a long-standing, unspoken rule. Scott is not allowed to drive any car that anyone cares about. Things Happen.

Scott looks between them, confused and worried. “I don’t...”

“He’s going to your house anyway,” Derek points out, as though this all makes perfect sense and isn’t sideways car theft.

Scott seems to decide that he doesn’t care about the why and accepts the keys. “I’ll be careful,” he says earnestly, fidgeting with the keys. “You really don’t look great, man.”

Stiles glares at Derek for another five seconds and then lets his shoulders slump. “Fine,” he concedes. “But no radio.”

Scott doesn’t even protest.

Ironically, the worry about Scott getting distracted by thoughts of Allison or bunnies on the side of the road or not noticing traffic lights and totalling his precious Jeep keeps Stiles not only awake,
but tense on the edge of his seat all the way back to his house. Scott still can’t drive stick worth shit so the constant grinding and jolting as he brakes and accelerates helps, too.

They pull into the driveway behind Aunt Pearl’s rental car and Scott lifts his head, sniffing. Stiles is never not going to find the sight of Scott sniffing the air like a dog basically hilarious.

“Well, come on, Lassie, what is it?”

Scott grins at him and sniffs again. “Borscht,” he says, in a softly worshipful tone, and gets out of the car.

Stiles follows him inside, and manages to catch Scott’s half-bashful, clearly-gleeful reunion with Aunt Pearl, purveyor of all of his technically-adult-approved if not Mom-approved childhood mischief. Aunt Pearl hugs him, tells him he needs a haircut, asks after his mother, and then brings the subject around to Allison, all in the space of about forty-five seconds. Scott is left grinning, blushing and dumbstruck. It’s almost awe-inspiring.

“She’s great,” Scott says, as Stiles wanders over to the stove to sniff at what’s bubbling in the pots. It is, indeed, the famous Vaytsiushkevich family beef borscht; apparently Deda Vaytsiushkevich’s recipe originally, Mom used to make it on special occasions or whenever Stiles needed cheering up. It’s one of the only things Stiles hasn’t been able to bring himself to make since she died. Just standing here, inhaling the steam, is making his eyes water a little.

Because of the steam, obviously.

Aunt Pearl comes over and leans in. “Zim?” She sounds - slightly - hesitant. For Aunt Pearl.

Stiles wipes at his eyes quickly. “Yeah, I - it’s been a while since I--”

“Hmm,” says Aunt Pearl, looking at him carefully. “Your deda wouldn’t like to hear his recipes were going unused.” Mom’s recipe book is propped up on the counter, the pages liberally splashed with red-purple beet stains.

“Yeah, I know.” Stiles nods. “It’s stupid. I just... that one in particular.”

Aunt Pearl gives him a quick, one-armed hug and gives him a quick shove over towards the table, where Scott is sitting very straight, shredding cabbage and pretending he hasn’t heard every word with his stupid werewolf hearing. Stiles sits down next to him. Scott looks at him questioningly, and Stiles just shrugs, staring down at his hands on the tabletop until Scott inches his chair over and headbutts him in the shoulder. Stiles laughs, pushing his head away.

After Dad has come home - still in his uniform, because he has to go back to the station after - and they’re well into the meal, Stiles wonders aloud whether Aunt Pearl is planning on moving in with them and becoming their full-time chef.

“It would give me a lot more free time, is all I’m saying.” Scott makes an affirmative noise, his mouth full.

“I don’t get to cook much when I’m travelling,” Aunt Pearl tells him primly. “Consider it one of your many birthday gifts.”

“I don’t mind,” says Dad, with a look at the ceiling that totally fails to pass as innocent.

Stiles points a finger at him. “Don’t get used to it. You’re only allowed this much sour cream because it’s a special occasion.”
“Speaking of your birthday,” Aunt Pearl continues, as though they’re not arguing across her, “what were your plans?”

Dad’s eyes drop from the ceiling and Stiles drops the pointing finger. Even Scott goes quiet, eyes darting nervously between them all.

“No plans,” Stiles says, shrugging awkwardly, not meeting her eyes.

The silence isn’t oppressive exactly, but he probably thinks that because he’s the one causing it.

“We’re going to have to do something about that,” she says eventually, and he doesn’t know exactly what doom he should be reading into her tone because he kind of doesn’t dare look up at her face.

“I don’t really--”

“Zim,” she says, tone almost gentle, and he does look up then, sees both warmth and stubbornness in her eyes, and it’s so much like Mom is sitting there that he’s abruptly on the verge of tears: face hot, throat tight.

“It’s an important day,” she says, and on her other side, Dad is looking not at Aunt Pearl, but at Stiles, with an expression that is at least a close relative to the one he wears when he catches Stiles lurking at crime scenes. Like Stiles is the answer to some question he hasn’t yet figured out how to ask. Stiles saw a lot of it in the months after Mom died.

“It’s not that big a deal,” he mutters, and he can actually feel Scott fidgeting on his other side.

Aunt Pearl pats him on the cheek. “It’s supposed to be,” she says, and then pushes to her feet. “I think Scott will help you do the dishes, John,” she declares, and Scott shoots up out of his chair like it’s electrified, while Dad grumbles his way over to the sink.

“I need to make a phone call,” says Aunt Pearl, and disappears upstairs, leaving Stiles to sit at the kitchen table for five minutes staring at his hands some more until he finally gets up and follows. He meets Aunt Pearl coming back down the stairs.

“I really don’t want a party,” he tells her, voice pitched low, though it’s not like Scott can’t hear him anyway.

Aunt Pearl looks at him, looks over his shoulder towards the kitchen, and beckons him into the living room. “I worry about you, Zim,” she says, and Stiles presses his lips together to keep in the words that want to come rushing out. He’s fine. Nobody needs to worry about him.

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“I just don’t--”

“You don’t have to tell me why,” she tells him, with faint exasperation. “I know why, I know you don’t like to make a fuss, and though I love him some days I want to go back and...” She holds up her hands, the picture of unspecified thwarted violence, and then drops them, sighing and passing a hand over her eyes. Instead, she places both hands, heavy, on Stiles’ shoulders and looks into his face. “You are eighteen, Zim. You should like parties. You should cherish the praise and adoration of all who know you and then sneak off to drink with your friends. You are a brilliant wonder and your birthday should be about you.”

Stiles sags under the weight of her attention. “Weren’t you the one who told me ‘should’ was a moral imperative and--”

“Fsht!” She cuts him off, pointing a warning finger into his face, and then going serious, mouth
soft. “Do you trust me, smart boy?”

“‘Course,” Stiles answers, surprised into answering without thinking. She squints at him a moment longer, and then nods her head.

“Good,” she says. “Then it’s settled.”

Stiles has no idea how she does this. He never has. But he does trust her; trusts the weight and meaning of history between them, the certain bedrock of blood. Mom used to say he trusted strangely, but easily. Which means that later he’ll probably look back on this conversation and realize his terrible, terrible mistake - like that time he and Scott accidentally un-set the parking brake in Dad’s cruiser and crashed it, very gently, into a tree, because Scott said he’d totally worked out how cars worked, they’d just go up the street and back, it would be fine - but for now he’s just glad he doesn’t feel like he’s about to cry anymore.

“I guess so,” he agrees with a sigh, and there’s a whoop from Scott in the kitchen, followed by an exclamation from Dad as Scott probably splashes soapy water all over the place.

“I have no idea why we’re even friends,” Stiles yells.

“Okay, whatever!” Scott yells back, and Stiles can’t help but grin.

***

Mom got diagnosed on Stiles’ ninth birthday.

He remembers because he came home with Scott, vibrating with excitement because they were going to laser tag and then cake and then Terminator and it was going to be the best birthday ever... and stopped short at the sight of Mom’s Jeep in the driveway next to Dad’s cruiser. He stopped so suddenly Scott walked right into him and fell down. But Stiles couldn’t move, rooted to the spot on the sidewalk with a heavy-dark feeling he couldn’t name. It didn’t make any sense at the time, but he was nine and used to following his instincts and usually being right about them. Looking back, he wonders if it wasn’t something a little more than that.

Scott got up, and they made their way up the drive carefully, Scott not knowing what was wrong but accustomed to following Stiles’ lead without asking. Inside, the house was dark, and there were voices in the kitchen - both his parents and Grandma Stilinski (his last grandparent; she died a year later), sitting around the kitchen table, heads bent together.

Even going with caution, neither Stiles nor Scott were ever much for stealth, and the adults looked up as they entered. They smiled at him, but he’d caught sight of their faces a moment before.

They had the party, he knows, but all he remembers from that day is standing in the kitchen doorway, Scott clutching the back of his shirt, and Dad’s hands white-knuckled around his coffee mug.

Sometimes he feels like all he can remember is the bad parts.
Stiles’ last final is at 8:30 AM on a Friday. By 9:22 he’s making his way outside, garbage bag full of locker contents slung over one shoulder, in something of a daze. He thinks he should feel more jubilant, more excited, but mostly he feels like he got up way too early and his head hurts.

He heads for the Jeep on autopilot, thinking only of going home and crawling back into bed, but he’s almost knocked over a moment later when Erica jostles into his side with her shoulder, saved only by Lydia doing the same, far more gently, on the other side.

“I kicked your ass in Calc,” Lydia informs him breezily, tossing her long hair back over one shoulder. “Just so you know.”

“We’ll see,” he returns, even though she probably - okay definitely - did. At least he probably beat her in Chem, even if it was only by like half a percent. It counts.

The parking lot is deserted, at least in terms of people, so it’s a bit of a surprise when they turn a corner and come upon Aunt Pearl leaning against the Jeep, reading a book.

“Hey,” Stiles says uncertainly, as Aunt Pearl straightens up, tucking the book into her purse.

“You all done? I thought we’d go shopping for the party,” she says, in a way that makes it clear it’s not a request. Stiles sighs, especially when Lydia and Erica perk up at the word “party.”

“Stiles,” says Lydia in a voice that could easily pass as ominous, “are you trying to one-up me? I already called the grad party.”

“I would never do something that stupid, I don’t have a death wish,” Stiles promises her.

“So what kind of party is it, then?” asks Erica, elbowing him in the ribs. She looks thoughtful, and then widens her eyes dramatically. “Ooh, wait, is it your birthday?”

Aunt Pearl frowns at him, as though she’s disappointed in him, which is totally unfair. They all know when his birthday is. Everyone’s birthdays are on the big calendar hanging in the foyer of Derek’s house, carefully written in Isaac’s painstakingly tidy hand. He just hasn’t been going out of his way to remind people, that’s all.

On his left, he can feel Lydia staring, hard, at the side of his head. He can almost sense the calculation.

“There’s going to be a barbecue,” Aunt Pearl explains, still frowning at Stiles a moment longer before smiling at the girls. “Would you girls like to come help fetch and carry?” The and perfect my evil plan is unstated, but implied.

Well, thinks Stiles as they all pile into the Jeep together, at least Aunt Pearl is recruiting other people to do the manual labour.

An hour later they’ve been to the party supply place, the bakery, and at least three places where Stiles was instructed to stay in the Jeep while Aunt Pearl, Lydia and Erica went inside for a few minutes and emerged carrying mysterious packages, and the three have become the best of friends.

This cannot possibly end well for him.

But at the grocery store, Aunt Pearl dispatches the girls with a list and tucks her arm into the crook
of his elbow and they walk down the frozen food aisle at a more leisurely pace.

“I’ve given up trying to figure out what you’re planning,” he informs her as she squints at a display of fresh-frozen herbs. “I’ve decided just to let it happen.”

“That’s nice, honey,” she says, patting his arm absently. “Now help me get the one from the bottom, Zim, it’s always freshest.”

Sometimes it’s nice to be led around and not have to worry about things, Stiles thinks. He’s hardly ever in the grocery store and not in charge of every aspect of the trip, whether he’s shopping for him and Dad or criticizing Derek’s dietary choices on behalf of the pack - because superpowers or no superpowers there is no need for that much red meat and sodium - and speaking of Derek, there he is.

Stiles’ steps falter when he sees him, and though he quickly corrects, forcing himself to relax, he can tell Aunt Pearl has noticed. She glances at Stiles, and then looks up and sees Derek glowering thoughtfully at the Hot Pockets selection, and an expression crosses her face that Stiles has never seen before. It’s familiar, mostly because he’s used to seeing it on Lydia - it’s the one she wears when she’s got everything figured out but isn’t about to make it easy for you. At least, he thinks that’s what it is - because it’s gone as soon as he notices, and then she’s smiling peaceably, and they’re still walking, and the distance between them and Derek is diminishing. Stiles thinks really hard at Derek - run away run away - but to his everlasting disappointment, emergency telepathy is still not one of the superpowers in the werewolf lexicon.

Derek does notice their approach, or rather, he probably senses Stiles’ approach, and he looks up as they reach him, though he seems surprised to see them there. “Stiles?” he says, and then his eyes flicker over to Aunt Pearl, and back to Stiles.

“Hi Derek,” Stiles says, and he tries to keep walking, like this is a chance meeting with a near stranger, like he can just say “Hi Derek” and move on, but Aunt Pearl stops, and Stiles has to stop with her.

There is a brief, silent eye-contact conversation between him and Derek - I tried to stop it - what’s going on? - be cool, be cool - and then Stiles is saying: “Oh, hey, this is my Aunt Pearl.”

Derek stands stiff and blank a moment longer, and then shakes Aunt Pearl’s hand. “Nice to meet you, ma’am,” he says, in that weirdly too-polite way Derek is with strangers who aren’t trying to kill him. Stiles always imagines Derek’s mom being like his own, hissing “manners!” at him every three minutes between the ages of five and ten.


Derek glances at Stiles again, so quick most people wouldn’t notice. The nascent smile disappears and the blankness returns.

“Um,” Stiles tries, but Aunt Pearl waves a hand dismissively.

“Aunt Pearl?”

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Derek glances at Stiles again, so quick most people wouldn’t notice. “Yes ma’am.”

Aunt Pearl nods. “John said you were trouble,” she says. Stiles starts. He didn’t realize Dad and Aunt Pearl did a lot of talking when he wasn’t around. She’s smiling, though; a smile with sharp edges. “You don’t look so bad to me.”

The thing about Derek, Stiles always forgets, is that he can be really charming when he wants to be. And Stiles, who is watching his face, can see the moment when he gives up on trying it here. The nascent smile disappears and the blankness returns.

“Um,” Stiles tries, but Aunt Pearl waves a hand dismissively.

“Nice to meet you, young man,” says Aunt Pearl, “maybe we’ll see you at the party?” And just like that, the incredibly-awkward encounter is apparently concluded. They move on, and Stiles
looks back long enough to see Derek staring after them, looking totally lost, eyebrows furrowed together in confusion and alarm. Stiles meets his eyes just long enough to widen his eyes, throw up one hand - *I have no idea, seriously, what the hell* - before they’re turning a corner, out of sight.

***

By the time they’re home and the Jeep is unloaded, Stiles has a headache worthy of epic poetry and retreats to his room to, in order, attempt to play video games, attempt to read, and finally curl up on his bed and wonder if he has the strength to crawl to the bathroom for the Tylenol bottle.

The answer, he decides a few minutes of glaring across his darkened room later, is no.

He pulls his pillow over his head and shuts his eyes, thinking maybe a nap will help. But he’s in a weird mood, wired and anxious for no reason he can discern, and he can’t seem to settle.

The sound of his window opening is familiar enough that he doesn’t register it immediately - doesn’t consciously think “oh, Derek’s here” until he feels the cool night air against his bare feet, his bare arms. He lifts the pillow away to see Derek standing over him, just staring, hands at his sides, but Stiles has the idea that he’s stopping himself from reaching out.

“Are you sick?” Derek asks, and Stiles doesn’t know what that face is - the straight line of Derek’s mouth, the line between his eyebrows.

Stiles doesn’t realize that the headache has actually gotten worse until he shakes his head, and then he winces, curling in on himself a little. “Headache,” he says, he hopes dismissively. He’s been doing a lot of magic lately and sometimes when he overextends himself it comes back to bite him on the ass in exactly this way - though it’s never been this bad before.

“No big deal. Just trying to work up the energy to get up for painkillers,” he mumbles, dropping his head back to the pillow, because he seriously does not have the energy to argue.

He looks up at Derek again. The furrow between his eyebrows has deepened, and Stiles gets a flash of that weird, elusive thing he sees in Derek’s eyes sometimes - dark and sharp and anxious, like he can’t hold on to what he’s got in his hands. It never lasts for very long, but it always makes Stiles want to break out the patented Stilinski hug; reassure him that things aren’t nearly as bad as he thinks they are. He’d do it all the time if he thought Derek would let him.

Derek sits down on the edge of the bed. He’s warm - the wolves are always warm to the touch, and even at a distance - and when he reaches out a hand, the difference in temperature makes Stiles shiver.

“I can...” Derek offers, his hand curved around the side of Stiles’ head, but not quite touching. “It looks bad.”

Stiles swallows, and then closes his eyes. “Okay,” he murmurs, and Derek’s hand is warm and heavy and then the pain is ebbing away like sand running out of an hourglass. It makes Stiles feel a little giddy, and he lets out his breath in one long exhale as the tension in his neck and shoulders dissipates.

“Ffffffck,” he mumbles, half into the pillow, and above him, Derek chuckles, low and soft.

“You’re welcome,” he murmurs, and Stiles isn’t sure if he’s imagining it - that Derek’s thumb is stroking back and forth against his temple while he draws out the pain.
“I saw your aunt today,” Derek says later, sitting on the floor next to Stiles’ bed and flipping through Stiles’ latest comics haul. Nobody would believe him if he told them Derek Hale was a Hawkeye fan. Not that he’d tell them anyway. He kind of likes the idea that this is something just between him and Derek.

Stiles feels drunk. At least he thinks that’s probably the best description for post-werewolf-healing-hangover. He hasn’t got a lot of basis for comparison; these days everybody he once would have been engaging in underage drinking with is supernaturally immune to the effects of alcohol and the last couple of years have significantly decreased his totally natural adolescent desire to hang out in the woods drinking crappy beer anyway.

“Yeah, I know,” Stiles says, the words just a little slurred. His head doesn’t hurt anymore, but it also doesn’t feel attached to his body in the usual way. “I was there.”

Derek’s head tilts back against the mattress, eyes rolling back to give Stiles an unimpressed face. He peers at Stiles’ face as if inspecting it for lingering symptoms of migraine, but seems to find none, because he looks back down at the comic.

“I’m fine,” Stiles tells him, flapping a hand. “Thanks,” he adds, and Derek doesn’t look at him, but his shoulders rise and fall in some kind of negligent shrug. It’s not the first time Derek has done this for him, and it’s been more common lately due to headaches Stiles figures are mostly magic-related. He always hangs around afterwards, like he’s making sure there are no side-effects, though Stiles thinks it’s more that the first time he did it for a headache, Stiles slid right off his desk chair and almost cracked his head open on the corner of his desk. That time was the only time Derek suggested maybe Stiles should go to a doctor about the headaches, and he must have heard the upkick in Stiles’ heartbeat at the idea of the doctor, of the hospital maybe - since he knows they do CT scans for migraines - because he hasn’t mentioned it again.

For a minute there’s silence, filled only by the sound of pages turning and Derek’s occasional almost-silent huff of laughter, which, Stiles can’t blame him. Clint Barton. Guy’s got problems.

“Where?” Stiles asks finally, when his brain has caught up.

Derek makes a soft, half-distracted interrogative noise and turns another page, but Stiles isn’t fooled. He rolls up onto his elbow so he can stare down at Derek. Sometimes establishing geographic superiority is the only way to start a conversation with Derek off on the right foot, i.e. with Stiles winning. “Where did you see her? Aside from the grocery store, I mean.”

Derek stops turning pages and goes still for long enough that Stiles feels the frown form on his own face. Derek shrugs again.

“Never mind,” he says, not looking at Stiles.

“You’re acting weird,” Stiles says flatly.

“You’re weird,” Derek responds.

Stiles glares at the side of his head for a long moment before pushing experimentally up to a sitting position. Derek still doesn’t turn, but Stiles sees the muscles in his back shift like he had to stop himself from turning around and grabbing at Stiles’ elbow, certain he’d keel over.

“Derek.”

Derek holds himself carefully still for another long second or two, and then raises one hand to pinch the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. Stiles has no idea how Derek picked
up the same gesture his dad uses when Stiles is being a pain in his ass, but he’s been doing it for years now. “I shouldn’t have said anything,” he says.

“Too late,” Stiles says shortly, and Derek turns his head, finally, looking unsettled and a little pissed. He looks away again, quickly, but not quickly enough. “Derek, what?”

“I saw her at the coffee place on Cherry,” Derek says to the floor. “With Chris Argent.”

It takes Stiles a moment to process that, along with the tension between Derek’s shoulder blades, the way his fingers are flipping the edges of the comic back and forth, the way he won’t look at Stiles.

He’s suddenly angry, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. “Derek, what the hell-- were you following her?”

Now Derek does look at him, eyes wide, expression somewhere between affronted and pissed. “I was getting a coffee.”

“And besides, Argent’s our ally now, remember? What do you care who he’s having coffee with?” Stiles knows he sounds defensive, but he can’t help it, can’t stop the words coming out of his mouth.

Derek’s standing now, arms crossed over his chest. “I knew I shouldn’t have said anything,” he mutters.

“Then why did you?” demands Stiles.

Derek throws up his hands. “Because I thought you’d be in a better position to see what she’s--”

“So help me, Derek, if you end that sentence with ‘what she’s up to’ I will--” Stiles pauses, one fist in the air, grasping for a threat that’s actually credible. Threatening Derek was a lot easier when they didn’t like each other.

He lets it hang too long, though, because Derek turns away, takes a deep breath, lets it out. What he does when he’s about to try and make a point and he thinks Stiles is being irrational. Stiles recognizes it because he’s pretty sure Derek picked it up from him.

“I’m not saying she’s ‘up to’ anything, Stiles,” he says, slowly, addressing the opposite wall. “I’m just saying it’s weird, okay? I know she’s your family. But something about her is...” he turns around, arms hanging loose, and he mostly just looks weary, “...I don’t know. Off.” He shrugs, clearly frustrated. “And historically that hasn’t gone down well for us.”

Stiles glares at him a long moment longer, and then slumps down on the edge of his bed. “Fine,” he says, hands fisted on his knees. “Fine. I’ll... I’ll check it out.”

“Thank you,” Derek says, quietly, and his voice is soft, genuinely grateful, but Stiles doesn’t want to give him the satisfaction of looking at him, giving the impression that he’s forgiven.

“Don’t thank me,” Stiles says. “I’m not going to find anything.”

Derek just sighs, and Stiles hears him move towards the window.

“What’s it stand for?”

Now Stiles does look up. Derek is halfway out the window, one leg thrown over the sill. He’s looking curiously at Stiles.
“What’s what stand for?” Stiles asks.

“Zim.”

Stiles stares at him. “How’d you--”

“Heard your aunt call you that.” Derek shrugs.

A few seconds pass before it dawns on Stiles that Derek doesn’t know his first name. That Derek might, after all these years, be the only person in his life who doesn’t know this closely-guarded secret. Somehow, thinks Stiles, it’s just never come up.

He doesn’t know how he feels about that.

He crosses his arms. “Just because you have super-hearing doesn’t mean you actually get to know every single thing about my life,” he says, and immediately feels bad when Derek’s face goes blank, the way it does when he’s angry or hurt. But before Stiles can take it back, Derek’s moving.

“I’ll see you later,” Derek says, and then he’s gone.

Stiles stares at the empty window. Why did he say that? He doesn’t even know why he said that. Maybe just because he was pissed at Derek, for letting Stiles in close, but only so close.

Maybe.

“You’d only have laughed anyway,” he mutters to himself, crossing the room to close the window.

***

Stiles has grand plans to subtly broach the subject over diner pancakes the next morning, but when he finally wakes up at a quarter to nine - werewolf painkillers put him out like the good drugs - Aunt Pearl’s rental car is gone and so is she. He’s briefly exasperated, standing on the front porch staring at the empty space where her car should be, doubly so when he trips on the loose aluminum strip over the door sill. He reminds himself that Derek is crazy and paranoid and goes to watch cartoons with a bowl of cereal instead.

At eleven he drives over to Deaton’s for his usual Saturday lesson and spends two hours getting lectured on technique and chided for a lack of his usual concentration and told he’s putting more power into wards than he needs to. Deaton’s big on efficiency and whenever Stiles gets just a little over-excited he slaps him down like Mom used to do when Stiles tried to eat cookie dough out of the bowl.

“Well are you so determined to make everything less fun?” Stiles gripes, rearranging his ingredients for the fifth time under Deaton’s critical eye.

Deaton just raises an eyebrow. Stiles sighs. “Yeah, yeah, strong foundation etcetera etcetera, I’m just saying.”

Deaton cracks a smile. “Don’t worry, Stiles, I’m sure it will still come out with all your usual flourishes. Just efficiently.”

Stiles rolls his eyes and starts again.

Coming out into the waiting room afterwards he nearly has a heart attack, because Aunt Pearl is
sitting in one of the chairs, reading an issue of American Pet Magazine from 2007.

She doesn’t notice him right away, and for a second he stands frozen with indecision. Hide? Lie? Conceal his backpack - which in retrospect seems really conspicuous considering he wrote his last high school exam yesterday and has no reason to be carrying it around except that it contains various bottles, bags and pouches of weird herbs and oils and other supernaturally incriminating materials - under the counter? Why is he here? Why has he never bothered to come up with a convincing cover story for being at the vet’s office when Scott isn’t working?

He’s about to give it all up as a loss and duck back into the exam room and sneak out the back when Deaton comes up behind him and says “Pearl. You’re early.” in the warmest voice Stiles has ever heard come out of him (which means it’s somewhere between “neutral” and “barely polite librarian” on the ordinary human emotive scale). Aunt Pearl, of course, looks up from her magazine.

She smiles at Deaton first, and only then seems to notice Stiles.

And barely reacts.

“Alan,” she says, dropping the magazine back on the wobbly side table where the magazines live and getting up. “I had some time on my hands after my early appointments. Are you ready to go or do I need to occupy myself for a while longer?”

“No, I can cut out a little early,” says Deaton, nodding in Jeff-the-receptionist’s direction and getting a handwave back. “Just one moment.”

He disappears into the back again, and Stiles and Aunt Pearl are left to stare at each other.

Aunt Pearl sticks her hands in the pockets of her linen pants and smiles at him, utterly unperturbed. “Honey,” she says.

“Um,” says Stiles.

“All right, ready,” says Deaton, tucking his phone into a pocket and letting himself out through the waiting room gate. Stiles darts out after him and hears the gate click shut behind him and sort of drifts out into the lot in the wake of Dr. Deaton and Aunt Pearl, who are both completely ignoring him. Only as they get into Aunt Pearl’s rental car does she even look at him again, with a little wave as she turns the key in the ignition.

He doesn’t call Derek. He pointedly doesn’t call Derek because there’s nothing suspicious at all about Aunt Pearl and Stiles’ reluctant magical mentor having an early lunch after Aunt Pearl’s mysterious early-morning appointments got out early when Stiles didn’t even know they knew each other. Why shouldn’t they know each other? They’re both vets. Beacon Hills only has two, if you count Dr. Chan who’s only at the clinic three days a week - three if you also count Dr. Rivers, the large animal vet. Stiles’ mom used to be the primary veterinarian for Beacon Hills Animal Clinic and Aunt Pearl was not only her aunt but her mentor.

It’s all perfectly logical... if you don’t know about werewolves or magic or anything else.

Which Stiles does.

But he doesn’t call Derek. Instead, Stiles watches them pull out of the lot and drive away, and then he goes to have angry pancakes by himself.

He goes to the second-best diner, the one tucked in between the sketchy lingerie shop and the sushi place that keeps having suspicious fires that are probably insurance fraud, because the good
diner is for special occasions and he wants to sulk without interference.

It’s just his luck that Danny and Lydia are already there. Stiles considers leaving, but Danny spots him and waves him over.

“Isn’t this place a little downscale for you guys?” he asks, sitting down next to Lydia. “I thought you didn’t eat in places with styrofoam takeout cups, Lyds.”

“I’m not eating,” she tells him, primly. “I’m calculating.” She waves a hand at the spreadsheets on the table in front of her, which probably depict her total dominance of the upper first percentile of their graduating class. Stiles already knows he did pretty well, if not as well as Lydia, so instead of engaging her he waves down the server and orders pancakes and a coffee.

He manages to eat his pancakes in relative peace as they talk around him, about schools back East and scholarships and who destroyed who in the valedictorian race (summary: Lydia destroyed everybody; it wasn’t even a contest), until Lydia gathers up her papers and laptop and excuses herself, and Stiles actually doesn’t even notice she’s gone on a conscious level until Danny kicks him, gently, in the ankle.

“Huh?” Stiles says, jerking upright, and sees Danny frowning at him across the table.

“What’s the matter with you?” Danny asks. “The coffee’s not that good.”

Stiles blinks at him, confused, before realizing he’s been staring down into his (objectively pretty terrible) coffee for the last ten minutes without taking in much of what’s happening around him.

“Nothing,” he lies, not holding out much hope that it’s a good lie. Even before he could pick up on people’s physiological tells via werewolf-superpowers Danny had a pretty good bullshit detector, though it’s always a 50/50 toss up on whether he’ll choose to care enough to actually engage you on whatever you’re bullshitting him about.

“You let at least a half-dozen shots from Lydia about your GPA go completely unchallenged,” Danny says, shrewdly. “And you kind of look like the walking dead. Did you and Derek have a fight or something?”

Today, it seems, is not Stiles’ lucky day.

He lets his head drop onto the chipped plastic table top and groans. “Can we not?” he mumbles into his lap. Danny remains the only person on Earth explicitly aware of Stiles’ incredibly unwise Thing for Derek, and only because of one magically-judgement-impaired, ill-advised makeout session both of them agreed to pretend never happened. Danny was actually pretty cool about the whole thing, all things considered; he definitely could exploit the information a lot more than he does, but mostly it amounts to the occasional gentle dig, and only when they’re alone. Danny really is the nicest person in the entire pack, no lie.

Danny snorts - a verbal shrug. “Not if you don’t want.”

Stiles lifts up his head to see Danny sipping his coffee, eyes cast up at the yellowing stain on the wallpaper next to the table. A pretty convincing display of nonchalance if you don’t know Danny at all.

“I don’t know what to do,” Stiles admits.

“About what?” Danny asks.

“That’s the thing,” Stiles says, throwing up his hands helplessly. “I don’t know. But I don’t know
if I *want* to know, you know?"

Danny gives him a look that says that Stiles is making no sense, but also that this is about as much sense as he’s come to expect from Stiles, so he’s going to soldier on anyway. “There’s an answer, but you’re not sure if you’ll like it,” he translates.

“Pretty much,” Stiles agrees, slumping back in his seat.

“So what happens if you don’t find out?” asks Danny.

“Maybe nothing?” Stiles shrugs, miserably.

“But maybe something really bad.”

“Maybe,” Stiles admits.

Danny says nothing for a while, and the server comes and refills their coffees. Danny stirs in cream and sugar and then taps his spoon on the mug, thoughtfully.

“Well,” he says eventually, “the last time somebody kept a big secret from me, it turned out to be werewolves and I almost died.”

Stiles’ hands clench on the edge of the table hard enough that it bites into his palms. He forces himself to relax, because he’s not a werewolf and he’s more likely to break himself than the table.

“Thanks man,” he says, dully, picking up his fork again. “That helps a lot.”

Danny nods, and drinks his coffee, and lets Stiles finish his pancakes in silence.

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After everything, graduation is kind of anti-climactic.

The gowns are ugly (as expected) and they itch (an unpleasant surprise, because it’s not like Stiles has enough trouble sitting still already), but the ceremony is mercifully brief, with only a couple of pointless speeches by public figures before they start calling people up for awards and scholarships. Getting up twice for academic awards means Stiles can nudge Scott on his way up to and back from the stage, so he’s never nodding off for more than a minute or so. Lydia’s valedictory speech is three paragraphs long and secretly about big fish in small ponds, though he suspects most of their class lets the point sail right over their heads. When they finally line up for their diplomas, Stiles is mostly thinking about how living in a small town is a blessing when you’re near the end of the alphabet.

Then people are cheering and throwing their caps in the air and seemingly not too long after that, they’re spilling out onto the back field and Scott is tackling him to the grass, laughing.

“Man, can you believe we actually graduated?” he asks, helping Stiles to his feet. “Half the time I didn’t think we’d survive that long.”

“Yeah, I admit it, I was half expecting Principal Graveworthy to turn into a giant snake at the end. I’m almost disappointed.” Stiles finishes brushing grass from his hair and looks up as Dad and Aunt Pearl wave to them from the edge of the field.

“Dude,” Scott says in an undertone, “don’t even joke,” and Stiles laughs.

Then Allison tackles Scott from behind and it takes them another minute or two to make their way
over to their parents.

Mr. Argent is waiting with an enormous bouquet of multi-coloured daisies, and he hugs Allison before handing them over and shaking Scott’s hand. “Congratulations, kids,” he says, and glances over at Stiles’ dad, who sweeps Stiles up in a hug the moment he’s close enough.

“You did it, kid,” he says, letting him go so that Aunt Pearl can crush the air out of his lungs too.

“Thanks guys,” he says weakly, when he’s finally released - and then Melissa swoops in out of nowhere and grabs Scott and Stiles together, one under each arm.

“I’m so proud of you all!” she declares, looping Allison in as soon as Scott manages to wriggle free. Allison allows it, the way she always does, smiling shyly. Mama McCall does good hugs and these she seems to have take up the duty of Mom-hugs not just for Stiles, but for Allison as well.

“You boys want to change before we go for lunch?” asks Dad, and Stiles and Scott look at each other before just pulling the gowns off over their heads and balling them up under one arm. Dad watches this with a resigned expression.

“Well, at least I know what your dorm rooms are going to look like,” he mutters, and turns to Mr. Argent. “You’re welcome to come along, if you don’t have plans, Chris,” he says, and Mr. Argent looks at Allison, who shrugs, linking an arm through Scott’s.

“Late lunch at the diner, and then I think the kids have plans of their own,” Melissa says, giving Scott and Stiles her patented I-know-what-you’re-up-to look, which they both return with practiced, innocent expressions.

The diner staff is expecting them because it’s graduation day and the sheriff’s kid is graduating, and there’s a whole set of tables pulled together in front of the big windows, complete with a spangly dollar-store CONGRATULATIONS sign hanging from the ceiling.

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“Late lunch at the diner, and then I think the kids have plans of their own,” Melissa says, giving Scott and Stiles her patented I-know-what-you’re-up-to look, which they both return with practiced, innocent expressions.

The next hour is a composite of Chris Argent’s awkward silences punctuated with attempts to participate in the conversation, Dad and Melissa telling embarrassing stories about Scott and Stiles, and Allison and Scott making stupid lovestruck faces at each other, which are unnecessary since they’re not going to be tragically separated at different colleges as everyone feared might happen (substituting “everyone” with “Stiles” since he would definitely have been the one getting the bulk of the complaining and dramatic moaning). Scott got into his first-choice school, because Scott isn’t actually stupid, and as it turns out it’s a lot easier to keep up your grades when nobody’s trying to murder you every other week. Stiles is a little proud of him, too, and not just because he comprised fifty percent of Scott’s tutoring team (the other fifty percent being Lydia, who will definitely be taking all the credit).

Stiles is mostly content to pick at his remaining fries and watch everyone else be happy, for a change.

“You did good, kid,” Dad says, leaning over into his space.

“Thanks, Dad,” Stiles says, and tries not to think about all the ways this day almost didn’t happen.

Dad nudges their shoulders together and says in an undertone, “your Mom would be proud. You know that, right?”

Stiles doesn’t look at him. He can hear it in his voice, imagine the quiet, intense look on his face. “Yeah, Dad. I know.”
When he does look up, Dad has gone back to his burger and Aunt Pearl is watching him thoughtfully over her water glass.

“We come here on special occasions,” Dad is saying, when Stiles next tunes in to the conversation. “Right, Stiles?”

“Traditions are important,” Mr. Argent says agreeably.

Dad nods. “It used to be a weekly thing, when Stiles was little.”

He and his mom had a tradition: Saturday mornings at the public library, and then lunch at the diner across the street. This diner. Stiles looks up - the library has gotten some upgrades and a new facade in the last few years, but it’s still familiar.

“Until he threw a tantrum in the parking lot, remember, Stiles?”

Stiles looks up, surprised. “Huh?”

“Okay, kid,” Dad nods his head, like he’s playing along. “It’s not like it was the first time we were asked to vacate the premises somewhere.”

Stiles stares at him - doesn’t ask what the hell Dad is talking about, because yeah, there was a phase where he got frequently... _out of hand_ was one common euphemism, but that? That time Dad’s talking about? He doesn’t remember it at all.

“But don’t worry,” Dad adds, with a wicked grin, “I’m saving the naked merry-go-round story for your wedding.”

Stiles opens his mouth to say something - he’s not sure what - but the servers arrive with another round of celebratory milkshakes and he’s distracted.

It isn’t until later, when everybody is heading for their cars, that it comes back to him - he looks across the street and sees the library, and stops, right there in the middle of the parking lot.

“I’ll see you at home later,” Dad says, one hand on the open door of the cruiser, and Stiles nods absently. Melissa levels one last I-know-everything look at him - not Scott, but _him_, that is so _unfair_ - before she leaves, and then it’s just him and Scott and Allison, who is already sitting in the driver’s seat of her car, touching up her lipgloss while Scott opens the door on the passenger side and waves at Stiles to hurry up.

“Yeah, okay, I’m coming,” Stiles tells him, with one last glance towards the library, and turns his back on the street.

His knees go out from under him all at once, but he doesn’t feel himself hit the ground.

_He’s six, maybe seven, and he’s holding his mom’s hand. They’re in the library, under the big skylight, the bright colours of the children’s area vivid and oversaturated in his mind’s eye. He’s tugging, impatiently, at his mother, because they’ve been here all morning and he’s hungry, already has his books checked out and tucked away in his red backpack. The strap pulls at his shoulder, weighing him down, but all he can think about is chocolate milkshakes at the diner, crinkle-cut french fries with ketchup and that Scott’s coming over later so they can all go swimming._

_Mom is talking to her friend Ms. Talia, whose dark hair is loose and shiny around her shoulders, who looks down at Stiles with a soft smile, who touches Stiles’ shoulder and stills his fidgeting in a_
way that surprises him, makes him stare.

“I’ll see you later,” says Mom, and lets Stiles pull her to the door, out into the bright sunshine of the parking lot, laughing and smiling, and then the man is there.

He’s tall, skinny and sick-looking, and Stiles almost says so out loud. Mom looks puzzled, like she recognizes the man but can’t place him, and it’s as she’s staring at him that the man, not looking at anything but the book open in his hands, jostles into them, knocking her off her feet.

Stiles is frozen in place as she stumbles, as the man startles, drops his book, and starts apologizing, reaches out a hand to pull Mom to her feet.

There’s a flash of something not-real, not-seen, not-there. It happens sometimes, but he’s learned to ignore it, because it’s not real.

It’s not real, so there is no reason for why he’s suddenly driven into motion, why his chest seizes with terror and fury, why he flies at the man with fists milling, the cry torn from his throat like a scream but not quite.

The man is surprised, long enough that Stiles kicks him, hard, in the shin, not long enough that Stiles doesn’t see the way his face is pale, furious, for just the barest moment before Mom grabs the back of his shirt, pulls him away, holds him back, feet not quite touching the ground, saying “baby, no, baby, stop!” but Stiles is struggling, crying, saying words that run together and don’t make any sense, because he can’t breathe and he’s scared and--

--by the time he’s calmed down, by the time Ms. Talia has come running out into the parking lot and Mom is holding him to her, stroking his hair and wiping the tears from his hot cheeks and murmuring into his ear, the man is gone, and Stiles can’t remember why it was so important; why the man frightened him so badly.

It’s never been like this before.

When he opens his eyes again on the present, the memory is still there, painfully clear, and Stiles can’t decide what’s most disturbing: that he had forgotten all about that day until now, or that he’s pretty sure Ms. Talia the children’s librarian was Talia Hale, Derek’s mom.

Or maybe it’s the worried look in Scott’s eyes, the way his hands are moving over Stiles shoulders, his face, his head, like he wants to help but doesn’t know how.

“I’m okay,” Stiles tells him eventually. “I just got dizzy for a second.” He’s on his hands and knees, and when he straightens up a little, he feels bruised, but he’s not bleeding anywhere. Scott must have kept him from falling too hard, and Stiles just hopes nobody saw how fast he must have been moving to get across the lot that quickly.

“You’re not okay,” Scott says, hands a little too tight on Stiles’ arms. “You haven’t been--”

“I’m okay,” he says again, firmly, cutting him off, and Scott must know he’s lying, but he just frowns and pulls Stiles to his feet and doesn’t ask the question he so obviously wants to.

Allison looks at him with concern as he drops into the back seat, but he gives her a hard look and she starts the car without asking any questions. Allison’s good like that.

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Stiles hasn’t been to a party - not one that was called a party rather than just being an impromptu gathering with the pack sprawled around on couches with takeout - since the time in sophomore
year where everyone was hallucinating their worst nightmares. He’s forgotten about that until he steps out into the back yard in Scott and Allison’s wake, and remembers all in a rush: Dad saying he’s ruining my life. He stumbles, hand reaching for a nearby pillar, and misses, and this time it’s Allison who catches him under the elbow.

“Stiles, are you—” her voice is low and urgent and her eyes wide. Scott has stopped and is looking back at them, brow furrowed in confusion. But Stiles pushes her off, shakes his head.

“I’m fine,” he repeats, focusing on his pulse, willing it slow. “It’s fine,” he says, again, until she lets him go, lets him stand on his own.

It’s a smaller party than the one he remembers - in fact, mostly pack, with a dozen or so others, most of whom Stiles recognizes: lacrosse players, swim team, Lydia’s admirers. Not the come one, come all for a chance to bask in the magnificence of Lydia Martin free-for-all that used to make Lydia’s birthday parties the social event of the year. It’s surprising except in all the ways that it’s not: Lydia has other ways to outshine her peers, these days, and most of them come down to her having stopped pretending anyone at Beacon Hills High was good enough to be called her peer.

Stiles, spotting her near the pool with a drink in her hand and Jackson on her arm, thinks it suits her.

Scott and Allison slip away to dance and Stiles briefly considers getting drunk - a drink does, after all, keep appearing in his hand - but after the second one he decides against it. Being out of his head stopped being fun around the second time he got magically roofied, and anyway these days he has trouble letting himself relax enough to enjoy it. Besides, he thinks his headache might be coming back and being dehydrated is probably not the best method of prevention.

With that in mind, he grabs a bottle of water and lets himself drift to the edge of the party, his back to a wall, and watches. He’s good at watching. It calms him down, knowing where everyone is; settles his nerves and for a while, his head even feels better. He wonders how long until he can get away with slipping out, going home. He’s starting to get that stormcloud feeling again and doesn’t want to inflict it on anyone else.

“Are you okay?” says Derek, suddenly there, and Stiles doesn’t jump and drop his drink because he chokes on a sip of water and starts coughing instead. It’s rare that Derek can sneak up on him entirely undetected these days, but Stiles supposes he was distracted.

“One day the bell thing will stop being a joke,” he wheezes, poking a finger into Derek’s chest, but Derek just gives him a tiny, almost triumphant smile.

“What do you mean, anyway? I’m at a party. High school is officially over. I’m great.”

Derek tilts his head. Stop bullshitting me, Stiles, say his eyebrows. “Scott told me what happened at the diner.”

“Traitor,” Stiles mutters under his breath, and waves a hand dismissively. “I’m fine. All parts present and accounted for, see?” he gestures to himself, and Derek, seemingly surprised into it, looks - and then looks away, just as fast.

“He said you collapsed in the parking lot.”

“I did not - for fuck’s sake. I did not collapse.” Stiles waves the bottle for emphasis and just barely misses sloshing water all over the front of Derek’s shirt. Derek doesn’t jump back out of range; just catches the hand holding the bottle, takes the cap from Stiles’ other hand, and screws it back
on. Surprised, Stiles just stands there, staring, as he does it. “I--” his voice wobbles, so he clears his throat. “I just,” he continues, “I got a little dizzy for a minute. That’s all. No big deal.”

Derek eyes him skeptically. “You’ve been getting dizzy a lot lately,” he says quietly, voice pitched just for Stiles. “Is it something - is it something I should know about?” His voice is a yellow-alert version of the I’m-the-Alpha, listen-to-me one, and Stiles immediately flashes back to the memory - this time it doesn’t take his knees out from under him, but for a second the image of Derek’s mother, smiling in the sunshine, is crisp and clear and present. He blinks it away and shakes his head, praying his heart doesn’t betray his momentary panic, because he doesn’t know what this is. Doesn’t want to talk about it with Derek, of all people, until he has a handle on it. Because as disturbing as it’s been, the past few weeks, the way he’s been remembering things he can’t imagine having forgotten, it still doesn’t feel like anything sinister. And Stiles has a well-developed sense of imminent doom. He knows.

“It’s nothing. Can’t we just - can’t I just enjoy the party?” He says it a little more sharply than he intended, and Derek’s face does that thing where it blanks out entirely for a second, eyes darting away and back, composed. Like nothing touches him. It’s harder to watch now that Stiles knows it for the lie it is.

“You didn’t look like you were enjoying the party much from where I was standing,” is what Derek says, and holds Stiles’ gaze, waiting, Stiles realizes, for the answering dig. Stiles considers responding in kind, but finds he doesn’t have it in him. Derek’s right, after all. Stiles was standing here wondering when he could most easily duck out without ruining other people’s fun.

“I’m sorry about - about yesterday,” Derek says after a while, and Stiles looks at him in surprise. “I was a dick,” Derek clarifies, and then he sighs, eyes cast upwards as though this is really taking it out of him. “I know what it’s like to... to want to protect what you have.”

Stiles looks away. “Thanks,” he says, and then he’s afraid to look back, even though he’s sure he’ll just find the Derek-mask instead of Derek’s actual face. He gives it a minute before he finally caves, facing Derek squarely. “Look, you are coming to the party, right?”

Derek raises his eyebrows and tilts his head towards the crowd, the lights; the drink table up against the fence.

“Very funny,” Stiles says, rolling his eyes. “I mean - on Thursday. My party. If you can call it that, I mean, given that it’s kind of being imposed on me.”

Derek makes a face that involves wrinkling his nose and Stiles tries not to find it cute. Oh, how the mighty have fallen. “I don’t know...”

“Aunt Pearl invited you, if you recall,” Stiles says, poking him again. “Now if you don’t come it’ll be weird - she’ll just spend an hour asking about you. Come on.” He laces his fingers together, looks at Derek pleadingly. “I’ve decided to treat it as hostile territory, which is something you’re really good at, so I wouldn’t mind you having my back.”

Derek eyes him for a long moment, and then sighs, defeated. “Fine,” he says, his shoulders slumping a little.

Lydia and Erica come to collect him then, and gather up Derek in the bargain, and drag them over to where Danny is carefully pouring something golden-brown and rich and sweet-smelling into a series of shot glasses - filling them right to the top, so that the liquid wobbles in a shallow dome against the rim of the glass that Stiles is handed. Only the pack seems to have been graced with shots, gathered in a loose circle around Danny and his tall brown bottle. The rest of the guests are
holding red plastic cups.

Once everybody has a drink in hand, Lydia raises hers into the air. “To the class of 2014!” she declares, and the crowd cheers, drinking, before she adds, in a lower voice covered by the noise, “to surviving high school.” She clinks her glass to Derek’s and grins at him before taking the shot all in one go.

Stiles allows himself to enjoy the confused/stricken/touched expression on Derek’s face for all of three seconds before he can’t take it anymore and tosses back his own shot. The liquor tastes like gingerbread, warm and Jesus, strong, Stiles thinks, as it burns its way down his throat to settle, not unpleasantly, into a diffuse warmth that spreads from his belly outwards. He licks his lips appreciatively, letting himself smile as Scott butts up against his side, as Erica brackets him on the other side, elbowing him in the ribs. Maybe this isn’t so bad after all, he thinks. Now if only his head would stop hurting.

Instead of thinking about it too hard, he lets Lydia pour him another shot.
Chapter 4

At the beginning, nobody said Mom might die. Nobody said she’d be fine, either. Everybody was careful not to state any absolutes, as though it was bad luck.

It might have been easier to say she would probably die. Better to be pleasantly surprised than disappointed, right? Because Stiles, at least until the age of eleven and a half, was an eternal optimist, and was bound to assume things would turn out okay. That she’d get better.

He remembers yelling at Dad, late in the game when Mom ended up in the hospital because she collapsed in the garden; just a cold, but it was enough, with the chemo. “Why’d you let me think she’d get better?” he’d yelled, kicking the wall and denting the gyprock. “Why didn’t you just tell me she was gonna die?” He’d felt so cheated, like he’d been promised a trip to Disneyland and had it yanked away last-minute.

Dad just stood watching him, hands opening and closing helplessly until he kicked a hole right through the wall. Then he reached out and swept Stiles up, holding him close until he stopped kicking and punching at the air and sagged, sobbing, in his arms. Stiles was two weeks short of eleven, and too big to be held, all gangly arms and legs. Dad just sat down against the wall, held onto him anyway until he’d cried himself out, and then for a while afterwards; Stiles never knew how long. But it was early afternoon when Stiles started yelling, and dark by the time Dad got them both up, got Stiles a cool cloth for his face, ordered them a pizza.

The next day, Mom was feeling a lot better, more animated than she’d been in a while, and Stiles started to let himself hope again. No matter how many times he came face to face with the enormity of that mistake, he just couldn’t help it.

That would take another six months.

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Stiles takes his due as a newly-graduated adult the next day and sleeps until twelve-thirty and doesn’t remember his dreams except for a brief flash of being held, being small, and Mom, smiling at him from where she sat on a wooden floor, hands busy. It’s a familiar image, frustrating in its lack of context.

When he finally makes his way downstairs, Dad’s already gone to work and Aunt Pearl is slouched in a chair at the kitchen table, reading on a laptop that she closes when he walks in.

“Good morning,” she says, as he shuffles past her, zombie-like, towards the coffee pot.

He makes a vague noise in response and comes back to the table with coffee, and is just turning back to the cupboard for the cereal when she waves in the direction of the oven. “Your dad made waffles,” she says, and Stiles turns to see two clean plates and cutlery already stacked on the stove and a plate of waffles basking in the glow of the oven light, the temperature on low.

“Cool,” Stiles mumbles, bringing it all back to the table and sitting down.

“I guess he thought you might have been up late,” says Aunt Pearl breezily, pouring syrup over her waffle and then carefully spreading it so that all the little square indentations are equally filled. It’s a Mom thing; Stiles does the same without thinking about it.

“I can’t imagine what you mean,” says Stiles, “and neither can Dad, since obviously I am not of legal drinking age.” He grins and shoves a piece of waffle into his mouth, chewing happily. Stiles
“Naturally,” Aunt Pearl agrees, cutting up her waffle and then flinching when Stiles’ fork screeches against his plate. Stiles can sympathize; despite diligent rehydration he feels kind of crappy today, though there’s no telling if that’s drinking-related or just more of the same exciting migrainey excitement that has coloured the last three or so weeks of his life. Aunt Pearl, curiously enough, looks similarly, miserable, her skin sallow and the circles under her eyes dark.

If he didn’t know any better he’d think she was hungover.

“Any plans today?” she asks him, and he shakes his head.

“Sleeping the sleep of the just? Finally defeating the rainbow bridge level on Mario Kart? I don’t know. Everybody else is working.” Or in Lydia’s case, going through another dozen admission offers from schools she has no intention of attending. “It’s cool though.” He covers a yawn with one hand.

“Hmm,” Aunt Pearl says vaguely, eyeing him briefly before taking another sip of coffee. And - okay, “vague” sometimes means “suspicious,” but Stiles dismisses it because apology or not, Derek is clearly being ridiculous.

He takes care of the dishes and goes back up to his room with a half-formed idea of catching up on comics or firing up the Wii, but the second he sits down on his bed he’s exhausted again and there’s distant pain pulsing behind his right eye. He ends up sleeping through the afternoon, not waking until Dad comes home for dinner and knocks on his door.

“You awake?” Dad asks, through the door, and Stiles sits up, rubbing at his face.

“I’m up,” he calls back, and Dad cracks open the door, shaking his head fondly when he sees Stiles is still in his pyjamas.

“Dinner will be ready in a few,” he says, and stands there a moment longer, just looking at Stiles, and maybe it’s his imagination but for a second Stiles thinks he sees confusion in his dad’s face; like for a split-second he was seeing something other than the room, than Stiles.

“Dad?” he asks, hesitant.

Dad blinks, and shakes his head. “Before it gets cold,” he says before finally going, shutting the door behind him.

Stiles sits there a little longer, stretching out his arms and rotating his head on his neck like it will help with the headache - it’s on a low burn right now, which is something.

It’s not until he stands up that he notices the window is open a little - he’s sure he closed it last night. Crossing the room to slide it shut, he’s hit with the sudden image of Derek standing there, Derek’s hand on his shoulder while he dozed on the bed through the warm afternoon.

Shaking his head, Stiles turns away from the window, leaving it open after all as he goes down to dinner. It’s still a warm evening, and he probably only dreamed it anyway.

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To say that Stiles isn’t looking forward to his birthday party is a dramatic understatement. The idea of it has spent days gathering weight and formless anxiety at the back of his mind, and he expects it all to spill over right on cue; to explode out of him or worse, to draw everything into itself like the event horizon of a black hole. It’s happened before. He hates being the one feeling miserable
for no rational reason, lurking like a cartoon storm cloud at the edge of everything in a way that pisses everyone off and makes them feel uncomfortable and on edge, and usually he overcompensates to such a degree that it cancels out, but sometimes he just can’t help it.

Somehow, though, it just... doesn’t happen. He wakes up on his birthday and rolls over in bed, staring vaguely at the window wondering why he feels happy, why this is so exceptional, until he realizes he was expecting to feel shitty.

When he remembers what day it is, he lies there some more, pulling the covers up to his chin and appreciating the cool early morning air creeping in under the partially-open window.

For a while he’s content to merely be still. It happens so infrequently that when he stumbles into stillness, he lets it happen; treats it delicately like something that might break. And in the quiet, he pokes carefully around inside his head, as though expecting to be ambushed out of the dark at any second.

It doesn’t happen.

It keeps on not happening all morning, through breakfast and a trip to the store for milk and an afternoon of playing video games, Dad carrying tables and chairs up from the basement and out into the back yard, cooking smells and Aunt Pearl bustling into the house with a roll of wrapping paper propped over one shoulder like some kind of weapon. She gives Stiles a grin and disappears upstairs, and Stiles decides not to ask. He’s busy getting his spine ripped out by an alien with three barbed tongues; he’s distracted, and perfectly content to let other people do the work. It’s his birthday, after all.

And then people start to show up, and he’s distracted enough that he forgets about it.

The whole pack is here, so he hangs out with Scott for a while, argues with Lydia, fends off Erica’s increasingly outrageous suggestions for practical jokes because this party is full of cops. He makes the rounds of said cops who’ve known him since birth and need to make the requisite “look at you, all grown up!” statement.

It’s an hour into the party before he even remembers what he promised Derek, and he makes excuses to delay twice before he finally tells himself get it over with, it’s not like you’re going to find anything anyway. He can’t see Aunt Pearl anywhere, but he saw her a few minutes ago with Sylvia and he knows from experience that there is no such thing as a brief conversation with Sylvia.

He sighs, and ducks back inside.

The house is quiet, though he can hear the music from outside, the sound of all the people who are here to celebrate his birthday, and the irony that he’s sneaking off during his own party to spy on Aunt Pearl, who practically ambushed him with the party in the first place.

The guest room door is open, but the room is dim, lit only by the daylight light coming in through the window. He stops just inside the door. Aunt Pearl is tidy by nature, so there’s just her suitcase - open on top of the dresser - and some neatly-stacked papers and things on the desk. The bed is made and her slippers are lined up next to the rug. The only thing out of place is a few rolls of wrapping paper on top of the bedspread, which Aunt Pearl probably used to wrap whatever she brought from whatever distant places she most recently visited to give to Stiles for his birthday.

He feels like the worst person in the history of the world.

He almost leaves then. He can tell Derek he looked and didn’t find anything. Job well done,
Stiles. In fact, he’s about to do just that when he turns around, rubbing sweaty palms against his jeans, and he sees it.

The book is just... sitting there.

Later, he knows it can’t have been accidental. Aunt Pearl doesn’t do anything by accident - in exactly the same way Mom never did. Things would just... happen, and somehow you’d know she meant them all along.

As he stands there, he suddenly hears a noise, and looks up to see what he missed before: a sliver of light under the bathroom door.

*Shit.*

He needs to go.

He doesn’t know what makes him move, step further into the room, the sound of running water in the guest bathroom a reassuring cover. Maybe it’s years of information-gathering, when intel is the only thing that keeps his head above water, some days; keeps their heads above water and keeps him on an even footing with the superpowered members of the pack. It’s a reflex, by now, one that’s built on a foundation of always wanting to know, to understand, a habit Mom encouraged and Dad tolerates.

It’s leather, and red, and cracked where it bends. It’s thick creamy paper with blackened edges.

There’s a shape on the cover - some kind of plant, and he stares at it for a long moment before he decides it’s probably mistletoe. There’s a string of indecipherable script underneath - maybe Cyrillic?

In the next room, the water stops.

He can’t resist touching it, though - running his fingers along the edges of the mistletoe-shape, the depressions of the berries, the pointed leaves. Physically can’t keep his hands to himself, driven by sense-memory as much as curiosity, by the memory of the book Mom kept tucked in between her cloth-bound *Chronicles of Narnia* set on the top shelf in his parents’ bedroom, bound in red leather the exact same shade as the one under his hand. The book he knocked to the floor once trying to pull down *The Magician’s Nephew* and boggled at, staring at its soft leather cover, its black-edged pages like a wizard’s spellbook. The book that tingled against his fingers when he picked it up, that he stared at, transfixed, for long minutes before his mother appeared in the doorway, slipped it from his fingers, put it safely away, talking fast and breathless and distracting.

Later, when he remembered, it was gone.

This isn’t the same book. The leather is old and worn and the edges are foxed and curling. But it’s just like it.

And under his fingertips, it doesn’t tingle. It hums. It sings.

“Zim,” says Aunt Pearl’s voice, and Stiles starts, jerking his hand back like he’s been burned.

“I,” he says, “um. Sorry.”

She doesn’t look angry. And she should, probably. In Stiles’ not-inconsiderable experience with sneaking around and rummaging through other people’s personal belongings, most people are pissed when they catch you at it. Also when said belongings possess spooky, obviously-magical properties and mysterious plant-based symbols etched into their surfaces, getting caught is
generally accompanied by yelling if not straight-up physical violence.

Aunt Pearl doesn’t look mad, though. She just looks tired, and older than he’s ever seen her.

Her eyes are on the book.

“No,” she says eventually, eyes rising to meet his. “I brought that to show you.”

Stiles stares at her, finds himself groping for the desk chair with the hand not still clutched guiltily to his chest. As he thumps down into the seat, Aunt Pearl raises an eyebrow.

“Well,” he says reasonably, though his voice sounds faint and his heart is racketing in his chest, “this feels like a ‘you should sit down’ kind of conversation. Am I wrong?”

Aunt Pearl sighs, shaking her head.

“No,” she agrees, pulling the other chair up the desk and sinking into it with a lot more grace than Stiles. “You’re not wrong. But I think you knew that already.”

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He never gets a chance to work up a good panic, because she just shakes her head and sits down, squeezing his hands where they’re opening and closing nervously in his lap.

“Calm down, Zim,” she says chidingly. “You look like I’m about to come at you with an axe.”

“Well excuse me for the faux-pas,” he blurts out, “I don’t know the polite response to finding out your cool great aunt accidentally left her spell book out where anybody could find it. Where would I look that up? Emily Post, Supernatural Edition?”

“It isn’t a spell book,” she says, a little scornfully. “We’ve never called it that.”

“So what do we call it?” Stiles counters, fingers tangled together, trying to keep his hands to himself as she opens the book to the inside cover, covered in cyrillic lettering but some of the characters clearly spelling out Mom’s family name, the letters glowing-dark; an optical illusion, but visible to him, anyway. “Or,” he says, suddenly understanding her emphasis, “call... ourselves? I mean, assuming I’m--”

“You are.” It’s said with such utter, immovable surety that something inside him, some lingering uncertainty he hasn’t even realized was there anymore, unknots all at once. It’s a profound feeling he has, somehow, no words to describe, except that he can suddenly see connections he has spent years ignoring, afraid to touch. For a second he thinks he might cry again, but the moment passes.

Aunt Pearl is smiling at him, but it’s a small, solemn smile. “Alan doesn’t like the word,” she says, “but ‘witch’ is the one our family has always used.”

And that’s true. Deaton always shies away from the word, preferring the more mundane “worker” - a category, not a name - as the term most often used by the supernatural community.

It feels... right. It feels like there are a hundred questions waiting to spill out of him, but in the face of Aunt Pearl’s curious, unshakable calm, Stiles holds them in. Mostly because she already seems to know what all of them are.

“You can’t blame me for being a little suspicious,” he says, as she carefully tucks the book away, out of sight. “What with the aggressive coffee with Argents and the secret meetings with Deaton and everything.”
“I’ve known Chris Argent since he was six years old,” she tells him, primly dusting invisible lint from the front of her drapey blue shirt. “And I taught Alan everything he knows.”

“Oh, but—”

“Zim,” she says, neatly interrupting his train of thought as she bends over, tilts up his chin with calloused fingers so she can look directly into his face. “I know this is a lot to take in. But it will be all right if you only trust me. You do trust me, don’t you?”

Her grip on him is firm, her gaze expectant. He squirms a little, but nods. “Yeah,” he agrees, and she nods and lets him go.

“Come on, now, before we’re missed.”

“Does Dad know about this?” Stiles asks, as they step out into the crowded back yard.

“Does he know about the werewolves?” Aunt Pearl shoots back, and Stiles looks around frantically, but the music and the sound of people talking have thoroughly covered the W-word. When he looks back, she looks hugely amused.

He crosses his arms. Logic has always been her most devastating weapon.

Five minutes later Stiles finds Derek lurking near the gifts table and punches him on the arm. “Try and look less like a serial killer,” Stiles tells him. It’s a little unfair, because Derek has clearly made an effort; he’s wearing a dark blue dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up that looks really, really good on him. “I mean, I’m used to it, but there are like six people here who’ve arrested you.”

This is a lie. Only Dad has ever actually arrested Derek. The others were probably around, though. Sylvia from the front desk definitely remembers Derek, in a mildly disturbing wink-wink, nudge-nudge kind of way.

Derek looks almost guilty as he looks over Stiles’ shoulder at the crowd, and visibly forces his shoulders to relax. “Sorry,” he says, shrugging uncomfortably. “Happy birthday.”

“Thank you,” Stiles says, solicitously. “And hey, you showed up. That’s verging on normal social behaviour. I’m just so proud of you.” Stiles pretends to wipe a tear from the corner of his eye, and Derek sighs like Stiles is a huge trial.

“Your dad keeps staring at me,” Derek says, shifting his shoulders awkwardly. Stiles looks back over his shoulder and sees that Dad is, indeed, watching them. It’s not quite his I’ve-got-my-eye-on-you face, more of a I-know-you’re-up-to-something-but-I-don’t-know-what-yet one, but Stiles just gives him a jaunty little wave before turning back to Derek.

“Don’t sweat it. You’re my guest.” Derek gives him a brief, tiny, startled smile, looking away quickly. “And more good news: Aunt Pearl isn’t evil.”

The smile disappears. “I never said—”

“You implied it,” Stiles says, interrupting. “But it’s my birthday, so I’ll let it go.”

Derek looks conflicted, obviously trying to be nice about it until he finally breaks and raises his eyebrows in a much-subdued “well?” face.

“We talked,” Stiles says, lowering his voice a little.

“Stiles—”
“Do we have to do this now?” Stiles asks him, with a little bit of a whine. “I mean, tonight?”

“Putting off dealing with things hasn’t really worked out all that well for us in the past.”

Stiles slumps against the table and scrubs hands through his hair. “She told me some stuff... about her, and my mom... about me. She said... we’re gonna talk about it more in the morning. But the short version is basically: witches!” He makes a little “ta-da!” motion with both hands. Derek’s lips twitch, almost into a smile. Stiles drops his arms. “Runs in the family, apparently.”

Derek says nothing right away. Eventually he takes a step closer so that their shoulders are pressed together. “Are you okay?”

Stiles looks sideways at Derek, who is looking back. “I guess so? I don’t know. I’m not really there yet.” Deny, deny, deny. That’s something that has worked out pretty well for him in the past.

Except then he looks up, and Aunt Pearl is coming straight at them.

Derek stiffens up almost immediately as Aunt Pearl stops next to the gift table, puts something huge and heavy and only vaguely box-shaped down among the gift bags and other packages, then turns to face them.

“Zim,” she greets Stiles pleasantly, and then looks expectantly at Derek.

“Um,” says Stiles, because right. The pretense of civility. He’s on it. “Dr. Pearl Vaytsiushkevich, Derek Hale.”

“Yes, we’ve met,” Aunt Pearl says, smiling. She looks at Stiles, clearly entertained by their discomfort. “You were there.”

“Chill out, Sourwolf,” Stiles says, under his breath. Derek frowns at him, affronted.

“Chill out, Sourwolf,” Stiles says, under his breath. Derek frowns at him, affronted.

“It’s only fair, Zim,” Aunt Pearl tells him, looking utterly unperturbed. “I’m a stranger in your territory, Mr. Hale, so I’m not taking it personally. We each have a stake in this. I could ask you a number of questions about your assembling a pack from teenage waifs and strays, but you’ll notice I’m not.”

Stiles really, really hopes that the quick red flash of Derek’s eyes has gone unnoticed by the dozen or so cops currently milling about his back yard eating hot dogs. Stiles reaches out to grab his arm, but stops himself at the last second, hand hovering.

“Guys,” he says, mostly under his breath, so maybe Aunt Pearl doesn’t hear it, but Derek definitely does.

Aunt Pearl draws herself up, her shoulders back, and there’s something weird happening here, because, okay. Aunt Pearl is about as far as you can get from harmless little old lady, and Derek and Aunt Pearl are nearly the same height, but let’s be real: Derek is a badass Alpha werewolf and Aunt Pearl is human. That’s usually enough to establish Derek’s in-charge-ness of whatever room - or in this case, corner of the back yard - he’s in, with a speed and efficiency that totally eludes the other people involved.

But Stiles gapes at them both, because that’s not happening. Aunt Pearl seems utterly unmoved by the aggression of the Alpha werewolf standing within arm’s reach of her and Derek... isn’t backing down, but isn’t pushing it, either. Not physically, and not in that weird inner-ear
background-noise way Stiles has come to understand wolfy power dynamics.

It’s both terrifying and hilarious.

Derek is statue-still for a minute, but then he tilts his head the way he does when he’s surreptitiously scenting the air. He shoots Stiles an unreadable look. Then he straightens up, holds out his hands, palm-up, and Aunt Pearl mirrors the gesture.

This is... weird. It’s a common enough ritual - Stiles has used it himself - used in supernatural circles in situations where you want to both show respect and that you’re... well, not armed, to put it generally. The I’m-not-a-threat angle is a little less meaningful with werewolves, who don’t need to be armed to be armed, so to speak, but werewolves aren’t really big on uninvited non-violent touching from people who aren’t pack, so it’s multi-purpose, really.

“You obviously have something to say to me, young man,” Aunt Pearl says finally, arms hanging loosely at her sides in a somehow very pointed way. “So let’s get it out in the open. John is going to have enough questions as it is and the last thing he needs to see is discord.”

Stiles and Derek both stare at her, and she makes an impatient, get-on-with-it gesture with her hand.

“Fine,” Derek says.

“Oh god,” Stiles mutters.

“I want to know why you’re here.”

Aunt Pearl’s chin comes up. “This is my family,” she says, serene.

“Then why are you only back now?” And wow, Stiles hasn’t heard that particular growl in Derek’s voice for over a year. Not since he was lying in a hospital bed and Derek was sleepless and furious and guilt-stricken in the aftermath of the incident. “I’ve known witches. They don’t leave those with potential untrained. And when it comes to family they’re not that different from wolves.”

Now Stiles lets his hand land, carefully, on Derek’s shoulder. Just for a second. Derek doesn’t relax, exactly, but he leans, ever so slightly, into the pressure.

“Very true,” Aunt Pearl agrees. “But Zim, as I’m sure you’re aware, is very good at defying categorization. Boys rarely inherit, even in our family,” she says calmly to Derek, and turns back to Stiles.

“Even when you were young, when we were looking, you showed no sign of it. And after your mother... well. I thought the line would end with me. And I didn’t want to be the one who took her away from you all over again. To tell you there was a part of her you could never know.”

Behind him, Derek makes a noise that sounds like a disbelieving snort.

“If I had known differently, Mr. Hale,” Aunt Pearl says, with an edge to her voice, “I would have come back much sooner. But I didn’t know. I didn’t know about... about this.” She lays a palm on Stiles’ chest, steady and strong, and Stiles feels an answering heat, deep behind his breastbone, like she’s calling it to life. She flicks a glance over Stiles’ shoulder at Derek. “If I had known, I would never have left him alone.”

“He’s fine,” Derek says, close again, and Stiles realizes he’s moved up behind him, probably not even consciously. His tone sounds defensive; low and rumbly. In the midst of everything, Stiles
feels absurdly touched.

Aunt Pearl looks at Derek with a sad smile. “He’s a miracle,” she agrees, holding Derek’s gaze for a long moment, and finally drops her hand.

It doesn’t take much longer for Dad to break safe distance, sauntering up, casual as anything, hands in his pockets, like he hasn’t been watching them on-and-off from across the yard for the last twenty minutes like he’s on stakeout. Derek immediately tenses up again, which is ridiculous and makes Stiles want to laugh. The guy just had what felt like a life-or-death staredown with Aunt Pearl that on Stiles’ personal WTF scale ranked right up there with last October’s short-lived feud and subsequent ratification between Hale Pack and the newly-formed Vaughan Pack in the next county over. The Vaughans were a young pack, recent immigrants and unaware that the lands they were edging into were already taken. That little escapade ranked a five. The last quarter-hour felt like a seven, easy.

“I like how Derek can dress up for a party but you show up to your own eighteenth birthday wearing a shirt I know for a fact you slept in,” says Dad, throwing an arm around Stiles’ shoulders for a one-armed hug.

Stiles eyes Derek, who is, in fact looking good, if hideously uncomfortable. “I didn’t sleep in this shirt. You’re thinking of my other Iron Man shirt.”

“Okay, kid, whatever you say,” says Dad, nodding absently, eyes still on Derek.

“Haven’t seen you around in a while, Derek.” This is both awful and fascinating to watch. Dad doesn’t know about werewolves, so it can’t be deliberate, but Derek’s body language is almost the exact opposite of what it was with Aunt Pearl. He’s deferring, and Stiles wonders if he even knows he’s doing it, or why.

“Been busy, sir,” Derek says, eyes darting around as though looking for escape.

“Stop interrogating the boy, John,” Aunt Pearl says then, and Dad looks at her with narrowed eyes, as though she’s ruining his fun on purpose.

“Hm,” says Dad eventually, and turns back to Stiles. “How do you feel about cutting the cake?”

Stiles pretends to think about it. “I guess I could find time in my busy schedule.”

“That’s real generous of you, kid.”

“I’m a giver,” Stiles quips, and lets Dad lead him to the table where the cake is waiting, looking back over his shoulder to where Derek and Aunt Pearl are standing, cordial enough for now.

Maybe this isn’t the worst birthday ever, after all, he dares to think.

When he reaches the table, though, he taps his fingers against the wood, a quick one-two-three with a push of will behind it, before reaching for the knife.

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It’s nearly midnight before the last party guests leave, and close to one by the time Stiles and Dad and Aunt Pearl finish cleaning up the main mess in the back yard. Dad sends him up to bed once they’ve finished tying off the trash bags. “It’s your party, kid. I think you’ve done more than enough.” And Stiles wants to be the dutiful son and help finish cleaning up, but he’s seriously exhausted, so he goes.
He barely has the energy to kick off his jeans and crawl into bed in t-shirt and boxers, and he’s half-asleep when he hears the window sliding open, but it doesn’t phase him. He rolls over, and is utterly unsurprised to see Derek standing next to the window, still wearing the nice blue dress shirt, though it looks a little more rumpled than it was earlier in the evening.

“Don’t get up,” Derek says, his voice low, when Stiles starts to swing his legs out of bed. “I just wanted to... to apologize.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard you say that word,” Stiles tells him, unable to stop himself.

Derek glares at him, but it’s half-hearted. “For what happened with your aunt,” he clarifies, then rubs the back of his neck, looking at the floor. “I shouldn’t have been so...”

Scary? Aggressive? Like I was about to rip out her throat? But none of these very sensible objections mean much, though Stiles knows they should. Even before he knew the truth about Aunt Pearl it never really would have occurred to him that Derek was a threat to her. Not really. She’s just too... herself.

“Dude, don’t sweat it,” Stiles says, and Derek doesn’t even twitch at the dude, so obviously this is serious. “Like she said, it’s your territory and she sort of just came barging in.” Stiles shrugs. “I mean, she’s not going to apologize for the way she was totally fucking with you, but it was pretty shitty of her.”

Derek shakes his head, sits down at the end of Stiles’ bed when Stiles moves his feet out of the way. “It wasn’t that,” he says, looking embarrassed. “I shouldn’t have - I should have known what she was. Who she was. My mom - she would have kicked my ass for being so disrespectful to an elder. Especially an elder worker.”

Stiles shrugs. “It... worked out okay.” He’s not sure what to say. Derek is embarrassed, but it feels personal, different from before. Vulnerable, like--

“It’s not okay,” Derek says, shaking his head again. “I shouldn’t have overstepped like that. It’s not just bad manners, it’s...” He heaves out a sigh, mumbles something under his breath that Stiles can’t possibly hear right, because... but he looks up then, before Stiles can ask, holding Stiles’ gaze for a long moment before looking away.

“My mom always told me there was absolutely nothing wrong with being a Beta, and that I’d always be an important part of the pack, and anyway she’d be around for a long time to make sure Laura didn’t suck at it.” It’s all said in a rush, like he’s been thinking about it for a long time, practicing it, word-for-word. Derek casts a look up at the ceiling. “And then... I mean, who could I give it to?”

Stiles knows what he means. Scott’s well-meaning and smarter than most people think but still kind of a dumbass when people he cares about are threatened; Isaac’s worse than Derek for recent family trauma; Erica’s still too prone to hitting people with carburetors, Jackson is Jackson and Boyd - well, he’s a good Beta. He trusts Derek. Danny might be able to cut it - getting along with everybody you meet would probably serve a person pretty well as Alpha - but he’s got other plans for his life that probably don’t involve babysitting a bunch of sullen fellow werewolves.

“So I’m stuck with it,” Derek continues, doggedly. “All I have to go on is how my mom used to run things, and I don’t think anyone’s going to listen to me if I make four batches of gingersnaps and bring out Pictionary.”

Stiles stares at him; he knows he’s doing it and he tries to stop, but he can’t help it. This is like, the greatest number of English words he’s ever heard Derek say at once, and it’s kind of shocking.
He has a sudden, almost overpowering urge to hug Derek. It’s not an unfamiliar urge. He’s good at hugs, and they usually turn out well, and werewolves are surprisingly big on cuddling. At least, the rest of the pack is. But something stops him; makes him respect the distance Derek is currently, carefully maintaining between them.

“So sometimes you go too far trying to do things right,” Stiles translates. It’s not exactly news, though it took him years to realize that was what was behind Derek’s sometimes erratic, irrational behaviour when the pack was threatened. It is the first time Derek’s ever admitted it aloud.

“Yeah.” Derek’s voice is soft; he’s still not looking at Stiles. “And it was you, so.”

“Oh.” Stiles is suddenly disappointed, though he knows he has no right to be. He crosses his arms over his chest, defensively. “Because I’m human.” Because I’m the weak point.

Derek looks up; his eyes flash, very briefly, red, but he doesn’t look angry. “No,” he says. “That’s not why.”

Stiles doesn’t want to say his heart leaps in his chest, because that’s far too poetic for what actually happens - the way everything in him seems to jolt, the way his face heats up, even though he can’t… Derek can’t have meant it that way.

Derek is already standing, turning towards the open window, but he turns back. “I can be there tomorrow,” he offers, not looking at Stiles, but sort of past him. “If you want.”

Stiles thinks about it. He can’t pretend the offer is unappealing, because he has no idea what’s going to happen tomorrow and he has a feeling he’s not going to like everything Aunt Pearl has to tell him. But at the same time, it feels like this is… family stuff. Like it’s private. At least until he figures out where he stands with all of this. Though he has no idea how to explain that to Derek.

“No,” he says. “But thanks.” And Derek just nods, like he can see all the conflicting thoughts pushing at each other inside of Stiles’ brain and they all make perfect sense.

“Just call if you need me,” Derek says, and Stiles rolls his eyes, because that’s been a given for a long time.

Derek shakes his head at him, amused, and then he’s gone, the window sliding closed behind him.
Chapter 5

Aunt Pearl wakes him up when it’s barely light, and they speak in whispers over coffee and toast as the sky outside turns grey, then grey-blue. “I don’t exactly have a speech prepared for this, you know,” she says, rolling her eyes expressively.

Then she says: “Let’s go see your mom.”

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Beacon Hills has two cemeteries, and the older one, their destination, is a little outside of town. It’s a good half-hour drive, and quiet, and for a while it makes Stiles feel settled, almost meditative. For a while, he’s not worried, there’s no incipient dread anywhere in him. It’s just him, Betty, Aunt Pearl, and the road.

“When were you planning on telling your father?” Aunt Pearl asks, around the time they leave the street lights behind them and the road opens up. “I assume you were planning on it at some point?”

“Yeah... I’ve kind of been putting it off?” Stiles admits, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. “I was going to tell him before I went away to school. I guess I was...” he sneaks a glance at Aunt Pearl, but she’s watching the road. “...kind of waiting until I was eighteen and he couldn’t ground me anymore. Or until I was out of the house so if it went... you know, badly...” He can hear his voice get all thin and strangled and swallows hard against it, the feeling of foreboding that comes rushing in every time he thinks about telling Dad the truth and Dad... well. Not forgiving him, is what it really comes down to. Deciding he doesn’t know his own son, after all. Doing what Stiles has been terrified of for years, maybe even before his life become stranger than fiction, and cutting his losses, once and for all.

Which is... it’s crazy - objectively, Stiles knows that. Knows what everybody would say - what Scott, what Melissa would say - if he confessed that was the real reason he’s never told Dad the truth, aside from the whole putting-him-in-mortal-danger thing. But irrational fears are still fears.

It’s not like the werewolf-related crap he put Dad through was the first time Stiles made his life more complicated than it had to be. Though it was the first time Stiles had ever lied to him about anything important, which may turn out to be worse than everything else.

“What do you think is going to happen?”

“I don’t know,” he finally admits, forcing himself to relax his too-tight grip on the wheel. “That’s kind of the problem.”

After a while, Stiles doesn’t know how long, she reaches over and pats him on the knee. “It’s up to you, Zim,” she says, which means it really isn’t but she’s letting him think that it is, “but I don’t think you should wait. And if you want any help, I’m here.”

It’s tempting. One more adult to confirm that what Stiles is saying isn’t just some kind of fantasy or worse, some kind of elaborate scam. He knows Scott’s mom would do the same, if he asked. She’s offered before - for a while, at the beginning, she brought it up every other week - but Stiles has always put her off. But he’s running out of time.

“Thanks,” he says, but he doesn’t have an answer for her, not yet.

Aunt Pearl is unusually quiet as they park, eyes fixed, as they have been the whole ride, on some
point in the distance. As they get out of the jeep, shoes crunching on the deserted gravel parking lot of the cemetery, their breath fogs the air and she’s fidgeting with her sweater, with the scarf draped around her shoulders, like nothing is sitting right. Stiles wonders if it’s just how long it’s been; if maybe he’s feeling guilty and projecting. Because he is feeling guilty.

He still can’t come here without feeling at least a little hollowed-out when he leaves. It’s better than it used to be. For a couple of years after Mom died he used to refuse to come when Dad visited; these days Dad doesn’t visit as often, and when Stiles does he’s usually alone. It’s where he comes when there’s nowhere else to go.

Or - it used to be. Usually, these days, that’s Derek’s. It hasn’t come up in a while.

Stiles hasn’t met the new caretakers - the ones who took over after Mr. Lahey died and Isaac moved in with Derek. The Lis are an older, married couple, and he sees them sometimes in the grocery store or the housewares place in the mall. They go to council meetings and have half a dozen grandkids whose pictures are pinned up in the cemetery visitors’ office. They’re real people, is the point. Not lurking monsters like Isaac’s dad was.

Stiles isn’t sure if that’s why the place feels different - but it does. The grass is neatly trimmed and the decorative plants around the graves are pruned and fresh. That one mausoleum near the west gate is totally free of graffiti for a change, and there are no cigarette butts along the paths, not even in the shadow of the gigantic, creepy, lichen-encrusted trio of angels perched on the gravestone at the bend. Stiles has spent a lot of time here over the years, and he knows how it used to feel. He knows it feels different now.

“Been a while?” asks Aunt Pearl, squeezing his elbow gently. She’s got one arm tucked into his, the way she does when, he’s coming to realize, she wants to look harmless and offer support all at once. It’s different now that he knows about her. He knows what it means when he touches people for no good reason; the way he’s gotten used to offering help and healing when he doesn’t dare say the words.

“Yeah,” he admits, a minute later, as they pass beneath the big tree where the benches are arranged in a semicircle. Not far now. “Other things on my mind.”

“Other places to be, maybe?” she offers, not looking at him, but when he doesn’t answer, she nods. “That’s good, Zim. To have people. To find people. I’m glad you worked that out. It’s never been your dad’s strong suit.”

“He’s not--” Stiles starts to say, rising instinctively to Dad’s defence, but Aunt Pearl pats his elbow with her free hand.

“I know, Zim,” she says. “But he’s never been good at asking for help, especially when he needed it. That was why your mom was so good for him.”

“Mom didn’t ask,” Stiles says, half to himself, remembering. “She told.”

Aunt Pearl laughs, the sound seemingly too-loud and strange in the silence among the gravestones. “True enough,” she agrees. “But that was what worked. Works well with certain kinds of people, especially with what we do.”

Stiles considers that. “I still don’t really understand what that means,” he admits. “Mom - me - us.” He lets out a frustrated sigh. “Where we fit in all this.”

Aunt Pearl makes a considering noise. “I suppose the simplest answer is we don’t, always,” she tells him. “But that we make sure nobody takes up more room, metaphorically speaking, than is
sustainable.”

“So Mom and the Hales...” he says, voicing part of the question that’s been sitting quiet at the back of his head since yesterday, because there’s no way they didn’t know each other. That much, he might even remember.

“Your mother and Talia Hale were...” She seems to consider, for a long moment. “Friends, I suppose you’d say.”

“You suppose?” What does that even mean?

“There are people in your life who have always been there. Who will always be there, no matter what you choose to call them.” It’s said with a sort of finality; as if that’s all there is to say about it.

And then they’re there, and he’s bending down out of habit, plucking out little green weeds from among the flowers, brushing dead leaves from the stone. It’s in good condition, not suffering from his neglect; the new caretakers are doing a good job.

Stiles looks over at Aunt Pearl, and the smile freezes on his face. She’s staring down at the ground, face gone bloodless with shock. At the headstone, and the violets planted around it.

“Are you okay?” he asks, reaching for her automatically, but she holds up a hand to stop him. Wait, says her posture, and Stiles has gotten a lot more accustomed to reading body language in the past two years.

He doesn’t know what’s wrong, but something is wrong, in a way that has the hair rising up on the back of his neck, that would have Derek’s eyes flashing red. Stiles has become finely attuned to relative levels of ambient ohshit, and at the moment the needle is pushing into orange.

Aunt Pearl closes her eyes for a minute, her forehead crumpled up in concentration, and when her eyes fly open, she’s looking at Stiles. His head starts to hurt, the ache pulsing in time with his heartbeat.

“Damn,” she says softly, a moment later. “I was hoping he was wrong.”

She won’t explain herself as they return to the Jeep, and she sits in the passenger seat with her eyes closed for a really long time before opening them and telling him to drive to Deaton’s. Stiles is starting to get a little freaked out by now, but he does as he’s told, because something in her voice...

...well, he’s not really sure he wants to know.

Scott lets them in, because he’s working the early shift, and he’s smiling when he sees them but his expression quickly goes worried and puzzled when Aunt Pearl just pats him on the shoulder and pushes right past him and into Deaton’s office at the back of the clinic. Stiles follows, barely hearing Scott lock the door behind them.

And all Deaton does when he sees them in his door is nod grimly and say “so it’s come back to you, then.”

For some reason - the impulse comes out of nowhere - Stiles really wants to punch him.

Aunt Pearl doesn’t look like she would completely disagree.

“You should have told me, Alan,” she says, and Stiles thinks that he’s never heard her sound that angry.
“I tried,” Deaton says, infuriatingly calm, and Stiles doesn’t realize the fury’s not all his until Aunt Pearl glances in his direction, then drops her hand from his arm where it’s been gripping, tightly, unaware, and the anger throttles back; present, but distant, not his own.

“You hinted. You and your damned riddles—”

“I didn’t know what might happen if I told you something you didn’t already know,” Deaton says. “What might happen to you.” And oh, oh, now he’s angry, eyes flashing and it’s not just anger, either.

And Stiles is confused, he’s so confused, but he can see the moment Aunt Pearl gets it, gets whatever it is, because she goes perfectly still, letting out a long, slow breath like the air running out of a balloon, and then reaches out a hand to lean against the desk. Her head hangs down, her eyes closed. Backlit in the window next to Deaton’s desk she looks a hundred years old. It scares Stiles like nothing has since Mom first got sick and behind him, Scott moves closer, doesn’t touch, but stands near enough Stiles can feel his body heat.

Deaton comes around the other side of the desk, cups a hand under her elbow, and guides her into a chair, and to Stiles’ astonishment, she lets him. “I’m sorry,” he murmurs, in the kindest voice Stiles has ever heard him use - not a trace of irony, no amusement - and frowns when she covers his hand with her own for a moment before rolling her eyes and pushing him gently away.

“Save your apologies,” she says gruffly, and then looks up to where Stiles is standing, Scott close behind him. It’s too familiar, too close, and Stiles wonders whether the jagged howl of helplessness squirming in his chest is his own or someone else’s. There’s too much in the room to be sure.

“Some time ago, Mr. Stilinski,” Deaton says, and oh, they’re back to Mr. Stilinski, which means this is going to be bad, “rumours began to circulate that a group of real estate developers on the east coast were using mercenary workers to convince reluctant homeowners to sell - a something usually accomplished via bribery or more traditional, physical intimidation.”

Stiles looks between them - Deaton has his teaching-face on and Aunt Pearl is staring down at her clenched fists. “Okay,” he says, “magical mercenaries. That’s... not new?”

“They were shut down by the authorities - the human authorities,” Deaton clarifies. “Who of course only knew they were guilty of conspiracy, fraud, and a number of other offenses - but a few slipped the net. When one of them was recognized at a gas station just north of here, the Beacon County Sheriff’s Department was notified...”

Deaton shrugs a little, and Stiles translates: And I found out about it. If it weren’t for all the magic and seedy underworld connections, Stiles bets Deaton would be one of those guys with a police scanner in his car, just for fun.

“...and it came to light that the same man had been through Beacon County before. Even matched the description of an unidentified man wanted in connection with handful of assaults and break-ins committed between 2002 and 2008.”

Deaton tilts his head slightly towards Aunt Pearl, and she finally looks up, meeting his eyes. When she speaks, her voice is rough, tired.

“There were traces of it there even now, Zim. In her grave.”

It takes him a minute. But he’s pretty smart, so it doesn’t take much longer than that. The real struggle is managing to think, around the constant mental litany of no, no, it’s impossible, how
“You can’t give someone cancer.” Stiles is sure. He’s so sure. He Believes it, flatly and defiantly. She blows out a breath, looks... hesitant. “No,” she agrees. “But there are things you can do that... that... precipitate things.”

Stiles vaguely hears Scott’s bewildered “huh?” from behind him, but Stiles just stares at her, half-daring her to explain.

“Magic is about belief, Zim. You know that. Belief’s a powerful thing. It can’t make unreal things real, exactly, but if there’s a seed... if it’s in you already... well. Belief can be the tipping point, if it’s the kind of belief we can muster.”

Stiles feels like he can’t breathe; like the room around him is as insubstantial as fog, the floor shifting under his feet. “How could you not know?” he hears himself say, and watches her mouth go tight, like she’s clenching her jaw.

“There are a number of workings that are undetectable until they’ve run their course,” Deaton says, with an undertone of you know this. “Unless you’re looking for them.”

He thinks of the way he’s come to know Beacon Hills, the Preserve, the ebb and flow of its life-force. Then he thinks of the graveyard, with its fog of memories and echoes and the residue of grief that clings to every stone, every blade of grass.

He wonders if he ever would have noticed.

“And - and after?” He can hear his voice breaking, hear the way his breath hitches, fights it back. “Why now? Why are you only sure now?”

“Alan’s not blood,” Aunt Pearl says quietly. “He couldn’t know anything was different. Not for certain.” She looks up then, meets his eyes. “It runs in our family, Zim. We trusted the doctors.”

Behind her, Deaton looks grim. Under that is something else Stiles has never seen: he actually looks angry.

Stiles stands there for three endless, over-loud heartbeats, his chest too tight, his throat too dry, before he turns on his heel and leaves, walks out into the sunny afternoon. No one tries to call him back.

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The thing is, at the time, it had stopped feeling like a sudden thing. Mom was sick for so long that it became almost normal. Normal because otherwise he couldn’t have even moved. Mom was sick; Mom slept a lot; sometimes Mom couldn’t do anything other than lie on the couch in front of Murder, She Wrote reruns and throw up into a bucket. Stiles remembers, vividly, a time when he realized he couldn’t really remember things being any different; his memories of a Mom who was vivacious and bright-eyed and laughing and did things like take him hiking and spend whole Sundays in the garden with him seemed hazy and unreal, like dreams.

That was nearer the end, he thinks, that moment of realization. It shook him more than the months and months before it. It was the first time he’d thought “she’s going to die” with conscious deliberation, and the bitter irony was that the one thing he wanted to do (go crying to his mother) was the one thing he couldn’t do. She was sleeping, peacefully, and he didn’t want to wake her.

He remembers thinking “it would be easier if she were gone,” because she was hurting and Dad
was killing himself and Stiles was tired of being sad, of being scared, of being angry and he wanted it to stop. He hadn’t really understood, then, that it would just get worse once she was gone. The only difference was that the quiet of tension and care became the quiet of absence, and that was both better and worse.

The anger was worse.

He figures that most people never really guess at the anger. Mostly he forgets, too. It’s true what they say: it never stops hurting, but with time it becomes a part of you. Like the endorphin high you supposedly get with tattoos. Pain heaped on pain high enough that you become acclimated. Most of the time it is like that; he’s developed a tolerance.

But he thinks maybe he’s doing it wrong. Over the years it’s supposed to get easier, isn’t it? Fade into the background so you forget sometimes?

It did, for a while. Faded back into the shadows in the wake of Mom’s death, because he had other things to think about. Had to take care of Dad. Had to protect Scott. Had to get Lydia to love him. It’s a good thing school has never been a challenge, because he doesn’t really know what would have happened to his grades if he’d had to further divide his attentions to keep up his A average.

(And then there were the werewolves.)

So it’s okay, most of the time. It’s been okay. For a while there he thought he was finally getting it, that it was finally settling...

...but he just can’t seem to stop being angry.

Sometimes he loses his grip on it. It surprises people, he thinks - the people who know him as quirky, funny Stiles and think he can’t really have much darkness in him. The people who don’t know, or who forget. He keeps it to himself when he can because it doesn’t make sense. You feel anger as part of grief because there’s nothing else left, because there’s nothing you can do, no one to blame. (Which sounds absurd; like helplessness is some kind of fucking gift.) But this isn’t that, and he knows it now better than ever.

People react to loss differently. Stiles reacted by developing a state of denial so nuanced and complex that it’s practically its own artform. That’s what people see.

But the anger’s always there, just under the surface, and these days, three near-death experiences and a couple of strictly-speaking-those-were-probably-manslaughters under his belt, not to mention the clinical self-reflection necessary for even the most basic of Deaton’s exercises, it’s harder to pretend it isn’t. Easier to look at it and think “Yeah, I’m angry.” To realize he’s always been angry. That after all the doctors and the counselors were done saying “it’s okay to be angry” and meaning it only as a platitude, a stepping-stone to the place beyond, it didn’t go away like they said it would. That maybe this wasn’t the kind of anger they meant: dark and simmering and deep, driving him to practicality and ruthlessness beyond what most people he knows can manage.

Because maybe there was a reason after all.

He just didn’t know it yet.

***

He goes, without thinking, to the Hale house; is only conscious of where he is when he sits down on the picnic table mouldering in the back yard, and doesn’t notice Derek’s approach until he’s right up close.
“You heard,” Stiles says, not asking. Out of the corner of his eye, Derek is carefully still, which is as good as a verbal confirmation from anyone else. “Scott,” he says, also not a question. This time, Derek nods.

“Scott,” he agrees. Because of course, Scott told him. Probably told everybody. Because Scott knows better than to come looking for Stiles when he’s like this, knows that there are times when Stiles can’t handle Scott’s bumbling, all-or-nothing approach to comforting people. But Scott is also completely fucking incapable of just leaving things alone.

Stiles wants to be mad, to say that this is his, that there are things that he doesn’t want to share, that something that hurts this bad shouldn’t be out in the open for everyone to see... but he also knows that of all people, Derek knows that.

“I think I remember your mom,” Derek offers, and when Stiles looks up, Derek has his hands in his pockets. It’s such an ordinary thing that on Derek it’s a huge red flag. Derek is uncomfortable. And not in an I’m-going-to-rip-your-throat-out-to-make-you-stop way; in an awkward, please-don’t-make-me-talk-about-feelings way.

It should be a big glowing sign declaring RUN AWAY RUN AWAY, but when Stiles was twelve he spent most of his time desperately, unhealthily seeking out any piece of his mother left in the world. Letters. Pictures. Her clothes and books and jewelry, which he hid in the attic for months so Dad couldn’t throw them out. If he has one weakness, it’s this, and it remains.

“Yeah?”

“She used to come for breakfast on Sundays. She brought you a couple of times.”

Stiles blinks at him. “What?”

Derek shrugs. “I didn’t really remember until now. I was only... I don’t know. Four or five, maybe. You were small.” Derek shifts on the table next to Stiles, like his skin’s not sitting right. “You ran out into the yard once and got lost in the woods.”

Stiles holds himself very still - sometimes that works, when he’s trying to hold a thought in his head. He can... remember that, almost. Sort of. It’s the kind of half-formed memory you have from very early childhood, where everything is soft-edged and there’s focus only in places and words and faces bleed into each other and things are missing, and it’s harder right now because the harder he focuses on it, the blurrier it gets, the worse his head hurts. He knew he’d been to the Hale house before the fire; long before. But he’d always figured it was... trick-or-treating, or a house call, or something. His mom used to make house calls, and she took him along sometimes, before he was in school. But this sounds more like... like they were friends.

“Why didn’t I know?” It’s not really a question - at least, he doesn’t mean to ask it of Derek. But Derek rubs his hands on his jeans.

“I don’t know,” he says.

“And it had to have gone on longer than that. When I was older. Why didn’t I remember? Why didn’t you?”

“I don’t know,” Derek says again, shoulders tense.

“Well, thanks, you’ve been a lot of help,” Stiles snaps, and presses a fist to his chest; his heart’s beating too fast, and breathing is -- breathing is --
Derek’s hand is there, between his shoulder blades, before he can even form the thought that hey, he’s having a panic attack.

“Stiles, calm down,” he says, hand warm and heavy and certain. “It’s - it’s okay. Just--”

Stiles breathes, listens to Derek’s voice, focuses on the contact; the hand on his back. And then he can breathe. It never really got a chance to get started. He’s okay.

“Thanks,” he says, eventually. Derek doesn’t move his hand. Stiles wondered when they got here, to this place where Derek touches him without hesitation, where Derek seems to care about Stiles’ state of mental well-being and doesn’t try to pretend he doesn’t. He can’t help being aware of it, Stiles knows, but even Scott was never very good at paying attention to the things he should know, let alone doing anything about them. That’s never been how their relationship worked. Stiles has always been the one who paid attention.

“There were always people, coming and going,” Derek says, and Stiles glances up to see him grimacing apologetically, uncertainly. “And I never made the connection. I wouldn’t have, not until after--”

After Peter went crazy. After Scott was turned, and Stiles was dragged into all of this. After the pack. After they became whatever they are now.

And Mom died not long before the fire. A few months, half a year at most. Laura and Derek left town not long after that.

But, still. He should have remembered. They both should have remembered.

“It’s okay,” Stiles tells him, even though it’s not. Even though it feels wrong.

Derek’s hand drops away then, and he shoves his hands into his pockets. “I was never going to be Alpha,” he says, quietly. “It wasn’t my job to remember.” He looks out over the yard, towards the woods. “Maybe Laura knew.”

As always when Laura is mentioned, Stiles doesn’t know what to say. Instead of trying, he scrubs a hand over his hair; props his forehead on his fists. “I wish she’d just told me.”

It hurts, more than he thinks it should. He’s used to people keeping secrets from him; moreover, he’s got over two years of experience not only keeping secrets from, but actively lying to people who love and trust him. He’s got a lot of nerve being hurt by something Mom did, given he’s doing it to Dad right now.

He wonders if she ever would have told him. If it would have been a secret forever. It’s not like he needed magic or super-strength to become part of a werewolf pack; why should this be any different? Or was this just one more thing someone else decided he couldn’t be a part of because he wasn’t... what? Strong enough? Special enough?

“Maybe she would have,” Derek says, but he doesn’t sound sure. Derek never wanted him in the pack to begin with; wanted Stiles kept out of it. Not because of any of his more personal reasons but because Stiles wasn’t a werewolf, wasn’t anything really, anything that should connect him to this. He wasn’t qualified. He changed his mind quickly enough when it became clear that as went Scott, so went Stiles’ nation, and that Stiles was basically the only useful one out of all of them, and it hasn’t been an issue for ages; Stiles knows Derek doesn’t believe any of that anymore. Stiles is pack. He’s said so. That there are humans in packs; that differences make a pack stronger; that Stiles is part of them.

Still, every so often Stiles wonders. Not very often these days, but... sometimes. Maybe someday
that will go away.

This, though.

“And maybe not,” Stiles mutters. “Maybe it would have been a secret forever, because I didn’t have superpowers. Story of my fucking life.” Because he wasn’t enough.

Derek makes a noise that sounds like a sigh, or maybe a growl. “Stiles.”

Stiles waits for the rest, but instead Derek puts a hand on his shoulder and says “I’ve got coffee, come on,” and pulls him to his feet.

Stiles doesn’t see Derek call them, but over the next couple of hours the whole pack shows up in ones and twos, and eventually they’re all sitting in Derek’s living room, on couches and the loveseat and cushions on the floor, watching the original Star Wars trilogy in ten minute increments with pauses for commentary and snack breaks.

Stiles suspects some sort of conspiracy - they never want him to talk quite this much during movies. Also there seems to be some kind of unspoken agreement between the others to never leave him alone for a second. He’s installed, somehow without noticing, in the middle of the couch, and he is never, for even a few minutes, left with an empty seat on either side. Every time somebody gets up, another person is plopping down in the vacated space. At one point he’s got Isaac on one side, Lydia on the other, and Erica and Boyd on the floor by his feet. Even Jackson is leaning a little against his knees, though it’s cunningly disguised as leaning on Lydia’s.

So it’s definitely a conspiracy. But Stiles doesn’t mention it, because this is clearly Derek’s plan: to make Stiles feel better by smothering him with affection, and cunningly, most of it not offered by Derek himself.

Besides, it’s not as though he actually minds.

Aunt Pearl calls once, and doesn’t leave a message. Melissa calls twice - once in the morning and once in the afternoon, probably after getting off shift. Dad calls about a dozen times in a row and then the calls abruptly stop after 7pm. Stiles stares at his phone for a while before finally texting I’m fine. I’ll be home later.

He wonders if Aunt Pearl has told him anything. If that’s why he stopped calling.

Okay, kid, says Dad’s return text, which does nothing at all to quell the dread Stiles is feeling. Dad’s obviously figured out something is up, but how much is anybody’s guess.

“I want to tell my dad,” Stiles finally says, in between A New Hope and Empire while Erica and Boyd are in the kitchen making popcorn (and making out), and Lydia, Jackson and Allison have gone to pick up pizza.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Isaac freeze and look at Derek. At his left, Scott leans in. “Are you sure, man?” he asks. “I mean, I know you were going to tell him soon, but...”

Stiles doesn’t move; keeps his eyes fixed on the screen, where the menu animation is on its fourth loop. “I think I have to,” he admits. “I think... I think I have to tell him about Mom, and I can’t do that without...” he waves a hand, indicating Scott, the pack, the house, and the general what-the-fuck of their collective lives.

Scott’s quiet for a few beats, and then leans into Stiles’ side, butting his head into Stiles’ shoulder. “You know I’m there for you if you need me, right man?”
You better be, Stiles thinks, but all he says is “Yeah, bro. I know.”

On his left, Derek leans into him, so that Stiles is sandwiched between two werewolves, warm and safe.

He dozes off some time during Return of the Jedi, and wakes up to find most of the pack on their way out the door. Allison is scrolling through something on her phone with Scott out like a light on her shoulder, but Lydia, Erica, Jackson and Boyd are standing in the foyer, jackets on, speaking softly. Stiles realizes, uncomfortably, that they’re probably talking about him.

Isaac appears in front of him, taking the mostly-empty popcorn bowl out of his lap, and squints down at Stiles before nodding and heading for the kitchen, giving Scott a gentle kick in the shin as he passes. Scott begins to stir, slowly, waking up all the way when Allison nudges him upright and herds him towards the door.

Everybody says goodnight as they spill out into the darkened yard, and Stiles is left sitting in the living room again, alone except for Derek and the sound of Isaac retreating upstairs.

“I’m going to do it tomorrow,” Stiles says into the silence, and turns to see Derek in the kitchen doorway, folding a throw blanket in quick, efficient movements. He sets it down on the arm of the couch and nods.

“Okay,” he says, and he’s not doing a very good counterfeit of “unconcerned,” but Stiles lets it pass.

“That wasn’t like, a heads-up,” Stiles tells him, circling around the couch and stopping in front of Derek, who hasn’t moved. “I want... I want you to be there when I do it.”

Derek stares at him. “Are you sure? I thought... Scott.”

Stiles shakes his head. “Yeah, no. I’ve decided that’s a terrible idea.”

“Really.” Derek steps around him and begins gathering up cushions, putting them back in their proper places.

“Well, sure,” says Stiles. He feels wired. Maybe he does need to sleep more. “My dad has a gun, and this is probably going to be kind of a shock. I don’t think Scott is the ideal representative for werewolfkind.” He paces from one end of the room to the other, turns around, and heads back in the other direction.

Derek turns to frown at him, looking slightly put out. “You want me there instead of Scott, who your dad has known since you were both four, because you think he might shoot me.” It’s not a question.

Stiles sighs like Derek is being unreasonable, which he is. “No, I want you there instead of Scott because you’re the Alpha, and you know more about werewolves than Scott does, and I love you and everything but Scott’s much more likely to take it personally if Dad shoots him.”

There is a prolonged, conspicuous silence, and Stiles drifts to a stop to look and see Derek staring at him, eyes wide. It takes Stiles a second or two to go back over what he just said and then flush hotly, heart suddenly pounding. “Um,” he says, waving a hand. “You know what I mean.”

Derek swallows, nodding slowly. “Sure,” he says faintly. The tips of his ears are red.

They finish cleaning up the living room, carrying dishes into the kitchen, and Stiles hops up on the counter to dry the dishes Derek is washing and putting into the rack. They work in companionable
silence, the only sounds those of running water and clinking dishes and from upstairs, music playing loudly in Isaac’s room. It’s not until Derek’s drying his hands that he even looks at Stiles again, face serious like maybe he’s going to say something.

“You’re a good Alpha,” Stiles says suddenly, the words unexpected, but when Derek’s eyes widen and his mouth snaps shut, he realizes he meant them.

“Oh, okay,” says Derek, uncertainly, looking away to fold the damp dishtowel over the handle of the oven door. He turns back as Stiles slithers down off the counter.

“No, I mean it,” he says. “I...” he looks up at the ceiling, down at his stocking feet, and all around the kitchen before meeting Derek’s eyes again. “Look, I really need to tell you this, okay? And I need to say it all at once because I’ve been thinking about it for a while and if I don’t say it I might never say it, so I need you to just stand there and listen, okay?”

Derek’s eyebrows go down. He doesn’t look away from Stiles, but something about his posture broadcasts that for a second he was seriously considering making a break for it. He settles himself, though, and nods. “Okay,” he says, still uncertain.

“You said it wasn’t my job to worry about everybody,” Stiles says. “You said you wanted me to have a life and it wasn’t my job to worry about the pack. And I thought - I thought that was you saying it wasn’t my job because I wasn’t as much Pack as everybody else was, that was why I - and yeah, I know that wasn’t what you meant,” he hurries to explain, as Derek straightens up and opens his mouth like he’s going to protest. “I know it’s not, but that’s what made me realize that the real reason I’m worrying about us all splitting up and going to different schools next year is because I’m worried about you.”

Derek opens his mouth again, eyes Stiles like he expects to be shut down again, and when nothing happens, he asks: “About me?”

Stiles rolls his eyes. “Yes, about you, Mr. Stoic. We’re all going off and doing big things and you haven’t said anything about how... how things are going to work, with us all so far away from each other. And it took me a while to realize that was because you’ve got it in your head somehow that saying something would make you, I don’t know, a bad leader or whatever, because you thought we might think you were trying to hold us back or something.”

Derek frowns. “That’s... that’s kind of convoluted,” he says, but he’s not denying it.

“And yet still true,” Stiles points out. “Isn’t it?”

Derek doesn’t answer, so he pushes on. “The thing is, it’s going to be okay.”

Derek looks at him again, eyes wide, eyebrows furrowed. “Just like that, huh?” he says, dryly.

“No, not just like that,” Stiles says, exasperated. “I know it’s been hard for you. I know you said you were never supposed to be Alpha. I know you think you’ll never be any good at this because you’re somehow convinced that you’ll never do anything right but the thing is, you’re actually not terrible at this. I mean you’re still pretty shitty at dealing with emotional stuff in a proactive way, and from what I’ve gathered over the years that seems to be kind of an important part of the job, but you’re also a lot better at it than you used to be. I mean, look at us now. Look at today. Three years ago would you even have thought that was possible?”

Derek’s face does something complicated, and his eyes flicker down across Stiles’ body, to the places where there are still visible scars - small ones, but they’re there - from Stiles’ “accident.”

“That wasn’t me,” says Derek. “That was you.”
Stiles has a momentary urge to strangle him, but he reins it in because it would be a waste of energy anyway. “No, you dumbass, it was both of us. And my primary contribution was landing my ass in the hospital. I didn’t do anything. You’re the one who brought everybody together and solved the problem and protected us and protected my dad—” he pauses to swipe at his eyes and ignores the way Derek twitches in his direction, like he wanted to reach out, but stopped himself.

“You did that. Maybe I was like a catalyst or something, but you did it. You made things happen. You did. You’re good at this. And you’re getting better all the time, and we’re getting better, all of us. Even me.” Stiles laughs, a little self-deprecatingly. “Which, okay, is probably presumptuous as hell, but I think we’re in a place now where I can say that, right? And nobody else is going to say it, and you need to hear it, so I’m saying it. And because—” He drags in a breath, a little light-headed because even for him, this is a lot of words all together, “—because maybe I needed to say it. Maybe I’m going to miss you. Maybe—”

He doesn’t get to say any more, because Derek breaks his self-imposed safe distance and advances on Stiles in a few long strides, and the next thing Stiles knows Derek is hugging him. Or he’s hugging Derek. It’s hard to say. It’s hard to do anything but cling, for a few long moments.

It comes to an end only a little awkwardly, but they stay in close proximity, Derek with his hands on the counter on the outsides of Stiles’ hips, Stiles’ hands on his shoulders. It’s maybe stranger than the hugging, but neither of them seems inclined to resume their usual distance, just yet.

“The other day, when I brought it up the first time,” Stiles says eventually, “when I asked why you weren’t talking about it, weren’t acting worried about it. Do you remember what you said?”

“I said you’d be there,” Derek answers, without hesitating, which makes Stiles pause, and not only because Derek’s whole body goes stiff for a second, like he didn’t mean to say that aloud this time any more than he did before.

“Yeah,” Stiles says, and pushes Derek back, just a little, so he can meet his eyes. “I will be, you know.”

Derek looks at him, eyes searching his face, before nodding, slowly. “Yeah,” he says, “I know.”

And then he steps back, pushing off the counter. “Come on,” he says, “I’ll drive you home.”
It’s late when they get back, and after Derek pulls into the driveway and shuts off the engine they just sit there for a long minute, staring into the dark.

“It’ll be okay,” Derek says, quietly. Stiles closes his eyes and slumps in his seat. “Even if he’s mad - he’ll come around. He loves you.”

It’s a testament to how much things have changed that hearing Derek use that word doesn’t phase Stiles at all.

“It’s not the coming around I’m worried about. I know he will, eventually,” Stiles says. “It’s the intermediary freaking-out stage that I’m worried about.” Stiles rubs at his face. “I lied to him. I’ve been lying to him for more than two years. He’s - he _should_ be mad.” He lets his head fall back against the headrest, closes his eyes. “I would be.”

Derek makes a noise - the one that’s not quite a growl, but a rumble, full of frustration. Stiles opens his eyes, and then Derek reaches out and pulls him into what might, to an onlooker, seem like a hug. Derek’s hand around the back of Stiles’ neck, cheeks pressed close; somehow more intimate than the hug, and Stiles can feel the connection in it, the reaffirmation of something unnameable. Stiles can’t help but drop his face into the crook of Derek’s shoulder; he hasn’t done that since he was hurt, since Derek was at his bedside in the hospital, frantic and overly-present in a closed-off, resentful, _Derek_ kind of way.

The position itself is easy, familiar; the way he touches the Betas, sometimes, clearly something that used to be habit. Stiles imagines it might be something Derek’s family did, every day, the way Dad ruffles his hair and Mom used to kiss him on the forehead, coming and going, hello and goodbye. It was familiar from the first time Derek did it, like something Stiles remembered, from long ago. It’s come to signify comfort, belonging, and a lot of other things Stiles is a little afraid to name.

It doesn’t usually last this long.

When Derek draws away, he doesn’t go far. His hand squeezes, gently, and he looks at Stiles from very close. Stiles could count his eyelashes. “It’ll be okay,” he says again. “You won’t be alone.”

Stiles knows that. He’s never alone, these days. But he’s only just, after all these years, coming to really believe it.

There’s an endless span of seconds where the quiet consumes them, where Stiles thinks maybe this moment might become something else, cross this invisible line between them that’s been growing more and more tangible by the day... but in the end Derek’s eyes flick away, and he lets go.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” he says, and Stiles gets out of the car.

The house is dark and quiet. Dad’s at work, but Aunt Pearl should be here. She is; Stiles can feel her, and that’s still not really something he’s used to. Other people don’t look like this to him; they’re familiar, and present, but with few exceptions, dimmer; Aunt Pearl is a nearly-visible point of brightness just out of sight.

He finds her on the back porch. She’s holding one of Stiles’ seedling pots, a rough little coir pot
full of silty soil. Stiles planted a whole row of peppermint last week, but it’s too early for any of it to have sprouted. This is why he does a double-take when he sees that the pot in her hands is home to a young plant nearly six inches tall, green and vigorous and fragrant.

“Um,” he says, momentarily derailed. “Think you could teach me that?”

“Sure,” she says, patting the step next to her. She takes his hand, folds it carefully under the pot and covers it with her own. Stiles’ eyes drift closed reflexively, and he drops into that dark other-place where he can see/hear/feel the connecting threads between her hands, her self, and the roots of the little plant, whisper-fine and reaching.

“It’s easy, really,” she says, from far away. “Just patience and encouragement.”

She moves slowly, without hesitation, and he follows her lead until he can see how she’s doing it.

“Patience, Zim. I know it’s not your strong suit,” she teases, when he almost goes too far.

He opens his eyes and she’s looking at him sadly; her palm is dry and rough against the back of his hand.

“I wish I’d told you,” she says.

He looks away. “I guess you had your reasons,” he says, not a little bitterly.

She folds her hands in her lap. “I’m not apologizing.”

Stiles rolls his eyes. Naturally not.

“But I see, now, that I should have. Not just because we were wrong about you; you had a right to know.”

She turns more fully towards him, watching his face carefully. “You met Kate Argent,” she says slowly.

It’s reflexive - his muscles clench, his face freezes. He makes himself relax. “Yeah,” he says, looking away.

“Hm,” says Aunt Pearl, as if in agreement with everything Stiles isn’t saying. “Well. The Hales weren’t her first venture into premeditated murder. She’d done it before - smaller packs, younger ones, more vulnerable. She’d used fire before, too. It was a favourite method of hers.”

“Can’t tell you how much that surprises me,” Stiles mutters.

“I can’t say the same for a lot of Hunters, but the Argents aren’t all indiscriminate killers, Zim,” she says, just a little sternly. “Their mother Aurelia did a better job of living the code. Sharp as a knife - cold as one, too - but she was a good leader. She followed the rules. But she died when Chris and Kate were young.”

Stiles nods. “Allison told us that.”

“Allison’s a good girl,” Aunt Pearl says. “She’s a lot like her grandmother. Aurelia was the matriarch, but when she died, her husband took control. Not traditional, you understand. But there was no one else.” Aunt Pearl looks out into the dark. “I’ve wondered, more than once, what might have happened if Aurelia had lived. Whether Kate was born the way she was, or if it was her father who - “ she glances at Zim. “Aurelia and Gerard’s marriage was an arranged one. A treaty pact. He never took well to their ways.”
Stiles makes a rude noise. “That explains a lot.”

“It does,” agrees Aunt Pearl. “But the point I was driving at - that girl, she was rotten inside. Maybe always was, I don’t know. But by the time she came to this town, she knew what she was doing. Everything she did here, she’d done before. Years later we’re still tallying up her crimes, including one time she paid a worker nearly as rotten as she was to take out a town’s witch before she massacred the local pack of three in their home - not with fire, that time, though. Bullets.”

The words take a second to penetrate, and when they do, there’s a moment where his entire being is overwhelmed by the icy rage pushing up from inside him. He takes a deep breath. He takes another. Aunt Pearl is silent beside him.

“Kate,” he says, and has to stop, close his eyes. “You think Kate Argent paid someone to--” He looks at Aunt Pearl, who is just waiting, watching him. “You think that’s why Mom got sick.”

Aunt Pearl sounds as angry as he feels, but the anger is different: older, hotter, embers down deep. “I think,” she says slowly, “that Kate Argent told him to find a weak spot and push, and that’s the one he found. Some of our kind are particularly skilled at that sort of thing, when it comes to the human body. The one she sent... well, I met him, a couple of months ago.”

Stiles starts, hard, almost drops the plant. Aunt Pearl nods, as if to herself, eyes far away. “Norman Palaver. A shining example of what happens when you ignore the rules. He’d been hired to poison an aquifer; drive away people living on a piece of land some developer wanted. The police knew there was something sinister going on, but at first they couldn’t prove any kind of detectable contamination; just that people kept turning up with tumours and lung problems. It didn’t take long to sniff him out; he was no great talent, just clever.”

Carefully, hands shaking, Stiles puts down the plant on the porch step. “What happened to him?” He can’t decide if he actually wants to know or not, but he can’t help asking.

Aunt Pearl just looks at him, the line of her mouth thin and hard, her chin lifting, and... oh.

“I didn’t know, of course,” she continues, “and in time the work would have eaten away enough of him to save us the trouble, but...” She shrugs, and Stiles is slightly chilled by how easily she wears this; wonders at how much less it bothers him than it used to. Wonders what it means that he can’t even stir up the energy to wonder about the right and the wrong of it. It had to be done; that much is clear. And he can’t pretend that part of him doesn’t find it a little satisfying.

But what she says next makes the warm glow of satisfaction blow away like a cloud.

“And then I started to remember.”

Remember--

It hits him hard, makes him sway. He digs his fingernails into his palms because at least the pain is something real he can focus on. “You’re saying... he did something to us. All of us.” It makes sense, at least in context. Stiles thinks of his headaches, of the things he’s been remembering and the things Derek thought he’d simply forgotten. For a long several seconds, he waits, expecting familiar panic to rise up, tighten around his chest and steal away his breath, but it doesn’t happen.

“No,” says Aunt Pearl, “Not exactly. I think he worked something tied to himself, to make sure we wouldn’t remember. It was probably to protect himself as much as anything else.” Her chin comes up again. “He recognized me. Tried to run.”
Stiles squirms on the step. “You said he was nothing special, power-wise.”

She shakes her head. “He wasn’t. But there are some magics that anyone can work, things that are hard to fight, even if you’re as strong as we are. The reason it isn’t usually an issue is that few workers will cast something tied permanently to their own lifeforce. It’s too dangerous; too much can go wrong. Too much sacrifice. If I had to guess? She was threatening him as well as paying him. Maybe even somebody as ruined as that had something he cared about losing.”

“Tied to his... you mean it would have lasted for as long as he lived.”

She looks at him, holds his gaze as she says: “And then he stopped doing even that.”

Aunt Pearl takes his chin between rough fingers, peers at him with narrowed eyes. “I suppose you’ve been remembering things,” she says. “And headaches, I imagine.” He nods, as much as he can, and she lets out a breath, letting him go. “I’m sorry about that, Zim.”

“So they’re real,” he says, voice barely a whisper. “The memories.”

She nods, somber. “They’re real,” she agrees. “And I’m afraid it might get worse before it gets better.”

Stiles doesn’t say he doesn’t see how it could get worse. After all this time he knows better than to give the universe that kind of opening.

“I remember him,” Stiles says, suddenly back in the new memory - the library, Mom, the man, the terror behind his ribs. “I was there.”

Aunt Pearl frowns, comprehension dawning. “That story your father told,” she says, and curses, softly, to herself, mutters something that sounds like “what I shame I couldn’t kill him twice.”

Stiles swallows against the lump in his throat. He feels like he’s been tiptoeing along the edge of a breakdown since yesterday, with all this new knowledge battering against his stability, and he doesn’t know what’s down below if he slips. “I always thought... I mean I didn’t know I thought it, it wasn’t like, a thought exactly, but it always felt... wrong.”

She laces her fingers together, un-laces them; curls her fingers over her knees. “Instinct,” she says, nodding. “Our sort or the usual kind, I can’t say. Children often sense things that adults can’t; that’s not just a cliche. And for you... sometimes we can sense when things are... out of order.”

“So maybe somebody could have stopped it,” Stiles says, the desperation of his twelve-year-old self sparkling, familiar, in his arms, his legs, his chest; useless, always useless, but inescapable. “Maybe somebody could have--”

The look she gives him - resignation, a touch of pity - stops him cold.

“No, honey,” she says gently. “I don’t think there’s anything anyone could have done.”

“But you said it was... out of order! Wrong! You said--”

“I said you sensed something happening that was not meant to happen. That doesn’t mean it was unnatural.”

Stiles glares at her. “Please go on, because you’re making a whole lot of sense.” He feels the urge to leap to his feet, to pace around on the dew-damp grass, but she closes a hand around his wrist and squeezes, gently, and he feels the urge settle. He remembers Mom doing that when he was little; how sometimes it was the only thing that helped.
“Once it was done,” she says, voice low and slow again, “it was done. Maybe if we’d known early on, before it took hold... but once it had begun, it was real. That we do these things by believing in them doesn’t mean that they’re imaginary, Zim.”

“I saw it happen,” he insists. “I knew he was bad. I knew it was wrong. I just...”

“You were a child.” Aunt Pearl’s fingers tighten around his wrist again, just for a second. “Your mother was the most skilled and powerful witch our family had seen in half a century, and I’m not too bad myself, young man, so believe me when I say there is nothing you could have done that she, herself, could not.”

There are tears in his eyes. He doesn’t bother trying to stop it. “It just seems like there should have been something...”

She picks up his hand, places the peppermint plant in it, folds his fingers around the curve of the pot. “Look at it. It’s bigger than it should be, stronger maybe, but it’s not so different now from what it would have been anyway, given time. The only difference is that we showed it a quicker way, lent it the strength to get there. Is it any less real for all that? Any less true to its nature?”

The smell of the peppermint is all around them now, like the plant is pleased with itself and showing off. “So there’s nothing you could have done, even if you’d known. Is that what you’re saying?”

“You’re a smart boy,” says Aunt Pearl, and ruffles his hair, then draws him close and kisses his temple. “You’re a good boy.”

They sit like that, quiet and close, for quite some time before she kisses his head again and pulls back. She looks thoughtful, still sad.

“It’s a very human notion - that things not going as we’d like must mean they’re somehow defying the natural order. But nature doesn’t care what we want, Zim. Well - not most of us.” She gives him a wry little smirk. “It does what it wants. What order there is in the universe is both implacably logical and from our rather limited point of view, capricious and even vindictive. But that doesn’t mean it’s wrong. That’s just our emotional human objection to a reality that doesn’t take our feelings into account.”

He thinks about his dreams, his returning memories; the bright sunlight and the moment of stomach-churning dread in that handshake. He’s not sure, anymore, how much of what he remembers is real and how much he’s filling in now that he knows what it could have been.

“It might just mean it wasn’t meant to happen then. Or in that way.”

“It might.” She rubs at her forehead; she looks tired. “What we are, Zim, it comes from being sentient and self-aware in such a way that our perceptions of reality can become stronger than the agreed-upon perception shared by everyone else. From being able to understand the relationships between living things in ways that others take for granted; to see diverging paths where most people see a long straight road. Just knowing that they’re there, having the will to change what we see. To nudge what can be into what is.”

She quirks half a smile in his direction. “That last one was your grandmother’s, by the way. Her favourite teaching phrase. Liked to quote poetry. Two roads diverged in a wood. Drove your mother crazy.”

Stiles stares at the plant in his hands before carefully putting it back with the others. “Probabilities,” he ventures. “Like, the fifth dimension. In Mostly Harmless.”
Aunt Pearl grins, slaps a hand on her thigh. “Was that Alan’s example?” she asks. “It’s close enough. We have a talent for perceiving probabilities. Not... seeing them, exactly, but knowing that they’re there at all. When you get right down to it, it’s no more extraordinary than having a talent for music, or athletics, or math.”

She sobered, then.

“Sickness is part of life. So is death. Magic can’t change any of that; it’s as bound to the borders of the living world as anything else. The only difference is that the borders aren’t where most people think they are, and we can see that. We can bend the rules in ways that ordinary people can’t. Stretch things. Reinterpret things to our liking. We can bend the rules, but we can’t break them. No one can. Your mother might have lived a long life...”

“But you don’t think so.”

“No.” Her shoulders drop a little. “Palaver was smart, but not a great power. It would have been harder for him to catch at threads that were further out, harder to reach.” Aunt Pearl looks out over the yard, towards the horizon, where the first blush of dawn is glowing through the low clouds. “No, I think she would have had another year, maybe two or three. It probably still would have happened. Maybe not, but probably.”

Stiles thinks about hating the hospital; about sitting on the couch with Mom, wrapped up in blankets; about the anger that has crouched in the shadows of him for years, confusing and righteous and irrational, given the facts.

“But maybe I wouldn’t feel this way,” he says, half to himself, but she cocks her head at him.

“What way?”

He rubs his hands on his thighs, turns his hands over to stare at the palms.

“Angry.”

“Oh, Zim--”

“No.” He shakes his head. “Not second-stage-of-grief angry. Like, all the time. Every second, since she got sick. It comes and goes, but it’s... it’s always there.”

It gets louder in the middle, and quiet at the end. His hands curl into fists in his lap, and Aunt Pearl reaches out and covers them with her own hand.

“Sometimes our minds work in ways that don’t seem to make sense. Laughter where there should be fear. Anger where there should be grief. But it’s usually because our bodies know better than we do. I’d say some part of you had processed the available input and come up with the result that you should have had more time than you got.”

He laughs - a short, sharp shock of sound like it’s been punched out of him. “I was mad because the math was wrong?”

“More or less,” she agrees.

His face is wet and his eyes feel raw. He doesn’t remember crying, but it doesn’t surprise him to realize that he has been. Aunt Pearl produces a handkerchief from somewhere and he takes it.

“I don’t suppose that helps much,” she muses, and he shakes his head.
“No,” he says. “I mean, yes. Sort of.” He folds the handkerchief back into quarters, offers it back to her, but she waves it away, so he tucks it into his pocket. “It’s hard to explain.”

“I know what you mean,” she says. “For instance--” She sighs. “Your young man asked why I didn’t come back before now.”

Stiles automatically opens his mouth to protest the wording, and she just looks at him, one eyebrow raised, and he subsides into silence. She rubs at her mouth with her hand, then waves it in the air. “I could make a lot of excellent excuses. I do have a rather important job. And until recently my memory of events was... hazy. But the truth is, I was a coward. When Alan first called me - after you were hurt, Zim - I was angry with him. I asked him the same question: why he hadn’t told me before, that we were wrong about you. He calmly replied that I hadn’t seemed to want to know.”

She laughs, shaking her head. “I was furious with him. I was all set to come racing back, but a crisis came up, and then when it was over I imagined having to explain to you what I’d kept from you... and I imagined you reacting just as you did.” She chuckles dryly. “You had every right, of course. But I rather childishly wanted to delay it as long as I could. I wanted you to go on seeing me as you’d always done.”

“I guess I understand that,” he says, thinking about Dad and the conversation they’re going to have tomorrow. Or - he looks up at the sky, which is brightening steadily into dawn - today.

***

He can’t sleep for long, and he doesn’t think Aunt Pearl does, either. He gets dressed and goes downstairs, finds her at the kitchen table with her little red book, face pinched and thoughtful. She always looks mad when she reads, but she says she’s just concentrating.

She reaches out to pat his arm, absently, as he brushes past on his way to the coffee maker, but doesn’t look up until he sits down across from her.

“You said it would get worse,” he says, “before it gets better.”

She’s quiet for a while, and then she shuts the book, fingers curling over the top edge. “It doesn’t have to,” she says at last. “I was trying to... move things along.” She wiggles the fingers of her free hand vaguely in the air.

“You’ve been trying to speed up the process,” he realizes aloud. “That’s why I’ve been getting the headaches.”

She nods. “They should ease off now,” she says. “I’ve been making things up as I go along, but...” She runs a hand through her hair. It’s already standing on end. “It can take time,” she says. “Your mind is trying to fit the pieces back together. Left to its own devices--”

“How long?” he asks, wondering as he says it just how long he can stand this - having the worst parts of his childhood doled out to him, piece by piece, when he thought he already knew which parts were the worst.

Her lips thin out, and she leans back in her chair - there’s a pause before she answers. “Years.”

He’s shaking his head before he realizes it - years? He can’t - he can’t.

“The other way,” he says, leaning forward. “Can you make it work?” Stiles knows the feeling of his heart beating fast, hard, of feeling like it might bang its way right out of him, but this is different. This is light and quick and strange, making him dizzy.
She sees it, somehow - looks sad, the lines around her mouth deepening into a grimace. But eventually, she answers. “Yes,” she says, but even as he opens his mouth, she’s shaking her head. She leans forward then, cups his cheek. She smells like peppermint, and like comfrey, and like valerian. Her hand is rough and square and suddenly he’s exhausted, those two hours of tossing and turning not nearly enough like real sleep. “You need to think about this, kiddo,” she tells him seriously, and her voice is low, tired. “Because the long way is easier. And this way... it would hurt, Zim. Worse than it has.”

“But I’d remember,” he says. “All of it.”

The nod seems reluctant, but it comes. “You would.”

He slumps back in his chair, not sure if what he’s feeling is terror or excitement. Given what’s about to happen, he’s not sure he’d be able to tell the difference. “I’ll think about it,” he tells her finally.

“Good,” she says, getting up and going for the coffee pot.

When she comes back, he’s still slumped in his chair, head tipped back to stare at the ceiling. He doesn’t move when she puts a mug down in front of him; doesn’t react until she pokes him, hard, in the ribs, and he flails and almost falls out of the chair. When he rights himself, she’s sitting in front of him again.

“It’ll be all right, you know,” she says.

“That’s what Derek said,” Stiles answers without thinking, and his face warms when he jerks his head up, finds her wearing a smug smile. “Quit it,” he mumbles, ducking his head.

“He’s right,” Aunt Pearl tells him, the smile softening a little. “Your dad’s a good man, kid. He might pitch a fit, but he’ll settle eventually.”

“I’m glad all of you are so sure,” Stiles says bitterly, because he can still remember the plummeting sense of failure, the vanishing-into-the-dark feeling from sophomore year when Dad said “I don’t even know you anymore.” It’s hard to forget, especially since he couldn’t even blame Dad for saying it. On the face of things he’s been a pretty shitty son.

Aunt Pearl pats him on the hand. “Cheer up,” she orders, with the easy authority of someone who expects to be obeyed, and goes back to her book.

Derek returns just after six, and Stiles and Aunt Pearl are waiting for him on the front porch, huddled together over fresh coffee. Derek must have parked the car down the block, because he arrives on foot. He’s foregone the usual leather getup and is wearing a long-sleeved t-shirt and jeans instead, and he walks across the lawn to them with his hands in his pockets.

He stops a few paces away and stands stiffly, eyes shifting back and forth between Stiles and Aunt Pearl.

“Hey,” says Stiles, with exasperation, and Derek looks at him again, posture loosening up a little when Stiles holds out his mug for Derek to take.

“Hey,” Derek greets him back, clutching the mug like a lifeline.

Stiles sighs, loudly. “Oh, this is gonna be fun, I can tell,” he mutters, under his breath.

“It will be fine,” Aunt Pearl says, with unshakable confidence. Stiles looks at her long enough to
see the confidence mirrored on her face, and then back at Derek, who is visibly torn between reassuring Stiles and glaring at Aunt Pearl some more.

“I wish I could be as sure as you are,” Stiles tells her, stealing back the coffee from Derek long enough to take a long sip.

“You know we’re here for you, either way,” Derek says, voice low. He’s angled himself so he’s standing between Stiles and Aunt Pearl, and Stiles would laugh if he weren’t so stressed out. Instead, he rolls his eyes and takes a step away from the porch so that Derek has to follow if he wants to keep looming.

“Now. Who’s for pancakes?”

Oh, so apparently this conversation is over. Okay, then. Stiles stands there for a second, frozen in place, but follows when Derek nudges his shoulder.

“Wait,” Derek says, and they stop, halfway up the stairs.

“Yes?” asks Aunt Pearl.

Derek flicks a quick glance at Stiles, and Stiles has just enough time to think oh, crap, before Derek is asking: “What does Zim stand for?”

Aunt Pearl stares at him, looks at Stiles, and then smiles, big and evil. “Zigmantas,” she tells Derek.

“Aunt Pearl,” moans Stiles.

“Zigmantas,” Derek repeats, his voice flat, but there’s a spark of amusement in his eyes. “Really.”

Aunt Pearl levels a look on them both. “It was your great-grandfather’s name,” she says, and then reaches out and chucks Stiles under the chin. “It’s traditional. You should be proud.”

And before Stiles can complain any further, she’s gone, the back door swinging gently shut behind her, leaving them alone on the porch. There’s silence for a moment.

“So—” Derek begins, but Stiles cuts him off with a sternly pointed finger.

“Don’t even, wolf-man,” Stiles warns him, but Derek just grins.

***

Breakfast is... awkward. It starts out hilarious when Dad comes down the stairs, takes in the scene in the kitchen, and his face goes through a whole series of expressions. Stiles at the stove, making forbidden bacon (delight, then suspicion); Aunt Pearl at the table blowing gently on her piping hot cup of coffee, watching him with a secretive half-smile (irritation and even more suspicion).

When he spots Derek, who is sitting in the chair next to Aunt Pearl, hunched over like he’s actually trying to hide behind a seventy-five year old veterinarian from the regard of the Sheriff but not let it be obvious that that’s exactly what he’s doing, Dad’s face does the most interesting thing yet. It goes abruptly blank for a split-second, the colour draining away, and then his eyebrows shoot up his forehead, and then he glances at Stiles and everything else is washed away with a weird, scrunch-face brand of resignation, which settles there as he accepts the cup of coffee Aunt Pearl has just poured for him and sinks, with obvious reluctance, into a chair.

“Derek,” says Dad.
“Sheriff,” says Derek, very, very politely.

No one else says a word as Stiles finishes cooking.

When the toaster pops up, Derek actually flinches.

Food, however, is the great peacemaker. Everybody tucks in gratefully - except Aunt Pearl, who seems completely unaffected by the uncomfortable tension in the room - and by the time Dad is mopping up the last of his egg with a corner of 100% whole wheat toast, Derek looks slightly less like he expects to be shot any moment and Dad is no longer flicking unreadably curious glances between Derek and Stiles.

Finally, the food is gone, and then the silence starts to get noticeable. Stiles makes eye contact with Derek over the table.

_Well?_ says Stiles with his face.

_Well what? He’s your father, _say Derek’s eyebrows.

“So, John,” says Aunt Pearl, “the boys have something they need to tell you.”

Stiles sees Derek’s eyebrows react incredulously to “boys” and turns his head just in time to see Dad’s face cycle back to “resigned.”

“Um,” Stiles begins, but Dad holds up a hand, and Stiles falls silent.

“Before you say anything,” says Dad, “let’s keep in mind that I’d prefer not to be told about anything illegal?” He looks pained, but he’s keeping his eyes fixed, very carefully, on Stiles. “The hear no evil, see no evil routine has been working pretty well for me so far.”

“Wait you mean you _know_?” Stiles blurts out.

“Stiles, you do realize I’m a law enforcement professional?” Dad says, wryly, flicking a glance in Derek’s direction that is either commiserating or deadly, Stiles honestly can’t tell. “And that your Jeep is known to just about every municipal, state and county official in this town? And that I’m notified of it being seen parked in unusual places as a matter of departmental policy?”

“Wait...” Stiles blinks at him. “My Jeep? What--” Under the table, his knee has started to bounce, up and down, and Derek reaches over, apparently without thinking, and stops it. It can’t be visible but Dad clearly catches the movement, raising an eyebrow, and that’s when everything clicks into place.

“Dad, _no_,” he says, his face going hot. Derek catches on a second later and snatches his hand away, looking terrified.

Dad raises the other eyebrow and sits back in his chair. He’s enjoying this. He is a _terrible father._

“You’re telling me you didn’t orchestrate all this, conveniently the day after you turn eighteen, to tell me you’re dating Derek Hale?”

“No!”

Dad rolls his eyes. “Okay, I’ll play along. What’s this all about, then, and why does Derek look like he thinks I’m going to shoot him? Because if there’s another good reason for him to be showing up at your birthday party in a two-hundred-dollar dress shirt I’d love to know what it is.”

“Christ on a bike,” mutters Aunt Pearl, and Stiles looks over to see she’s got one hand over her
mouth, apparently stifling laughter.

“Not helping,” Stiles hisses at her, and she waves a hand, getting herself under control.

“I think it might be easier if you just show him,” she says, to Derek, who swallows visibly, and then looks at Stiles, eyes wide, waiting.


What happens next is mostly a lot of noise - Dad’s shout of “holy shit!” and the sound of his coffee cup hitting the tiles as he scrabbles at his hip for a gun that isn’t there, followed by Aunt Pearl saying “John!” and catching his arm in a hard grip; Stiles can see her fingers digging into the skin.

A moment later, Stiles is half out of his chair, reaching for his dad, and Derek is still sitting, clawed hands resting on the table, shifted face turned away from the Sheriff, eyes squeezed shut.

Like he’s just waiting for it to hurt, Stiles thinks, and slowly, deliberately, places his hand on Derek’s shoulder.

“It’s okay,” he says, to both Derek and his dad.

“John,” Aunt Pearl says again, sharply, and Dad lowers himself, very slowly, back into his chair.

Stiles squeezes Derek’s shoulder until he looks up at him. “That’s probably enough,” he murmurs, quiet but loud enough for Derek, who nods and shifts back, face smooth and human again. Stiles hears Dad gasp, and looks over to see him sitting back in his chair, passing a hand over his face like he’s sure he must be seeing things.

“So tell me the truth, son,” he says slowly. “Was there something funny in those pancakes?”

“Nope,” Stiles says, and he thinks he’s doing pretty well that his voice only shakes a little. “Funny story, though—”

“Zim,” Aunt Pearl says, voice low.

Stiles sits back down himself - he almost misses the chair - hand still on Derek’s arm. He can’t seem to bring himself to let go.

“Stiles, what is -- sorry.” Dad laughs a little, shakes his head. “Derek. What... what are you?”

Derek glances at Stiles, presses his lips together.

“He’s a werewolf, Dad,” Stiles says, and Dad frowns.

“It’s true, sir,” Derek says, quietly, looking up to meet the Sheriff’s eyes, and Dad, bless him, only starts a little, reins it in hard.

Dad stares at Derek a long second before looking back to Stiles. “Werewolves are real.” It’s like he’s saying it aloud just to hear how it sounds.

“Yes,” Stiles confirms. “There are a lot of things that are... a lot of things, it turns out, that most people think are...”

“You knew about this?” Dad asks, turning to look at Aunt Pearl. She’s still holding his arm, but she’s relaxed her grip somewhat. “Of course you knew,” he mutters, when she just nods her head.
“Jesus,” Dad says, covering his face with his free hand. He lowers it and looks at Aunt Pearl again. “And about Stiles?”

Stiles jerks with surprise; under his hand, Derek goes stiff. Aunt Pearl...

...doesn’t look surprised at all.

Of course not.

“Not for sure,” she says, and smiles like a sphinx. “He was a surprise.”

Finally Dad looks up, meets Stiles’ eyes again, and it’s shaky but it’s a smile, a real one. “Yeah,” he agrees. “He always was.”

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“Wait,” Stiles says later, as Derek and Aunt Pearl are cleaning up the remains of breakfast, “you mean all this time you thought me and Derek were dating and you were okay with it?”

Dad’s face does something weird that Stiles can’t quite catch, but it settles into what Dad probably intends as a neutral expression. “Did I say that?”

Stiles fidgets, but maintains eye contact stubbornly. “It was... implied?”

Dad crosses his arms and stares back. “Not that it’s relevant now, of course,” he says, the words heavy with meaning, and Stiles opens his mouth to reply, but stops abruptly when he realizes that all sound from the kitchen has stopped, and shuts it again.

“I did mention the whole werewolf-super-hearing thing, right?”

There’s a crash from the kitchen, and the sound of Aunt Pearl cackling with laughter, and Dad sighs, leaning back into the couch and nodding thoughtfully. “Huh,” he says, rubbing a hand over his stubble - he still hasn’t bothered getting dressed. “Remind me to tell Scott he owes me a plate from last week.”
Dad has to leave for work not long after that, but not before pulling Stiles into the longest hug they’ve shared since right after Stiles got out of the hospital. “Thank you,” he murmurs into Stiles’ hair, and Stiles doesn’t know if he means for trusting me or for finally telling me the truth or for still being here, but suspects it’s a combination of all three.

“You call me if you need me, you understand?” he says, when he finally pulls away.

“Yeah,” Stiles says, saying nothing else because he thinks if he says anything else he might lose it again.

Dad kisses the top of his head, shoots a look Stiles doesn’t catch over Stiles’ shoulder to where Derek and Aunt Pearl are standing, and leaves.

Then it’s time to tell Derek about the spell.

Derek takes it pretty much how Stiles expected. Calmly at first, slowly growing more agitated as the full extent of it penetrates: Mom and Ms. Talia. Palaver’s spell and what Aunt Pearl said about him. Kate Argent’s involvement. Stiles recites it like he’s reading from a script because he thinks if he stops to think about it, he’ll lose his nerve.

Finally Derek just gets up and walks out of the room, and Stiles hears the kitchen door open and close - well, he thinks, still taken aback by the unexpected interruption (he wasn’t in the middle of a sentence or anything, but still) and reeling a little by the strength of Derek’s reaction, at least he didn’t slam it.

He wants to get up, move around, pace. He wants to be angry or hurt or something by Derek just walking out, but really it was one of only a few possible reactions. Derek’s default is to put the needs of others first even when it’s bad for him, but when he thinks whatever he’s feeling might spill over into that he pulls back, keeps it to himself.

It’s really fucking annoying.

Stiles covers his face with both hands and takes a deep, shaky breath that does absolutely nothing to make him feel any better.

When Derek doesn’t come back after a few minutes, Stiles gets up and follows.

Derek is standing at the corner of the back yard, looking out over the low back fence where the grass starts to disappear under encroaching forest; the Stilinski house backs onto woods - not the Preserve, not Derek’s deep dark forest but still, a little patch of wilderness. He looks right there, like he’s been painted into a picture; has his hands in his pockets and is staring out into the dim under the trees.

Stiles approaches cautiously, deliberately making noise even though Derek would hear him anyway, and then he stands there for a while waiting for acknowledgement, and when that doesn’t happen he just gives up on waiting. “Derek,” he says, and Derek doesn’t turn around but there is a certain quality in his silence that’s changed; become attentive. Or maybe that’s just wishful thinking.

“Look, I’m getting better at knowing the difference but right now I can’t tell if this is Leave Me Alone brooding or Please Interrupt me brooding but - but I’m going to assume it’s the latter.”
“Derek, come on,” Stiles says, letting his frustration creep into his voice, because he’s discovered almost impossible reserves of patience when it comes to the art of waiting out Derek Hale but right now he needs - he needs--

“We need to decide what to do,” he says, “so could you stop being mad at me for a second and--” and that finally gets Derek to turn around, slowly. Stiles isn’t sure what he was expecting, but Derek’s face is human, though for a second there’s an echo of red in the eyes he turns on Stiles.

“I’m not mad at you,” he says, sounding surprised.

Stiles waves a hand in the general vicinity of Derek’s face. “You could have fooled me, with the dramatic exit and the laser-eyes--”

Derek does that thing where he gazes upwards as though praying for patience - he only seems to do that around Stiles, and Stiles has never been able to decide whether he should be offended or not.

“I’m not mad at you,” Derek clarifies. “I’m just... she...” He closes his eyes for a second and shakes his head, like he’s hit a wall, and Stiles understands. Fucking Kate. Kate who’s been dead for years and still somehow manages to keep fucking with their lives - in ever-expanding concentric circles, as it turns out.

“I’m--” Derek starts to say, and Stiles actually claps a hand over his mouth, suddenly furious.

“I swear to god, if you apologize, I’ll--” And whatever threat he was about to utter - he honestly doesn’t know if he actually had a plan of any kind - is derailed entirely by the look on Derek’s face. Not angry, just - confused, maybe.

“I don’t want you to apologize for what she - I mean I’d prefer it if we could forget she existed altogether, but obviously that’s impractical. But let’s just collectively veto you ever apologizing for a mass murderer ever again, okay? Please? For me?” The last few words come out thready and soft and not at all like he meant them: dry and a little sarcastic and safe. But Derek hears it, hears the meaning behind the words, pulls Stiles’ hand away from his mouth and nods, slowly. Stiles feels selfish for being grateful, but he is.

Instead, he crosses his arms over his chest and says: “We need to decide what to do.”

Derek nods, and mirrors his position: arms crossed. His considering pose. “What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know,” Stiles says, and Derek gives him the typical wolfish head-tilt that means I know you’re lying.

“Stiles,” Derek says.

“Fine,” Stiles says, throwing up his hands and turning to pace a few steps across the grass, a few steps back. “I know. I know I want to do it. I think about another who-knows-how-many years of this - of being blindsided by things I should have known all along, by pictures of her in my head that are just - I think about that, and I want to scream. I think about that and I - I don’t think I can do that. But it’s not just about me, Derek, okay?”

Derek uncrosses his arms, taking a hesitant step in Stiles’ direction. “Oh,” he says.

“Oh,” Stiles mimics. “Yes, oh. It’s not just me.” He sits down on the porch steps and scrubs his
hands through his hair. “It’s me and Aunt Pearl and you and maybe Dad and Scott and... anybody who knew her. Aunt Pearl says it could have affected anybody who had memories of her that could have led back to the working of the spell itself. That it fed back on itself like a logic loop. That it...”

He shuts his eyes, trying hard to think of a memory of Mom that isn’t her sick or dying or smiling, silent, like a photograph. “Do you know... I can’t even remember what her voice sounded like. I mean, that’s a thing people say, that you forget someone’s voice, you forget the sound of their laugh, but I can’t remember a single word. Not even her...” he shakes his head, “...her singing to me. And I know she did; she sang all the time. But I can’t remember what she sounded like. It’s like she never had a voice at all. And I think, I think that can’t be normal, can it? What if, what if there were too many little pieces, too many things that could have led me back to the truth, so the spell just took everything?”

He pulls his sleeves down over his hands and wipes his eyes; stays like that for a second, eyes closed, until he feels Derek come closer, hears him sit down on the step next to him. Stiles wipes his face again and looks up. Derek looks stricken, and sad, and really, really young. “What kind of person am I that I never realized that before?” Stiles asks, barely a whisper, but Derek surprises him by shaking his head, vehemently.

“Don’t do that,” he says. “That’s not fair.”

“Fair--” Because fair is just about the least relevant thing right now--

“People forget things,” Derek says, rolling right over him, determined. “When something is too much - too painful - to remember, people forget them. It’s easier, sometimes. You’re not always...” His mouth works silently for a few syllables, and he continues: “...equipped. For what’s real. So you forget.”

Stiles thinks about how he doesn’t know, anymore, where the bliss of forgetting because he needed to ends and interference by dark magic begins. About how his therapist used the word “equipped” a lot, too, right after Mom died and his panic attacks were really bad.

“I need to remember,” he says, instead of all the other things he could say, and Derek nods, slowly.

“I know,” he says.

“If I do - if we do this...”

“I know,” Derek says again, face set and determined.

Stiles considers him, and sighs. “That’s the face you make right before everything goes horribly wrong,” he points out, and this time, Derek grins, bright and sudden like the sun coming out. As always, it’s a shock of warmth that Stiles feels all the way down to his toes.

“I know,” Derek says.

***

In the end, they go back to Hale House.

They wait until evening, because Aunt Pearl says that Dad should be there, and Melissa, and Scott and Boyd and Isaac are working until six, and Deaton needs to close down the clinic so he can be there if anything goes wrong, which is a sentence that does not fill Stiles with overwhelming confidence.
It’s also, apparently, because Deaton and Aunt Pearl want to chance to walk around the outer perimeter of the house, nodding importantly and criticizing Stiles’ wards. Being annoyed by Aunt Pearl’s small, meaningful smiles and Deaton’s critical eyebrows at least distracts Stiles from panicking more than absolutely necessary.

By the time everyone has finally arrived, there are enough cars parked in the front of the house that it looks like they’re having a party. And there is, in fact, a table crowded with food - supermarket deli trays, a couple of packages of cookies, one of Erica’s pies and some kind of pasta casserole, among other things. If it weren’t for the way everybody is moving carefully around each other and barely speaking above a whisper, it might even feel like a party. All the people Stiles cares about in the world under one roof, all their secrets running together like watercolour paints. In fact, if he closes his eyes, looks at them from the other-place, they even look like that, a little.

When he opens his eyes again, Aunt Pearl is standing in the doorway that leads to the outside, a little leather pouch in one hand, an unlit candle in the other.

It’s time, then.

Aunt Pearl’s setup is even less flashy than Stiles’. She lights the candle, arranges herself and Stiles and Derek on the floor and advises everyone to sit down wherever they can find room. “I’ll be honest, I don’t know exactly what’s going to happen when this works,” she admits, looking around at them all. “But as a rule it’s better to make sure you don’t have far to fall.”

Isaac, the last one still standing, plops down in the remaining vacant corner of couch, next to Jackson, who gives him a dirty look until Lydia elbows Jackson sharply in the side, her eyes on the candle.

Then Aunt Pearl looks at Stiles, reaching for his hands, and he reaches back. Her hands are broad and calloused and strong, and he trusts her, but right up at the edge of this line he can see nothing clearly on the other side and he feels his heart start beating faster.

“It’s okay,” Derek murmurs, from his position on the floor just outside the imaginary circle.

Aunt Pearl smiles at him and squeezes his hands. “Close your eyes, Zim.”

When he finds himself in the other-place, she’s right in front of him, limned in brightness and holding him firmly.

*Are you ready?*

If he could laugh, he would.

*No,* he admits, and feels her reaching for him, drawing him close, the warmth of her surrounding him.

*I’m scared,* he tells her, and he can’t feel his heartbeat from here but knows it must be racing.

*So am I,* she tells him, and then - *close your eyes.*

He’s somewhere else. Beyond the other-place, deeper and silent, but he can feel her there, still holding him close. She does something--

--*it hurts*--
and then he can’t feel anything at all.

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He never knows how much of it they see. He knows that this kind of magic doesn’t work without a two-way connection, without sharing parts of yourself with each other, but he doesn’t know how that translates to a working woven of the disparate threads of this many people. He can feel them, in the thick of it; echoes of the presence of each member of his pack; of Dad, of Melissa, some feeling close enough to touch and others dimmer, fainter, more like voices heard from many rooms away in an empty house; almost inaudible.

He knows he gets pieces of them, a patchwork of past and present: a young Erica in the hospital; Scott’s muddled, angry memories of his dad battling for prominence with the present’s laser-focus on Stiles; Lydia’s fierce, brilliant confidence and Boyd’s quiet strength and a touch of Allison, fleeting, a silver minnow-flash of affection; a brief flash of Isaac’s father, angry and monstrous, that makes him tense and want to cry out. Scott’s mom, worried and certain and steely, and Jackson and Danny, mirroring one another like magnetic poles. Dad’s rose-tinged memory of meeting Mom and an image of Laura that must be Derek’s - grubby tear-tracks on her cheeks, flashing red and blue lights, the smell of smoke.

As he comes back to awareness, it all rushes through him. He almost loses his grip for a minute, but he fumbles and it holds.

And then someone is saying open your eyes, open your eyes, “open your eyes, come on, kid--”

He opens his eyes and immediately wishes he hadn’t.

Everything is pain. This is worse, worse that the worst migraine he’s ever had, worse than after the accident when everything was a haze of pain and the suffocating cotton-wool of pain meds. Worse because he can’t shut it out, shut anything out, it’s all rushing into him and he can’t hold it all--

--it stops so suddenly that he hears himself gasp, feels the hard floor underneath him and he tries to curl into a ball but can’t, because there are hands on him, arms around him, bodies. Hands holding his hands. Hands on his shoulders, the side of his neck, his forehead. Someone talking, saying his name; someone else muttering nonsense words in his ear, panicked and whispered.

He recognizes Scott’s voice first, as the pain recedes - Scott’s voice is the one in his ear, Scott’s hands on his forehead, curled around his shoulders. Scott behind him, propping him up like a very muscular armchair. Aunt Pearl is holding his hands, her grip tight enough to hurt, but it gentles as he turns his head to one side, opens his mouth to say something, clears his throat because it’s raw and rough like he’s been screaming, has he been--

He opens his eyes again.

The room is dim; the curtains drawn closed. The candle has been snuffed out. Scott is holding him, and Stiles realizes after a second that Scott is taking his pain - that that’s why it stopped so suddenly. It has to be a lot, though, because Scott is tense and rigid behind him and Stiles can see the tendons standing out on his forearms, the back of the hand spread over Stiles’ chest.

Aunt Pearl, when he meets her eyes, looks exhausted, red-eyed and sad, but she isn’t crying. She doesn’t look surprised at all.

“Okay?” she asks, and he nods, with effort, half a breath before Dad comes crashing down on his knees beside them and drags Stiles up into a hug.
It’s awkward, with Stiles half-lying on the floor and Scott still pressed up against his back, but Stiles hugs back as hard as he can because - well, because he can’t not. Dad’s voice is thick and horrible-sounding, muttering “sorry, I’m sorry, I didn’t know,” which makes Stiles wonder all over again how much Dad knew about Mom’s other life, but now isn’t the time to ask. Now is the time to ride it out.

When Melissa finally draws Dad gently away, Stiles finally sees Derek, sitting within arm’s reach, still on his knees. Boyd is crouched behind him, hands on his shoulders in a way that makes Stiles think that Boyd was doing what Scott was doing, but now he mostly seems to be keeping Derek from falling over. Derek’s eyes are fixed on Stiles like there’s nobody else in the room, and he looks gutted, face wet with tears.

“‘Sokay,” Stiles manages eventually, patting clumsily at Scott’s hand. “‘Mokay, you c’n--”

Scott lets out a sigh of relief and relaxes by increments; the pain returns, but only a little, a faint echo of what it was a moment ago.

He reaches for Derek and he’s there in an instant, holding on as hard as Dad did, pulling Stiles nearly into his lap. Nobody says a word, though someone makes a quickly-stifled sound like a sob - Stiles thinks maybe it was Allison, judging by the way Scott gets up and moves towards the couch, steps dragging a little.

When he can walk without falling down, he goes straight to the open door of Hale House, where he can still see his mark glowing, and looks down at the sill of the front door. It’s the same solid oak frame that was there when the house burned, and in the very centre of the sill, worn almost completely away by time and the passing of many feet, is a tiny carving: tiny berries and long, narrow leaves like blades.

It’s not the same as the shape pressed into the cover of the red leather book, but it’s similar enough to make it obvious it’s an invocation of it; a declaration. Vaytsiushkevich. Viedźma. Yaga. This home is protected.

“Mom did this,” he says softly, and as he says it he remembers it - sitting on the front porch of this house in Ms. Talia’s lap, hands busily shredding blades of grass onto her shoes as Mom sat across from them, cross-legged on the bare wood, bent over the doorsill with a tiny silver knife. The one memory that stayed, though he could never see it clearly enough to make out details.

Someone crouches down next to him - Derek, he knows, even before he looks. Derek’s hand comes down next to his, fingers brushing carefully around the edges of the shape in the wood. “I remember it too,” he says, almost under his breath, and Stiles nods. In the memory, Derek is there too - out in the yard, being chased by a shrieking Laura - Stiles couldn’t have been more than two, the way he remembers it, and he’s sure none of them ever shifted around him, but even then, he thinks, he knew something was different about them. The way he knew it about his mother. About himself.

Stiles thinks that if he went home and pried up the aluminum guards covering the doorsills of their own house, he’d find the same thing. Out of sight, out of mind.

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In the aftermath, Stiles might have expected them to be strange with each other, but as it turns out the last few years of nearly dying together and then not dying have forged bonds that are strong enough to withstand even this: the revelation that they all had connections with each other that they didn’t even know about. As a concept, it’s not a particularly new or frightening one.
It affected them all to varying degrees. Some of them recovered what amounted to whole lifetimes of memories - bits and pieces peppered over years or decades, in the case of Stiles, of Dad, of Derek and Aunt Pearl. Some discover they were missing crucial moments, fragments of conversation, the memory of acquaintances or encounters on the street; even just the memory of an inkling that something about Sarah Stilinski was a little different. A look in the eye of a stranger who was in town one summer and left quickly; the way Theresa at McKay’s Diner thought he was creepy. The sound of her singing softly to herself while she did the grocery shopping, her almost uncanny way with animals.

Mom was good at keeping secrets from Dad, it seems. The things he’s recovered are all tone and angle, unformed theory and potential that might have become suspicions, one day, down the road, if things had been different. Stiles wonders if Dad ever would have worked it out on his own, if Mom would ever have told him the truth, or if, like with Stiles, she would have kept it from them forever. Maybe not; obviously Dad worked out some of what was happening with Stiles, in the context of what he retained from Mom, though the spell kept him from drawing correct conclusions.

Scott remembers losing only nuance; one exchange between Stiles’ mom and Ms. Talia that Stiles remembers being present for, and a handful of memories of her humming in the kitchen while she made dinner; it turns out that the silence in Stiles’ memories was not an isolated effect. He seems almost hurt by how little he’s lost in comparison to what Derek remembers of Sarah, as though maybe it means somehow that Derek’s connection to Stiles overshadows his own. But he doesn’t say anything, just looks vaguely sad and worried as he watches Stiles and Derek together.

He doesn’t remember falling asleep, or even sitting down on the couch, but that’s where he wakes up: on the couch in Derek’s living room, covered with the afghan usually draped over the back. Somebody has removed his shoes; he can see them over by the door. The front door is open a little, the curtains drawn halfway, letting sunlight fall in sharp narrow rectangles across the couch cushions, the hardwood floor; across Derek’s face, where he’s dozing at the other end of the couch.

The house is quiet, and somehow Stiles knows that there’s no one else here.

For a while Stiles lies there, watching the sunlight crawl across the floor; watching Derek’s eyelids flutter and jump, tentatively poking at the new arrangement inside his head.

He doesn’t know how he feels. His headache is gone - well and truly gone for the first time in over a month - but in its wake is a strange kind of... tenderness, he’d say, like newly-grown skin. Things are back where they belong, and he can feel that, feel the rightness of it. He thinks he should be relieved, and there is an element of relief in it, but... but that’s not quite right, either.

“Relief” implies a temporary state; something not meant to last. Something that can end.

This... isn’t that.

It isn’t only his memories that are different. When he closes his eyes, reaches out with his power beyond the anchored almost-reality of wards and charms and everyday magic he can see more - beyond, in a way he’s only ever half-glimpsed, unable to see clearly with his mind tethered to the present and shying away from the hypothetical in a way he never realized was unnatural.

He can see everything.

At least, that’s how it feels.

It’s just how Aunt Pearl described it. He holds back, cautious even now, but he knows with
almost frightening certainty that if he wanted, he could reach out a hand and unroll the maybes and might-have-beens before him like coils of ribbon, unfurling out into nothing.

It’s tempting, but at the same time it scares him.

Instead, he dozes, wakes up twice, and the third time turns his head to see Derek looking at him, head still tipped sideways against the back of the couch, hands tucked under the end of the same blanket covering Stiles. Stiles’ feet are almost in his lap.

“Feeling better?” Derek asks, voice low.

Stiles yawns, covering his mouth with one hand. “A little,” he says. “Where is everybody?”

Derek yawns - he’s one of those people who absolutely can’t resist the reflex to yawn when somebody else does - and shrugs. “Went to get dinner; we cleaned up everything everyone brought earlier. Said they’d be back in a couple of hours.”

Stiles carefully doesn’t say anything about Dad leaving Stiles alone with Derek, or that it apparently takes ten people two hours to pick up a few pizzas, because at the moment he’s not sure he wants to think about it himself.

As if on cue, Stiles’ stomach gurgles. The corner of Derek’s mouth quirks up and he rolls his head away from Stiles, eyes on the opposite wall. Then he pushes himself to his feet, stretching both arms over his head, and Stiles is very briefly distracted watching the muscles in Derek’s arms and shoulders flex and ripple under his soft green shirt.

“I’m going to go move the laundry,” he says, and disappears down the hallway to the laundry room - the impeccably organized laundry room with its candy-apple red, energy-efficient, water-saving washer-and-dryer set.

Stiles considers following - a little light-hearted ribbing about Derek’s fastidious laundry-washing habits would probably lighten the mood - but instead he sits a minute longer, and then gets up and shoves his feet into his shoes.

When Derek finds him, he’s sitting on the picnic table again, elbows on knees, chin propped in his hands. He hears Derek approach but is too lost in his head, in examining the new arrangement from every angle, to react much.

Derek doesn’t seem to mind. He just sits down next to Stiles and waits, a warm presence all along his side.

“Do you ever wonder,” Stiles says finally, “what it would have been like if things were different?”

Belatedly he realizes this is a stupid question, because of course Derek wonders that, probably spends all his free time wondering that, because if Derek has a talent it’s using more of his energy beating himself up for things that aren’t his fault than eating or sleeping.

Stiles waves his hands as if he can wipe away the careless words. “I just mean - the way Aunt Pearl explained it to me, it’s... I can’t help it. It’s like, I don’t just wonder about it. I can... I can see all these... possibilities. Ways things might have gone. Ways they might go. It’s really distracting, but I think I’m getting a handle on it.”

Derek’s quiet for a while, and Stiles thinks he’s going to get up and storm away like he always used to do when the conversation got too feelings-related, but he just turns and looks out over the forest. “You mean like... our families. If that was different.”
Stiles swallows back his first response, and then his second, because he’s almost afraid to agree, even though that’s exactly what he means.

“I can almost see it,” Stiles says. “Like it’s something I remember.”

Derek’s voice is soft: “Tell me.”

Stiles looks at him, hesitant. “You sure?”

Derek takes a breath; releases it, and nods. “Yeah.”

Stiles closes his eyes. He’s telling the truth; if he looks at it long enough, it’s more like a memory than anything else, hard to separate from the real memories only so recently restored to him. It’s remembering a might-have-been, and it’s trippy, disorienting, but not as much as it should be.

“My mom... she never got sick. And our families are... they’re close. Everyone knows everything and it’s... it’s okay. It’s normal. My dad smiles a lot. And you - your mom’s... scary and amazing, and your dad’s... he’s funny, and careful, and he makes us take off our shoes when we come into the house.” Lucas Hale, who went by Luke, who was always smiling, always building something. “There are... dinners, and bonfires in the woods, and Christmas is this huge, noisy thing with so many people I can’t even see all their faces. The house is... so full. You and Laura and--” He pauses, unsure, but Derek talks over him.

“Graham. And Natalie. Rosie and Ewan.” Derek’s voice is unsteady, almost inaudible, and Stiles thinks that may be the first time in over eight years that anyone has said their names aloud. Graham - born human - and Natalie, the two youngest at eight and five. Peter’s kids - Rosanna whom everybody called Rosie, six years old and in the real world still hadn’t turned with the moon when she died and Ewan, who was only two. Their mother, a bitten wolf named Trudy, pale and blond and insubstantial and terrifying when she got into a temper. Grandma Rose, no longer the Alpha but still the matriarch. And there are more, ghosting around the edges so Stiles isn’t sure if they existed as real people or merely possibilities. “Everyone comes here. And I know them all. And you...” Stiles opens his eyes, sees Derek’s face, pale and soft and shocked, eyes fixed on Stiles’ face like he can’t look away. His expression is... something hard to quantify. Almost yearning.

“I’ve always known you,” Stiles says, so quietly he almost can’t hear the words himself. His throat feels tight; his vision is blurry with tears.

Derek doesn’t move, just keeps... keeps looking at him, like Stiles is something unexpected, or something he knows and never expected to see again. Even though Stiles warned him; asked if he was sure. He looks away again, can’t bear to see whatever is happening on Derek’s face, because it’s bad enough he feels like this.

“What if... I just, I keep thinking. All the ways it could have been different. If, if everybody was okay. If I’d...” Stiles’ fingers twist together on their own. “...If I’d been... if my brain worked right, and they’d known, when I was little... if they hadn’t kept it from me...” And all of a sudden, it’s overwhelming, because he’s been thinking it and thinking it, examining it from every angle, but he’s been too scared to say it aloud, even to Aunt Pearl.

“If I’d known that guy for... for what he was... if I could’ve...” He can hear his own voice getting thick, and now Derek does move: reaches out to cup his hands around Stiles’ shoulders as Stiles voice breaks, and squeezes, a little, movements jerky and uncertain.

“If I’d said something,” Stiles says, swiping a sleeve over his face. “If I’d known what it was instead of just feeling... I knew he was bad and I didn’t--”
Just like that, he can’t hold it in anymore - he can’t breathe, but it’s not panic, this time. It’s something else, something like regret, but vast and chasmic. Like gravity has given up the ghost and all there is is this sense of falling forever and never hitting bottom.

Derek pulls him in without preamble, holds him tight, and Stiles doesn’t even resist - just lets it happen, doesn’t think about the fact that he’s sobbing like a snotty baby into Derek’s t-shirt. Now that it’s started it feels like it will never stop.

But it does, after an eternity. Gradually he realizes he can breathe again, that his breaths have calmed from hiccuping sobs to shallow pants; that he’s gotten Derek all wet; that he’s clutching the back of Derek’s shirt like a lifeline; that Derek’s got a hand cupped around the back of his neck and has been talking, all this time. *It’s okay and shhh, shhh*, soothing nonsense-sounds whispered into Stiles’ ear.

It should be weird. But it’s not. It hasn’t been for a while now.

Stillness descends, and the weather is turning so Stiles is getting cold, but Derek’s got both arms around him, and he’s putting off enough heat that Stiles stops shivering.

“I can’t stop feeling like it was my - like I could have done something,” he murmurs, and Derek pulls back far enough to look him in the face. He looks utterly bewildered; outraged, even. His eyes are rimmed with red and Stiles realizes, distantly, that Derek was crying too.

“How can you - you were a kid. How could it be your fault?”

Stiles actually laughs. It sounds awful, raw and harsh. “Pot, meet kettle.”

Derek’s face scrunches up. Stiles laughs helplessly. God, they’re a mess.

“Laura...” Derek ventures, after a while, “…she said we always think we could have done something. That no matter what, we always look back and think we see the one thing - the thing that would have changed everything.”

Stiles watches him, says cautiously: “She was pretty smart, huh.”

Derek’s smile is complicated; small and sad. “Yeah,” he agrees. “I wish I’d listened to her more.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I think you guys were always the same with each other,” Stiles offers. “I mean - in all the other ways I can see it having gone... you always messed with each other. Pushed each other around.” He shrugs. “I never had brothers or sisters but it looked... kind of nice.”

The sound Derek makes might be called a laugh: a huff of breath and something that’s closer to a smile than before. “Yeah, that sounds about right.” He leans into Stiles. “What else do you see?”

Stiles squints into the middle distance. “Mostly it’s just... easier. Warmer.” He closes his eyes, rubs at his face. “Details are hard,” he tells Derek, regretfully. “It hurts, to look too long.”

“It’s okay,” Derek tells him. “It’s enough.”

“We would have known each other. Always known each other. Like me and Scott.” Stiles bumps their shoulders together, trying for lightness. “Kinda different from the creepy older guy stalking us from the edge of the woods. It wouldn’t even have been weird.”

Derek sighs irritably, but he’s smiling.
“You would’ve known about us. Would’ve been easier,” Derek offers.

“You could’ve bought me beer.”

“I’m not buying you beer,” Derek says automatically. For somebody with so many violent felony charges on his record Derek is weirdly prim about underage drinking.

Stiles tries to stop staring at Derek’s mouth, but he feels a little light-headed, like he always does after a lot of crying. This time Derek notices, and lets Stiles see he’s noticed. This time he doesn’t pull back, just stays where he is.

“Not to mention my massive, embarrassing crush on you would have been a lot less awkward,” Stiles mutters.

Derek blows out a breath through his nose, nostrils flaring, and Stiles knows he’s sniffing the air, scenting Stiles. Like he needs his super-werewolf-nose to smell how Stiles feels right now.

“You think so, huh?”

Stiles huffs a laugh. “I said less awkward,” he points out. “This is still me we’re talking about.”

Stiles pulls, just a little, and Derek goes; he looks dazed, like he can’t believe what’s happening, and fair enough - neither can Stiles. Not even as he presses his mouth to Derek’s.

Derek’s whole body jolts, but he doesn’t pull away, which is the part Stiles tries to focus on as he leans into Derek’s body, hands in Derek’s shirt, trying to figure out angle and pressure and a half-dozen other things without having to lose any proximity.

It’s easy. Easier than Stiles expected, though he probably should have known. They’re different than they were, different from a year ago when Stiles used to imagine this being fast and desperate and not a little angry. This is simple, an inevitable fall forward, hoped-for but never expected.

But he pulls back, because he’s not an idiot, and Derek isn’t just dazed. He blinks at Stiles, looks caught somewhere between panic and something better, warmer that on another person’s face Stiles might even label “happiness.” But it’s not there alone, and even Stiles can feel how fast Derek’s heart is beating, the way Derek’s skin is jumping, the way his shoulders have gone hard and tense, for all that he hasn’t let go of Stiles.

“Sorry,” Stiles whispers, not pulling away entirely; staying where he is.

Derek shuts his eyes, forces his muscles to relax with obvious effort, but he’s still shaking, just a little. “Don’t be sorry,” he says, forcefully.

Stiles isn’t sorry. He’s angry - the same anger he feels whenever Kate is mentioned or invoked, and he’s just done it himself and he wants to punch himself in the throat for putting that look on Derek’s face.

“I wish I could kill her,” Stiles says, and then shuts his mouth, shocked, because he didn’t mean to say that aloud. Didn’t even think it, really, not in words. He’s always careful how much he lets himself think about Kate Argent and what he’d do, given the chance. He’s been too afraid he might mean it. The last couple of days have been harder than usual.

But Derek doesn’t look shocked. Doesn’t look like he even minds. Just looks at Stiles, mouth a straight, easy line.

“I know,” he says, and with an expression of intense concentration he leans in again and kisses
Stiles, soft and thoughtful, once, twice. This time when he pulls back his shoulders are relaxed; his hands are easy on Stiles’ shoulder and the back of his neck. Stiles thinks he’s about to say something, but instead Derek leans in again, and instead of kissing him he rubs his cheek against Stiles’, presses his nose behind Stiles’ ear, inhales deeply.

Stiles shivers and makes a noise that could not possibly have been dignified. Derek laughs.

“The others are coming,” he murmurs. Stiles listens - yeah, even he can hear engines approaching from the road. He spreads his right hand out against Derek’s back, keeps his eyes closed.

“We’ve got time,” he says.
It’s mid-July before Aunt Pearl finally packs her bags and the pack gathers at the Stilinski house for her farewell dinner. The whole pack, even auxiliary members like a very reluctant Mr. Argent, who brings potato salad and hovers uncomfortably with a beer in his hand until Dad takes pity on him and goes over to draw him into conversation with Deaton and Melissa.

The younger members of the pack have been there most of the afternoon, lazing about the yard and at one point engaging in a protracted water war. The grass is still damp, but the hot summer sun has baked it mostly dry so it’s no longer squelching. Stiles sits on the porch steps peeling the label off a mostly empty bottle of soda and watching Scott and Jackson wrestle at the other end of yard, Lydia and Allison watching from reclining lawn chairs, both holding plastic cups of soda and looking both fond and exasperated. Lydia is wearing a wide-brimmed white hat; Allison has a straw fedora perched crookedly above the huge sunglasses which are sliding down her nose. Isaac and Boyd are over by the barbecue, conspiring - it’s the only word that applies.

Stiles wonders where Aunt Pearl has gotten to for only a moment before somebody comes up behind him, ruffling his hair, and Aunt Pearl walks past, carrying a platter of hamburger patties, followed by Erica, carrying the plate of buns and the condiment bottles. She aims a gentle kick at his thigh as she steps out onto the lawn, barefoot, bright red toenails standing out against the green grass.

It’s a few minutes of watching it all, feeling strangely content, before Stiles realizes he’s waiting for something to happen - either a water balloon attack from above or something more sinister, he isn’t sure. But he pushes the feeling forcefully away. He decided, this morning, that he was going to enjoy today, even if it meant Aunt Pearl was going away again, and for who knew how long.

At least this time they could stay in touch for real; she no longer had any reason to keep her trips mysterious.

He’s not at all surprised when Derek comes out of the house behind him and sits down at his side, taking the empty bottle with its peeled label out of his hand.

“You made a mess,” he says mildly, picking up the scattered bits of paper and rolling them into a ball, tossing the paper into the bottle. He sets the bottle down on the steps and laces his fingers together over one knee, surveying the gathering with a satisfied expression and loose shoulders. Derek is more relaxed than Stiles has ever seen him, the lines of his face easy and calm, and it makes something twist, not unpleasantly, behind Stiles’ breastbone.

Instead of saying any of the dozen things he could potentially say, he leans into Derek’s shoulder. Derek leans back, just enough to hold him up, and though he can only see him in profile Stiles does see the corner of Derek’s mouth hitch up in a smile.

“Still worried?” Stiles asks, voice pitched low so it probably goes unheard by the other wolves under the sounds of music and other voices.

Derek shrugs with the shoulder Stiles isn’t leaning on, in the way that means I’m always worried. “Not much,” is what he says, and glances at Stiles. “Are you?”

Stiles hums and shakes his head. “I’ve decided to adopt hopeless optimism as a personal
philosophy,” he tells Derek.

Derek laughs softly: just a distant rumble in his chest. “Isn’t that an oxymoron?”

“Not at all,” Stiles denies, even though it probably is. “I mean, it might all turn out badly, but at least until it does I’ll have a positive outlook.”

Derek looks at him then, amused. “I’m still pretty sure you could put those two words in the dictionary definition of oxymoron--”

“You’re an oxymoron,” Stiles tells him, just barely restraining the urge to stick out his tongue. “Seriously, it’ll be fine. Most of us are only a few hours away, and you can visit. You are going to visit, right?”

Stiles watches as Derek looks at him again, face serious, and nods slowly. “I’d like to,” he says quietly. “I’d like that.”

“Me too,” Stiles says immediately, just so there isn’t any confusion or mixed signals or the tiniest iota of doubt in Derek’s mind. With some things concerning Derek, Stiles has discovered, it’s better to over-clarify than risk misunderstanding.

Derek stares at him for another long second, mouth half-open, and then swallows, throat bobbing, and nods again. “Good,” he says, and turns back to look out over the yard - over his pack.

“Good,” Stiles agrees, going back to leaning against Derek’s side.

They haven’t discussed it much since the first time - the kissing thing, that is. They haven’t discussed much of anything. Neither of them has seemed overly inclined towards analyzing it. There have been other things, other non-discussions composed of leaning and interpretably non-platonic touching and a couple of instances of what Stiles could only call nuzzling. There have been at least a dozen instances of mostly-clothed bed-sharing, for sleeping purposes only, that could be described as entirely platonic except for how Stiles always wakes up with Derek curled around his back. It is the very definition of a non-surprise that Derek Hale is a cuddler.

But he likes it, and he doesn’t want it to stop, so he doesn’t say anything. When anybody asks, he either tells them to mind their own business or that they’re taking it slow. Not that many people ask. Mostly the only people who know anything is up between them are Pack and they know enough to leave it alone - to watch, and wait, just like Stiles is doing.

“Besides,” Scott told him once, a couple of weeks after that day at the house, after he came upon Derek and Stiles napping together on the living room couch, “it’s not like nobody saw this coming.”

Stiles is forever grateful that Scott is okay with this... whatever this is. When he said this to Scott, Scott just looked affronted and said “Well, yeah. Bros until death, right?” And looked adorably unsure until Stiles hugged him and told him to shut up, yeah, of course.

Besides, he’s not really sure what he would say. Derek doesn’t talk about his reasons for taking it slow - whatever It is - but they’re obvious to anyone with eyes and even a little background knowledge. He knows Derek started seeing someone - like, an actual medical someone - at the end of June, because he asked Melissa for a referral. It’s another one of those things that he told Stiles without telling him; left the therapist’s business card tucked into the corner of the bulletin board in the foyer of Hale House, where anybody could see. It was such a staggering display of trust that Stiles went right up to him where he was digging out a garden bed behind the house and hugged him, sweaty shirt and all, until Derek laughed and looked at him like Stiles was
a little crazy but he didn’t mind.

So, they’re taking it slow. It’s okay. They’ve got time, now.

Derek shifts beside him, drops his arm around Stiles’ shoulders. Stiles goes still for a second - it’s probably the most overt display Derek’s made so far in front of the others - but relaxes because he certainly doesn’t have anything to complain about. “Burgers are almost ready,” he says, practically radiating contentment. Two years ago this would have been almost surreal, but now it’s just... how things are. Stiles has even almost - almost - stopped expecting a disaster around every corner, though all joking about hopeless optimism aside, that will probably never really go away. It’s how he plans ahead. How he makes sure; believes in surety.

Things are different now. There’s no denying it. It isn’t only Stiles’ magic, though that’s a big part of it. It has changed, if only in his ability to look at it with new eyes, in its proper context, in the context of his family and his history and a legacy that makes him sad and proud and capable of considering the future in ways he never thought possible before. He can see so much more, now, than just one long straight line unrolling in front of them. He can see all the roads, diverging a dozen, a hundred ways with no end in sight.

It’s changed Derek, too, in the way he’s planning ahead for more than the next week or the next year. Derek’s better at showing than telling, but he demonstrates it in actions, the way he took that first step when they remodelled the house, which was about reclaiming the past as much as securing a future he’s maybe only now starting to believe in. Derek just nodded indulgently along last week when Stiles wondered, aloud, whether Scott and Allison would get engaged before they finished undergrad or hold out until after graduation. (The idea is simultaneously terrifying and 100% as expected and, Stiles concluded, totally okay in either case. It’s not like he hasn’t had an ever-evolving draft of his best man’s speech ready to go since third grade.)

“What’s that one?” Derek asks, and Stiles looks at him, realizes he’s been doing it again: humming under his breath. He’s been doing that a lot lately - catching himself humming snatches of songs he starts without meaning to, and doesn’t even notice he’s doing it until somebody mentions it. It’s something Mom used to do, something Stiles hadn’t done since she died, which was an utter shock the first time he realized it. She was always singing, humming, filling up whatever silences presented themselves. Stiles always wondered where he got it from, before, the inability to stay quiet, because it wasn’t from Dad - though he, too, has been doing it recently. Sometimes Stiles will hear him whistling, off-key, as he works in his office or makes breakfast or washes the car. They’re not always Mom’s songs - neither are Stiles’ - but they often are.

Stiles thinks about it. “I don’t know,” he admits. Maybe Aunt Pearl does. “I just know the tune. I don’t think I ever knew the words.”

“It’s nice,” says Derek. “Don’t stop.”

It takes him a second to pick up the thread, but then it comes easily, the tune as familiar to him as the smell of Mom’s flowers, the worn places on the stairs of their home, the feeling of Derek next to him; the memory of Derek, younger and lighter, smile a flash of white through the leaves. It’s all mixed up together, as it often is, these days; the edges of the different parts of his life muddy at the edges, jumbled up together, they way they’re supposed to be.

Stiles doesn’t try to hold it in. Just lets the music spill out of him, lets himself enjoy the warmth and laughter of the summer night.
Hey look! It’s Ramble About Folklore and Etymology Time!

If you’re wondering (you’re probably not) the Vaytsiushkevich family is of Belarusian extraction, another thing to be credited to Lauren. (The bit about Pictionary and gingersnaps as well as the two paragraphs preceding it are lifted more or less wholesale from our rambling email threads during the writing of the story, and credit goes to her.)

Due to the complicated linguistic composition of Belarus (and their family), though, some of the words used by Stiles and his Aunt Pearl are Belarusian and some are Russian. Stiles calls his grandfather (whom he never met) Deda, which is a colloquial Russian diminutive for “grandfather.” Viedźma is Belarusian for “witch,” though Stiles, Aunt Pearl (and their family) use the word “witch” in everyday conversation with viedźma, it seems, being reserved for use only under specific, ritual circumstances (and in this story, never even spoken aloud). Deaton and Derek simply use “worker,” which in this world is a broad categorical term for a magic-user (there is probably a different, more particular term for the type of “work” Aunt Pearl does; I did try to come up with one, but it would have led to a lot more worldbuilding than storytelling, and more about Aunt Pearl than about Stiles and Aunt Pearl, and besides every word I did come up with was some variation on blood-letter). Derek uses “witch” only once he and Dr. Vaytsiushkevich have been formally introduced.

You might recognize yaga from the story of Baba Yaga, a folkloric figure generally described as a somewhat-grandmotherly old woman. Baba is, of course, a diminutive for “grandmother,” but the etymological origin of yaga is a good deal more complicated. For the purposes of this story, it’s another broad, non-specific term for somebody clever who uses magic, albeit with deeper cultural and mythological underpinnings.

The various herbs with folkloric “magical properties” used by Stiles, Deaton and Aunt Pearl in this story include:

- Comfrey - safety and protection, especially while travelling
- Coriander - protection, luck, prevention of illness
- Mountain Ash/Rowan - protection
- Wolfsbane/Aconite - purification, protection
- Mint - energy, communication, vitality; protection of the home
- Vervain - healing and purification; protection, particularly of children
- Valerian - in the real world valerian is actually used as a sedative for insomnia, anxiety, and stress; Aunt Pearl may well be using it for these reasons, but in folkloric magic valerian is also associated with counteracting self-blame and guilt
- St. John’s Wort - protection against negative energy; prevention of illness
- Mistletoe - protection and luck, among other things

Though I personally consider NO STOP WHAT NO HELP FUCK YOU TEEN WOLF this story’s True Name, its current title as stated above is a (clumsy, roundabou) reference meant to invoke bits and pieces of a massive body of mythology and folklore in which the Golden Bough - probably a particular variety of mistletoe that produces yellow-green leaves and white berries in the middle of winter - was considered a powerful magical ingredient in rites related to protection, fertility, the treatment of illnesses, votive and human sacrifice and other mystical rites. On top
of its actual, we-know-it’s-true uses there were (and still are) all sorts of superstitions about mistletoe, some of them really weird. Like, shoot-it-down-with-a-bow-and-arrow, potent-only-under-a-waning-moon-while-Sagittarius-is-on-the-rise, catch-it-in-your-left-hand-but-don’t-let-it-touch-the-ground weird. Somewhere I have a first-year Celtic studies textbook that contained not one, but eight pages of the weirdest ones, and the ones I’ve mentioned were only like, 10% of it. If you’re into folklore and you want to know more I suggest The Internet, or something like The Aenid or James Frazer’s The Golden Bough.

Because I prefer hinting at things to actually stating them, mistletoe is also part of the Vaytsiushkevich coat of arms (I did a few doodles of it, but it’s not included because I couldn’t decide what else might be on it) - Stiles’ mother’s family, who in this story are an old and powerful magical dynasty... or rather, used to be.

Might be again.

Who knows, right?

You can email me, or you can find me on the Tumblrs (probably waving my Internet-cane and yelling “damn you kids get off my lawn” and muttering resentfully about the good old days on LJ).

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!